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Trans-Atlantic circulation of black tropes: Èsù and the West African griot as poetic references for liberation in cultures of the African diaspora

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TRANS-ATLANTIC CIRCULATION OF BLACK TROPES:
ÈSÙ AND THE WEST AFRICAN GRIOT AS POETIC REFERENCES FOR LIBERATION IN
CULTURES OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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In

Comparative Literature

by
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¹ We will use the gender neutral pronoun “it” to describe Èsù, despite the fact that Èsù is often represented as a masculine figure. Beyond gender neutrality, the impersonal pronoun “it” denotes an understanding of Èsù as a concept or agent rather than a personified figure.

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, under the direction of Dr Pius Ngandu Nkashama explores the spread of African rhetorical tropes in the Atlantic world. Building on Henry Louis Gates theory of Signifying, I use the West African God of fate Èsù and the West African cultural figure of the griot as cultural referents for the persistence of African tropes in the New World and their subsequent dissemination throughout the Atlantic world. Analyzing those two West African referents and their connections to New World cultures such as Afro-Brazilian capoeira angola, hip hop and African-American poetry, I attempt to demonstrate the centrality of the trope of Signifying in the Black Atlantic world through the analysis of related concepts and through close textual analysis.

Strategic dissimulation, deception and double-entendre appear as fundamental strategic rhetorical tricks that are shared both by African and Afro-Diasporic populations. I present those rhetorical tricks as both part of an African cultural continuum and an incorporation and response to oppression and exploitation of African people worldwide. In the diverse forms I analyze, I am more specifically interested in the contact between orality and the culture of writing, in black intertextuality, in the circulation of Signifying in the Atlantic world, as well as the historical dimension of this trope in particular as it relates to myth formation.

The introduction to this work explores the imperialist framework which has determined relations between Western nations and Africa for at least four hundred years, up until the present period. The in depth analysis of the mechanisms of imperialism and colonialism in the work of authors such as Edward Said, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon constitutes the back bone of this introduction.

The first chapter focuses on the West African figures of Èsù and the griot as cultural referents for the New World. I describe the place these figures occupy in their respective societies and isolate common features such as mediation, ambiguity, liminality as basis for the rest of my analysis.

The second chapter is focused on the New World human manifestations of the West African principles described in chapter one. I describe first the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira angola, then focus on the African American verse tradition and finally describe hip hop culture, and rap in particular. The capoeirista, the African American poet and the rapper all appear as New World embodiment of the West African griot.

The third and final chapter is dedicated to the analysis of poems and songs from our New World cultural forms. I focus more specifically on Henry Louis Gates' concept of Signifying, in particular in the tension between orality and the culture of writing present within this trope. I also look at black intertextuality through Signifying revisions. Finally, I focus my analysis on myth formation in those different forms.

INTRODUCTION

The present study is centered on African and Afro-Diasporic cultural manifestations. By looking at specific African cultural forms and their possible re-interpretation and development in the new world consecutive to the displacement in mass of African populations through the middle passage, we will try to identify cultural tropes that characterize black expression. Our main focus will be on rhetorical strategies. Bringing together such a large segment of the human population and characterizing it under such terms as “black culture”, “African”, “Afro-Diasporic” etc...seems overgeneralization. Beyond identifiable philosophical, aesthetic, and moral similarities found among different African and Afro-Diasporic groups which seem to legitimate such categorization, the historical context connecting those diverse populations undoubtedly accounts for a shared experience. After all, one is only “African”, “black” etc...in relation to an alternative referent. Thus African cultural unity must primarily be understood in contrast to the European or rather Western cultural matrix which has influenced it. Following this logic, one could argue that a supposed Western cultural unity can only be achieved through the concerted explicit marking of alternative identities on the global scale. One indeed can only be “Western” in relation to some “Eastern” alternative or otherness. The predominantly black skin color of the African population seems to be too obvious a marker of difference to be ignored by the imperialist rhetoric which has supported the colonization of Africa and the exploitation of its people. Today, skin color still seems as determinant a factor as cultural specificities in the imperialist/colonialist rhetoric which continues to perpetuate oppression through emphasis on the difference between “The West” and Africa. We will therefore posit the existence of a common “African” and/or “Afro-Diasporic” sensibility which was in part determined by extensive and mostly painful contacts with Western civilization(s) but which is however solidly anchored in a common “African” world view manifest in cultural, moral and aesthetic coherence among

diverse groups in Africa and its Diasporas. This study will look at some of the connections and differences between African and Afro-Diasporic cultural manifestations. We will nonetheless assume and demonstrate a black unity both based on cultural affinities and the shared experience of Western oppression. This unity which has become global is not foreign to Gilroy's idea of a "Black Atlantic" as we will see.

If we aim at a theoretical cultural unity among African and Afro-Diasporic populations, it is therefore necessary to define the cultural and economic context which participated in its crystallization. For lack of a better term, crystallization describes a sort of solidification or rather unification of Afro-Diasporic cultures in response to the common denominator of Western oppression. While understanding crystallization as a process which involves the growth of a crystal from a geometrical basis, we will see that African and Afro-Diasporic cultures are indeed characterized by constant movement and re-adaptation while staying connected to certain relatively stable traditions. They indeed do not constitute solidified and unmovable blocks. This crystallization as we shall see is however a response to an oppressive system which is itself implacably rational, compact and static as it continues to determine the domestic and global power imbalance that we experience today. We will therefore start our discussion of African and Afro-Diasporic rhetorical strategies by describing the Western ideological mechanics against which, around which and inside which these strategies manifest themselves. Defining the framework of imperialism as the main concept ruling over European (Western)/African relations will be our first task.

One of the main questions that arose in this endeavor in the broad field of "post-colonial studies" is the definition of key terms that are central to this area of cultural study. The main issue arose from a necessity to differentiate concepts such as "imperialism," "colonialism,"

“slavery,” and “racial supremacy.” Only through the analysis of those related concepts can we clearly define the theoretical, historical and cultural framework of this present study. Thus, our main concept, the one that contains and determines all the others, will be “imperialism.” If we look at its etymology, *imperialism* comes from the Latin verb *impero* which means to command, to order, to bid. The very etymology of the term leads toward what appears as a moral superiority or a superiority of status allowing the power to command from a distance. This suggests the idea of a center of command. We can already refer to Edward Said’s interpretation of imperialism. As he demonstrated in his study of the relations between imperialism and culture (*Culture and Imperialism*), territorial expansion and sustenance is primarily based on the idea of the empire. It is based on a discourse about a presupposed superiority of the empire. If military invasion insures physical expansion, maintaining the illusion of superiority is the only viable tactic to sustain the empire in the long run. Said primarily chose to look at culture as inseparable from the political, historical and social context that generates it. Culture can therefore be seen as an integral part of the imperialist enterprise as it plays a central role in the propagation of the image of superiority. Music, literature and visual arts all participate in this construction of a dominant discourse which alone can sustain imperialist enterprises (Said xxii).

We could also define imperialism as the imposition of a dominant minority’s values over a majority. The efforts to spread the values of the dominant group, seem to be motivated by the sole purpose of securing and maintaining economic domination. Following this logic, imperialism could translate as an international expansion of the exploitation of human beings by other human beings (or groups of) from a center of command toward the periphery for the purpose of securing economic benefits. Imperialism appears to us as not totally foreign to the global market based economy that regulates today’s global cultural and economic exchanges.

Said himself was aware of the perpetuation of imperialism even after the decolonization process of the post-World War Two period. He was in that regard a strong critic of US foreign policy, in particular in the numerous military interventions successive US governments have deployed on the five continents since the end of World War Two (54-56).

Though the institution of slavery, one can understand the logic of imperialism as it constitutes one of its most notable manifestations in the physical world. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams addresses the economic aspects of slavery. He makes a parallel between the structure of slavery and the structure of European societies. He states that when slavery is “seen in historical perspective, it forms a part of that general picture of harsh treatment of the underprivileged classes, the unsympathetic poor laws and severe feudal laws, and the indifference with which the rising capitalist class was ‘beginning to reckon prosperity in terms of pounds sterling, and ...becoming used to the idea of sacrificing human life to the deity of increased production.’” (5). Here, Williams explicitly refers to the hierarchical, exploitative and oppressive nature of European societies. He understands slavery as part of a continuum of exploitation, thus presenting Europe’s hierarchical division of society as a major prerequisite for slavery’s manifestation in the new world. The hierarchical system already in place in Europe was indeed extended to the colonial world. It found an extreme outcome in slavery where dehumanization of black people in particular allowed unprecedented profit from exploitation. Slavery is thus interconnected to imperialist rhetoric as it is the perfect embodiment of its guiding logic: securing economic interests at the expense of a subaltern population. Williams’ thesis in *Capitalism and Slavery* is that the profits made through slavery and the slave trade allowed the financing of the industrial revolution in Europe (vii). (We will see that cultural inheritances of both colonialism and slavery in contemporary society are parallel to this financial

aspect.) The development of Europe to its present state was therefore conditioned by the colonial occupation of foreign land, the expropriation of natural resources and labor (free labor). It appears that maintaining the level of economic development reached by industrialized nations today is still determined by the perpetuation of the same mechanisms. Natural resources and labor are still expropriated from formerly colonized lands and populations on a large scale. Through the understanding of the mechanisms of imperialism's perpetuation, we begin to perceive how imperialism and slavery are related. Slavery could indeed be understood as one of the components, or rather a logical consequence of imperialism. We could argue that it even constitutes its most extreme manifestation. Slavery is therefore an integral part of the imperialist structure. The relation slavery bears to imperialism is a circular one. Slavery needs imperialist rhetoric in order to sustain itself, and imperialism finds some of the justification of its own logic in the institution of slavery. We will see later how this internal logic works when studying colonialism and its effects on the two actors of this (in-)human drama. Colonialism, as we shall see, can be understood as a logical consequence of imperialism, and slavery possibly a consequence of colonialism. The same circularity described earlier applies to those three elements. Hierarchy, even racial hierarchy, constitutes one of the foundational paradigms behind each of those three concepts.

Imperialism, that is the defense and propagation of the ruling elite's values throughout the empire, has for its primary objective the defense and expansion of the elite's economic domination. This can only be achieved with the benediction from the larger national population. The idea of the empire must first germinate in the national consciousness in order to manifest expansion outside national boundaries. Edward Said stressed the fact that "when most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture they were principally celebrating ideas and values they

ascribed to their own national culture, or to Europe as distinct from the Orient, Africa, and even the Americas.” (44) He added that “as the national and international competition between European countries increased during the nineteenth century, so too did the level of intensity in competition between one national scholarly interpretative tradition and another.” (44) Pride in one’s culture and tradition seems to drive populations to validate and engage their energies in the idea of imperialism. Hierarchy still plays an important role here. Beyond pride in one’s nation and culture, it is the hierarchical division of society that is promoted to trans-national levels through the empire. If people at home buy into the idea of the grandeur of their culture, it is in relation to others. Grandeur seems only significant in superiority. This presupposed superiority encloses national subjects in the rapture of patriotism and chauvinism. Even subaltern populations who are at the bottom of the national hierarchy engage their energies in the idea of superiority, as it appears to grant them a little prestige over some unknown, but certainly backward, uncivilized and possibly threatening foreign other. The same hierarchy that debases them at home, aggrandizes them on the international scene. However, by accepting and supporting imperialism, national subjects embrace their own exploitation. Only through apparent consensus and overexposure of imperialist ideas in the national discourse can this construct of superiority spread and flourish.

The first phase of the physical implementation of an empire is only possible once the national population is convinced of the necessity and the divine right of their nation to rule over another one. National narratives are thus molded (consciously or not) by different cultural actors in order to sustain the idea of empire. Referring to Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*, Edward Said addresses the necessity to erase historical connections between the North and South in order to construct the idea of racial superiority. Said

states that “according to Bernal, whereas Greek civilization was known originally to have roots in Egyptian, Semitic, and various other southern and eastern cultures, it was redesigned as ‘Aryan’ during the course of the nineteenth century, its Semitic and African roots either actively purged or hidden from view.” (15-16) The manufacture of racial supremacy necessitates the manufacture of an historical discourse to support it. Intellectuals and artists both participate willingly in this revisionist construct as their very existence and status in the national discourse is conditioned by the aspirations of the ruling elite, to which they often belong. A whole array of experts in fields such as “anthropology, Darwinism, Christianity, utilitarianism, idealism, racial theory, legal history, linguistics,” (Said 101) and more, must concur toward the national narrative of superiority if the colonial and imperial enterprise is to be maintained.

In analyzing Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Said marvels at the “circularity, the perfect closure of the whole thing [that] is not only aesthetically but also mentally unassailable” (24). While talking specifically of Conrad’s narrative, Said indeed describes the broader imperialist structure in which it is framed. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow (i.e. Conrad) describes his interpretation of the imperial enterprise from the position of the imperialist, without trying to represent the other side of the story. The narrator and the audience are disconnected from the experience of the colonized. For Said, “Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz’s great looting adventure, Marlow’s journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa” (23). These “performing acts of imperial mastery and will” characterize not only Conrad’s work, but the whole imperialist enterprise itself. Imperialism and the performance or representation of the empire are certainly inseparable. Imperialism constitutes a paradigm closed onto itself which will try to shut down any representation that tends to contradict its prewritten script or challenge its

authority. The voices and histories of the oppressed are the first elements that imperialism will try to erase or re-arrange.

The representation of greatness, past, present and future, from the imperialist's point of view, has two aims. The first one that we have just discussed is to rally the nationals to the cause of the empire by including them in a great civilizing movement outward. The second, which is as important as the first in maintaining imperial power, is to convince the colonized people that the oppressor's superiority is part of the natural order of things, and that imperialism constitutes a natural plan for relations between rulers and ruled. The oppressed must then accept his/her predetermined inferior position in order to submit to the laws of the empire. By his/her submission, the oppressed validates and contributes also to the empire's development and sustenance.

A definition of colonization is required before we move forward, as it represents spaces of contact between the oppressors and the oppressed predefined by imperialist ideologies. If imperialism is the idea of superiority of a nation or group in order to justify mercantile exploitation, colonialism is the physical manifestation of this concept on the land of the colonized. Imperialism is the concept and colonialism is one of its main manifestations, but both share the purpose of domination of one group over another as well as the ultimate goal of material/economic exploitation. Imperialism is a pre-requisite for colonialism. Indeed, there needs to be a drive to domination in order for it to be manifested in the physical world. Colonialism is a mechanical consequence of the imperialist drive. At the same time, imperialism, that is the idea and display of power, feeds off colonialism. Imperialism not only gets its nutrients from the very material gains it extracts from the colonial relationship, but it also

sustains itself from both the display of force and control that colonialism represents and through the debased image of the colonized it enacts.

