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The Signifyin (g) Tradition of the Hip-hop Music Video

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An Abstract of  
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
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## Abstract

### The Signifyin (g) Tradition of the Hip-hop Music Video

By Ryan Scallan

This thesis attempts to interpret and contextualize Henry Louis Gates 1989 text, *The Signifying Monkey*, through the textual and formal analysis of hip-hop music videos spanning the last three decades. Through the exploration of Gates's theoretical frameworks, each chapter places prominent black cultural theorists in dialogue with one another in order to find space for new interpretations and understandings of black cultural traditions imbedded within hip-hop music video culture.

Each chapter moves through different themes within *The Signifying Monkey*, drawing structural and theoretical comparisons between prominent African American modernist authors and hip-hop music video auteurs. Dissenting theorists from Stuart Hall's Birmingham School of Cultural Studies provide alternate perspectives and complicate notions of cultural continuity across mediums specific to African American cultural traditions. The final chapter focuses on a 2014 roundtable discussion involving Michael Eric Dyson and the rapper Nas. The discussion operates as an example of hip-hop scholars' tendency to focus solely on the lyrical and narrative importance of rap music. This thesis aims to prove that the formal and textual aspects of hip-hop music videos serve as important visual examples of Signification and contain decades of valuable contextual information.

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Listen

History repeats itself and that's just how it goes  
Same way that these rappers always bite each others flows  
Same thing that my nigga Elvis did with Rock n Roll  
Justin Timberlake, Eminem and then Macklemore  
While silly niggas argue over who gon' snatch the crown  
Look around, my nigga, white people have snatched the sound  
This year I'll prolly go to the awards dappered down  
Watch Iggy win a Grammy as I try to crack a smile  
I'm just playin', but all good jokes contain true shit

- J. Cole

## ***Introduction***

In the spring semester of 2014 I decided to enroll in a Comparative Literature seminar investigating major works in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Black Cultural Theory. Having had little preparation for the course, I contributed little to class discussions but thanks to my fellow students and the instruction of Dr. Sean Meighoo of Emory's Institute of Liberal Arts; I left with a theoretical toolbox that continues to illuminate alternate contexts and perspectives.

The semester concluded with Henry Louis Gates's most well known text, *The Signifying Monkey*. While working through the book's literary critiques and analysis of Yoruban mythology, I realized the relevance of Gates's literary and cultural analysis when applied to the emergence of a unique African American visual culture founded in the production and exhibition of hip-hop music videos. Gates's interpretation and application of Bakhtin's notion of "double-voiced words" and Saussure's assertion that "shifts" occur in the relationship between the signified and the signifier work towards a greater understanding of African American literary movements as they pertain to one another. In understanding the tradition of both oppositional and cooperative signification in African American literature, one can gain a better understanding of cultural traditions that go beyond literary criticism and envelop aural and visual traditions as well.

While *The Signifying Monkey* serves as the inspiration for this thesis, the work does not fully encompass the critical theories needed to complete the necessary research. Many of Gates's contemporaries stand in opposition to the

perpetuation of *The Signifying Monkey* as a cornerstone of contemporary African American Cultural Theory. In her essay, *The Blackness of Theory*, Hazel Carby addresses the formation of a male dominated, African American literary canon by stating:

He (Gates) is silent about the substantial body of black feminist criticism on the work of Hurston, Reed and Walker, and the very significant theoretical interventions by Deborah McDowell, Hortense Spillers, Barbara Smith, Valerie Simth and Mary Helen Washington among others that have constituted a critical field during the last decade. Is it possible that, like Richard Wright, black feminist critics and black feminist criticism must remain on the margins of the formation of blackness?<sup>1</sup>

The absence of black feminist criticism in *The Signifying Monkey* forms a critical gap in the theoretical framework used to investigate a perceived continuity African American cultural traditions in visual media. Therefore, Gates's omissions are negotiated through the use of Hazel Carby's collection of essays on the politics of racial identity, among other works by black feminist scholars.

At the time of its release, *The Signifying Monkey* caused many diasporic scholars to speak out against the privileged position of Yoruban culture within the text. The book begins with a chapter entitled "A Myth of Origins: Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey"; Gates uses the Yoruban mythological construction of the Esu-Elegbara "trickster" to assert his central claim:

The Yoruba myth of the origins of interpretation is relevant to the use of Esu as the figure of the critic and is helpful in explaining the presence of a monkey in Latin American versions of this primal myth. It is the presence of the monkey in the Yoruba myth, repeated with a difference in Cuban versions, which stands as the trace of Esu in Afro-American myth, a trace that

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon* (New York: Verso, 1999), 235.



enables us to speculate freely on the functional equivalence of Esu and his Afro-American descendant, the Signifying Monkey.<sup>2</sup>

The tracing of Afro-American Signifyin (g) traditions to the Yoruban Esu-Elegbara conflates the Signifying Monkey with other diasporic linguistic phenomena and thus, presupposes the historical and cultural legacy of a highly specific West African regional culture above other equally influential traditions from the African continent. For the scope of Gates's text, tying African American literary traditions to Yoruban mythology makes logical sense but the historiographic limitations of the book's overarching theoretical framework is worth noting.

Within *The Signifying Monkey's* dense portions of literary analysis, Gates draws heavily from the Bahktinian school of Formalism as well as Roland Barthes's work with semiotics and mythology. Using Gates's theoretical influences as a way to relate literary criticism to cinematic textual analysis provides valuable points of comparison and similarities. At times the cinematic language of hip-hop music videos appears esoteric and difficult to negotiate but many aesthetic trends in the production of hip-hop music videos Signify upon earlier traditions within the visual culture of hip-hop music and African American culture as a whole. Rather than naively attempting to investigate the contemporary African American experience, this project endeavors to explore acts of visual Signification as they apply to hip-hop music videos. With that said, one cannot fully interpret hip-hop video culture without proper context. As a cultural product of contemporary American society, rap videos must be viewed with an understanding of the greater sociocultural milieu

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xv.

and sociological context in which they are produced. Therefore, every case study found throughout the following chapters will outline a particular context for the reader to engage with as they disseminate the visual constructs and ideologies of each video.

As a high school student I remember getting together with friends to watch the Hype Williams directed “urban crime drama”, *Belly*. As teenagers, we did not engage with the film’s overt political and social messages; we became absorbed in the contrasting color palettes, non-diegetic soundtrack and over the top violence. Looking back on my pleasure watching the film over and over again with friends, I wondered what drove a group of white teenage boys in suburban Seattle to bond over a forgotten crime drama that depicts 1990’s inner city violence in Queens (among other locations). After reexamining the film for a term paper last spring, I became uncomfortable with my adolescent obsession with *Belly*. After a moment of clarity, I began to examine the ways in which Hype Williams constructs the relationship of city dwelling African American males to the American law enforcement apparatus. Additionally, I found that the film complicated the academic understanding of cultural and societal continuity among diasporic communities in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., the narrative importance of New York City and Kingston, Jamaica). *Belly* provides a rich visual text to apply the theoretical positions of *The Signifying Monkey* along with the music video scholarship of Carol Vernallis and the black feminist frameworks of Hazel Carby. Paul Gilroy’s work with Afrocentrism and “anti-anti-essentialism” further complicates the academic

discourse on the continuity of African cultures in diasporic locations as they appear within *Belly's* narrative.

Chapter Three investigates contemporary interpretations of Gates's Signifyin (g) framework as they apply to the shifting media landscape and its effect on hip-hop culture. The 2014 roundtable discussion between the African American studies scholar, Michael Eric Dyson, and Nas is used as an entry into contemporary discourses in hip-hop scholarship. Through an analysis of shifting aesthetics, critiques from a number of scholars are placed into dialogue with one another to better understand how the imbedded ideologies within hip-hop music become conflated with their visual depictions. The chapter also uses new interpretations of the Signifyin (g) framework to highlight shortcomings in the field of hip-hop studies.

This thesis is not meant as a theoretical catchall. Over the next three chapters, the Signifyin (g) framework will be put into dialogue with a multitude of other cultural and media theories in hopes that the study of hip-hop music videos will provide new cultural texts to better understand contemporary discourses in African American studies. The chapters are designed to move through the content of *The Signifying Monkey* in a linear fashion but certain aspects of the text reappear throughout my arguments. My interpretation of Gates's text is at times abstract but please recognize that the purpose of his book is to explore and develop new modes of analysis and criticism separate from the "presuppositions of Eurocentric literary practices."<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that there is debate over naming the genre hip-

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xv.

hop or rap; I will not be engaging in that discourse, the words will be used interchangeably.

### **Chapter One: Rap Videos and Signifyin (g): Henry Louis Gates's *Theory of Tradition* as told by Def Jam Records**

As I began outlining this chapter and my thesis as a whole, I realized that Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* would serve as the project's guiding text. The book's overarching structure provides a template to form unique positions and organize arguments into congruent and understandable frameworks. Gates spends the first half of the book discussing his unique understanding of Signifyin (g) as it applies to the history of African American literature and literary criticism. No previous texts in the field of African American Studies outlined the origins and the practice of Signification in African American literature. While *The Signifying Monkey* focuses solely on literary traditions, I believe that Gates's textual analysis and cultural critiques engage with an overarching African American tradition that transcends a particular creative medium. Over the past three decades, a number of prominent African American Studies scholars have spoken out against the book's critical resonance. Positions held by black feminist scholars and members of Stuart Hall's Birmingham School of Cultural Studies dispute Gates's positions. These dissenting perspectives provide an opportunity to complicate my own project and understand ongoing dialogues in cultural and African American studies. I hope that this chapter and my thesis as a whole will serve as an exploratory bridge between critical dialogues in African American literary criticism and the ongoing acts of Signification found in hip-hop music video culture.

The music videography of Def Jam Records served as the inspiration for my thesis. Prior to my realization, I became intrigued by formal and textual elements of hip-hop music videos after dining at a Waffle House during the filming of a Rick Ross music video in 2013. Watching the shifting industrial and cultural contexts represented in three-minute films, I realized that there was some form of continuity found throughout the entirety of the music videos. With subtle odes to previous directors and musicians, I began to identify a unique cinematic language utilized by hip-hop music video directors. As Carol Vernallis states:

... in music video, an image's apt reappearance against the musical line, and a well-judged change in its internal structure, creates patternings. By providing a mnemonic device, music's formal grid contributes to the structure. We can connect an earlier image that rhymes or relates thematically to an image we are now seeing, partly because the current sound and/or image echoes what took place two measures ago or in the previous verse; we will also learn to anticipate the image's placement in the near future—at the end of a melodic line or apex of a phrase.<sup>4</sup>

While Vernallis's formal analysis of music video structure relies on case studies outside of hip-hop, her perspective is incredibly useful in understanding the rhythmic conflation of the visual and musical in hip-hop music videos. The reflexive nature of hip-hop's lyrics and beats affects the visual structure of a rap video causing the video to contain filmic elements unique to hip-hop. The rhythmic patterning discussed by Vernallis provides a useful point of entry for textual analysis informed by dialogues in African American literary criticism.