Colonialism implies the expansion of the imperial domain through physical occupation of land. The occupation of land can only be achieved through violence. Violence perpetrated in the acquisition of the colony is the first physical step that gives imperialism substance. Once the colony is established, actual violence is only periodic while the threat of violence remains permanent. The accumulation of capital and raw materials justifies the whole enterprise to the ruling elite and the national subjects, who also get some of the advantages of this exploitative structure. But this imbalanced system has a cost that is borne by both the oppressed and the oppressor. If, according to Albert Memmi, the reasons that drive nationals to leave for the colony are determined by material benefits that they could never enjoy in the mother land, then the colonialist's rationalization and unconditional defense of colonialism/imperialism is easy to understand (yet not necessarily justifiable). Materialistic gain is the prime motive for supporting the imperialist structure. But this gain is at the expense of local populations. Born and raised in colonial Tunisia, Albert Memmi was a direct witness of the colonial domination imposed by France. His work *Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur* describes the mechanisms of colonization and its effects on both actors of the colonial play. By first analyzing the position occupied by the colonizer in the colony and then describing the response of the colonized to domination, Memmi clearly demonstrated how both colonizer and colonized are harmed by the colonial relation and the great divide which colonialism generates.

As I have described earlier, violence for the conquest of territory is the first step of the colonization process. The imperialist fabric which will determine relations in the colony is sealed by this initial act of violence on the colonized people. Each repetition of acts of violence will

echo the first invading act. From its onset, the colonial situation is therefore characterized by physical containment through the use of brute force. Violence is a given and ready to be manifested at any time. Physical oppression is thus the most extreme means through which the colonial apparatus secures the economic advantages generated by the exploitation of the colonized. In *Les damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon describes the colonial situation, its impact on the colonized and the means of liberation available to the colonized. He describes the colonial setting as an occupied ground, almost a war zone where the colonized is constantly reminded of the violence that might spring from any direct challenge to the status quo. Fanon states: “Le monde colonisé est un monde coupé en deux. La ligne de partage, la frontière est indiquée par les casernes et les postes de police. Aux colonies, l’interlocuteur valable et institutionnel du colonisé, le porte parole du colon et du régime d’oppression est le gendarme ou le soldat. ” (27) Fanon then draws a parallel between the enforcement of social hierarchy in capitalist societies and violence in the colony. He states:

Dans les pays capitalistes, entre l’exploité et le pouvoir s’interposent une multitude de professeurs de morale, de conseillers, de « désorientateurs ». Dans les régions coloniales, par contre, le gendarme et le soldat, par leur présence immédiate, leurs interventions directes et fréquentes, maintiennent le contact avec le colonisé et lui conseillent, à coups de crosse ou de napalm, de ne pas bouger. [...] L’intermédiaire n’allège pas l’oppression, ne voile pas la domination. Il les expose, les manifestes avec la bonne conscience des forces de l’ordre. L’intermédiaire porte la violence dans les maisons et dans les cerveaux du colonisé. (27)

Echoing Williams’ argument, Fanon links the hierarchical oppression in the “mother land” to the oppression in the colonial setting. The only difference according to him is that in the colony, all the safeguards and veils of culture and institutions which conceal the reality of class based oppression and violence inherent to European societies are absent. We now understand that the

control and repression of the colonized population is a priority in the colony. Physical containment is indeed the primary characteristic of colonialism.

If violence is the first deterrent to rebellion from the colonized, it cannot justify alone the passivity with which the oppressed accepts his inferior status and the expropriation of his land, labor, and dignity. Said was aware of this dynamic when he described the surreal asymmetry between, on one side, the tremendous power the colonizer seems to exercise on the colonized, and the imbalance in numbers. He states: "We must not forget that there was very little domestic resistance to these empires, although they were very frequently established and maintained under adverse and even disadvantageous conditions. Not only were immense hardships endured by the colonizers, but there was always the tremendously risky physical disparity between a small number of Europeans at a very great distance from home and the much larger number of natives on their home territories." (10-12) Thus, it seems that the power of the colonizer can only be effective if the colonized gives up his/her own agency.

While both Fanon and Said agree on the omnipresence of the threat and display of violence and its recurring manifestation in the colony, Fanon seems to lay the emphasis on its frequent use by the colonial powers, while Said focuses on the display or even the idea of the possibility of violence as an effective way of control. If both elements are important in maintaining the colonial apparatus, this difference of emphasis denotes a difference of interpretations and approach. Fanon focuses on the colonized and his/her potential responses to colonization. Fanon's aim is liberation by any means. His emphasis on the violence of the situation makes the legitimization of the use of counter-violence for liberation more acceptable if not legitimate. Said, on the other hand, acknowledges the impasse that violent reaction to oppression represents. To him, regaining agency does not necessarily imply violence. He seems

more interested in demonstrating that violence is most of the time a projection, a potential threat rather than a constant reality. It is the fear of violence that maintains the status quo rather than violence itself. Said advocates for more rational resistance strategies which would render violence inoperative.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott displays a comparable perspective to both Fanon's and Said's in his analysis of relations of domination and submission. He acknowledges that "effective display may, by conveying the impression of actual power and the will to use it, economize on the actual use of violence" (48). The performance of power is therefore a central element which allows the machinery of colonialism to run smoothly. Scott cites George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" to illustrate the colonizer's necessity to perform his own myth of greatness in order to consolidate and reaffirm colonial power constantly. Orwell states: "I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives", and so in every crisis he has to do what the "natives" expect of him. He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it..." (Qtd. in Scott 11). The colonizer, if he wants to maintain his status and the whole colonial enterprise, must embody the imperialist doctrine. Violence is one of the main tools at the disposal of the colonialist, but as we have seen, violence is most efficient when suggested rather than enacted repeatedly. The colonial setting is constructed as the stage of a theater where the script is dictated by the colonizer and where any deviance from the imperialist narrative is more than likely sanctioned by violence. For maintaining the status quo, both oppressor and oppressed must enact the imperialist scenario.

The rules are very clear. The natives, if they want to escape the violence of the colonial situation, must conform to the script that has been pre-written for them.

We have seen that the constant threat of potential violence can maintain the status-quo and prevent the use of actual violence. It is indeed always preferable not to use violence in an unstable setting where repression might trigger large-scale rebellion from the oppressed. Apart from the effective display and threat of violence, the colonizer employs other psychological warfare strategies such as constant attacks on the self-esteem of the colonized as a group. The colonizer finds legitimacy for oppression in the demonization of the oppressed. When presented as inhuman, the colonized subject then appears to deserve the inhuman treatments inflicted upon him/her. Through this closed circle of rationalization of oppression, the colonialist manages to convince him/herself of the necessity of his/her attitude. The rhetoric of the inhuman, uncivilized nature of the colonized as a group is one of the primary strategies used for the justification of colonialism to the general public in the colonizer's motherland. As a consequence of the legitimization of oppression, economic domination of the colonized is normalized, even encouraged. Economic domination and control is not presented as such, but rather as the colonialist's desire to help the colonized in his/her aspirations for modern (that is Western) civilization, democracy, etc. The land and resources of the colonized are indeed of better use in the colonizer's hands since the colonized is by nature inferior and incapable of development and progress in the eyes of the colonialist. Memmi states: "A la base de toute la construction, enfin, on trouve une dynamique unique: celle des exigences économiques et affectives du colonisateur, qui lui tient lieu de logique, commande et explique chacun des traits qu'il prête au colonisé" (104-105). This process of demonization of the colonized takes the form of naturalization. Through the naturalization of behavior, the colonizer is able to apply myths to the whole group

of the colonized without differentiation. Using the example of the pervasive myth of laziness applied to the colonized, Memmi explains:

...il ne s'agit nullement d'une notation objective, donc différencié, donc soumise à de probables transformations, mais d'une *institution*: par son accusation, le colonisateur institue le colonisé en être paresseux. Il décide que la paresse est constitutive de l'essence du colonisé. Cela posé, il devient évident que le colonisé, quelque fonction qu'il assume, quelque zèle qu'il y déploie, ne serait jamais autre que paresseux. Nous en revenons toujours au racisme, qui est bien une substantification, au profit de l'accusateur, d'un trait réel ou imaginaire de l'accusé. (103)

Memmi goes on to admit that this mechanism can apply to any derogatory characterization of the colonized by the colonizer. Thus, according to Memmi, racism's purpose is the rationalization of economic exploitation, which is central to the colonial situation.

The degradation of the colonized goes hand-in-hand with myths about the colonizer. The colonizer's values, motherland and general attitude are thus represented by the colonizer him/herself as universal and intrinsically good. Memmi reminds us that "plus l'usurpé est écrasé, plus l'usurpateur triomphe dans l'usurpation; et, par suite, se confirme dans sa culpabilité et sa propre condamnation." (77) This self-condemnation pushes the colonizer further in the necessity to justify him/herself and to demonize the colonized. As much as economic gain cannot be achieved without the disenfranchisement and depreciation of the colonized, the oppressor's status cannot be elevated without the demonization of his/her inverted double. Memmi states:

Dès qu'il a pris conscience de l'injuste rapport qui l'unit au colonisé, il lui faut sans répit s'appliquer à s'absoudre. Il n'oubliera jamais de faire éclater publiquement ses propres vertus, il plaidera avec une rageuse obstination pour paraître héroïque et grand, méritant largement sa fortune. En même temps, tenant ses privilèges tout autant de sa gloire que de l'avalissement du colonisé, il s'acharnera à l'avilir. Il utilisera pour le dépeindre les couleurs les plus sombres ; il agira, s'il le faut, pour le dévaloriser, pour l'annihiler. Mais il ne sortira jamais de ce cercle : il faut

expliquer cette distance que la colonisation met entre lui et le colonisé ; or, pour se justifier, il est amené à augmenter encore cette distance, à opposer irrémédiablement les deux figures, la sienne tellement glorieuse, celle du colonisé tellement méprisable. (78)

In the colonial fiction, the degradation of the colonized determines the aggrandizement of the colonizer. The colonizer must both debase the colonized and display his/her power in order to embody “greatness” fully. These converging forces are impressed on the psyche of the colonized. The constant repetition of this paradigm will eventually make it appear as natural to both actors. According to James C. Scott, “domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery” (11). The term *performance* describes well the nature of relations in the colony. It is an artificial and superficial world where each actor must embody the part that has been assigned to his/her group. The continuation of the performance depends on the actors’ willingness to perform.

In a context where all power and agency have been taken away from them, colonized populations do not have many choices available to answer constant intellectual, cultural, moral and psychological attacks. They will either be convinced of their intrinsic inferiority and therefore try to assimilate fully the values of the oppressor, or they will reject those values and expose themselves to exclusion or, more likely, direct reprimand from the colonial power. A third option available to colonized subjects is the partial (or complete) assimilation of the values of the oppressor, but a critical one which can alternatively be used for active resistance or solely as a protective display of compliance. This strategy is the wisest and the most broadly shared by the colonized as it constitutes a mediation between total assimilation and total rejection. This attitude characterizes the colonized who plays the part that is expected of him/her as a protective shield from colonial oppression. The critical display of compliance indeed allows the colonized a certain freedom of movement in the colonial context. It allows him/her to move undetected, so to

speak. This tool can be used critically for very concrete, material benefits as well as for liberation from the all-pervasive imperialist gaze. It can also be a means of upfront subversion and challenge to authority, but in a disguised manner. It appears then that through mimicry, camouflage, or assimilation the colonized can temporarily regain agency in a setting where the rules work against him/her. The syncretism of religious practices in the Caribbean and South America represent exemplary cultural manifestations of this technique. Brazil's Candomblé and Cuba's Santería for instance, constitute perpetuations of African traditional religion (Ifa, the Yoruba religion and divination system) disguised under the mask of Christianity. Through those examples, we can appreciate the subversive potential of such a strategy in any oppressive context. It has indeed proven a particularly relevant and efficient tool of survival and resistance for colonized and displaced Africans.

In *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, James C. Scott analyzes social relations of domination and subordination. According to him, everybody is confronted daily with situations where one is either in a position of domination or submission. Each one of us uses conscious or unconscious strategies to negotiate the tensions generated by the hierarchical nature of society. Scott explains: "Much of what passes as normal social intercourse requires that we routinely exchange pleasantries and smile at others about whom we may harbor an estimate not in keeping with our public performance. [...] Our circumspect behavior may also have a strategic dimension: this person to whom we misrepresent ourselves may be able to harm or help us in some way" (1).

This banal fact of human relations takes another dimension in the colonial context. Constantly under the threat of repression, the colonized must use discernment in his/her everyday interactions. The situation of the colonized obliges him/her to repress his/her behavior constantly

and adjust to the all-pervasive framework of domination imposed on him/her. Any display that does not concur with the social expectations of the colonial regime exposes the colonized to reprimands. For self-protection, the colonized must then conceal his/her true feelings and identity behind a mask of compliance to rules. The strategic use of concealment can assume different forms. It must, however, systematically concur with the expectations of those in power and not pose a direct threat to the ideology and public discourse of imperialism. The form that strategic dissimulation takes is, therefore, determined by context. Scott goes on to explain: “The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. In the short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him” (4).

According to Scott, the public transcript is the space where the expectations of the oppressor and the performance of the oppressed meet. It is in the public transcript that the oppressed must enact the social role assigned to him/her. It is also the public space where the official discourse and performance of the oppressor is displayed. Thus the public transcript is mostly determined by the oppressor. This does not mean that the oppressed cannot acquire agency in that space, but the public transcript remains framed by the power.

Strategic concealment remains, however, the safest and most potent method available to subordinate groups for self-preservation and regaining agency under restrictive colonial rules. Language appears as the main vector through which the subordinate can negotiate the public transcript to his/her advantage. The mastery of the language of the oppressor constitutes one of the tactics employed for self-protection or self-empowerment. Our study will look more closely

at the different ways in which language can be manipulated in a colonial context determined by imperialist rhetorics.

In the last 500 years, African populations have experienced modernity in ways no others have. The encounter of Africans with Europeans marked the beginning of large-scale colonial competition, which would lead to the implementation of the slave trade in the New World. The triangular circulation of goods and people has made possible the industrial revolution in Europe, as Williams has demonstrated in his study. Modernity in Europe, therefore, was determined by the subordination of African populations and the annexation of their lands and resources. The exploitation of African material and human resources could only be legitimized through the imperialist rhetoric of superiority and “mission civilisatrice.” The ideology of European/Western superiority was constructed through a projection of the fears of those societies onto populations whose land and labor were coveted. This projection continues to this day to influence policies and people’s outlooks both inside and outside the national boundaries of the imperial center. As we have already said, the current global economic system is still based on the logic of exploitation of certain population’s land, natural resources, labor etc... Africa is not the only targeted area of imperialist exploitation, but it still constitutes to this day one of the most coveted places by newcomers in the colonial expansion game for its natural resources. It is also still considered former colonial power’s private ground. The independence that African nations claimed and obtained after the Second World War has not changed the subaltern position of these nations. They remain mostly dependent on the will of European/Western superpowers. National empires used to decide for their colonies before 1945. In the new paradigm, the destiny of “independent” African nations seems to be determined by immensely powerful trans-national corporations that dictate at will the rules of global market economics. Globalized financial levers

are the new deciding forces behind neo-colonialism (one could argue that this is indeed nothing new). The former colonial powers/states are still here to maintain the discourse of imperialist domination (through a binary rhetoric of opposition: superiority/inferiority, science and technology/dependency and underdevelopment, national/foreign, etc.), but decision-making on the fate of nations seems to be more and more at CEOs' discretion rather than at elected officials'. Here is Frantz Fanon's understanding of the evolution of colonialism after independence in *Les damnés de la terre*, published in 1961:

Aujourd'hui, l'indépendance nationale, la formation nationale dans les régions sous-développées revêtent des aspects totalement nouveaux. Dans ces régions, quelques réalisations spectaculaires exceptées, les différents pays présentent la même absence d'infrastructure. Les masses luttent contre la même misère, se débattent avec les mêmes gestes et dessinent avec leurs estomacs rapetissés ce que l'on a pu appeler la géographie de la faim. Monde sous-développé, monde de misère et inhumain. Mais aussi monde sans médecins, sans ingénieurs, sans administrateurs. Face à ce monde, les nations européennes se vautrent dans l'opulence la plus ostentatoire. Cette opulence européenne est littéralement scandaleuse car elle a été bâtie sur le dos des esclaves, elle s'est nourrie du sang des esclaves, elle vient en droite ligne du sol et du sous-sol de ce monde sous-développé. Le bien-être et le progrès de l'Europe ont été bâtis avec la sueur et les cadavres des nègres, des Arabes, des Indiens et des Jaunes. Cela, nous décidons de ne plus l'oublier. Lorsque un pays colonialiste, gêné par les revendications à l'indépendance d'une colonie, proclame à l'intention des dirigeants nationalistes : « Si vous voulez l'indépendance, prenez-la et retournez au Moyen-Age », le peuple nouvellement indépendant a tendance à acquiescer et à relever le défi. Et l'on voit effectivement le colonialisme retirer ses capitaux et ses techniciens et mettre en place autour du jeune Etat un dispositif de pression économique. L'apothéose de l'indépendance se transforme en malédiction de l'indépendance. La puissance coloniale par des moyens énormes de coercition condamne à la régression la jeune nation. (68)

This analysis appears more relevant than ever when we consider the attitude displayed by Western nations toward their "former" colonies in the present time. Colonialism a thing of the past, you said? This attitude, which systematically denies the possibility of African nations in particular to develop autonomously outside Europe's pre-determined plan, is backed up by

attempts to present colonialism as an improvement and a chance for the colonized people. France's recent attempt to focus on "les aspects positifs de la colonization" in their school textbooks illustrates the perpetuation of historical revisionism for the construction of imperialist national discourses. Education is indeed one of the first tools of propaganda for the promotion of imperialism. If we look at the terms used in academia, for instance, we realize that the term "post-colonial" implies that we are done away with colonialism. Taking into account the main authors recognized as major literary and theoretical references in post-colonial studies, we realize that the term post-colonial seems misused. The term "anti-colonial" seems to be more adequate to describe a corpus that focuses on the analysis, deconstruction and condemnation of the colonial apparatus in all its forms. Describing and commenting on the inner workings of colonialism is not only a way for those authors to come to terms, or at least try to reconcile with, the past; It is also a way to apprehend present realities while keeping an eye on future potentialities. Colonialism is indeed not solely a thing of the past. Not only has its expansion across the globe during the past 400 years or so shaped the global political, economic and cultural landscape, but its influence on the present goes beyond the simple fact of legacy. Colonialism might have changed clothes, its purpose, internal structure and influence have remained unchanged. The colonialist/imperialist structure has spread even more broadly across the globe in many different forms and Africans worldwide still seems to be one of its primary targets.

We will take therefore as a given that colonialism did not end with the independence of former colonies. If the colonial system is still in place, the colonialist or imperialist must find a way to justify its perpetuation. While it seems more and more difficult to justify domination to the colonized (the recent revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East prove that populations

which have been submissive for so long are refusing to endure the inequity any longer), the larger population of the national center of command seems to be more and more overloaded with imperialist propaganda which keeps on demonizing the colonized. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said described racist rhetoric displayed in US media's witch hunt on "Arabs" during the Gulf War. His analysis points at the inheritance (or rather continuum) of colonialism and imperialism through racial discrimination in modern societies (36-37). While in most people's minds (at least in the West) colonialism is over, one element is still present as a reminder that colonization happened: the colonized. If colonization had indeed disappeared, then the rhetoric of racial subordination used for its legitimatization would have been gone with it. The perpetuation of racial oppression is the primary signal that colonialism and imperialism are still at work, this time not solely overseas, but in the land of the colonizer as well.

To illustrate, we will posit the ghetto as a manifestation of colonization in the land of the colonizer. The ghetto in Western countries, where subordinate groups often originating from "former" colonies are overrepresented, is indeed a colonized space. The same colonial rules that we have discussed earlier apply there. It is easy to make a parallel between the plantation in the US and today's urban ghettos, for instance. In many southern cities, former slave quarters have remained all-black ghettos. We clearly see a continuum of oppression since slavery. Using Edgar Thompson's *The Climatic Theory of the Plantation*, which looks at the claim that blacks were more fit to work in southern or tropical areas because of their adaptation to the climate, Eric Williams reminds us of the political nature of the plantation:

The climatic theory of the plantation is nothing but a rationalization. [...] Edgar Thompson writes: 'The plantation is not to be accounted for by climate. It is a political institution.' It is, we might add, more: it is an economic institution. The climatic theory 'is part of an ideology which rationalizes and naturalizes an existing social and economic order, and this everywhere seems to be an order in which there is a race problem. (22)

The same logic could be applied to the ghetto as a locus that is structurally enforced, and whose basis is economical and political. Through rationalization, the realities of the living conditions imposed from outside, and people's responses to them are presented as natural, as endemic to a certain population.

The same paradigm at work in the US can be observed in former European empires, most notably in France and England. Underprivileged, urban areas often display a concentration of first, second, or third generation immigrants from former colonies. The ghetto represents a zone outside of mainstream (i.e. largely white) society, where specific rules apply, jobs are scarce, services are kept to a minimum, and police supervision borders on daily harassment. This omnipresence of the police characterizes life in the ghetto, whether in France or in the United States. In *Race Rebels*, Robin D. G. Kelley discusses the development of gangsta rap in Los Angeles by giving an account of the context of its emergence. Kelley describes the living conditions in the Watts and Compton neighborhoods, which considerably deteriorated during the post-civil rights era. He goes on to describe the brutal attitude of the police in the management of crime, linking police harassment to conditions under slavery. He states: "Like the economy itself, the criminal justice system changed just when hip hop was born. Prisons were no longer just places to discipline; they became dumping ground to corral bodies labeled a menace to society. Policing in the late twentieth century was designed not to stop or reduce crime in inner-city communities but to manage it." (185)

To complement Kelley's analysis, we quote the 13th amendment of the American constitution, which theoretically ended slavery. A close reading makes one realize that this amendment did not end slavery, but made it legal under specific conditions. Here is the amendment:

“Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” (Constitution of the United States, Amendment XIII)

I have italicized the part of interest to us. It basically implies that slavery is indeed protected by the constitution in cases of conviction of a crime. The criminalization of black males, in particular, that is both over-displayed in mass media and enforced by police and judiciary forces, is a telling account of a continuum of slavery to this day. The constant and progressive industrialization of prisons in the past few years inevitably points toward a perpetuation of the economic exploitation of the plantation system through the judiciary system in the United States.

The perpetuation of slavery in the United States is just one example of the continuum of colonialism and imperialism on a global scale. The ghetto, as a colonized space, or a space where the colonized are contained, constitutes the symbol of modern global colonialism. This historical legacy and continuation does not solely manifest at the ideological level but also in concrete, physical aggression and exploitation. This systemic oppression could seem gratuitous, as reason and morality seem excluded from the plantation/colonialist/imperialist mindset. Oppression, however, continues to serve an extremely rational purpose: to demonstrate and display the imperialist rhetoric in order to defend the perpetuation of economic exploitation. Indeed, by continually maintaining Black People at home in a state of poverty and preventing their inclusion in society, the global logic of imperialism and the reality of colonialism is perpetuated.

Following imperialism's self-justifying logic, blacks can rightfully be exploited at home and Africa can be plundered overseas.

Centuries of oppression toward black people and their culture have influenced global culture and economics in many ways. We have seen through William's work that slavery, (that is, in our immediate historical memory, the exploitation of black labor) has generated the capital needed for the industrial revolution in Europe. We have also discussed how imperialist rhetoric based on the demonization of blacks on a continental scale has determined Europe's outlook on Africa and its diaspora. These events have shaped the economic, cultural and social global landscape that we know today. It is also obvious that these experiences have shaped black people's outlook, cultural production and responses. East, North, South and West African cultures have been irremediably marked and redefined through the experience of colonization. African-American (U.S), Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Caribbean populations and cultures all bear the stigmas of slavery. These stigmas can be observed in the different cultural manifestations of these populations. Jamaican singer Bob Marley put it in one of his hit songs: "One good thing about music, When it hits, you feel no pain" ("Trenchtown Rock"). In other words, culture, even bearing the scars and memory of brutality, might hit you (get at you) and help you soothe the pains of history. That is the reason why he sings: "Now you want come cold I up/But you can't come cold I up/ Cause I'm grooving." It is indeed through the integration, repetition, re-memorization and understanding of the painful experience of colonization and slavery that black cultures world-wide seem to overcome the weight that this tragic history bears on present reality. A culture that does not reflect and re-interpret its history in honest terms cannot bring about constructive possibilities for the future. Indeed, historical revisionist manipulations applied to cultural manifestations might only produce a repetition of past mistakes. In this study, we will

see the lessons learned by African populations worldwide from the contact between Africa and Europe, and the universal lessons it can teach humanity. We will analyze some of the responses Africans found in their own cultural memory in order to counter the effects of dehumanization. Through this analysis, we will try to understand the relevance of certain aspects of black culture in today's economic and cultural globalized landscape.

A close look at cultures of the black diaspora makes one soon realize that they are characterized by hybridity. While I would argue that culture is in itself always hybrid, always evolving, both retaining and absorbing, cultures emanating from the African Diaspora often present a multitude of facets inherited from the diversity of the cultural matrix from which they originated. Under slavery, Africans from different tribes and regions, speaking different languages, worshipping different gods, were put in contact under the oppressive dominion of a foreign culture. Afro-Diasporic cultural manifestations are thus necessarily hybrids of those different African cultural traditions and of the cultural traditions of the oppressor. The same is true of cultures in Africa, where colonialism influenced local populations' cultural responses. In the case of Afro-Diasporic cultures, hybridity meant finding cultural connections between not only many diverse African cultures but also with the oppressor's culture. It is easy to assume that the different African cultures brought to the Americas had more in common with each other than with the oppressor's culture. The commonality of experience of diverse African groups under slavery nonetheless determined their unification against a common oppressor. Ironically, beyond their Africaness, the all-pervasive common denominator which could connect these diverse African groups remained the very culture of the oppressor. How can a black subject in the new world embrace a culture that is biased against him/her? How can he/she not lose his/her own

historical, experiential and cultural specificity? I posit that part of the answer can be found in the cultural memory of transplanted Africans, within their own African heritage.

We have discussed earlier the different possibilities available to the oppressed under repressive conditions. The black subject in this case can embrace the culture of the oppressor and try to make it his own, but his progress in the colonizer's culture will only be determined from outside, and total integration in the culture of the oppressor seems forever proscribed due to color/race. Conversely, the black subject can totally reject the oppressor's culture and face reprimand or even death. The third option that we have discussed can be termed *critical assimilation*, where the oppressed learns the culture of the oppressor, makes it his/her own, but retains his/her African heritage, his cultural memory of the experience of colonialism/slavery and the consciousness of the inherent injustice and degradation in the oppressor's culture. This critical approach constitutes a real subversion of the paradigm of domination. By playing the part that is expected of him/her, the subaltern both validates and discredits the colonial situation. The oppressor's culture gives the oppressed the tool for understanding his/her own situation, which gives him/her agency. He/she can at the same time get an understanding of the oppressor's position and play with it. This analysis of the imperialist relationship that binds oppressed and oppressor gives an advantage to the oppressed, which can thus partially alleviate the burden of life under domination. The oppressed is thus always ahead of the oppressor in that sense, and that is probably what makes the oppressor's position not quite as advantageous as it seems. The oppressed integrates two cultural paradigms and manages to make them coexist in a constant dialogue. The oppressed is often much more aware of the oppressor's culture than the oppressor is of the culture of the oppressed. Cultural bi- or multi-literacy is the main characteristic of oppressed populations. It happens to be a trait particular to African cultures as well.

Looking at the oppressor's culture from the perspective of the oppressed allows critical distance and comparison. It is in this contact sphere, in the consciousness of the oppressed, where two conflicting world views are brought together, that a real dialogue of cultures is engaged. In the development of a culture of survival by the oppressed, what initially appeared as incompatible cultural tropes are in communication, disconnected experiences are brought together and their incompatibility resolved for the concrete purpose of survival, and eventual liberation. Both the oppressed and the oppressor actually benefit from this confrontation. One could argue that this process works both ways, and that by an objective and honest analysis and understanding of the oppressed culture, the oppressor could reach a space where domination becomes irrelevant. The oppressor, by understanding the outlook of the oppressed, could reassess his own participation in imperialist structures and reshape them. While this certainly occurred and continues to occur, history seems to prove that it is still not the dominant paradigm. Nonetheless, we will try to describe how cultural forms from the black Atlantic participate in cross movements between cultures.

As we have said earlier, European cultures have defined themselves as antithetical to the "savage" customs of Africa. By making the cultures of Africa and Europe coexist in a common experience or cultural form, black artists have indeed created revolutionary mediums of artistic expression that go beyond the simplification performed by the imperialist discourse. Cultures in this sense can be understood as polymorphous, in constant evolution and not fixed and unchanging. This hybridity is what Paul Gilroy describes in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. He opens his argument by stating that being both black and English is already political insubordination (1). Hybridity is something that the imperial and colonial discourses try to erase by presenting a front of racial and cultural uniformity. Anything that

brings together elements that the empire defines as absolute opposites is by definition a threat to the empire. We see the tremendous potential for resistance that is inscribed in cultural hybridity, or, dare I say, culture at large. On this question, Gilroy states:

The intellectual and cultural achievements of the black Atlantic populations exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment and its operational principles. Their stems have grown strong, supported by a lattice of western politics and letters. Though African linguistic tropes and political and philosophical themes are still visible for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World locations to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning. These modern black political formations stand simultaneously both inside and outside the western culture which has been their peculiar step-parent. (48)

To Gilroy, the black Atlantic is thus both inside and outside western cultural consciousness. According to him, transplanted Africans managed to find the tools for their liberation in both their African and European cultural heritage. What transplanted Africans have achieved is a synthesis of cultures of both Africa and Europe. Not only do black Atlantic cultures bear the historical and cultural memory of the contacts between Africa and Europe; they might well bear the seeds for a common future that would help transcend past incomprehension.