Using hip-hop music videos solely from the Def Jam catalogue was a conscious decision. The label's subsidiaries cover decades of geographically and

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 188.

ideologically diverse music while utilizing a small group of contracted video directors and producers. The music videos of Def Jam Records serve as case studies displaying the industrial contexts that create textual and formal continuity among hip-hop music videos. The use of one label illustrates the utility of music videos as a marketing commodity for record labels rather than a solely artistic endeavor. In tracing traditions of signification through the videography of Def Jam records, this chapter will pair arguments in African American literary criticism with hip-hop music videos in order to find underlying similarities representative of a greater cultural tradition.

Gates begins Part One of *The Signifying Monkey* with an anthropological tracing of African American literary criticism to the Yoruban myth of Esu-Elegbara.<sup>5</sup>

For Esu [Elegbara] is the Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation. The literature of Esu consists to a remarkable degree of direct assertions about the levels of linguistic ascent that separate literal from figurative modes of language use. The Fon call Legba “the divine linguist”...<sup>6</sup>

The positioning of Esu as a mediator of language allows Gates to situate the myth as an allegory for his own literary criticism. As an interpreter of figurative language, the myth of the Esu also applies to hip-hop as a linguistic and rhythmic medium. As mentioned previously in the passage from *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*, music’s formal grid and patterning create a visual rhythm within music videos. The conflation between a song’s rhythm and the visual patterning of a

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<sup>5</sup> Also known by its English language, North American name of “The Signifying Monkey”

<sup>6</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 6-7.

rap music video allows for textual analysis informed by the mythic tradition of the Esu.

The music video for the 1998 single, “Respiration”, by Blackstar<sup>7</sup> and Common clarifies the previous passage. The video begins with various black and white shots of urban scenes in New York City as a female narrator states: “Escuchela... la ciudad respirando.”<sup>8</sup> The song’s cryptic introduction frames the overarching theme of the narrative. The artists want the viewer to question notions of identity within the urban space, particularly New York. Prior to the first verse, the camera passes through New York’s Queens-Midtown Tunnel in order to disorient the viewer and position Talib Kweli, Mos Def and Common as interpreters of the city’s contemporary moment. As the first verse commences, the video cuts to Mos Def on a busy street corner stating: “The new moon rode high in the crown of the metropolis—Shining, like who on top of this?” This line sets the urban scene that will unfold for the remainder of the song; “we start out in the heavens, but we’re about to plummet into the messy, heaving tumult of New York City.”<sup>9</sup> Following his first line, Mos Def creates a series of societal binaries that prove to be equally reprehensible (i.e. “Can’t tell between the cops and the robbers, they both partners—they all heartless”). While Mos Def expresses his discontent with the city’s moral decay, the directors speed up the pace of the video by fading in and out of street scenes with the rapper’s face serving as the tableau’s vanishing point.

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<sup>7</sup> A group comprised of Mos Def, Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek

<sup>8</sup> In English: “Listen to it, the city is breathing.”

<sup>9</sup> “Rap Genius: Respiration,” moderated by Contactek, accessed December 31, 2014, <http://genius.com/61590/Black-star-respiration/The-new-moon-rode-high-in-the-crown-of-the-metropolis>.



Mos Def, "Respiration," viewed on Vevo. Directed by BlackStar. New York City, NY: Rawkus Entertainment, 1998. Distributed by Def Jam Records.

The video's editing techniques along with the songs lyrics and high tempo base line articulate a unified interpretation of a specific African American urban experience. In embracing their role as a continuation of Esu's interpretative tradition, Blackstar and Common understand "[Esu]'s relation to destiny, and [its] priority over destiny... inscribed in its role as the guiding force of interpretation itself."<sup>10</sup> In a sense, hip-hop songs embracing a particular societal struggle also represent Esu's ability to overcome a predetermined outcome. In order to overcome their own destiny (futile consciousness), they interpret their circumstances and express their sentiment through cinematic and musical means.

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 23.



In Chapter 2 of *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates moves away from the mythical origins of the Signifyin (g) tradition as he begins differentiating between the black linguistic sign, “Signification”, and the Standard English sign, “signification”. Gates argues:

The relationship that black “Signification” bears to the English “signification” is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity... What we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white... We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.<sup>11</sup>

Gates’s differentiation reflects the importance of black vernacular as an opposing discourse to the hegemonic English linguistic tradition of signification. In terms of music, Signifyin (g) relates to the play of black language games as a mode of formal revision and “turning repetition of formal structures and their differences.”<sup>12</sup> The notion of black music as a revisionist play of difference corresponds to the cinematic tropes of hip-hop music videos and the cultural cache of directors who understand the genre specific modes of production.

The music video for the Game’s 2007 single, “Wouldn’t Get Far”, featuring Kanye West is the most poignant example of hip-hop’s revisionist attitude towards video culture. The song’s lyrics reveal the miserable lifestyle of video models behind the façade of a hip-hop music video production. The video’s director, Bryan Barber, uses the song’s themes abstractly to Signify upon the industrial contexts of hip-hop

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.

video culture. Barber employs pop-up text bubbles<sup>13</sup> to humorously draw attention to the various conventions of an early 21<sup>st</sup> century rap video. The satirical nature of the video revels in the perceived tropes of the genre while also exposing the power dynamics



“Wouldn’t Get Far,” viewed on Vevo. Directed by Bryan Barber. Los Angeles, CA: Aftermath Records, 2006. Distributed by Def Jam Entertainment.

of the music industry apparatus. In the above image, Barber uses the text bubble to play with the viewer’s expectations of a Hype Williams directed rap video. With two well-known rappers involved in the project, it can only be assumed that a high profile director would also work on the song. The formal aspects of the sequence reference Williams’s stylistic editing tendencies; widescreen ratios with a secondary

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<sup>13</sup> Styled after the “info nuggets” in VH1’s *Pop-Up Video* programming

shot split between the upper and lower bars of the screen are used following the appearance of the Hype Williams text bubble. As a song about the unattractive reality of being a female extra in a rap video, Barber blends the artists' lyrics with an overarching visual allegory regarding the absence of creativity within the industry apparatus.

While operating as an industry critique, the "Wouldn't Get Far" music video also functions on a separate plane of figurative meaning that reflects a larger cultural tradition. The video begins with a warning message: "What you are about to witness is not a real rap video, but a reenactment of what would happen on a real video set. In fact, these are not really video girls, but actresses pretending to be. Repeat... this not a real rap video." From the introduction, the video is framed as visual double speak. Satire, a necessary component of Signification, initiates the viewer's relationship with the images and audio. This video illustrates Gates's understanding of Signification as a cultural tradition but also represents the critical divide within African American literary criticism. For Gates, Signifyin (g) is the essential trope that creates continuity among African American literature. Through the continued use of intertextuality and humorous revisions, "Wouldn't Get Far" also shares in Gates's belief that Signifyin (g) denotes some form of cultural continuity within the African American narrative tradition.

In her critique of *The Signifying Monkey* entitled "The Blackness of Theory", Hazel Carby positions her argument in direct opposition to the theoretical framework posed by Gates. Carby's dissent stems from her assertion that Gates utilizes an eclectic mix of formalist theorists in order to identify an imagined

continuity that “discounts historical conditions that shape [d] the production of a text.”<sup>14</sup> She goes on to claim that Gates’s understanding of race as a trope creates a theoretical space where race is “not understood as a historically constructed and politically contested category.”<sup>15</sup> Gates’s perceived construction of race as a trope complicates the analysis of music videos like “Wouldn’t Get Far”. Using Carby’s position, Bryan Barber’s editing decisions appear to be nothing more than superfluous stylistic flourishes informed by the song’s materialistic lyrics which, in turn are informed by the political and economic conditions of the United States in 2007.

Carby’s most substantial criticism of *The Signifying Monkey* comes from her examination of authors used by Gates in his critical analysis. In order to maintain credibility within the dominant intellectual paradigm, Carby believes that Gates perpetuates Eurocentric critical conventions through his creation of an African American literary cannon. The authors highlighted by Gates serve to reinforce his construction of Signification as the quintessential trope of African American literature.

The political project to imagine a black literary theory and tradition has to define that tradition and set of theoretical premises against both a dominant cultural formation and other subordinate ethnic formations...The concern to establish a canon or tradition is a conventional literary project, there is nothing inherently black or feminist about it, but the question of whether it is indeed necessary or desirable to create traditions rather than to develop a critique of the process of canon formation remains unasked.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon* (New York: Verso, 1999), 234.

<sup>15</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 235.

<sup>16</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 232-233.

Gates neglects to develop an alternate construction of an African American critical literary tradition; he uses the same dominant conventions that have relegated African American literature to the margins of academia. In using the same model, Gates degrades the critical work of other diasporic authors (e.g. Caribbean, South American and Central American) and black feminists in order to maintain a textual unity amongst his chosen African American authors and critics.

On the whole, Hip-hop music orients the listener with the perspective of an African American male artist; the narrative of a song is perceived through the position of a hyper-masculine rapper. In trying to identify a formalistic cultural tradition like Gates, I identify tropes within works of African American male artists. Even subversive videos function within the parameters of a constructed tradition. One of Carby's peripheral arguments relates to Gates's idea of "an ideal reader...of the black vernacular,"<sup>17</sup> she believes that Gates concept "depends upon the construction of a link between the frequently esoteric use of a critical discourse and an everyday language practice of the people who live adjacent to but do not enter Yale except to clean it."<sup>18</sup> The same can be said for a critical analysis of hip-hop music videos when one views the text as something non-formalistic and related to the industry apparatus and sociocultural milieu.

The dueling critical theories of Carby and Gates reinforce the validity of my thesis but other cultural theorists warn against the "appropriation of critical ideals" for the analysis of popular culture. In a critique of *Django Unchained*, the political scientist, Adolph Reed, states his issues with textual analysis in today's universities.

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<sup>17</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 231

<sup>18</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 233.

Despite the dogged commitment of several generations of American Studies and cultural studies graduate students who want to valorize watching television and immersion in hip-hop or other specialty market niches centered on youth recreation and the most ephemeral fads as both intellectually avant-garde and politically “resistive,” it should be time to admit that earnest disposition is intellectually shallow and an ersatz politics. The idea of “popular” culture posits a spurious autonomy and organicism that actually affirm mass industrial processes by effacing them, especially in the putatively rebel, fringe, or underground market niches that depend on the fiction of the authentic to announce the birth of new product cycles.<sup>19</sup>

In Reed’s estimation, hip-hop video culture serves as a marketing based commodity designed to sell the most records possible. While there is truth in Reed’s Marxist critique, his understanding of popular culture analysis is deeply flawed and egregiously over simplified. By calling hip-hop an “ephemeral fad,” Reed positions his argument in a counterproductive way. Rather than engaging with specific examples to further his point, he disregards an entire body of scholarship specific to an African American cultural tradition. Music video production is a function of an industrial apparatus but unlike feature films, no admission fee is needed to view the media.<sup>20</sup> This distinction allows music videos to operate with relative creative freedom as compared to feature films that demand a more tangible return on investment. Submission to video sharing websites like Youtube requires no fee, allowing artists to produce and distribute videos with little financial capital.