At the center of this argument lies a reality from which we cannot escape: the reality of the continuum of oppression toward Africans worldwide. This study will look at the responses of black artists to counter or at least negotiate the hegemonic presence of the imperialist mind frame. I will follow the lines of Paul Gilroy's definition of the Black Atlantic and recognize both the European and African elements that constitute those cultures. The focus of this study, however, will be grounded on the possible original African tropes or potential African referents that influenced those forms. This study will posit a cultural continuum between principally West African cultures and cultures of the African Diaspora. More specifically, I will try to demonstrate

that the West African godly figure of Èsù in Yoruba mythology, and the West African traditional figure of the griot, represent models for cultural survival and resistance for African populations in the New World. I will map out the common and distinctive traits of those two emblematic African figures and their manifestations in the new world. The world of capoeira in Brazil, hip-hop in the United States and globally, and African-American poetry in the United States will be our three main domains of analysis in which the figure of Èsù and the griot function dynamically. I will advance the hypothesis that Èsù and the griot, as conceptual frameworks of reference, gave Africans the tools to survive slavery both physically and culturally, and that the lessons learned from the experience of contact between European and African civilizations might hold effective responses to the major problems facing humanity in today's context of late capitalism. Signifying, as defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., and the central philosophical concept of *Malícia* in the world of Brazilian capoeira, will be the two main theoretical frameworks that we will develop. We will try to understand to what extent those two concepts are similar. We will see that the main element that brings those two concepts together is the use of deceptive strategies as a form of empowerment. We will analyze how the strategies demonstrated in both of these cultural philosophies constitute potent tools for resistance in a colonial/imperialist context. We will also try to demonstrate how deceptive and playful strategies could prove to be agents of mediation that have helped black populations to create hybrid cultural forms which built bridges between cultures and which came to define global popular culture over at least the past hundred years.

The ultimate goal of this work is to build on Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifying as the main trope of African American culture. Connecting Signifying to *Malícia* and to the original West African god-concept of Èsù (which was Gates' starting point for the elaboration of his

theory) is a way to position Signifying, despite its North American specificity, as a global concept denoting the spread of African cultural tropes globally. I will indeed try to demonstrate Signifying's global relevance through its dissemination in the Black Atlantic world.

Let us first briefly define the concept of Signifying. In his major work *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates develops a general rhetorical theory of African-American culture at large and applies it to literature in particular. If the scope of his theory has been criticized for being too large, and the theory itself too general to adequately represent the multitudes of variations observed in Afro-Diasporic contexts, Signifying still appears as one of the most potent tool to define common grounds in Afro-Diasporic literature and culture. Gates managed to do so by looking at some of the cultural roots of African-American culture. Using Yoruba mythology, Gates picked a cultural matrix which is still observable today in many different cultures of the African Diaspora, whether in North America, in the Caribbean, or in South America.

Gates developed his theory around the mythological figure of Èsù. Èsù is the Yoruba god of fate. Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, Vaudou in Haiti, Voodoo in the United States are all different manifestations of a coherent belief system in which Èsù plays a central role. Èsù is a trickster figure as well as an agent of mediation. It mediates between generations, past, present and future, but it is also the messenger between men and gods. God of fecundity, Èsù is the one who brings opposites together. As god of fate, Èsù is capable of revealing or concealing a person's potential. Èsù is indeed an ambivalent figure. Christian missionaries associated this mythological persona with the devil because of the tricks it played on humans and the potential harm it could generate. As a mediator between gods and men, Èsù is the divine interpreter of *Ifá's* divination poetry². For Gates, these interpreting attributes makes Èsù's role similar to the role of

² *Ifá* is a divination system based on poetic verses in traditional Yoruba cultures. It is also the name of the deity associated with the divination process (*Ifá*).

the literary critic. According to him, Ogun, the god of war and artisans is the muse of the writer, while Èsù is the muse of the critic. I would nuance Gates interpretation by emphasizing the fact that Ogun, as the god of war, of blacksmiths and all artisans leans toward the materiality of the creative act. However, artistic creation is primarily an act of interpretation. It always constitutes a re-affirmation, a repetition with difference of an idea, a feeling, or an impression from the artist. Èsù could be considered the muse of the artist since it allows the interpretation of divine concepts and renders possible their materialization through artifacts. The concrete process of the materialization of the artifacts would be Ogun's matter. For Gates, Èsù assumes a much more important role in the New World than in traditional African contexts. As a mediator between different worlds, Èsù appears as the natural agent of dialogue between Europe and Africa, and therefore the main ally of oppressed black populations, especially in the plantation context of the New World.

In the tale of the Signifying Monkey, Gates finds Èsù's counterpart in the New World in the trickster figure of the monkey. For Gates, "the Signifying Monkey, stands as the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse" (44). According to him, a "confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white" is present in this rhetorical principle. (45) This refers to the intrinsic double voice quality of black texts in America, which are always determined from the inside by African-American cultural imperatives, but also determined from the outside by the predetermination of the historically oppressive nature of American society toward blacks. In the case of the concept of Signifying, the word itself ("Signifying") denotes similarity in the signifier, but difference in the signified. Thus, if Gates' concept refers to the received English word "Signifying", its meaning is slightly different. This according to him denotes an approach to language that is broadly shared in

African-American cultures. As such, Signifying defined by Gates, is in itself a resistive move against cultural oppression by restoring the natural tendency of language to generate ambiguity and plurality of meaning. The focus is placed on the materiality of the sign, on its form rather than on a specific and fixed meaning. This emphasis on form allows play, generating a certain distance in discourse. This rhetorical trick is the one employed by the Signifying Monkey to counteract his inherent inferiority towards the Lion. By using rhetorical tricks, the Monkey can overturn the domination of the lion, at least temporarily. Signifying constitutes one of the main rhetorical resistive tools available to blacks to regain agency in colonial and “Post colonial” societies. It is natural that countless occurrences of this trope are present in the African-American literary repertoire.

We will now describe step by step our approach to the analysis of this concept in its different manifestations in the New World. We will end this description by describing the literary corpus which we will analyze.

Our first chapter will be dedicated to Èsù and the West African griot. Section 1.1 will focus on the West African cultural concept of Èsù, the Yoruba god of fate. Section 1.1.1 will be devoted to the analysis of this African mythological figure, within the context of the *Ifá* divination system. We will define the role of Èsù, and the divinity Ifá, as they relate to the fate of humans. We will also describe to what extent *Ifá* worship is anchored in Yoruba social life. Finally, we will discuss the figure of the *babaláwo* priest, human intermediary between humans and gods during the divination process. We will describe the divination process, focusing more particularly on the specificity of the text of *Ifá*, and describe Yoruba cosmogony through the all permeating principle of *ashé*. We will present Èsù as the agent of connection between the different plans of existence, past, present and future, and the material and spiritual world. The

following section, 1.1.2, will be dedicated to Èsù's mediatory dimension. We will try to overturn Èsù's representation as evil, and present it as more ambivalent. We will see that Èsù's trick, which sometimes brings calamities to the world of humans, is not to be understood as evil, but as a consequence of human's inadequate behavior vis-à-vis universal laws. Èsù's trick indeed always constitutes a warning or a re-establishment of balance. We will also see that Èsù's tricks are means to test humans' adaptability in the universe. We will then focus on Èsù as the agent of liminality and mediation. Section 1.1.3 will focus on its manifestations in the New World, in particular in Brazil. We will map out the differences between the West African god and its New World manifestations. We will see that the warrior aspect of Èsù and its magical dimension were emphasized in the New World. We will try to understand how the context of the New World influenced Èsù's transformations. We will finally describe Èsù's liminal position between black and white universes in Brazil. We will define Èsù as both an agent of mediation and separation between these universes, effective through the process of interpretation.

Section 1.2 will be dedicated to the West African griot. Poet, singer, musician, philosopher, historian, etc, the West African griot assumes many roles in traditional contexts as well as in modern societies. We will posit the griot as the West African embodiment of the artist. In section 1.2.1, we will analyze the figure of the griot in its social dimension, in the context of Mande culture and in the context of Wolof culture as well. We will see how these cultures are related. We will first define the caste system which determines the griots' position in society. We will also evoke the stereotypes associated to their rank. We will finally understand that, despite their inferior position in social hierarchy, griots hold a certain power over the nobles for whom they work, both through the very nature of their art, and the knowledge they hold of history and social organization as well. We will see how griots are simultaneously agents of social cohesion

and separation within these codified structures. Our second sub section (1.2.2) will be devoted to the main instrument of the griot's power within the social structure; the mastery of language. We will first define the approach to everyday speech use that is specific to West African cultures. We will then demonstrate how griots participate in maintaining the social structure, most notably through historical narratives, and a connection to the past. We will then describe the different literary genres which define the art of the griot. We will analyze the connections between music and speech in the art of the griot. Finally, we will focus on the importance of polysemy in their language. Our last section in this chapter, 1.2.3, will be focused on the similarities between Èsù and the griot. We will see that they are both agents of social and universal mediation. We will also try to understand how griots maintain social boundaries while having the capacity to break them when necessary. We will see that they are social negative referents for the nobles. We will then try to bring together universal concepts related to both the universe of griots and Èsù. We will see that their relation to creation is very similar. Our final section will be devoted to the magical power of griot's speech, through the invocation power of language, and the play on ambiguity.

Our second chapter will be dedicated to the figures we have chosen as embodiments of griots of the Diaspora, namely, the capoeirista, the African American poet, and the rapper.

Section 2.1 will be focused on the capoeirista, practitioner of the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira. We will focus more specifically on the subgenre of capoeira angola which is characterized by a focus on the African roots of the game, and a more pronounced Africanist aesthetic. In section 2.1.1, we will first give some background information on the origin of the game, and give a description of the *roda*, that is, the ritual through which the games are played. In section 2.1.2, we will first look at capoeira's particular approach to its own history, in

particular through the mythical figure of the *malandro* (bad man). We will then explain the three philosophical concepts of capoeira: *Malicia*, *malandragem*, *mandinga*. Finally, we will describe how capoeira, through its ritual, constitutes an exploration of duality through liminality and ambiguity. Section 2.2 will be focused on African American poetry. We will first briefly describe a few of the very first poets, and the dilemma between assimilation of white/Western cultural standards, and the defense of their fellow slaves, which is present in their writing. We will then move to abolitionist poetry and discuss its didactic dimension. Questions of representation and stereotypes will be raised in section 2.2.2. We will focus our attention on the minstrel show, and what some described as its literary manifestation; dialectical poetry. We will demonstrate that dialectical forms were often misinterpreted as misrepresentations of black vernacular cultures, and assimilation of stereotypes imposed on blacks, erasing the cultural resistance inscribed within these forms. We will then move to the Harlem Renaissance poets and focus our discussion on the question of the integration of vernacular forms in poetry. Finally, we will look at the Black Arts Movement and describe the radical approach to poetry that these poets displayed, in particular in the fusion of oral and written forms of poetry. We will also describe their approach to performance poetry. Far from representing the totality of African American verse tradition, the periods and movements I have chosen to focus on nonetheless display authors and works which exemplify the main tension between the white and the black discursive universe that any black artist has to negotiate in American.

Finally, our last section of this chapter, section 2.3 will be focused on rap music. In section 2.3.1, we will first define rap's Africanist aesthetics, in particular through the concept of the break and the centrality of repetition within the musical manifestation of the genre. We will then associate these aesthetic priorities to the urban context which saw the birth of this genre. We will see that

hip hop culture was indeed determined both by its Afro-Diaporic dimension, and the context of post industrial urban decay which defined the South Bronx in the late 1970s. Section 2.3.2 will be mainly centered on the concept of Signifying and its manifestations within hip hop culture. We will first define Signifying through both its African American origin, and some aspects of its African roots. We will more particularly define it through the tradition of oratory battle inherited from Africa and which found relevance in the North American context. We will then focus our attention on new understandings of literacy and a breaking down of the literacy myth, through the New Literacy Theory approach. We will see that hip hop participated in this movement of the breaking down of the literacy divide by its promotion of vernacular forms of language as well as in the fusion of written and oral forms. We will finally look at the dichotomy between mythical and realistic narratives in rap, in particular through the mythological urban figure of the pimp.

Our last chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of our literary corpus. We will indeed analyse poems and songs from our three domains of study. We will try to demonstrate through textual analysis that Signifying constitutes a potent trope defining Afro-Diasporic rhetorical strategies at large.

In section 3.1.1, we will approach the tropes of Signifying and *malícia* as similar concepts manifested in two different Afro-Diasporic contexts. We will then define Signifying as the main rhetorical principle of Afro-Diasporic cultures at large, using Gates' theory. We will see how this trope negotiates the tension between orality, characteristic of African cultures, and writing, determining European and Western cultures. We will present Signifying as a rhetorical move, which places the capacity of language to generate a plurality of meaning at the center of language use. We will present the tensions between oral and written cultures. We will then analyze the capoeira song, *Vou Dizer a Meu Sinhor*, emblematic of the trope of indirection in

Signifying, especially in the oppressive context of slavery. We will observe a similar approach in Paul Dunbar's dialect poem *ACOUNTABILITY*. Finally Kenneth Carroll's poem *Theory on Extinction*, will help us demonstrate the importance of the trope of repetition to Signifying. This poem also demonstrates Signifying's approach to targeting several audiences at once.

Section 3.1.2 will describe the tension between orality and writing within Signifying, in particular in its manifestation in written texts. The use of the voice within written texts will be our main focus. First, we will define the features of oral cultures in particular through Noel Amherd's analysis of the *Ifá* text and Mamoussé Diagne's analysis of African oral cultures in *Critique de la raison orale*. We will see that the ambiguity and multiple interpretations of oral texts are determined by the context of utterance, that is, during performance. We will approach oral cultures as intrinsically focusing on the use of meaning association and polysemy for the very concrete purpose of preservation of knowledge. A play on the narrative voice is one way to achieve the integration of orality and plurality of meaning in writing. Several literary examples will help us understand this dimension. We will first use the ritual of the capoeira *roda* to define the context of an oral performance. A *Chula*, that is a sung call to the capoeira event, taken from the first recording of the GCAP group³ will help us understand the expression of a plurality of voices through a common medium which manifests in a ritualistic form. We will then analyze Sterling Brown's poem *After Winter* as an exemplification of the double-voiced quality of black texts, in particular in the Afro-American literary tradition. We will see how the two different voices in the text represent the two linguistic universes of white America and Black America. Then we will analyze the influence of rhythm, a formal aspect of texts, in generating plurality of voices and meaning through the poem *Heart beats* by African American poet Melvin Dixon.

³ Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho. *Capoeira Angola Salvador Brazil*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1996. CD.

Finally, we will analyze Notorious B.I.G.'s rap song *Gimme the Loot* as an example of the strategic use of narrative voices to create dramatic effects. We will also evoke the use of samples as another element adding layers of complexity to the use of voices within rap.