Reed’s critique of reappropriated critical theories creates a barrier between Gates’s theories of tradition in *The Signifying Monkey* and the potential application of his cultural framework in the analysis of visual Signification traditions within hip-

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<sup>19</sup> Adolph Reed, “*Django Unchained, or, The Help: How “Cultural Politics” Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why*” Emory University: Nonsite.org (February 2013): <http://nonsite.org/feature/django-unchained-or-the-help-how-cultural-politics-is-worse-than-no-politics-at-all-and-why>

<sup>20</sup> Given that the media is viewed legally.

hop video culture. Reed's argument privileges the established fields of research that Hazel Carby and a great number of cultural studies scholars are rebuffing in earnest; without the development of new textual horizons, alternate perspectives and cultures will not become part of the discourse. Reed believes African American protagonists function as "universal modes of decontextualization" that play into the "whitewashed" historical rhetoric of the dominant power structure. In discussing contemporary Hollywood films with African American protagonists, Reed states: "Their substantive content is ideological: it is their contribution to the naturalization of neoliberalism's ontology as they propagandize its universalization across spatial, temporal, and social contexts."<sup>21</sup> The films (i.e. *The Help*, *Django Unchained*, and *Red Tails*) selected by Reed in his industrial analysis play into his assertions regarding the neoliberal attempt to cinematically sanitize morally vacuous moments in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American history. To Reed, the effort to gloss over and misrepresent systemic bigotry and oppression epitomizes the guiding principle of neoliberal race relations:

... the neoliberal rendering of social justice as equality of opportunity, with an aspiration of creating "competitive individual minority agents who might stand a better fighting chance in the neoliberal rat race rather than a positive alternative vision of a society that eliminates the need to fight constantly against disruptive market whims in the first place."<sup>22</sup>

Hip-hop music videos exist within the same socioeconomic contexts that Reed outlines in his critique of African American led Hollywood films but that is beside the point. His entire construction of a "neoliberal rat race" privileges his own grand

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<sup>21</sup> Adolph Reed, "*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*: How "Cultural Politics" Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why" Emory University: Nonsite.org (February 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Adolph Reed and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and its Analytical Discontents," *Socialist Register* (2012): 166.

perspective while disregarding the positions of people who must choose to engage with society's cultural output. To many, films with African American protagonists represent an important shift in societal norms, while these films may have problematic implications; they represent a positive step forward for society at large. Reed fiercely detests any films that reinforce the neoliberal industrial and societal apparatus but he seems to forget that his own engagement with these cultural products reinforces the mass industrial processes that he speaks out against.

Hip-hop videos demand thoughtful analysis through the application of influential critical works that assist in the uncovering of continuity among African American cultural and narrative traditions regardless of any problematic societal contexts. As mentioned previously, hip-hop music videos function on the formal and cultural margins of Reed's entertainment power structure. In an attempt to group all popular cultural phenomena into one static category of industrial output, Reed privileges a macro view of cultural creation over the understanding of specific cultural traditions as unique forms of interpretation and Signification. Take for example, the 2011 video for Frank Ocean's single, "Novacane". The video was directed by Ocean and released weeks after publicly stating he was homosexual. The song's lyrics and the use of superimposed female video models reflect Ocean's lament with the emotional numbness felt when having intercourse with women. The song and video track the efforts of Ocean to experiment with different women and drugs to find a formula that provides him with peace of mind. The most direct act of formal Signification comes in the song's second verse. Ocean states: "Bed full of women, flip on a tripod, little red light on shooting—I'm feeling like Stanley Kubrick,



this is some visionary shit—Been tryna film pleasure with my eyes wide shut but it keeps on moving.” The lyrics are accompanied by the superimposition of a white tiger’s face on Ocean as well as a group of nude women placed in the frame’s background. Ocean’s lyrics Signify upon the plot of *Eyes Wide Shut* and the directorial prowess of Stanley Kubrick while the video’s textual elements emulate the masquerade style group sex of the film. In an additional layer of Signification, the lyrics and imagery parallel Ocean’s difficulty finding sexual and emotional satisfaction with the Dr. Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) difficulty recollecting the complex details of the ritual orgy in *Eyes Wide Shut*.



“Novacane,” viewed on Vevo. Directed by Frank Ocean. Los Angeles, CA: Island Def Jam, 2011. Distributed by Def Jam Entertainment.

This additional context and analysis serves to illustrate the dangerous oversimplifications in Reed's critique of popular culture. Rather than understanding the cultural significance or subversive qualities of the video, Reed's framework simply disregards the achievement as a product of a neoliberal economy without any mention of art's intrinsic value.

"Novacane" speaks to Gates and Carby's "ideal reader" discourse. While particular formal elements of hip-hop music videos are lost on the majority of viewers, certain contextual aspects of videos disrupt genre conventions. In the case of Ocean's "Novacane", the sociocultural context surrounding the video's release exceeds the importance of the video's text. This example reflects the re-writing of a black cultural tradition through the inclusion of new interpreters of the tradition. Some of hip-hop's most iconic artists (e.g. Kanye West, Jay Z and Drake) take part in the re-writing process through songs and videos featuring Frank Ocean (e.g. "No Church In The Wild"). This Celebrity Intertextuality<sup>23</sup> evokes the evolution of hip-hop's cultural milieu and the importance of inclusion in the development of new narrative and cinematic positions within the genre's culture. Ocean's intervention does not reflect the position of Gates or Carby; it bridges the gap between their respective views in understanding black traditions outside of the academy.

One can view the visual text of Kanye West, Jay-Z and Frank Ocean's collaborative video, "No Church In the Wild", with varying levels of Signification. On a primary level, the text can be interpreted by all readers of hip-hop videos, "ideal" or not, as a major departure from the dominant paradigm of rap culture. "No Church

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Stam, ed., *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 207.

In the Wild” visually rebuffs assertions of masculinity and gestures towards hip-hop’s new visual discourse. The video, directed by Romain Gavras, does not include any of the song’s performers; it depicts a violent protest between an ambiguous citizenry and a paramilitary group. Ocean’s opening chorus frames the video’s gratuitous violence as a virtuous overthrow of an oppressive regime: “Human beings in a mob—What’s a mob to a king? What’s a king to a god?—What’s a god to a non-believer who don’t believe in anything?—Will he make it out alive?—Alright, alright, no church in the wild.”



“No Church In The Wild,” viewed on Vevo. Directed by Romain Gavras. Los Angeles, CA: Roc-A-Fella Records, 2012. Distributed by Def Jam Entertainment.

Ocean’s description of an imagined societal and metaphysical hierarchy positions the criminal acts perpetrated by the video’s protesters as a ritual cleansing of an

oppressive and morally bankrupt society. The video's Manichaeic binary paired with Ocean's illustration of a flawed "Chain of Being" reflects the decolonization strategies of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. In Fanon's chapter, "Concerning Violence", he states:

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself.<sup>24</sup>

Fanon's discourse privileges transformative action over the continued subversion of unjust socioeconomic models of governance. The three rappers along with the video's director contextualize Fanon's sentiment through a contemporary rendering of struggle.

Comparing Frantz Fanon's seminal work with the collaborative visual project of Frank Ocean, Jay-Z, Kanye West and Romain Gavras stands in direct opposition to detractors of contemporary cultural studies. That position, espoused at length by Adolph Reed, creates an exclusionary field where the study of popular culture loses its important sociocultural contexts. If every "niche" cultural trend can be reduced to a potential capital market, consumers within that capital market deserve analysis as to better understand their desire to view and consume particular cultural products. These consumers are interpreters of cultural texts (i.e. hip-hop music videos) and thus, take part in the perpetuation of cultural traditions through

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<sup>24</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 36-37.

economic transactions or page views. This distinction allows larger populations of people to operate as “ideal readers”<sup>25</sup> of text. If “No Church In The Wild” is speaking to Fanon’s treatise on decolonization, it Signifies a sentiment that runs through a unique diasporic cultural tradition.

While this project as a whole utilizes particular aspects of Gates’s theoretical framework from *The Signifying Monkey*, the discourse will deviate from his construction of African American literary criticism in order to better understand competing positions and prominent arguments in the field. With that said, his understanding of Signification provides the most complete and applicable framework for understanding continuity among contemporary African American cultural traditions. This chapter conflated the aural narrative of hip-hop music and the filmic language of hip-hop music videos in order to convey the interplay between the two mediums. The next chapter will focus solely on the works of video director, Hype Williams, and the way that a director can Signify upon hip-hop history and contemporary rap culture through the invention and implementation of a cinematic language specific to a particular time in hip-hop history.

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<sup>25</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 231.

## Chapter Two: “Knowledge Born, What’s the Science Baby?”: *Belly* and its Cultural Signification

Upon its release, Hype Williams’s 1998 “urban crime drama”,<sup>26</sup> *Belly*, received mixed reviews with many critics stating that the film privileged form over substance. *Belly*’s lackluster box office performance, coupled with production delays and poor budgeting, pushed Hype Williams out of feature filmmaking and back into directing music videos. While many film critics tend to dismiss (or disregard) his work for its “over stylized inner city angst,”<sup>27</sup> *Belly* merits attention and academic engagement for its influential editing techniques, textual signification and continued cultural resonance. Throughout the 1990s, Hype Williams created a unique music video aesthetic that dictated the creative output among hip-hop music video directors working for major record labels. As a full-length feature film, *Belly* presents the most thorough articulation of the 1990s hip-hop music video aesthetic. With its cinematographic homage to Hype Williams’s greater oeuvre—along with the conflation of the lead actors’ on-screen and off-screen personas—*Belly* provides a rich text through which we can better understand the visual articulation of Henry Louis Gates’s literary theory of Signification. This chapter aims to apply the styles of textual and formal analysis found in *The Signifying Monkey* to the interpretation of *Belly* while complicating the discourse through the implementation of oppositional frameworks posed by members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Van Gelder. 1998. “*Belly*; For Young Blacks, Decency vs. Crime.” *New York Times*, November 4.

<sup>27</sup> Mick LaSalle. 1998. “A Clumsy Film Debut, Williams’ ‘*Belly*’ Flops.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 4.

Hype Williams is viewed as a stylistic trailblazer who revolutionized narrative form in music videos and challenged earlier aesthetic traditions. Williams's early work is cited as one of the many catalysts in the commodification of the African American hip-hop artist. The Notorious BIG's 1995 music video, "Big Poppa", encapsulates Williams's effort to brand hip-hop's visual style; through the use of slow motion and split frames, Moët Champagne and Kangol Menswear are highlighted as Notorious BIG's nightclub necessities. The use of the split-screen juxtaposition of material goods, women, and rappers provided the catalyst for many major corporations to co-brand their products with the endorsement of hip-hop icons. The early commercial success of Williams coincided with the rise of hip-hop related programming on MTV and the initial public offering of Black Entertainment Television on the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>28</sup> MTV and BET developed a mutually beneficial relationship with Williams; Williams provided media entities with popular content to draw viewers and was provided with a platform to showcase his craft. Emerging hip-hop programming like MTV's "Yo! MTV Raps" and BET's "106<sup>th</sup> and Park" gave artists an outlet to visually articulate their music to millions of viewers. As the popularity of these programs continued to rise, the music videos began to reflect an increased production value. Out of this moment, Williams became the industry's leading director and denoted his work with a plethora of formal and textual elements.

BWP's (Bytches With Problems) 1991 single, "We Want Money", marked the directorial debut of Williams. Premiering on Yo! MTV Raps, the video drew criticism

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, Anthony Freitas, ed., *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 230-232.

for its promotion of childbirth for financial assistance but gained widespread popularity and remained on the program for five weeks. While Williams's signature stylistic flourishes are largely absent from this early work, the video does include a tracking shot that follows the female hip-hop duo through an ambiguous New York neighborhood. The sequence utilizes an audiovisual synch point where the word "Money" is emphasized both on the soundtrack and further highlighted visually through the use of jump cuts where the word occurs in the song. This may appear to be an observation of little importance but this stylistic tendency occurs throughout the entirety of Hype Williams's work. As his career progressed, his editing techniques evolved from the simple splicing of tracking shots to incorporate rhythmic cutting, superimpositions and dissolves. Williams' creative tendencies reflected the evolution of hip-hop as a whole; generally speaking, rap beats from the early 1990s contained slower tempos while the 2000's ushered in the proliferation computer-generated beats, which utilized a markedly faster BPM or beats per minute. As a pioneer of hip-hop music videos, Williams's work serves as a cornerstone in the understanding of contemporary hip-hop visual culture.

Gates's construction of Signifying as an African American tradition applicable to the subversion of Eurocentric theoretical cannons can also be applied to the cinematic modes of representation found in *Belly*. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates states:

Naming the black tradition's own theory of itself is to echo and rename other theories of literary criticism. Our task is not to reinvent our traditions as if they bore no relation to that tradition created and borne...by white men. Our writers used that impressive tradition to define themselves both with and against their concept of received order... We must do the same... to name our



tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify.<sup>29</sup>

Williams makes use of cultural Signification by incorporating specific narrative subtexts and various pieces of coded imagery throughout the film. From a stylistic perspective, *Belly* plays with aesthetic and narrative techniques utilized by prominent Hollywood directors. The film's opening monologue and introduction of characters mirrors Martin Scorsese's opening scene in *Goodfellas*. Within an industrial context, the casting of the film reflects the director's desire to play with notions of celebrity within hip-hop culture; the main actors in the film (Nas and DMX) carry cultural currency and thus, leave their own ideological imprint on the film. While *Belly* relies on a basic three-act narrative, the film weaves through self-contained vignettes that reflect the stylistic tendencies of Williams's music video work.

Following the opening sequence, it becomes readily apparent that Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* as well as Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* influenced the film's mode of storytelling and establishment of characters. Williams positions the viewer's perspective with the film's two protagonists, Bundy (DMX) and Sincere (Nas), through the continued use of voice-over monologues and diegetic dialogue between the two characters. Supporting cast members are introduced into the film's diegesis through voice-overs that explain the character's relationship to the protagonists. Using the two central characters as a bridge between locations, *Belly* moves from New York to Omaha to Kingston, Jamaica to Atlanta then finally back to New York for the film's conclusion. As Bundy and Sincere negotiate their

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<sup>29</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiii.

way through the various locations, they are confronted with the realities of their mortality and their position as cultural “Others” within the United States. Williams explores themes of diasporic identity and systemic inner-city violence through the contrasting perspectives of Sincere and Bundy.

### An African American Tradition of Signification

In Part Two of *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates pays close attention to Ishmael Reed’s articulation of the black experience through the pastiche of classic black narratives and self-references to Reed’s own literary devices. In his reading of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Gates offers a literary analysis that positions the Signifier (Reed) as the perpetuator of an amorphous black experience that cannot be defined:

...Reed’s fictions argue that the so-called black experience cannot be thought of as a fluid content to be poured into received and static containers. For Reed, it is the signifier that both shapes and defines any discrete signified—and it is the signifiers of the Afro-American tradition with whom Reed is concerned.<sup>30</sup>

Williams’s filmic language offers a new application of Gates’s literary analysis. As *Mumbo Jumbo* is “both a book about texts and a book of texts,”<sup>31</sup> *Belly* is a film about music videos and a film of music videos. Reed and Williams both operate as cultural Signifiers who attempt to articulate the malleability of the black experience in terms of literature and film.<sup>32</sup>

Gates’s use of intertextuality in discussing Reed’s parody of African American literature parallels Robert Stam’s use of the theory to investigate systems of

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<sup>30</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Reed’s attempt is undoubtedly more fruitful than Williams’s effort

signification in film. Gates and Stam approach intertextuality through Bakhtin's notions of the "Carnavalesque" and Dialogism. In his article, "From Realism To Intertextuality", Stam argues, "the contemporary film artist, within this conception, becomes the orchestrator, the amplifier of the ambient messages thrown up by all the series- literary, painterly, musical, cinematic, commercial and so forth."<sup>33</sup> Stam's construction of the filmmaker as an "amplifier of ambient messages" privileges Hype Williams as one whose medium can Signify onto a greater number of cultural objects. Positioning Reed and Williams as analogous to one another connects two unique moments in American history and thus, uncovers acts of Signification that reflect continuity in the tradition regardless of the medium.

Both Williams and Reed use naming techniques that conflate fictional characters with cultural traditions propagated by previous signifiers. For instance, Reed names the chief detective in his novel, Pa Pa La Bas. The name functions as a conflation of two Pan-African tricksters, the Haitian Papa Legba and the Afro-American La Bas. These trickster figures Signify onto a larger discourse regarding the relevance of Pan-African cultural traditions in understanding continuity among diasporic regions and urban centers. In a similar vein, Williams casts the rapper Method Man as an assassin, who enters the film halfway through the second act. The character's name is Shameek, a reference to the introduction of "7<sup>th</sup> Chamber" from the Wu-Tang Clan's debut album, *Enter the 36 Chambers*. Ghostface Killah<sup>34</sup> references Shameek in the song as an ode to their childhood friend from the 212

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Stam, ed., *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 205.

<sup>34</sup> A member of the Wu-Tang Clan

building of the Stapleton Housing Project<sup>35</sup> on Staten Island. As a former collaborator, Williams was intimately familiar with the structure and narrative of *Enter the 36 Chambers*; he directed two videos for singles off of the album.<sup>36</sup> As an act of cooperative Signification, Williams included Shameek's name as a textual reference to his previous work with Method Man and the rest of the Wu-Tang Clan.

In an additional layer of cooperative Signification, Williams's casting of Method Man reflects the cultural importance of the Wu-Tang clan as a whole. The rap group reflects the exchange between African American popular culture and Hong Kong martial arts films from the 1970s and 1980s. The group's name and first album reference Gordon Liu's 1983 film, *Shaolin and Wu Tang*. Through interludes containing dialogue from the film, *Enter the 36 Chambers* and the Wu-Tang Clan as a whole represent the cultural pastiche that Williams weaves throughout *Belly*.

Williams co-wrote *Belly* with Nas, whose stylistic imprint is vividly apparent throughout the film. The third act reflects the lyrics from the final verse of "One Love", a single from Nas's *Illmatic*. In a pivotal scene, Sincere returns to the Rosedale projects where he and Bundy grew up to talk with a "little shorty, a real loser type nigga with no hope for the future at all". Sincere shares a blunt with the twelve year old as the two discuss life as "soldiers". The scene expresses the same disenchantment with contemporary urban life as "One Love"; the dialogue from the

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<sup>35</sup> Alvin Blanco, *The Wu-Tang Clan and RZA: A Trip Through Hip Hop's 36 Chambers* (New York: Praeger, 2011), 20-22.

<sup>36</sup> "Can It All Be So Simple", "Wu-Tang Clan Ain't Nothin' To Fuck Wit/Shame On A Nigga"

film includes lyrics taken directly from the song.<sup>37</sup> “One Love” operates as a series of letters to Nas’s incarcerated friends. In reminiscing about their youth and discussing current life on the outside, Nas reflects on his own societal positioning and his inability to rise above inner city violence. In the final verse, Nas foreshadows a child’s incarceration as a critique of systemic cycles of violence and incarceration within New York’s housing projects.<sup>38</sup> The song focuses on the absence of hope and the futility of consciousness as a black male in 1990s inner city New York. Williams’s use of intertextuality in referencing Nas’s previous work emphasizes the film’s continued effort to index pivotal moments in hip-hop’s cultural history through cooperative acts of Signification. Nas performs the character of Sincere while reciting lyrics to a song written about his own societal woes growing up in the Queens Bridge Housing Projects. The Signifying acts in the sequence relate to Gerard Genette’s Transtextual categorization system. “One might speak of **Celebrity Intertextuality**, i.e. filmic situations where the presence of a film or television star or celebrity intellectual evokes a genre or cultural milieu.”<sup>39</sup> Using Nas and his body of work as its cultural Signifier,<sup>40</sup> the scene reflects hip-hop’s transition from a purely explicative medium to a new narrative form. Applying filmic language,

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<sup>37</sup> “I took the L when he passed it, this little bastard- Keeps me blasted and starts talking mad shit- I had to school him, told him don’t let niggas fool him cause when the pistol blows the one that’s murdered be the cool one”, *Illmatic*, 3:30-4:32. Produced by Q-Tip.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010), 144-146.

<sup>39</sup> Stam, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 206, 207.

<sup>40</sup> *Illmatic* had multiple layers of signification; instead of an A/B side album pressing, it was divided into 40th Side North and 41<sup>st</sup> Side South. Additionally, the album art was a direct reference to the Howard Hanger Trio’s album cover for 1974’s *A Child is Born*.

Williams argues that Nas and *Illmatic* serve as an ideological bridge between earlier narrative traditions in William Jelani Cobb's definition of golden age New York hip-hop<sup>41</sup> and a new, self-reflexive mode of storytelling referenced by Michael Eric Dyson.<sup>42</sup>

While Nas's "One Love" scene reflects the historical importance of *Illmatic*, it also comments on the visual mechanics of hip-hop music videos as a whole. The scene operates as a vignette that deconstructs the popularized editing techniques of late 1990s hip-hop music videos. As Ishmael Reed imitates the rhetorical structure of Chester Himes's detective novels<sup>43</sup> to Signify upon the narrative strategies used by modernist African American authors, Williams utilizes cutting techniques and color palettes common in music videos of the period (including his own) in order to Signify upon the specific visual composition that defines hip-hop music videos. Williams consciously omits rap music from the scene; a slow tempo jazz ballad plays as Sincere navigates his way through the courtyards of the housing project. Despite the lack of a hip-hop rhythm, the sequence includes a tracking shot with rapid dissolves and a bluish tint. The scene's absence of action or hip-hop music creates an aural vacuum, which allows Williams to articulate his interpretation of hip-hop's filmic language without commenting on any particular musical elements.