Section 3.2, we be focusing on black intertextuality and Signifying revisions. We will elaborate on the idea of intertextuality as a decisive aspect of Signifying. We will see that intertextuality assumes primarily the form of Signifying revisions, that is formal comments on former texts, in the literary tradition of the African Diaspora. We will see how the trope of repetition participates in this process through the use of mascon words for instance. The focus on the materiality of the sign, and the play on this dimension of language through repetition, denotes a play on meaning, as we will see through examples from our three domains of study. We will first focus on capoeira, and in particular on the use of mascon words, as a mode of intertextual signification. We will look at mascons referring to the African roots of the art, as in the song *Luanda é Meu povo*, which is part of the public domain. We will then look at Mestre Jogo de Dentro's song *Angola me Chama*, as another song demonstrating the use of mascon words referring back to Africa. The song *Tem Dendê*, displaying the mascon word *dendê*, is another example of the repetition of specific words denoting the African roots of capoeira. We will see, through successive revisions of the song *Sou homen não sou muleque*, that mascons and songs themselves are vehicles of Signifying revisions through the trope of repetition with difference. We will finally look at two songs revising the national myth surrounding the abolition of slavery in Brazil. We will see that capoeira songs act as agents of Signifying on official historical narratives. We will then analyze *O Black and Unknown Bards* by James Weldon Johnson, in particular its approach to Signifying revision through references to spiritual songs. Through the poems *Battle Report* by Bob Kaufman, *For Sweet Honey on the Rock* by Sonia Sanchez, and *To*

The White Fiends by Claude McKay, we will observe the recurrence of the theme of culture as a means of resistance to oppression, or culture as a battlefield. Finally, we will look at Signifying revisions in hip hop. We will analyze elements from the mixtape *Turn Off the Radio Vol. 4: Revolutionary but Gangsta Grillz* by hip hop duo Dead Prez, as an example of re-interpretation of mainstream popular rap songs. The whole album/mixtape will be seen as a revision of the theme of “gangsta”, which is prevalent in commercial rap.

Section 3.3 will focus on the dimension of the myth within our fields of study. We will describe the myth, in particular in African oral cultures, through Mamoussé Diagne’s analysis of the nature of oral discourse in black Africa in *Critique de la raison orale*. We will define myths as similar to tales. We will see that both manifest as Signifying revisions of real events taken from the social context of their utterance, or from historical contexts. The myth is therefore a mix of real social manifestations and imagination. We will see that the myth is also characterized by a play on the signified, a play on associations of meaning, using the signifier as its basis. We will first describe the use of historical resonance for the construction of myths around specific important figures and places in capoeira. We will in particular analyze the songs *Rei Zumbi*, *História do Mestre Pastinha* and *Grande João Grande*, composed by Mestre Moraes, founder of the group GCAP. We will then look at the song *Igreja do Bonfim*, which is part of the public domain, as exemplifying the use of the names of places to Signify on the history of capoeira. Finally, we will look at the song *Quando Era Pequeninho*, again from the public domain, which illustrates the reveal of popular myths through the art. We will then turn to the myth within African American verse tradition. We will first discuss the praise poem genre, in particular eulogies, through Joel Dias-Porter’s poem *Subterranean Night Colored Magus: 3 Moods in the Mode of Miles*. Our next poem, *TOUR GUIDE: LA MAISON DES ESCLAVES Ile de Gorée*,

Senegal, by Melvin Dixon, is a demonstration of how myth are constructed within the very structure of the poem. The last selection from the corpus of African American poetry demonstrates how art can Signify on persistent myths in society. This poem is called *The Drama*, by Suliaman El Hadi. It indirectly Signifies on racist myths about black people and culture, which allow the reality of oppression to be perpetuated. The poem plays on the opposition between reality and fiction, while using realistic descriptions of the reality of racial oppression in America. Finally, in our last section, we will analyze the play on myth within rap music. We will look in particular at the myth of the gangsta, which has taken over commercial rap since at least the year 2000, both in the US and France. We will return to our analysis of *Gimme the Loot* from Notorious BIG, and demonstrate that the song Signifies on the narrative voice, illustrating the mythical dimension of the rap persona, characterized by a fusion of real biographical elements and imaginary elements. We will also analyse a portion of the song *Locotes*, by rap group Cypress Hill, illustrating the ambiguous approach to the gangsta ethos commonly found within the genre. Finally, we will focus on French rap and present elements from rapper Sefyu's repertoire as demonstrating a reversal of stereotypes associated to Africans in France through a play on form. We will conclude our study on rapper Booba's mythical representation of himself through boast narratives. We will analyse one of his former raps, displaying different elements characterizing his rap persona, and we will discuss the ambiguous position he occupies, at the crossroad of critic of stereotypical representations and their validation through his rap.

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CHAPTER I : ÈSÙ AND THE WEST AFRICAN GRIOT: CULTURAL REFERENCES FOR THE NEW WORLD.

1.1- Èsù, God of Fate: Its position in West African societies and appearance in the New World

Following Henry Louis Gates' advocacy for a criticism of African-American literature defined by tools adapted to the specificity of this literature, we will use concepts available in African and Afro-Diasporic cultural manifestations to comment on selected songs, and poems emanating from the African Diaspora. It seems reasonable to assume that one cannot really study literature in a closed framework; literature indeed always exceeds the boundaries of its intended audience and purpose. However, African and Afro-Diasporic cultural expressions have suffered from European and Eurocentric cultural biases which, for centuries, predetermined their interpretation (the primacy of writing over orality being one of the main biases of Eurocentrism). It seems legitimate therefore to focus our analysis of these literatures (oral and written) on the Africanist dimension of those forms, not through an Afro-centrist premise seeing African and African-related cultures as superior to European or Western cultures, but rather as an attempt to connect different but related Black Atlantic cultural manifestations. It is following this rationale that Henry Louis Gates initiated his theorization of African-American literary criticism with an analysis of the Yoruba god of fate and its attributes. He indeed conceived of Èsù as the "myth of origins" of the Signifying Monkey who, according to Gates, represents African American vernacular culture in the New World (Gates 3- 4). Èsù, the god of fate of Yoruba mythology, is still today a central figure in many cultures of the African Diaspora. The omnipresence of this mythological figure in both West Africa and America attests to its relevance to the Black Atlantic. Furthermore, its very attributes, its conceptualizations and the transformations it assumes in different contexts illustrates its broad influence on African and

Afro-Diasporic cultural forms, and this outside the specific social frameworks in which it generally operates. If, according to Gates, Èsù is the link between West African cultural specificity and African American literary tradition, I will posit in my study that its influence (whether direct or indirect), and in a broader sense its relevance, can be extended to the African Diaspora at large. We will evaluate to what extent Èsù epitomizes African and Afro-Diasporic expression throughout the Atlantic world in many respects and inside many different genres.

In order to understand this West African god/concept/agent, one needs to be familiar with the traditional context it is a part of. We will thus focus our attention on one specific aspect of Yoruba religion in which Èsù is ubiquitous; the Yoruba divination system called Ifá. Then we will describe Èsù's attributes, which will allow us to present it as an agent of mediation at different levels. Finally, we will look at Èsù's manifestations in the new world, more specifically in Afro-Brazilian contexts.

1.1.1- Ifá divination system

1.1.1.a- Èsù and Ifá

Èsù is a central mythological figure in the pantheon of Yoruba gods. It is a central figure in the West African divination system known as Ifá among the Yorubas. The Yoruba people are mostly found in Western Nigeria and are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. Substantial Yoruba communities can also be found in The Republic of Benin and Togo. Yoruba culture has greatly influenced many cultures of the African Diaspora in the Americas. The Yoruba language is today spoken in different communities in the United States, the Caribbean and South America, mostly Brazil. The spread in the New World of religious systems based on Yoruba religion represents one of the main aspects of the current global nature of Yoruba culture

initiated through the advent of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. Indeed, the reach of Yoruba religion, Yoruba mythology and Ifá divination far exceeds the limits of Yoruba culture in West Africa. According to William Bascon, “Ifa divination is practiced by the Yoruba and Benin Edo of Nigeria; the Fon of Dahomey, who call if Fa; and the Ewe of Togo, who know it as Afa. It is also practiced under the name of Ifa by descendants of Yoruba slaves in Cuba and Brazil.” (Bascon 3) We are thus in the presence of a global cultural matrix that spreads across the Black Atlantic. We can easily bring forth the hypothesis that this matrix has had a great impact on a wide variety of cultural forms throughout this vast area in manifest and obvious forms as well as in more subtle ways.

The Yoruba religion is based on the existence of a supreme being called Olórun or Olóldùmarè. This being is not assigned a specific gender and is never represented in artifacts. The Fon of Benin worship a similar supreme god called Mawu-Lisa, who is understood as dual, both male and female. Ifá not only refers to the divination system itself, but to the name of the divinity which rules over the divination process as well. The Ifá divinity, also known as Òrúnmílá, holds a particular position among the gods in its special relation to humans. Òrúnmílá is in charge of the divination system which brings knowledge and advice from the supreme being and from the forces of nature to humans. Òrúnmílá’s role is to guide humans through divination and through the prescription of required sacrifices to please the gods. According to J. Omosade Awolalu, Ifá “knew the secret of man’s lot and could direct him how to rectify it because [...] he was present when man was created and his destiny sealed” (Awolalu 23). We see here that the divinity associated with the divination system fosters a close relationship with the fate of humans. It is the supreme being, however, who has complete authority over the fate of humans. Ifá is only a guide. Èsù and Ifá/ Òrúnmílá are also closely related as Èsù plays a central role in

the divination system as well. According to the myths, Èsù taught Òrúnmílá Ifá divination . Before focusing on Èsù's attributes and functions, let us first look at the divination system's inner workings and social implications. This is key to understanding the broader cultural context which determines Èsù.

One of the first aspects of the Ifá divination system that will help us understand the importance of Èsù is Ifá's ramifications in the larger social context. Ramification is probably too weak a term to describe a system, that, for its adepts, guides major aspects of their everyday lives. We touch here on a decisive aspect in our field of study. Indeed, the complete overlapping of religious and secular contexts has often been described as an element that defines both traditional African and Afro-Diasporic cultures. E.M. McClelland, in *The Cult of Ifa*, describes the influence of Ifá on social life:

The value of Ifá is [...] recognized as a social force. Practice of the cult imposes sanctions on its devotees and, through them, helps to influence public opinion and formulate codes of conduct. It is law that is being stated by the priest and obedience to it is required: oaths must be honored, contracts faithfully carried out, deceit and treachery condemned, and so on. The cult can exercise considerable pressure on a ruler, either for action or restraint. It can also be an important factor in the prevention of serious social unrest, for it is consulted when disputes occur on matters of social concern such as the infringement of property rights, succession to stools, claims to titles or plans for defense. (9-10)

Thus, we must understand Ifá as a fundamental agent of the regulation of social life in its diverse manifestations. As stated above, its influence is felt both on the rulers and on the ruled. Its political dimension should not therefore be underestimated. The Ifá priest, known as *babaláwo*, constitutes a major figure in the societies where Ifá is prominent. According to McClelland, *babaláwo*(s) are not selected through lineage. Rather, this function is either “conferred as honor or election” (McClelland 86). Going through initiation is a long and enduring process. Learning all the aspects of the system takes years and very few students actually manage to become priest.

The practice and diverse applications of divination require a broad knowledge of different related fields. Not only must the *babaláwo* know the verses and combinations which are at the center of the divination process and which constitutes in themselves an incredible achievement in terms of memorization of material, but he/she must also know the procedures for service and festivals, rituals, sacrifices, etc. The *babaláwo* must have an extensive knowledge of herbs, of their use for both medicinal and magical purposes (that includes knowing where to find and prepare those plants). He must study the habitats and properties of animals, as they also play a role in rituals (McClelland 86). This is not an exhaustive list of the domains of competence of the *babaláwo*.

For all those reasons, the *babaláwo* is a respected figure who is consulted on many different occasions in everyday life, such as arrangements for a future trip, birth, marriage, harvest etc. However, in the divination process, the priest is understood as an intermediary and not a protagonist. Indeed, “He is a link between two worlds, the ephemeral and the eternal, the material and the spiritual.” (McClelland 87) It is therefore through the *babaláwo* and his/her ability to access the divine through Ifá that adepts can regulate and rearrange their personal lives and society at large. The priest is therefore the relay or interface of this connection between gods/nature and humans. We will see that Èsù is the very agent which allows and manages this communication between the spiritual world and the physical world.

1.1.1.b- The divination process

Various methods of divination are employed among the different groups using the Ifá system. They are all based, however, on a set of verses that are combined, generally following patterns dictated by the throwing of sacred energized nuts. Here is a description of the process of divination given by one of Ifá’s most prominent practitioners and scholars in the United States, the late Louis Djisovi Ikukomi Eason:

Ifa priests energize the board for Ifa's entry into the divination process by tapping on the Eshu/Elegba figure, which generally is in the center top of the divining tray, with an instrument called *iroké*. In one hand, the diviner holds sixteen Ifa palm nuts taken from the palm tree known as *ope Ifa* (Ifa's sacred palm tree, mentioned in a creation myth above). These palm nuts have four indentations, suggesting a head with eyes, a nose, and a mouth. After being ritualized for divination, Ifa the sacral palm kernels are called *ikin*. [...] Ifa divination is also commonly performed with chains. (Eason 49)

The pattern determined by the throwing of the nuts will indicate which of the *odù*(s) (or sacred verses) will be used and how they will be combined. The combination is then recited and interpreted by the *babaláwo* who will determine the proper sacrifice or ritual to be performed.

J. Omosade Awolalu's comments on the *odù* corpus reveal important details about the ritual:

...there are sixteen principal *odù*, and each of the *odù* has a 'child', and the 'child' has a 'child' *ad infinitum*. Hence the Yorùbá speak of sixteen *odù* or 16 times 16 (256) *odù* or 16 time 16 times 16 (4096) *odù*. Each of these has a name. [...] Each *odù* has several cantos of various lengths together with stories which elaborate the cantos. The exact number of cantos in each *odù* is unknown, and the best that a *Babaláwo* does is to memorize as many of them as possible because the more he knows, the deeper he is believed to have gone into the mystery of Ifá and the more respect he earns from his clients. (Awolalu 125)

The corpus of Ifá divination verses seems, therefore, to be almost impossible to compute. The challenge of learning the tradition represents a memorization feat. A *babaláwo* truly is a master of language as he/she must memorize a huge amount of material and be able to recite and interpret it according to different situations and contexts.