While the Nas's "One Love" scene is devoid of hip-hop music, the addition of a jazz ballad serves as an additional layer of cooperative Signification. Nas's father,

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<sup>41</sup> William Jelani Cobb, *To The Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 113.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Himes's *Hot Day, Hot Night* aka *Blind Man with a Pistol*

Olu Dara, played the coronet in the chorus of “One Love”. The music playing in the scene reflects Nas’s cultural heritage while also commenting on the position of jazz as a genre of music reserved for America’s bourgeois. Williams repositions jazz in order to articulate its importance in the development of an African American urban identity.

Following the opening heist scene, the film’s protagonists return to the home of Bundy. As the characters situate themselves in the living room, Bundy turns on the television and instructs Sincere and Mark 2 (Hassan Johnson) to watch a scene from Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*. The group observes a boy with bunny ears playing dead as a group of other boys hurl insults and pretend to shoot him with cap guns. Referring back to Genette’s Transtextual categorization system, the positioning of *Gummo* within the diegesis could be considered an instance of metatextuality or “the critical relation between one text and another, whether the commented text is explicitly cited or only silently evoked.”<sup>44</sup> As Bundy, Mark 2, and Sincere watch the simulated death of a white child, the audience is asked to question its own relationship to representations of black on black violence throughout the film. As a film with its own racial politics,<sup>45</sup> Hype Williams places *Gummo* within the diegesis in order to incorporate the film’s ideology and thereby Signify upon the discourse regarding representations of race and violence in film.

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Stam, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 208-209.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “Indecipherable Films: Teaching *Gummo*,” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 1 (2007): 112-115.



Nasir Jones and Hassan Johnson, *Belly*, special ed. Blu-Ray. Directed by Hype Williams. Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2008. Courtesy of Big Dog Films.

### The Absence of Feminine Positions in the Contemporary Urban Aesthetic

Despite the film's attempt to represent the contemporary African American urban experience, *Belly* does little to investigate the positioning of women within the space. The film's two central female characters, Kisha and Tione, receive the majority of their screen time while interacting with their male partners. Through the sexualized nature of their representation, the two women are objectified by the film's plot and, therefore, by the film's spectator. Even in scenes where the two women are interacting with one another, the topic of discussion continually centers around their relationships with the male protagonists. In her essay, *Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context*, Hazel Carby discusses the black woman's body as it pertained to black social institutions within urban environments during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:



The need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also apperception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class... White and black intellectuals used and elaborated this discourse so that when they referred to the association between black women and vice, or immoral behavior, their references carried connotations of other crises of the black urban environment... Thus the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race...; as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.<sup>46</sup>

Carby asserts that representations of black women are denied in order to affirm and maintain a unified black identity that privileges masculinity and thus, perpetuates sexism within black cultural traditions. *Belly* maintains Carby's construction of black masculinity through its omission of African American women from the urban landscape; the two female characters reflect the privileged position of black masculinity within the film. In moments of self-defense, the film places an emphasis on the vulnerability of Tione and Kisha, citing the absence of their male counterparts as reason for extreme panic. Additionally, the two women align themselves with the ideologies of their partners rather than developing their own, unique subjectivity. Tione and Sincere feel ambivalent towards their own material wealth and the violence needed to obtain it. Kesha operates as the female iteration of Tommy; she embraces the violent nature of her societal existence and perpetuates Tommy's nihilistic position.

In her essay, *The Blackness of Theory*, Carby outlines her issues with Gates's formation of a male dominated African American literary and theoretical cannon:

He [Gates] is silent about the substantial body of black feminist criticism on the work of Hurston, Reed and Walker, and the very significant theoretical interventions by Deborah McDowell, Hortense Spillers, Barbara Smith, Valerie Simth and Mary Helen Washington among others that have

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<sup>46</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 741-742.

constituted a critical field during the last decade. Is it possible that, like Richard Wright, black feminist critics and black feminist criticism must remain on the margins of the formation of blackness?<sup>47</sup>

Carby continues to argue that critical discourses in African American studies exclude the positions of black feminists. In Carby's estimation, black women operate on the margins of both African American culture and African American cultural criticism. My textual analysis of *Belly* becomes complicated by the notion of perpetuating a male-dominated field of criticism and creative output; it is an act of unmotivated Signification caused by my proximity relationship to *The Signifying Monkey* and *Belly*. Nonetheless, it is an important position to note in attempting to objectively present the ongoing gender politics discourse in African American studies.

#### The Dueling Ideologies of *Belly's* Conclusion

From a cultural studies perspective, the most critically divisive portion of the film comes at its conclusion. As the two protagonists end their business partnership, their safety within the community quickly begins to deteriorate; federal agents apprehend Bundy while Sincere is shot outside of a neighborhood barbershop. Following the upheaval, Bundy and Sincere respond to their circumstances with directly opposing ideologies. After being coaxed into assassinating an African American church leader by the FBI, Bundy repents and joins Reverend Saviour's ministry. Saviour functions as an ideological representation of an Anti-Essentialist<sup>48</sup> position within contemporary America. He argues that the path to "truth" is through

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<sup>47</sup> Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 235.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Phillips, "What's wrong with essentialism?" *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 1 (2010): 47-60.

the acceptance of the racialized power dynamic within the United States. In order to overcome oppression, Saviour believes that African Americans must embrace social circumstances and rise above them as a collective group. In his acceptance of the reverend's sentiment, Bundy welcomes the flawed nature of his existence and recognizes his positioning in the United States as an ethnic and cultural "Other."

In the film's closing voice over, Sincere discusses his enchantment with life in Africa. While he fails to mention the exact country that his family now lives, he exuberantly illustrates how his move to Africa was a return home. Sincere's pilgrimage to Africa ideologically signifies Paul Gilroy's "Anti-Anti-Essentialist" position. Rather than submitting to the institutionalized racism of the United States, Sincere and his family decide to embrace the Black Nationalist position and return to the Motherland:

The usually mystical "Africentrism" which animates this position perceives no problem in the internal differentiation of black cultures, any fragmentation in the cultural output of Africans at home and abroad is only apparent rather than real and cannot therefore forestall the power of the underlying racial aesthetic and its political correlates.<sup>49</sup>

The "unifying, organic phenomenon" of blackness that Gilroy writes about is embodied in *Belly's* conclusion. Gilroy argues that specifics are not necessary when discussing a return to the Motherland; the theoretical concept of a unified Africa creates a "powerful, populist affirmation of black culture" rather than a "pejorative and arrogant deconstruction of blackness."<sup>50</sup> Sincere and his family choose to

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993), 99-100.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 102.

relinquish their position as strangers<sup>51</sup> in their native country to return to the land of their ancestors. Bundy remains in the United States, understanding himself as an African American while Sincere views himself as a displaced member of the African diaspora.

The ideological positioning of the two protagonists mirrors the actors' musical oeuvre at the time of the film's release. Throughout the late 1990s, DMX garnered the reputation as one of the hardest rappers in the game. With billboard topping songs like "Rough Ryderz Anthem" and "Where the Hood At", DMX provided a hyper-masculine African American subjectivity that provided listeners with violent urban fantasies including homicide, male dominated sexual fantasies and wealth through illicit activities. Much like his character, DMX projected a nihilistic view of contemporary urban life. Following the establishment of their heroin distribution network in Omaha, Bundy explains his relationship to society and America's law enforcement apparatus as Sincere listens:

I'm gonna stop grinding when I'm dead... You gotta stop reading those fuckin' books... Your shorty can't eat no fuckin' books...Faggot cops can't touch me; I'm out here smoking weed, speeding, all that dawg. Fuck that, that's me! Untouchable! I get it how I live it!

The cultural enigma of DMX permeates the film's diegesis and thus, positions his ideologies in a way that supports the Anti-Essentialist position.

### *Belly's Continued Cultural Resonance*

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates discusses the need for a unique African American literary tradition to exist through the subversion of frameworks created

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<sup>51</sup> Katherin Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus* (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 72-74.

by the Eurocentric theoretical cannon. In creating an oppositional body of influential texts, the tradition can be built upon and revised. Thus, Signifying upon the future works. Williams' oeuvre functions in a capacity similar to what Gates describes, using the cinematic techniques and tropes of the establishment, Williams continues to inform popular culture through visual Signification in each of his works.

Contemporary hip-hop culture Signifies upon many of the textual and formal elements found throughout *Belly*. The rapper, Smoke DZA, uses an artistic rendering of Tommy's house in the cover art for his album, *Substance Abuse*. The Brooklyn rap collective, The Flatbush Zombies, released a single entitled "Belly" that samples dialogue from the film to create a unified narrative structure between the song and the film.

With over 1.6 million likes on Facebook, *Belly's* social media presence continues to Signify upon contemporary hip-hop culture and rap history as a whole. With daily posts about social issues affecting African American populations nationwide, the unverified account utilizes the cultural currency of the film to articulate the relevance and importance of hip-hop as a contemporary mode of storytelling for African American communities throughout the United States. The page continues to share articles about hip-hop's response to the Ferguson riots and the death of Eric Garner while also highlighting uplifting stories about rappers giving back to their community. The page reflects the revisionist aspects of Signification and the continued effort to illustrate cultural continuity across platforms and mediums.

### Chapter Three: Signification in the Digital Age

In March of 2014, Georgetown University sold out its largest auditorium with a roundtable discussion hosted by African American Studies scholar, Michael Eric Dyson, and the rapper, Nas. The conversation spans over an hour and a half with the two men touching on a wide range of topics including the state of hip-hop as well as Nas's major literary influences. Following the event's conclusion, the video recording of the discussion was posted on Youtube and recently passed 150,000 views. While this isn't the first time that Nas participated in a panel discussion at a prestigious university, this particular instance reflects an attempt by Michael Eric Dyson to apply the same intellectual rigor used in literary analysis to the narrative modes found in hip-hop. Throughout the conversation, Dyson draws linguistic and narrative comparisons between African American modernist authors like Ralph Ellison and Nas. The continued barrage of comparative analysis provides a rich dialogue to parse through while also supplying an updated iteration of Gates's Signifyin (g) framework. This chapter will attempt to negotiate the theoretical complications imposed upon the formal analysis of hip-hop in the digital age with special attention paid to the complexities of Signifyin (g) acts in today's hip-hop music video production.