Awolalu goes on to explain the nature of the *odù* by describing it as a speech in parables that only a skilled *babaláwo* can read and interpret. He then describes the *odù*(s) as parables of the experiences of mythological figures, humans, animals, or plants confronted with specific situations, and the responses they adopted. The collection of Ifá verses appears thus as a reservoir of past experience that is reanimated and re-contextualized in the present in order to

help people apprehend difficulties. Eason's account of the nature of the Odu and Ifa complements the information which Awolale conveys

Ifa is a canon of divine wisdom and knowledge made accessible to humans for maintaining harmony on earth via divination. As a repository of Yoruba traditional knowledge, Ifa is useful for addressing all human concerns. Ifa is an archive with narrative accounts of Creation, the activities and problems of the orishas and deified ancestors, and historical events. The Ifa literary canon contains markers to Yoruba history, accounts of orishas's personal lives, the Yoruba traditional worldview, procedures for conducting rituals and ceremonies for every conceivable occasion, formulae for resolving individual and civic problems, prescribed sacrifices, prescriptions for healing, poetry, and songs and chants. (Eason 47)

As Eason later suggests, the corpus of *odù*, which represents an accumulation of knowledge from Yoruba experience, is the primary reference point for decisions about the present and future of individuals and the community in Yoruba context. In Yoruba belief, time is generally not sequential, but simultaneous and cyclical in nature. Therefore, the past, present and future are understood as all happening simultaneously. With such an understanding of time, the past is completely integrated in the present and constitutes a determinant aspect of the future as well. Past references are interpreted as maps that potentially predict future events or as behavioral guidance that can influence future events positively. The primary objective of Ifá divination is to insure fluidity and communication between the different planes of existence. Ifá connects not only the spiritual world and the physical world as we have already stated, but it also connects past, present and future.

This mediation aspect of Ifá divination accounts for the great reliance and trust the population places in the *babaláwo* to solve issues of their everyday lives and the centrality of the divination process in decisive moments of life such as rites of passage, birth, marriage, installation of chiefs, etc. (Eason 52). These important moments constitute intersections in life

which often determine one's, or the community's, future or fate. Òrúnmílá, who knows all about human destiny as we have suggested earlier, is here to guide humans in those transitional moments. We will see that Èsù, whose favorite place to be is often said to be the crossroads (intersection), plays a decisive role in humans' fate as well, but its means of action are different from Òrúnmílá's. While, according to Eason, Ifá "is uniquely equipped with knowledge and skills necessary for restoring order where there is confusion and chaos" (Eason 51), we shall see that Èsù is often itself interpreted as an agent of confusion and chaos.

1.1.1.c- *Ashé*: all permeating principle

Before moving to a more specific description of Èsù, we must acknowledge the existence of a centralizing concept in the Yoruba tradition that is also predominant in the New World manifestations of this culture. According to Yoruba beliefs, there is a singular energy that permeates all matter in the universe and that emanates directly from the supreme being (Eason 48). This energy is called *ashé* (spelled *àse* or *axé* in Brazil). As we shall see when we discuss the West African griot tradition, the concept of *ashé* is very similar to the concept of *nyama* in the Mande worldview. An analogy could also be made with the Chinese concept of *qi* (also known as *chi* or *ch'i*) that is central to many martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine as well. According to Fá'lokun Fatunmbi, *ashé* is the spiritual essence that "transforms spiritual potential into physical reality." (Fatunmbi 14) He goes on to explain that "*Ifá* teaches that the visible universe is generated by two dynamic forces. One is the force "*ino*", which means "expansions," and the other is the force of "*isoki*," which means "contraction" (14). According to him, *ashé* moves between those two elements, and in doing so, allows the manifestation of matter. Èsù is responsible for the repartition of *ashé* throughout creation. *Ashé* can be understood

as dynamic, in constant movement, a process. It is actually when *ashé* is not allowed to flow freely that problems occur (health issues, natural disasters etc.)

According to Eason's description, the management of *ashé* has direct practical applications, especially through the divination system of Ifá:

It is *ashé* that allows divinities and humans to communicate. For the Ifa diviner, *ashé* is a practical and immediately accessible phenomenon that energizes their divining instruments, including the air around them. The use of *ashé* in harnessing and activating the cosmic energy that is believed to reside in all animals, plants, hills/soil, rivers, human beings is identified closely with detecting problems and healing (Eason 48)

Eason clearly demonstrates the relation the Yoruba people bear with this concept. It is indeed not a remote notion which is used to account for the unexplainable nature of reality, but rather a conscious materialization and understanding of the reality of unity throughout the universe and a concrete force that can be manipulated and used for specific practical or spiritual purposes. A description of Èsù and its context could therefore not be complete without an account of the concept of *ashé* because of the role it plays in society. Èsù, who is responsible for keeping and spreading *ashé* throughout creation, is often represented carrying a calabash in which *ashé* is contained. Sitting on top of the divination board, Èsù is responsible of the use of *ashé* in the communication between gods and humans. Liana Salvia Trindade, in her study, *Exu: Símbolo e Função*, describes Exu's (Èsù) role and its relation to *ashé/àse*:

O princípio dinâmico da existência cósmica e humana é simbolizado nas religiões ioruba e fon, pela divindade Exu. Exu é um princípio. Pertence e participa de todos os domínios da existência cósmica e humana. Ele representa e transporta o “àse” (força mágica sagrada) que designa em nagô a força vital que assegura a existência dinâmica permitindo o acontecer e o devir. Exu representa esta força encontrada em todos os elementos animados e inanimados, que define a ação e a estrutura desses

elementos. Exu transporta “àse”, mantendo a intercomunicação entre os diferentes domínios do universo. A froça vital é única e várias são as suas manifestações, sendo transmitida através de Exu aos seres e domínios do universo. (Trindade 74)

Thus, according to her, Èsù is not only the carrier and guardian of *ashé*, but its direct symbol and embodiment. *Ashé* and Èsù are agents of intercommunication between all elements of the universe, temporal, physical and spiritual. The concept of *ashé* has today reached far beyond the context of Ifá divination in Brazil, as it is commonly employed as a way to greet someone informally. The fact that this unmistakably African concept found its way into popular Brazilian culture constitutes an illustration, among many others, of the spread of Africanist world-views globally.

We have now clearly identified the context of Ifá divination. We have seen that Ifá is a central element that permeates Yoruba society. We have defined it as a link between the gods and the physical worlds, but also as the main medium of communication between the past, the present and the future. We have discussed the human dimension of Ifá wisdom through our description of the babaláwo. We have also brought forth a definition of the fundamental concept of *ashé*, which determines Yoruba cosmogony, and have alluded to the role Èsù plays in the manipulation and preservation of this ubiquitous energy. We shall now move to a description of Èsù's attributes and functions, and more specifically its quality as an agent of mediation.

1.1.2- Èsù: Agent of mediation

1.1.2.a- Èsù: devil or divine trickster?

As we have suggested, Òrúnmìlà is the agent of knowledge, helper of mankind, restorer of order whenever there is chaos and confusion. Èsù, on the other hand, appears as an agent of chaos, as we shall see. We would be wrong however to understand those two entities as

opposites. We have already stated that Èsù taught Ifá/Òrúnmìlà the divination process. Èsù also controls the repartition of *ashé* during this same process and throughout creation. Èsù and Ifá are not in opposition, but seem to be cooperating and competing with each other, depending on the circumstances. They remain intimately linked as McClelland has suggested (McClelland 15). If Èsù is “universally feared for his unpredictable malice, his delight in causing trouble and upsetting plans-even those of other deities” (McClelland 13), if Èsù is often portrayed as a destructive force, responsible for misfortunes and accidents, if Èsù is indeed an agent of chaos, it cannot be reduced to this aspect only as Èsù is more ambiguous than that. In this sense, Èsù cannot be understood as the embodiment of evil or the “devil” of the Christian faith. Despite the fact that Èsù had been historically represented as the devil by Christian missionaries in Africa, Christian priests in the new world and is still understood as such by many in contemporary Brazil for instance, despite the fact that the populations who gave offerings to this deity have been categorized as “evil worshippers”, Èsù is not completely malicious and can be associated with both positive and/or negative outcomes in any given situation.⁴ He is in any case always fulfilling the will of the supreme being which is conceived as inherently good.

If the means employed by Èsù and the consequences it has on human life can appear chaotic, if not evil from a human perspective, Èsù’s role is always to maintain balance between opposites. In order to achieve this purpose, Èsù might precipitate shift in an imbalanced position in order to suggest change. McClelland tells us about Èsù that “any dishonesty, inadequateness,

⁴ See Danoye Oguntola-Laguda’s *A Re-Appraisal of the Activities of Esu and Moral Responsibility in Yoruba Religion*, published in *Orisha: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diapsora*, Edited by Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, Asmara, Eritrea, 2005) for a deconstruction of the myth of Èsù as the devil.

See also : De Salles Alexandre, *Èsù ou Exu? Da Demonização ao Resgate de Identidade*, Produções Editoriais, Rio de Janeiro, 2001. Print.

carelessness or greed that is revealed in the ritual surrounding sacrifice, in festival, in everyday life, in trading and markets, results in swift and vengeful punishment. He delights in such exposures and frequently acts as *agent provocateur*.” (McClelland 16) Thus Èsù’s malice is not gratuitous—although indiscriminate—but always constitutes some sort of trial that the targeted individual or group must go through. Èsù’s trick often sanctions inadequate or antisocial behavior. That is one of the reasons why Èsù is sometimes conceived as the avenger god, or the punisher (Awolalu 29). Human adaptability and compliance to universal laws is tested through Èsù’s tricks. Èsù, therefore, cannot be blamed for sinister outcomes that spring from an inadequate human response. Fà’lokun Fatunmbi identifies natural disasters as an aspect of Èsù’s manifestation in its capacity to upset the plans of humans. Here is his understanding of Èsù’s tricks:

...from a metaphysical perspective, natural disasters can be understood as attempts by the Forces of Nature to communicate fundamental information regarding the dynamics of being. In *Ifá* scripture it is generally *Esu* who carries this type of message from Nature to humans. When *Esu* is carrying a warning from Spirit, *Esu* assumes the role of Trickster. There is nothing demonic or sinister about the Spiritual role of Trickster in any Earth-centered religion. The function of the Tricksters is always to force human consciousness into a deeper understanding of self and world. (Fatunmbi 8)

Through this perspective, Èsù’s tricks can be interpreted as opportunities for change and reversal of former paradigms. Indeed, when confronted with conflictual situations, humans must reassess their own beliefs, social habits or interpretations in order to pass through the test unarmed or strengthened. Conflicts brought to the front by Èsù act therefore as trials designed to evaluate mankind and force them to change according to the will of the gods.

1.1.2.b- Èsù as agent of liminality

Within Ifá divination's context, Èsù is responsible for the communication between the world of the gods, spirits and ancestors and the world of humans. Both Èsù's potential for mischief and its position as the relay between worlds make him a respected and revered figure in the pantheon of Yoruba mythology. He is the first divinity to receive sacrifice when a divination ceremony is conducted. Awolalu states that "without Èsù the dynamic of ritual would not exist" (30). As guardian of *ashé*, the primary figure of divination and the global mediating agent, Èsù's natural areas of election are crossroads, entrance of houses, the market or any place of encounter, exchange or boundary. McClelland describes the market as his favorite spot for the exchanges that happen there and the great potential for teasing men's greed it offers (19).

Èsù's position at the intersection is significant for several reasons. First as we have just stated, Èsù is the link between the divine and the world of humans. It translates god's will into human speech and vice versa through the medium of divination. Its Fon equivalent, Legba is described as the "divine linguist", the one who knows all languages and is the only divinity to remember the language of the supreme being Mawu-Lisa (Pelton 72-73). Thus Èsù/Legba is at the threshold of communication between worlds, the embodiment of communication and separation. Èsù's position at intersections is also significant in the role it plays in relation to the agent of free will granted to humans. Fatunmbi describes Èsù's influence on human fate in those terms:

Each moment of existence includes a wide range of possible actions, reactions and interpretations. Those moments which require decisive action are described in *Ifá* scripture as "*òna' pade*" which means "junction in the road". Whenever a person who is trying to build character through the use of *Ifá*'s spiritual discipline reaches *òna' pade*, it is customary to consult *Esu* regarding the question of which path will bring blessings from *Orisha*. (Fatunmbi 11)

Free will is thus manifest through the choices that we make and which determine future outcomes. The fate of a person is not understood as leading toward one ineluctable conclusion, but rather as a set of possible routes with different outcomes that each person chooses at each crossroad of life. Èsù's liminal role is determinant whenever an important decision must be made or whenever a life enters or leaves the world. In order to fulfill one's higher destiny, one must make sure to consult Èsù and offer proper sacrifice. Èsù will facilitate the process of communication if proper sacrifices and offerings are made. Èsù can also be the agent of disruption or corruption of this communication if inappropriate behavior is observed.

In a broader sense, we can see Èsù as the agent of liminality itself. It is the agent that brings opposites together through *ashé*. It is difficult to qualify Èsù since it is always one thing and its opposite simultaneously. Èsù is often described as having legs of different sizes, with one foot in the world of the gods and one in the human world. Robert Pelton tells us that "If the threshold has become his special place, and if he is intimately associated with the crossroads and the market, it is because he is preeminently a being of the boundaries. He has sexual relations with any women he chooses because these boundaries—physical, social, religious, and even metaphysical—dissolve and reform in his presence." (Pelton 88) Èsù is indeed the agent which enables boundaries to be established, balance to be maintained and at the same time the agent which erases those boundaries and generates imbalance and chaos. As stated above, chaos is always a way to challenge status quo and move beyond former inadequate paradigms or reformulate them to fit a new context. Èsù, in this sense, is the agent that transcends binary oppositions and opens new ways. It is the agent of dialectic and process in Yoruba cosmogony.

Pelton gives us an account of the two "lengthiest and most complex myths" dealing with Legba (Èsù's equivalent among the Fon of Benin). According to him, those myths explain

“...how Legba gave magic to the world, became mediator between gods and men, was recognized as the agent and spokesman of Fa (the god of divination), was named the guardian of humans and their houses, became the embodiment of male sexual potency, and received the name *Aflakete*.⁵” (80) All this was granted to Èsù after he won a contest organized by Mawu, the female side of the supreme being, to determine who would be the chief of gods. The contest required to be able to “play a gong, a bell, a drum, and a flute while dancing to their music....” (Pelton 80) The correlation between Legba’s musical skills and magic, mediation, divination, protection of humans and their houses, male sexual potency and trickery made explicit in the two myths, is in itself an essential aspect that relates to the rest of our study, as we will see. Beyond the simple fact of musical skills and their practical purposes in society, this ability to perform different tasks simultaneously illustrates Legba’s polyvalence and capacity to navigate between different fields, in other words, liminality itself. Pelton states:

...it is Legba’s versatility that puts him before all the other gods at the center of human life. This versatility symbolizes his multiformity and his independence of ordinary structure, social as well as physical, human as well as divine.[...]Legba wins preeminence because his skillful playing discloses his power to shatter the limits of normal movement and to create a new harmony out of the seemingly disparate actions that his efforts brings into relationship. The dexterity of his hands and feet reveals his far greater ability to move across various planes of existence. This “rupture of planes,” according to Paul Mus, lies at the heart of that power to transform which we call magic. Through such a rupture the invisible spiritual world not only lies open to the visible world, but acts upon it, acts in concert with it, or is acted upon it. Legba, then, as an ontological master of sleight-of-form, is a prime agent of Fon magic.