#### What Does Signifyin (g) Mean to Dyson?

At moments throughout their conversation, Nas appears to operate as a rhetorical device for Dyson's assertions regarding the academic legitimacy of hip-hop. In one instance, the moderator asks Nas to discuss his relationship with

America's prison industrial complex and its effect on his creative output. As Nas blends personal anecdotes with his theoretical approach to understanding incarceration amongst ethnic minorities, Dyson interjects in order to contextualize Nas's statement in terms of a larger discourse in African American studies. The localized stories of unjustified arrests and institutionally imposed poverty discussed by Nas operate as an entry point for Dyson to articulate the narrative modes of cultural representation within the music of Nas. Using the comments made by Nas, Dyson situates himself as an interpreter of an interpreter. While the music and music videos of Nas signify upon particular cultural traditions rooted in the African American urban experience, Dyson's thorough analysis of hip-hop and hip-hop culture reflects the continuation of the Signifyin (g) tradition developed by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*.

As an interpreter of cultural texts, Dyson must engage with the Signifyin (g) techniques inherent in the visual traditions of hip-hop as well. The music video for Nas's song, "One Love", reflects the epistolary narrative of the single; the song is composed of letters written between Nas and his incarcerated, non-related "brother". The video begins with a young African American male running through the Queens Bridge housing projects and eventually being arrested at gunpoint by white undercover detectives while the song's baseline plays. The video then cuts to the same young man opening his mail inside of a prison yard telling all of the surrounding inmates that he received a letter from Nas. Following the initial prison sequence, the video presents Nas standing at twilight in Queens's Astoria Park reciting the song's opening verse. Throughout the video, jump cuts denote the

movement in and out of jail; Nas serves as an interpreter and recorder of inner city life for his friend who cannot experience life outside of prison. The relationship between impoverished urban life and incarceration are visually conflated in the juxtaposition of Nas and his imprisoned friend. Through formal characteristics (i.e. making prison sequences black and white and using sepia tones for flashbacks), the video accentuates the song's bleak and despondent tone while providing a visual text to construct a more tangible and humanistic story. Nas's music videos highlight aspects of his songs that add more context to the cultural circumstances surrounding each lyrical text.

When Dyson reflects on the epistolary narrative of "One Love", he does not mention the visual poetics of the music video; he focuses on the communal struggle of inner city life presented through Nas's fictional correspondence with an incarcerated friend. Dyson's analysis of Nas's inventive narrative device works to further perpetuate the academic study of hip-hop but in his effort to canonize the work of Nas, Dyson engages in a number of Eurocentric literary traditions that Gates opposes in *The Signifying Monkey*. In the preface to *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates states:

Europeans and Americans neither invented literature and its theory nor have a monopoly on its development. Let us hope that the gradual erosion of those nationalistic presuppositions that are amply evident in traditional schemes of categorization of the academic study of literature will serve as a model for the abolitionistic presuppositions that are amply evident in traditional schemes of categorization of the academic study of literature will serve as a mode for the abolition of racist and sexist presuppositions in literary studies as well.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xiv-xv.



Dyson's analysis expounds on theories specific to the black tradition of literary criticism but stops short of fully realizing the framework's potential. Rather than pushing the discourse into new territory with reference to the visually significant work of Nas, Dyson relishes in the lyrical Signification of hip-hop. In order to erode the traditional framework used to interpret hip-hop, the lyrical analysis of rap must be accompanied by a theoretically rigorous examination of rap music videos and the online culture that mediates them.

In the event's closing moments, a Georgetown undergraduate asks Dyson about the relevance of Southern Trap<sup>53</sup> and Midwest Drill<sup>54</sup> music in academic discussions regarding hip-hop culture. While the question aimed to initiate debate over the intellectual legitimacy of particular sub-genres of rap, Dyson's response illuminates the shortcomings of contemporary frameworks for understanding hip-hop culture.

Trap music to me, as all forms of indigenous, local, regional music have to be paid attention to... the most slept on artist of all time, Scarface, was making trap music before trap music. Think about it, "Trap"- music. Think about Tupac saying, "I'm trapped" on his first album; the beats are emblematic of an existential crisis. When I think trap music, I think regional culture... Hip-hop is so deep and so profound... it is so full of words. "In the beginning there was the word" ... That Logos is the seminal artistic force that creates a universe. Density of literacy is what characterizes rap culture at its best.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout his impassioned response, Dyson continues to reflect on the importance of "words" in rap culture. Lyrics are undoubtedly at the creative core of hip-hop but music videos and other visual devices provide additional layers of meaning and

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<sup>53</sup> Hip-Hop movement originating in Atlanta, Georgia that is noted for its ties to gang violence and the sale of illegal drugs.

<sup>54</sup> Offshoot of Trap, popularized by rappers in Chicago

<sup>55</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, Georgetown University, April 1, 2014.

Signification. When discussing Trap music, Dyson Signifies upon previous hip-hop artists who influenced the sub-genre but neglects to discuss the work of contemporary Trap artists. Additionally, he conflates the regionalized milieu of Trap with specific lyrical tendencies attributed to the “indigenous” music. Trap is noted for its unique beat breaks and lyrical rhythm but is equally recognized for the amateur aesthetic found in many of the genre’s music videos. Much like Nas, Trap music is used as a rhetorical device for Dyson to explicate his notions of hip-hop as a culturally specific linguistic art form.

Throughout the latter half of the conversation, Dyson reflects on the nihilistic and self-defeating lyrics of Chicago based teen Drill rapper, Chief Keef (Keith Cozart). He claims that the central themes found in Keef’s music are indicative of systemic social issues regarding the denial of living wages to inner city residents as well as America’s prison industrial complex. While Dyson’s assertions are poignant, they build upon the same perspectives; the artists and music he describes can be used interchangeably with his arguments. In order to fully understand the uniqueness of a particular rapper’s sociocultural perspective, new modes of representation must be incorporated into the discourse. As Carol Vernallis states in her 2004 handbook, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*: “Sometimes a strong image can work in tandem with a feature of the song to create a musical-visual hook. These can possess charm and power and seem to hold some secret about the [song].”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Culture* (NY: Columbia University Press), 156.

### Tracing Imbedded Traditions in Hip-Hop's Video Culture

Before venturing any further into the textual and formal analysis of contemporary hip-hop videos, allow me to trace the economic and ideological relationship between rap music and its video culture. In a 1999 Los Angeles Times article, columnist Emory Holmes II characterized hip-hop's economic and cultural transformation by stating: "Even though hip-hop has emerged in the U.S. as one of the dominant art forms of the '90s, it may be hard for some viewers to believe that there is any musical virtue, much less any art or culture."<sup>57</sup> Holmes credits the creative sensibilities of video directors in attracting the attention of the ethnically and culturally heterogeneous Generation X and Y. Paraphrasing UPN's president of entertainment, Holmes goes onto write, "the world has just woken up to the fact that hip-hop has replaced rock, pop... and virtually any other popular music...as being the defining music of... the new kids coming up, buying records and creating trends and pop culture."<sup>58</sup>

Holmes argues that hip-hop's watershed moment occurred in the fall of 1999. Throughout the mid 1990's, The Source Music Awards made headlines for brawls between record labels and palpable animosity between rappers from the East and West Coasts. Despite its reputation, The Source Music Awards debuted on network television for the first time in 1999. Advertising spots on UPN during the award ceremony garnered \$60,000 per 30-second spot, making it UPN's most lucrative

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<sup>57</sup> Emory Holmes II, "Hip-Hop Goes Prime Time With Source Music Awards," Los Angeles Times, August 20, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Emory Holmes II, "Hip-Hop Goes Prime Time With Source Music Awards."

programming block in the network's history (at the time).<sup>59</sup> Ad sales driven by global brands like Nike, Coca-Cola and Levi Strauss & Co. led Holmes to argue that hip-hop culture's entry into the popular consciousness of America's youth was due in large part, to the popularity of hip-hop's consumable visual media.

Hip-hop's rapid progression into America's mainstream continues to affect the genre's creative output both musically and visually. Despite the shift to online distribution, the production design and cinematography of today's hip-hop music videos bear a striking resemblance to the wildly popular rap music videos of the late 1990's. The cinematic language established by directors like Hype Williams and Dr. Dre<sup>60</sup> created a specific filmic tradition that continues to denote hip-hop's transcendence into the mainstream while also Signifyin (g) upon rap's position as an African American cultural practice. The cinematic language and textual elements used by hip-hop video directors captured a period of financial and social excess in American society; the tableaux of scantily clad women and exotic automobiles paired with tracking shots of rappers maneuvering through their expansive estates mark an ideologically important position in hip-hop history that continues to be Signified upon.

Even with a relatively low financial barrier to entry and a wider variety of perspectives, rap videos uploaded to blogs and Youtube continue to Signify upon the same consumer-laden cinematic language of earlier directors. Regardless of the budget, formal and textual elements remain present in today's digitally consumed

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<sup>59</sup> Emory Holmes II, "Hip-Hop Goes Prime Time With Source Music Awards."

<sup>60</sup> While most known for his skill as a beat producer, Dr. Dre served as Death Row Records in house music video director.

hip-hop music videos. The use of these elements signifies a specific historical moment when hip-hop proudly gained financial bargaining power with established corporations (i.e. media conglomerates and record labels). The continued implementation of these production techniques illustrates an understanding of hip-hop's visual and economic history but this mode of production also reflects a certain degree of indifference towards hip-hop's well-documented promotion of violence and misogyny. In her 2008 poem, "Hip Hop Hegemony", Janell Hobson expresses her discontent with hip-hop's integration into the mainstream.

Wake up, sisters (and brothers)  
 Take back the mike  
 And take back the night  
 And take back the right  
 To rhyme  
 Unmolested and uncoopted  
 By corporate controlled media  
 Fueling machines of politics, war and music  
 ipod tunes booming out soundtracks  
 in the ears of American soldiers  
 stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq  
 stultifying and horrifying  
 woman-hating lyrics  
 laced to dull bases and beats<sup>61</sup>

Hobson dedicates her poem to the woman who "reported being raped...by Duke Lacrosse team players, who hired her for \$400 to dance at their... party... because she resembled the hip-hop music video dancer that they had seen on Viacom-owned TV."<sup>62</sup> According to Hobson, the "coopting" of hip-hop by America's "corporate

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<sup>61</sup> Janell Hobson, "Hip-Hop Hegemony," *Meridians*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Representin': Women, Hip-Hop and Popular Music (2008) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). 15-18

<sup>62</sup> Janell Hobson, "Hip-Hop Hegemony," 15.

controlled media” has led to the perpetuation of hip-hop’s least productive qualities. Rather than being a mode of Signifyin (g) within the rich history of African American cultural traditions, it functions as an ideological tool of the oppressor, its only value coming from its ability to tyrannize other marginalized groups.