The planes that Legba ruptures, however, are chiefly social. Although his activity has a truly cosmic or metaphysical basis and shows itself in his power over physical reality, Legba normally shatters, reinforces, or rearranges the human planes and relationship that, taken all together, make up the elaborate network that is society. (81-82)

⁵ Fon nickname for Legba. Literally “I tricked you” (Pelton, 72).

Liminality here is manifest in Legba's capacity to move freely between different planes, breaking boundaries and reforming them elsewhere. If the "rupture of planes" is here understood in its magical dimension, in that it ties together the physical and spiritual world, the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, and allows communication between them, in the social context of human interaction, however, it seems to denote both Legba and Èsù's mediating qualities and anti-social character. Èsù and Legba's free movement across social spaces and conventions constitutes a breaking of status quo which is also the breaking of taboos.

When describing Èsù as the gatekeeper of the invisible realm, Fá'lokun Fatunmbi gives us an account of the representation of creation in Ifá. According to the Ifá corpus, creation can be understood as a circle divided into four quadrants by an equal arm cross (similar to the Celtic cross). The top half represents the spiritual realms and the bottom half represents the visible dimension of earth. The right side represents the future and the left side represents the past. All those elements are manifest in each present moment. Èsù can navigate easily between those dimensions. Balance between those elements is achieved at the center of the circle. Standing in balance at the center implies a direct connection to all the realms of existence, including the invisible realm. This balance insures blessing and harmony in one's life. Èsù is at the intersection of all those realities. The different parts of the circle are held together through *ashé*. Èsù, through his manipulation of *ashé*, allows the connection between the different realms of existence. Èsù must insure balance between those realms and this independently of human will, that is why its deeds can sometimes be contrary to human expectations and appear chaotic. We will see later on that the circle constitutes a major symbol repeatedly found in the diverse cultural manifestations discussed in our study.

Thus Èsù appeared to us as more ambiguous than the embodiment of evil it became in the eyes of European explorers and colonialists. Èsù is both an agent of good and bad in the sense that he can trigger both aspects of human ambivalence through its tricks. As we have discussed, Èsù's tricks are ways to provoke and challenge human stasis or inadequacy to universal laws rather than part of a plan to steer humanity toward its demise. Its mediating position between worlds determines its relative neutrality. Pelton states:

Eshu links together the transparency of the sky and the opacity of the wild, twin sources of knowledge hidden from humans, and then fashions a space that is truly neither sky nor bush because it has access to the potencies of each. These potencies are related, as we have seen before, as center and periphery. [...]It is Eshu in the persistence and agility of his movement across all boundaries, who defines the limits of this world by shaping an image of it. This image is Ifa... (Pelton 137)

Èsù is indeed the agent of liminality as we have discussed. Being both here and there simultaneously, male and female, old and young, godlike and human, mischievous and wise, Èsù embodies the threshold between worlds and allows communication between them. As the embodiment of boundaries, Èsù is able to break through them and recreate new ones whenever and wherever necessary. It is thanks to its freedom of movement which allows the continuous recreation of separation and communication, that boundaries between the different fields of realities are maintained. Through the repartition of *ashé*, the energy that connects all things, Èsù is both the agent of connectivity of center and periphery and the agent of their distinction. Now that we have a clearer understanding of Esu's attributes and function, let us look at its manifestation in the new world.

1.1.3- Èsù in the new world

1.1.3.a- Èsù/Elegba

As agent of liminality and mediation, Èsù is also the divine messenger of travelers, transformation, and the connection between oceans and lands. This aspect is called *Esu Arowoje* among the Yoruba (Fatunmbi 20). It seems therefore quite logical that Èsù found an expression in the New World. Indeed, Èsù was certainly following along with the successive Yoruba populations that went through the middle passage. The middle passage is in itself a transitional space, a boundary between two worlds. The fate of Africans and their descendants took a decisive turn whenever the first slave ship crossed the Atlantic successfully. Èsù is today present in many different areas of the new world and generally assumes functions to those it assumes in West African societies. Some differences, or rather accentuations of certain traits, are noticeable. According to Fatunmbi, the name Elegba to refer to Èsù is more commonly used in the West than it is in West Africa. For the Yoruba, Esu-Elegba is the warrior aspect of Èsù, or the “anger of the gods”. Interestingly enough, Èsù’s equivalent for the Fon of Benin, Legba, is never understood as a vengeful god as in the Yoruba context (Pelton 130). In any case, the adoption of Elegba as Èsù’s predominant name is significant in that it denotes the shift that occurred in Èsù’s relation to its worshipers in the New World. Fatunmbi notes that:

Elegba is a derivation of the term “*Ele Agbara*,” which translates idiomatically to mean “The Power of Strength”. As an aspect of *Esu*, *Elegba* is the ability to communicate with Spirits in the face of overwhelming obstacles and oppression. Given the conditions that existed during slavery, it is not difficult to imagine why *Elegba* would become the primary focus of interaction between human consciousness and Spirit within *Ifá* worship as it exists in the west. (Fatunmbi 2)

Indeed, the accentuation of the vengeful character of Èsù in the New World can easily be understood in the light of the radical change of context that Africans experienced in this new

universe. Agent of movement and fluidity, Èsù is certainly adaptable to different situations. The fact that the warrior aspect of Èsù appears as predominant in the New World seems to illustrate the need of African populations to defend themselves from the oppressive context of slavery and the dehumanization it implies. According to Liana Salvia Trindade's, the influence of the environment played a role in Èsù/Exu's shift in the new world, particularly in Brazil:

A sociedade escravocrata, baseada nas relações de dominação-subordinação, configura o conflito social do negro enquanto classe economicamente explorada. Neste contexto, a religiosidade africana passa a significar a forma de resistência ante a cultura dominante do branco. A concepção de Exu no candomblé é o resultado de um processo onde se perderam os quadros sociais de referência, em decorrência da desagregação sócio-cultural do escravo africano. Houve, portanto, o deslocamento do símbolos provenientes de uma estrutura lógica de pensamento, para adquirir novos sentidos fornecidos por um outro contexto de relações estruturais. (Trindade 81)

Candomblé, which is an Afro-Brazilian religious practice demonstrating syncretism between Ifá worship and Christianity, is here clearly understood as a re-actualization of African religious concepts in a new oppressive context, thus constituting a potent example of resistance. It represents, however, an incorporation of both former cultural models and new paradigms in the syncretism between African religion and Christianity it displays. A drastic change in the socio-cultural and economic context therefore determined the re-interpretation of African concepts in the New World. The differences observed between related New World and African religious manifestations will logically match the differences of context.

1.1.3.b- Èsù and magic:

Trindade brings our attention to the shift in Èsù's attributes in that its New World (or at least Brazilian) manifestations are characterized by a larger emphasis on Èsù's magical properties. The apparition of this cultural concept/folk hero in the New World is in itself an obvious sign of resistance to oppression in a context of repression of African cultures. Its

potential as an agent of resistance is therefore multiplied by Èsù's trickster quality, which materializes through magic. Èsù's tricks, with proper rituals and sacrifices, can indeed be used for self protection and/or for attacking someone. That is how Èsù in the New World became an ally of the slaves against the slave system and its perpetrators. According to Trindade, Èsù's new priorities in this new context constitute a natural movement of balancing of forces. In the imbalanced setting of slavery, Èsù taking side with the oppressed allowed effective resistance. Èsù became a direct agent of survival not only for African populations, but for their cultural heritage as well. Trindade makes here a clear distinction between "magia negra", the Western concept of black magic, that is magic used for evil purposes, often equated with "the magic of the blacks" in European psyche, and "magia Africana" which is generally devoid of Manichean connotations. According to her, magic must be understood as a neutral concept which can be steered and used for good or bad purposes, but the moral inclination only depends on the intentions of the person performing magic, not on the medium of magic itself. Trindade describes the use of magic in the context of candomblé in those terms: "Desde que a religião do candomblé constitui um "nicho" cultural de resistência comunitária a uma situação escravocrata, a magia de Exu passa a ser utilizada como força protetora e de combate ante as relações sociais conflitantes." (Trindade 83) It is therefore in the context of candomblé as a resistive practice anchored in an African cultural heritage and in response to an oppressive environment that Èsù assumed the role of defender of the oppressed. It is not far-fetched, therefore, to interpret Èsù as one of the primary agents of cultural resistance in the New World, in that Èsù represents African cultural persistence and resilience, an African cultural continuum in the New World. The liminal character of Èsù, its ambiguity and all-inclusiveness, which we have already presented as the very condition for magic (see 1.1.2, b : Èsù as agent of liminality), seems to mirror the process of

hybridization which characterizes Afro-Diasporic cultural forms. The context of the New World often implied the imposition of the culture of Europeans on the African slaves and the tentative of erasure of their traditional cultures. Èsù constitutes an agent of both the assimilation of the new imposed paradigm and the preservation of the African heritage, thus enabling the creation of a third space embracing both cultural dimensions. The ambiguous character of Èsù is therefore manifest in cultural syncretism.

Thus, Èsù is both the agent of disconnection between the oppressor and the oppressed through the use of magic as a defense, and the agent of connectivity between those two universes through syncretism. This tension between the polarized potential for unification and division is often made explicit in the different interpretations that are made of Èsù, as we shall see.

Alexandre de Salles, in *Èsù ou Exu? Da Demonização ao Resgate da Identidade*, describes the same process of transformation of Èsù into the warrior, vindictive god described by Trindade, but his interpretation is slightly different. While Trindade focuses on the social context of slavery as determining Èsù's shift, de Salle emphasizes the influence of the Euro-centric interpretation of Èsù as the devil as a determining factor of its transformation. De Salle states:

Na luta dos negros contra os brancos, observa-se que os negros se apropriam da visão branca de Èsù e permitem que prevaleça o caráter de patron dos feiticeiros sobre o de mensageiro dos Orixás. Devido a estrutura da escravidão e a tentativa de redução ideológica, o deus mensageiro e brincalhão, torna-se cruel : um deus que envenena, enlouquece e mata. Passa a ser o amigo e defensor apenas de seus fiéis negros. (de Salles 104)

Here the emphasis laid on magic and on Èsù's vengefulness towards the slave system is not solely a response to the context of slavery as such, but also a response to the demonization of the divinity, its devotees and all Africans at large, which de Salle characterizes as “ideological reduction” (“redução ideológica”). We can assume that the misunderstanding of Èsù as the devil,

the image of a malevolent divinity cast upon Èsù, further precipitated the accentuation of its propensity to perform acts of mischief in particular against the oppressors of its devotees. Consequently, Èsù's tricks on the slave drivers and whites in general further increased their categorization of the divinity as the devil. This drastic shift in Èsù's priorities seems determined and accentuated by a spiraling effect generated by the misrepresentations of Africans produced by European colonialist thinking. This spiral of misconception, which, oscillates back and forth between the oppressors and oppressed, has for sole outcome to accentuate further and further preconceived and presupposed intrinsic and insurmountable differences between Europe and Africa. The more Europeans despised and repressed Africans and their culture, the more they fought back through Èsù's powers, which in turn precipitated further oppression/repression toward them.

1.1.3.c- An embodiment of ambiguity

The misconceptions and misinterpretations of Èsù as the devil by Europeans, which we have just described, illustrate Èsù's ambiguous character. Èsù's ambiguous nature is indeed made obvious through the different interpretations that can be made of it/him. The different interpretations of the divinity appear to have influenced differences observable in diverse Brazilian religious systems originating from Ifá. Candomblé is a hybrid religious practice that appeared in Brazil in the early nineteenth century. Candomblé is mostly based on Yoruba religion and the incorporation of elements from Christianity. The different Yoruba gods have been assigned different names taken from Christian saints for instance. Candomblé is often described as an African religion disguised by the superficial traits of Christianity, but the similarity between the functions and qualities assigned to the Yoruba gods and the saints makes one appreciate candomblé as not solely a strategic dissimulation of African worship under a

Christian appearance, but as a genuine fusion of both religions as well. Macumba, while sometimes synonym to candomblé in certain parts of Brazil, is mostly understood as a form of candomblé focusing on witchcraft and in which Èsù is the primary divinity. Umbanda and quimbanda are two subgroups of macumba, which illustrate the racial division of Brazilian society. Umbanda is constituted mostly of white middle class followers and gives a larger part to Christianity. According to Trindade, umbanda constitutes a rationalization of candomblé that appeared to fit an urban industrialized context (87). This partially accounts for the lesser influence magic holds in this religion. Quimbanda on the other hand is closer to African worship and generally practiced by blacks. The use of magic for a variety of practical purposes is at the center of the system and Èsù assumes a central position there. Trindade describes the relation between the two systems of umbanda and quimbanda, through their respective understanding of Èsù:

A identificação de Exu com o diabo no sistema umbandista traz implícita a invocação das práticas mágicas da divindade africana, referidas tanto ao passado histórico quanto ao presente. Exu é visto pela ideologia dominante como um perigo sempre latente do oposição à ordem, pois a sua prática na Quimbanda, nos termos atuais, desperta na memória coletiva a reprodução do passado escravocrata. Exu-negro-diabo simboliza a magia do negro revivendo as práticas mágicas dos escravos contra os senhores. Tais imagens estão associadas ao mito bíblico em que o diabo é a figura do desafio ao poder estabelecido. Esta interpretação oficial de Exu atribui, implicamente à imagem do negro, uma conotação de feiticeiro ou de demoníaco em oposição aos valores do branco. (Trindade 130)

We get a sense of the division that exists between those two related religious forms. According to Trindade, since the very beginning of the division of umbanda and quimbanda, the theoreticians of umbanda emphasized the distinction between the two systems through their biased understanding of African culture as primitive, debased and uncivilized. In this context Èsù was clearly understood as the “devil”, a pure manifestation of evil forces. Umbanda was described by

those theorists as a necessary movement away from the African worship in order to counter its negative influence. Umbanda was understood as a sort of enlightened double of an originally and necessarily diabolical African system of worship (Trindade 130). Trindade's studies however clearly demonstrates the dichotomy that exists between the official discourse of umbanda concerning Èsù, and the fact that the actual practitioners of umbanda, while seeing Èsù as the devil, generally accept its ambiguous character, and place the good or bad moral inclinations on the will of human practitioners, not on the entity. The actual practice of the religions seems, therefore, to contest the structurally enforced separation between umbanda and quimbanda through what appears as a common understanding of Èsù's indeterminate, ambiguous and shifting character. Èsù, as the main agent of separation and connection between those two related religious forms, can be interpreted as the main pivotal agent between two factions of society that have been historically set apart through the concept of race. We must not forget that it is as carrier of *ashé* and overseer of Ifá divination that Èsù's interaction with humans must be understood.