Hobson’s impressionistic critique stands in direct opposition to hip-hop’s contemporary video culture. Rather than embracing hip-hop’s economic viability, “Hip Hop Hegemony” likens rap music to a cultural product sold as a commodity for mass consumption. Hobson’s displeasure echoes the sentiments of Adolph Reed; they both believe that America’s neoliberal economy utilizes “mass industrial processes”<sup>63</sup> to coopt African American cultural traditions while citing the need for multiculturalism. Hobson draws on United States foreign policy during Operation: Iraqi Freedom to contextualize the dangerous reappropriation of African American culture.

gun shots keeping rhythm  
 to the bang bang boogie  
 up jumped the boogie  
 to the boogie of the rhythm of the beat  
                                   beat  
                                   beat  
 sounds of a cold and villainous heart  
 targeting a sand nigger  
           who’s not quite the real nigger  
 but close enough to trigger  
 a familiar rage and fear in a wigger  
 placed overseas by the bigger  
                                   powers that be  
 spreading, hatred, intolerance  
                                   and a new age empire  
 of torture

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<sup>63</sup> Adolph Reed, “*Django Unchained*, or, *The Help*: How “Cultural Politics” Is Worse Than No Politics at All, and Why” Emory University: Nonsite.org (February 2013).

can somebody say Abu Ghraib<sup>64</sup>

In this stanza, Hobson uses rhyming language associated with hip-hop to conflate the coopted messages of the music with the unchecked aggression and oppression of the United States military under the Bush administration. Throughout each verse, Hobson's critiques oscillate between the "War on Terror" and the perceived destruction of hip-hop's earlier intentions. To Hobson, hip-hop is no longer a cultural expression from a marginalized population; it has become a part of America's cultural hegemony.

Imbedded within Hobson's critique is a conflation of media that synthesizes Carol Vernallis's notion of music videos as cultural products that we "experience in relation to other media."<sup>65</sup> By virtue of providing visual context to the music, the formal and textual elements of the music video "color our musical understanding in significant ways."<sup>66</sup> Hobson's understanding of contemporary hip-hop is colored through her interpretation of its visual form broadcasted on cable television. Hobson uses hip-hop rhyming patterns to disavow "the mechanical noise... emanating from BET."<sup>67</sup> The title of the poem is "Hip Hop Hegemony" and is dedicated to the woman raped by Duke lacrosse players because "she resembled the hip-hop music video dancer that they had seen on Viacom-owned TV."<sup>68</sup> Hobson's critique is incredibly relevant and thought provoking but the body of evidence she cites relates more directly to the purposes of this thesis. Her use of hip-hop rhyming

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<sup>64</sup> Janell Hobson, "Hip-Hop Hegemony," 15-16.

<sup>65</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video* 184-185.

<sup>66</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> Janell Hobson, "Hip-Hop Hegemony," 17.

<sup>68</sup> Janell Hobson, "Hip-Hop Hegemony," 15.

patterns paired with references to textual elements of hip-hop music videos proves that rap videos perpetuate and reflect the ideologies found in the music that they represent. Furthermore, Hobson's poem blends the societal influence of rap music and music videos, which in turn proves that the academic study of contemporary hip-hop is incomplete without a close examination of hip-hop's visual culture. With this understanding, lets revisit Chief Keef.

### The Case of Chief Keef

Chief Keef's debut single entitled "I Don't Like" became an Internet sensation through the visceral imagery of the song's accompanying music video. The video depicts Keef, sixteen at the time, on house arrest performing the song with fellow members of Glo Gang (a Chicago set of the Bloods). Shot in a cinema vérité style, the camera's motivated gaze places emphasis on the group's communal assertions of masculinity (i.e. brandishing hand guns, "throwing up" gang signs, blowing marijuana smoke into the camera lens). The formal style of the music video resembles the symmetrical editing of Jean Rouch's ethnofiction film, *Les Maîtres Fous*. The video begins with the young men socializing in the living room of Cozart's grandmother's house; the camera pans around the room emphasizing the casual atmosphere. As the song's first verse begins, the young men stand up, remove their shirts, dance and sing along. Much like the narrative arc of *Le Maîtres Fous*, the group is presented as socially normal but through the use of a jump cut and sync sound, the viewer is immediately transported to a representation of a trance state where the participants are fully engaged in a group ritual, performing for the camera. Rouch's energetic filming style draws in the film's subjects as active



participants in the creation and representation of culture. “For Rouch, whose project is inspired by notions of happiness, thrives in the shadows between darkness and light, endlessly disrupting the categories by which intellectuals conventionally seek to explain...the world.”<sup>69</sup> Notions of happiness are not reflected in the camera work of “I Don’t Like” but the director, DGainz, undoubtedly disrupts hip-hop music video conventions through bridging amateur aesthetics with industry tropes while also revealing the performative nature of masculinity within the context of a hip-hop video production.

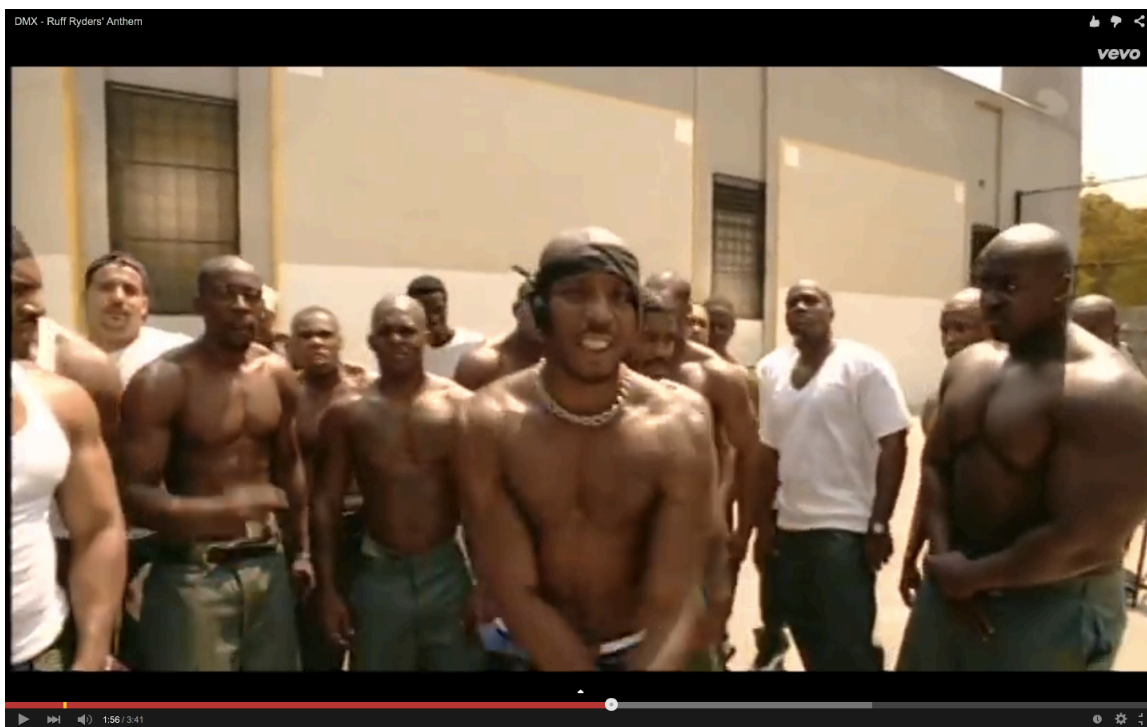


Chief Keef, “I Don’t Like,” viewed on Vevo. Directed by DGainz. Chicago, IL: Glo Gang Records, 2012.

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<sup>69</sup> Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye*, “Anthropological vision,” Cambridge University Press, 104.

Inside the vérité style of filmmaking lies formal and textual elements that reflect the hip-hop music video tradition established by late 1990's directors. The lyrics and visual aesthetics of "I Don't Like" draw on the widely popular, hyper masculine "posse cut" style of rapping and filmmaking made famous by DMX. As mentioned in the previous chapter, DMX became wildly popular for his "thug" bravado and violent lyrics. The video for his magnum opus, "Rough Ryders Anthem", cuts between scenes in a prison yard with shirtless men huddled around DMX and a motorcycle gang converging on a Bronx street corner. As one of Island Def Jam's premier artists, DMX received a lavish production budget for the title track from his debut studio album, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*.



DMX, "Rough Ryders Anthem," viewed on Vevo. Directed by J. Jesses Smith. New York, NY: Island Def Jam 2000.

Despite the disparity in production costs, Keef and DMX utilize many of the same cinematic tropes to assert the authenticity of their song's narrative. Whether it be in a prison yard or a living room, both artists strive visually and aurally to articulate a markedly anti-bourgeois sentiment. The wide shots of the rappers with their male counterparts reflect a collectivist mentality and a visual dispersion of the artist's wealth and notoriety. Both artists reject visual assertions of wealth in favor of an anti-establishment male dominated rallying call. DMX and Chief Keef remain in the center of the frame as to display the universality of their respective narratives while also denoting their position as the video's sole interpreter of hip-hop's Signifyin (g) tradition.

The visual and narrative similarities between "I Don't Like" and "Rough Ryders Anthem" are uncanny but the divergent industrial contexts of the videos reflect hip-hop's cultural shift in the digital age. "I Don't Like" premiered on the content aggregation sites, World Star HipHop and Vimeo. "Rough Ryders Anthem" aired on cable television (i.e. MTV's TRL programming block and BET's 106<sup>th</sup> and Park) and thus, followed a strict set of content restrictions and production requirements. All perceived vulgarity was edited out of the video and certain scenes with references to gunplay were also omitted from the television cut. The Internet along with the proliferation of relatively inexpensive video recording equipment allows rappers to disregard television censorship protocol and post anything that they believe will attract viewers. As previously mentioned, the elimination of financial and distribution barriers has led to a more diverse cross section of narratives within contemporary hip-hop culture but the availability of new digital

platforms blurs the lines between the fictional diegesis of hip-hop videos and their real world implications.

After “I Don’t Like” gained global notoriety, Chief Keef’s parole officer found the video online, resulting in a six-month stay at a youth correctional facility. Chief Keef’s situation illustrates the contradictory nature of contemporary hip-hop stardom; rap labels place a premium on street credibility but perceived “narrative authenticity” may lead to incarceration. “I Don’t Like” serves as just one example of the countless music videos that populate sites like World Star Hip-hop. For young hip-hop artists, the shock value and amateur aesthetic of a debut music video paired with formal techniques attributed to previous directors can authenticate a particular narrative and persona. Young rappers must prove they understand the communal struggle of impoverished urban life.

In an interview with *The Source* magazine, World Star Hip-hop’s founder, Lee Odenat, referred to the site as the “CNN of the ghetto”; the juxtaposition of amateur street fighting videos and music videos creates a space where violence is conflated with hip-hop as a musical genre. While violence and hip-hop have been inextricably linked for decades, the visual relationship between the two on a digital interface complicates the discourse. These problematic issues cause sites like World Star Hip-hop to receive criticism for the promotion of violence and gang activity. In a blog post for *The Gothamist*, John Del Signore, refers to World Star Hip-hop as “an Internet cesspool that’s cashed in big on senseless fight videos. The site’s popularity has created a... voyeuristic feedback loop, in which disassociated bystanders immediately videotape violent incidents and act as if they’re already watching a

video on the Internet.”<sup>70</sup> Signore’s observation is founded but his engagement with the site’s content is absent of sociocultural context. He doesn’t address the causes of a “voyeuristic feedback loop” and he neglects to discuss the music videos found on the site. Despite the criticism levied against World Star and its competitors, hip-hop video blogs continue to provide a critical point of entry for the music videos of aspiring rappers.

#### Critical Implications of Perceived Narrative Authenticity

The conflation between real world violence and reenactments or insinuations of violent activity in music videos complicates the way in which Signifyin (g) is understood in hip-hop videos. Throughout my thesis, modes of Signification have reflected an understanding of historical context, young rappers and video directors Signify upon previous works that influence their own creative development. The emergence of the Internet and video blogs shifts the way that we understand Signification in hip-hop. Rather than newcomers Signifyin (g) upon older stylistic tendencies and traditions, veteran rappers use the cultural cache and perceived authenticity of young rappers to inject a renewed sense of street credibility into their own narrative. This theoretical reversal in Signification creates a toxic environment for aspiring rappers. To gain notoriety amongst established artists, rappers must display their relationship to “the street” and the most effective way to do that is through the production of amateur music videos depicting the authenticity of a particular narrative. The effort to prove authenticity creates an

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<sup>70</sup> John Del Signore, “Police Seek 3 Men for Beating L Train Rider Who Scolded Them for Spitting,” *The Gothamist*. November 16, 2011.  
[http://gothamist.com/2011/11/16/police\\_search\\_for\\_men\\_in\\_beating\\_of.php](http://gothamist.com/2011/11/16/police_search_for_men_in_beating_of.php)

endless feedback loop littered with videos promoting a lifestyle opposed by critics like Janell Hobson.

The reversal of Signification inherent in modern hip-hop videos demonstrates the theoretical limitations of *The Signifying Monkey* when used to interpret the culture of digital media. Written in 1989, *The Signifying Monkey* reflects on previous traditions and the use of narrative intertextuality to reference prolific authors in African American literary history. When writing on Alice Walker's use of intertextuality to Signify upon the rhetorical strategies of Zora Neale Hurston, Gates writes:

The written representation of [the] voice is a rewriting of the speaking voice that Hurston created for her protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Walker, in this brilliant act of grounding herself in the tradition by Signifyin (g) upon Hurston's rhetorical strategy, tropes Hurston's trope by "capping" (metalepsis) and inverts Hurston's effect of creating an invisible writing that speaks, by creating an invisible speaking voice that can only write! The explication of the trope of the Talking Book enables us to witness the extent of intertextuality and presupposition at work in the first discrete period in Afro-American literary history.<sup>71</sup>

The example Gates uses to explain intertextuality simply does not relate to the way in which Signification occurs in contemporary video culture. His use of "Metalepsis" to explain Walker's "troping" of Hurston's rhetorical strategy implies a historically important technique being applied to a new context. Gates's theoretical framework relies on an author's use of previous African American literary techniques to Signify upon the historical traditions he frames throughout the text. One can draw a parallel between literary techniques and hip-hop music video cinematography but the

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<sup>71</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 131.

application of intertextuality to his literary analysis reflects an inverted framework that lacks an understanding of the Internet's digital ecosystem.

In Chapter Two, Gates's notion of intertextuality is used to analyze the casting of Nas and DMX in *Belly*. This example of intertextuality emphasizes Williams's respect for and understanding of hip-hop history while also Signifyin (g) upon Nas and DMXs' positions as interpreters of specific elements of African American urban culture. While important, this method does not reflect the inversion of Signification used by established hip-hop artists to denote their continued relevance. A new mode of Signification must be developed to fully investigate the non-linear modes of representation and Signification within digital hip-hop culture.

In a 2013 music video promoting his upcoming album, *My Name Is My Name*, Pusha T includes a single shot of himself with Chief Keef in a recording studio. The three-second cameo appears in the song's final thirty seconds and contrasts with the rest of the video. Pusha T recites each verse to "Numbers On The Board" while on Parisian rooftops but as the beat fades out, Chief Keef appears alongside Pusha T. As a member of the rap group, The Clipse, Pusha T and his biological brother, Malice, were known as hip-hop's "preeminent drug rappers"<sup>72</sup> throughout the mid 2000's. After the group disbanded in 2010, Pusha T signed to Kanye West's label, GOOD Music. Despite being ten years removed from the drug dealing lifestyle depicted in his albums with The Clipse, Pusha T continues to rap about his early struggles living in a Virginia Beach housing project. In order to project a continued understanding of

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<sup>72</sup> Ralphie Bristout, "Clipse's *Hell Hath No Fury*: By the Numbers," XXL, Nov. 28, 2011. <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2011/11/clipse%E2%80%99s-hell-hath-no-fury-by-the-numbers/>

“street life”, Pusha T positions Chief Keef within the text of his music video. Rather than Pusha T providing a seal of approval or co-sign for the young rapper, Keef appears in the video to denote the relevance and authenticity of Pusha T’s narrative. This reversal of Signification circumvents all traditional frameworks used to interpret African American cultural traditions.

Dyson’s analysis of Chief Keef and his music lacks the critical depth necessary to understand the systemic issues affecting Chicago’s inner city youth as well as the problematic cycle of violent narratives perpetuated in contemporary hip-hop culture. Viewing the work of contemporary rappers as a solely lyrical endeavor is both Logocentric and lazy. Without properly understanding the powerful ideologies imbedded in digitally uploaded amateur rap videos, the violent and voyeuristic feedback loop will continue to be coopted and promoted by the corporate controlled media apparatus referenced by Janell Hobson in “Hip-hop Hegemony”. New frameworks incorporating the textual analysis of Gates and Dyson must be established to create alternate perspectives and fresh ways of understanding modes of Signification within hip-hop’s digital ecosystem.



### Parting Thoughts

This project began as a way to understand Henry Louis Gates's Signifyin (g) framework in new contexts specific to contemporary African American cultural traditions. After spending the last six months working with *The Signifying Monkey* and dozens of hip-hop music videos, I can safely say that Gates's framework is unable to fully interpret the "black tradition inscribed" within the media. *The Signifying Monkey* is filled with rich analysis and new positions in the field of African American literary criticism but as a text published in 1989, it does not contain the theoretical elements necessary to interpret and analyze new media specific to African American culture. With that said, there is not a large body of research devoted to understanding hip-hop music videos, especially videos produced in the contemporary moment. As seen in Chapter Three with the poetry of Janell Hobson, hip-hop music videos have an incomprehensible effect on the ideologies of our society but their cinematic language continues to be conflated with the music that they contain. That's not to say that the music and the video are not inextricably linked, they most certainly are but the video deserves equal footing in the analysis; it is not secondary to the music as an ideological tool.

Over the course of writing three chapters, it seemed at times that *The Signifying Monkey* was meant solely for the interpretation of African American literature. Certain aspects of the text make it difficult to apply to non-written modes of representation. Despite the absence of media-specific theoretical elements, *The Signifying Monkey* presents an invaluable pathway into the various discourses surrounding African American literary criticism. The formal work of Gates lends

itself to the intertextuality studies of Robert Stam, particularly his notion of “celebrity intertextuality” in relation to *Belly*. Additionally, Carol Vernallis’s volumes on the formal and textual analysis of music videos provided the vocabulary necessary to bridge the gap between understanding Signification in African American literary criticism and the formal analysis of hip-hop music videos. Prior to writing Chapter Two, I didn’t believe that Gates’s Chapter on “The Critique of the Sign” would play such an influential role in my textual analysis of *Belly*. Within the chapter, Gates close reading of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* provided me with a thorough articulation of Signification’s cultural and textual fluidity leading to my formal analysis of the opening scene in *Belly*’s third act. Despite its shortcomings in relation to my research, Gates’s framework served as a catalyst in my effort to learn more about critical discourses in African American studies and pair those arguments with media-related text.

After reading and referencing a number of chapters in the Michael Eric Dyson edited *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic*, I was excited to learn that his April 2014 roundtable discussion with Nas at Georgetown University was available via Youtube. Watching the hour and twenty minute discussion between the two was the greatest disappointment of my project. I hoped that Dyson and Nas would examine some of the music videos Nas had appeared in over his career. The conversation felt stagnate and focused solely on the “canonical verses”<sup>73</sup> found in Nas’s oeuvre. This conversation illustrates the lack of engagement with hip-hop music videos found inside the field of African American studies. Even when given the opportunity to

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, Georgetown University, April 1, 2014.

speak about the cultural and scholarly importance of interpreting contemporary rappers, Dyson neglected to mention the impact of online video culture in the cultivation of stardom. Hip-hop videos are referenced only when supporting claims made about the music itself; there is relatively little research done on the cultural impact of the music videos. By perpetuating Gates's Signifyin (g) framework through the interpretation of hip-hop music, it is an egregious error to neglect the rich visual text of music videos in favor of the well-worn, Logocentric lyrical analysis so common in contemporary hip-hop scholarship.

This past June, 92YTribeca Theater in New York City screened *Belly* in its original 35-millimeter print. The event sold out in less than an hour causing the theater to offer screenings at various points throughout the summer months. Along with the wildly popular public screenings of *Belly*, the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival opened with the screening of *Nas: Time is Illmatic*. The documentary tracks the creative development of Nas during the time leading up to the release of his acclaimed album, *Illmatic*. Vice News's music blog, Noisey, continues to produce a web series focused on the regional milieu of specific subgenres of hip-hop (i.e. Atlanta's Trap). These public events and online productions illustrate the public's growing interest in hip-hop's evolution as both a genre of music and a creative medium specific to the African American experience. The relationship between the music and its visual culture has never been more obvious. The use of visual media to express the resonance of hip-hop's rich cultural history typifies the conflation occurring between the music and the visual renderings of its culture.

With the slated 2015 release of the N.W.A. biopic, *Straight Outta Compton*, along with the 2009 Fox Searchlight production of *Notorious*, the visual culture of hip-hop continues to be commodified by the Hollywood filmmaking apparatus. These films function as an anthology of music videos with a loose narrative connecting the audiovisual vignettes with one another. These productions may provide the best point of entry for future scholarship on hip-hop music video culture. The Hollywood narrative style provides more text than a traditional video to interpret and thus, may yield greater results than simply moving through music videos.

My thesis serves as an exploration into the field of hip-hop music video studies. Perhaps my dedication to working out from *The Signifying Monkey* hampered progress towards a greater discovery but I truly believe that one must utilize the Signifyin (g) framework to fully interpret modes of representation within hip-hop music and music videos. Contemporary iterations of Gates's framework (i.e. Michael Eric Dyson's work on Nas) do not fully encompass its theoretical potential. As previously stated, the field of hip-hop studies is dominated by relatively few voices that focus far too heavily on the lyrical aspects of the medium. Future research must reflect the shifting media environment in relation to newer modes of distribution and production within the record industry, particularly hip-hop labels. The fluidity of Signification in hip-hop culture makes it impossible for a theoretical catchall to address the field's complexities, but that does not mean that scholars

should shy away from a potentially rich discourse. I mean, “to rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxii.

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