In this context, we can assimilate Ifá divination to a prism, and *ashé* the material of which the prism is constituted. Èsù is the manipulator of the prism, giving it specific angles according to situations. The prism gives access to an image of the thing behind, but the personal perspective of the looker, the position of the prism itself and the object of focus will determine the nature of the image. Therefore, two persons having different points of view, will have a different appreciations of the same object, and similarly, any slant or bias in an individual's position will affect the image of the target. In an harmonious relationship with creation, we can assume that the thing will appear to the person as it really is. Thus Èsù, by manipulating the prism, that is Ifá divination, through *ashé*, forces humans to reflect on their position in the

universe relative to a specific target (the future, fate or else...) and allows them to correct any slant in order to act according to universal rules. The prism manipulated by Èsù is the very agent which distorts the vision, but at the same time allows a greater understanding of one's position in the universe.

Thus we have presented Elegba as the warrior aspect of Èsù, which became predominant under the harsh conditions in the New World. Èsù, through its vengeful aspect and its use of magic, became the symbol of resistance to physical oppression and cultural erasure, which was imposed on Africans in the New World. Through the shift that Èsù's character displayed in the New World, we can appreciate its adaptability to context, its potency as an agent of cultural resistance and cultural syncretism, and its propensity to generate multiple interpretations. The different interpretations of the divinity that we have evoked in Brazilian society illustrates the racial division that has characterized contacts between Europe and Africa (or the West at large and Africa). Èsù appeared to us as both the agent of connectivity between these two worlds through syncretism, and as the agent of disconnection between them through its ambiguous nature and the difficulty of interpreting its nature.

As we have seen, Èsù seems to act simultaneously as the agent of connectivity and separation. While Èsù is the one who can dissolve boundaries and make encounters possible, Èsù can also reinforce these boundaries. As the agent of communication between diverse and sometimes opposite universes, Èsù must be understood as a prerequisite agent for syncretism and hybridization, that is the sublimation of binary oppositions (If we think of Èsù as a personified entity, "his" approval and active participation is required in any context of communication, which is why Ifá worshippers perform sacrifices at Èsù's intention before any divination proceedings). At the same time, Èsù can be the very agent of (perceived) irrevocable separation

between different universes. The inclination the encounter is leaning towards only depends on human interpretation of Èsù's tricks (that is, to use the prism metaphor Èsù's positioning of the prism relative to the person observing.) We can refer here to the story of the two brothers, which illustrates perfectly Èsù's play on appearances and the misunderstanding that can spring from a rigid and superficial interpretation of events (see Gates page 32 for a version of the tale.) This tale clearly demonstrate the ambiguous nature of Èsù, its liminality and its propensity to point at the deceptive nature of appearances and the fragility of superficial human interactions. Pelton explains Èsù's deceptive nature when commenting on a tale where Èsù brings discord between a husband and his wives:

On the surface he is the cause, or at least the instigator, of that conflict; more deeply, he is the revealer. He exposes the instability of the superficially peaceful family by laying bare real lines of opposition that must be dealt with so that more fruitful structure [...] can emerge. (Pelton 140)

Here is his interpretation of the brothers'/friends' tale as it relates to divination:

In the first place, Eshu causes trouble by walking along the boundary between the two friends, a boundary that they do not, in fact, acknowledge. [...] Furthermore, neither of them can encompass the other's vision. They notice Eshu's clothing, his staff, and his pipe, but neither really sees his movement—or what the other sees. They are bound by habit. It is the past that holds them, not the present. Finally their quarrel reveals all sorts of suppressed animosity. [...] there was surface harmony, but underneath lays suspicion, anger, and violence. The friendship was held together by custom, not by mutual awareness and willingness to undergo modification together. Thus Eshu has only to draw attention to the real boundary between them to shatter their false peace and to infect the world with their poison. (Pelton 142)

Thus we must understand Èsù's agency through trick as it relates to human conflicts in Èsù's capacity to reveal the tensions and imbalances rather than in generating them. The tale of the brothers can be interpreted in the light of the historical encounter of Africa and Europe and the

consequences it had on human development. The encounter seems more like a missed one in the sense that incomprehension has been the rule. The laws of economic domination were the determining factors of this encounter as far as Europe is concerned, which precipitated the rationalization of the categorization of Africans as outside culture, civilization, that is outside of humanity. Such misconceptions have been perpetuated to this day under the same economic prerogatives, maintaining at the same time a seemingly unbridgeable, but nevertheless superficial, if not totally artificial, racial gap between populations. Èsù as the agent of communication between worlds played and continues to play a central role in the global interaction between Africa and Europe/America. It is therefore not a surprise that Èsù appears so central to the Afro-Diasporic cultures born of the prolonged interaction between Europe and Africa. (Laying the emphasis on Èsù's relevance to Afro-Diasporic cultures does not imply that African contemporary cultures do not bear elements of this encounter. Indeed contemporary African cultures as well have been influenced not only by continuous contacts with Europe, but by its Diaspora as well. What I am rather trying to point out here is that it seems that the cultures of the Diaspora have consistently managed to generate genuine hybrids of European and African cultures.) Èsù is thus the symbolic revealer of the misunderstanding between Europe and Africa, but its intrinsic ambiguity makes it also the symbol of successful and genuine integration of both civilizations. As much as Èsù itself, the many cultural forms born out of the experience of Africans in the new world are undeniable markers denoting this ambiguous history. These forms both bear potentials of separation and combination between the Western World and Africa, and might indeed hold the seeds for an appeased common fate. Let's take a look now at another central West African cultural figure, the West African griot.

1.2- The West African Griot: An African definition of the artist?

As we have discussed, the Yoruba people constitutes one of the main groups in West Africa whose influence on cultures of the New World is readily identifiable. The broad influence of the Yorubas in America is, however, probably rivaled if not surpassed by another West African linguistic group called the Mandé. We will focus our attention on one of the main figure of Mandé society. Indeed, the griot is one of the main cultural figures representative of the social organization of this group. The griot is also a central figure in many different West African societies. The functions of the griots are related to oral and musical artistry, but they go well beyond the typical western understanding of the role of artists. Griots indeed assume a whole set of duties in the daily lives of people from different strata of society. Our study of the West African griot will be mainly based on the literature available on the Mandé griots, as well as on the Wolof griots of Senegal, whose culture and history is intertwined with the Mandé's. Mandé people spread across a large region encompassing Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Chad, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The Mandé group is composed of many diverse linguistic groups such as the Mandinka, Soninke, Bambara, Diula among others. Mutual linguistic intelligibility among the different Mandé populations is observed mostly among the Mandingo subgroup (Bambara, Diula, Malinké) (Camara 15). Mandé and Wolof people are predominantly Muslims, but they commonly borrow elements from animist religions. Islam and Christianity in West Africa are generally characterized by syncretism with pre-islamic and pre-colonial African religious practices. The Mandé people are known as the founders of two of the largest empires of pre-colonial Africa, the Ghana empire and the Mali empire. The Wolof empire was part of the Mali

empire before it gained independence during the fourteenth century. This historical connection accounts for the great similarities in the structures of Mandé and Wolof societies.

Both Mandé and Wolof cultures are hierarchical, patriarchal and based on a caste system. The griots, generally called *jali* or *jeli* among the Mandé and *guewel* among the Wolof are part of a low cast, which includes the leatherworkers, the blacksmiths, the woodworkers and other artisans. Griots are artisans of speech and music, but as we will see, they assume a lot more practical functions in their respective societies. We will first discuss the position and role griots occupy in Mandé and Wolof societies as well as their relation to language and the spoken word. We will then compare the characteristics of the West African griot to Èsù's.

1.2.1- The social dimension of the griot

1.2.1.a- The griot and the caste system

While it seems hard to understand Èsù's functions and attributes without evoking the context of Ifá divination, a clear understanding of the griot cannot be achieved without a description of the social context in which he/she is immersed. We will base our description of the context on the works of Mamadou Diawara on the griot among the Soninke, on Sory Camara's work on the Malinké and on Isabelle Leymarie's work on the Wolof of Senegal. We need to remain conscious of the problematic of generalization, which necessarily leads to misrepresentations. However, similar traits among griots of different West African societies can undoubtedly be observed and help us build a global understanding of this capital figure of social life. On the cultural connections between the different groups where griots are represented, Isabelle Leymarie notes that:

Les influences unificatrices des empires ouest-africains du Ghana (VIIIe au XI siècle), du Mali et à un moindre degré de l'empire songhai (XVI e

siècle) favorisent l'homogénéisation culturelle et social du Sahel. Certains peuple du Sénégal, du Mali, de la Guinée, de la Gambie et du Sud de la Mauritanie, jadis membres de l'empire du Mali, possèdent des traits culturels similaires : hiérarchies prononcées avec des professions endogames et systèmes de clientèle prévalent entre les « hommes libres » et les artisans. Au Sénégal, les Wolof, les Peuls, les Sereer, les Sarakolé, les Toucouleurs, et les Mandingues ont établi des équivalences entre leurs diverses strates d'artisans et lors de mariages, les considérations de la classe tendent à l'emporter sur les différences culturelles... (Leymarie 5)

The significant cultural similarities among disparate West African cultures across a vast area stretching from Senegal to Chad (Hale 11) allows a description of the griot as the West African embodiment of oral and musical artistry. If we must remain conscious of the problematic raised by such a generalization, this categorization seems necessary to our endeavor to develop a coherent model of a global Africanist aesthetic. We will therefore not go into too much detail about each society, but look for the numerous connections observable between these different societies and latter on connect them to New World cultural manifestations.

As Leymarie suggests earlier in her analysis, the first common feature that these different societies share is an elaborate and codified system of division of social roles and positions. Mandé and Wolof societies are divided in three different traditional classes through a caste system. The caste system largely prevents social mobility and mixing to this day although Islam and western influences have greatly affected traditional repartition. Society is still divided into a dominant class of nobles, a lower class of artisans and a slave class. The griots are part of the artisan category along with other craftsman such as the shoemakers or leatherworkers, the woodworkers, the ironsmiths, etc. The griots, as members of a low class, are dependent on the nobles for their revenues (through money and gifts). Their dependence is not complete however. We will see that they enjoy a certain agency in this pre-determined structure. For instance, Camara notes that while the activities of the griot (called jeli among the Malinké) are absolutely

proscribed for the nobles (Horo), the jeli can generally have a parallel occupation to his/her art, be it agriculture, commerce, etc.

As a member of a lower stratum of society the griot and the other artisans suffer from a set of stereotypes associated with their positions. Camara describes sexual promiscuity as one of the main stereotypes associated with the griot and the woodworkers. The main element, however, that generates both fear and disdain from other castes is the very raw material that griots manipulate, that is language. As masters of language griots are feared for their capacity to trigger passion, to lie, and to discredit a person or group through the use of their oratory skills (Camara 89). Barbara Hoffman, in the introduction to her dissertation *The Power of Speech: Language and Social Status among Mandé Griots and Nobles*, contends that the interpretation of the griot as a group despised by the nobles presented in the literature only reflects the authors' bias in favor of the nobles. According to her, it is the social tensions that are inherent to nobles' and griots' respective positions that generate such characterizations. Their interdependence and the conflicts that emanates from it is at the root of the perceived inferiority of the griot (Hoffman 3). We will see that if the political power is in the hands of the nobles, griots hold an equal power in society which counteracts the nobles'.

1.2.1.b-The functions of the griot and relations to the nobles:

Griots assume many different roles in society. In *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*, Thomas A. Hale gives an extensive, yet not exhaustive, list of the functions associated with the griots. Hale describes griots as genealogists, historians, advisors, spokespersons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters/translators, musicians, composers, teachers, exhorters, warriors, witnesses, praise singers, ceremony participants, as well as responsible for naming, initiations, courtships, marriages, installations and funerals. These functions are often

performed for the benefit of a specific noble family. Each griot family and individual is indeed always closely associated with a specific noble family. Griots generally perform their art on behalf of the nobles. They are also the guardians of the nobles' history and genealogy and assume different mediating functions for them, such as speaking on their behalf, translating for them, etc.

Mamadou Diawara in, *La Graine de la Parole*, defines the Soninke word *nyaxamala*, describing the caste of the griots (which includes other artisans), as coming from a phrase meaning "make me happy and I will follow you." This illustrates the relationship the *nyaxamala* bear with their patrons. Diawara notes : "le client suivrait donc celui qui fait son bonheur, il est totalement libre de choisir son patron. " (Diawara 39) The patron is responsible for the material well being of the griot. The griot generally offers his/her services in exchange of gifts or money. The griot often builds and/or maintains strong and lasting connections with the specific family he/she works for, however, a griot can decide not to work for a certain family and find another one to work with at any time. We can here appreciate that despite his/her inferior position in the hierarchy, the griot enjoys a certain freedom of movement.

According to Camara, the young Malinké griot starts to learn the history and genealogy of his/her clan, village and country from his/her grand-parents and parents, and starts also very early to specialize in playing one instrument. Eventually, the griot must choose a family of nobles to which he/she will be attached. The strong links that already exist between a griot family and a noble family often determine this choice, however, as exemplified in the soninké context described above, the young griot can choose his own patrons. The griot will then have to learn or deepen his/her knowledge of the genealogy and history of the new clan and the new family. Camara tells us that griots do not limit themselves to learning the history of one

particular clan or family, as a good and renowned griot is primarily measured through the extent of his/her knowledge (Camara 128). Knowledge is indeed primordial among griots as it supersedes the habitual hierarchy of age. Thus a younger one can teach or replace an older student in certain contexts if his/her knowledge is greater (Diawara 92-93).

We will see now in what sense the knowledge of the griot and his/her capacity to express it in performance generates respect and fear from the nobles and the rest of the population. We will appreciate the great source of power that resides in their art and their position in society.

1.2.1.c- Power over nobles:

Diawara in his study of the Soninke, emphasizes the importance of the nobles in the learning process of the griots. According to him, it is the patrons who primarily teach griots about their own genealogy and familial history. However, griots always use outside sources such as neighbors, friends or enemies of their patrons in order to confirm or eventually challenge the “official” version they have received. Furthermore, the griots, always following their patrons, are witness of the nobles’ words and deeds and generally know the secrets of the family for which they work (Diawara 80-81). While both useful to and at the same time materially dependant upon the nobles, griots maintain a certain level of agency over the nobles through their knowledge of familial history and their omnipresence as witnesses to their patron’s deeds. Indeed, griots constitute a permanent potential challenge to the social prestige, and therefore, to the power of the nobles, while at the same time being the very agents of this prestige. Generally working toward the enhancement of the nobles’ fame, respectability and acceptance by all, the griots, as masters of language and keepers of collective and private history, can use their intermediate position to pressure the nobles through the threat of destroying their reputations. Griots are thus simultaneously agents of consolidation and/or challenge of the nobles’ power over the rest of the

population. Diawara tells us: “La situation de dépendance du client contraste avec sa position de force par rapport à son protecteur. L’artiste a accès à plusieurs sources d’information contradictoires et parfois secrètes qu’il peut dévoiler à des occasions imprévisibles.” (Diawara 91) Thus, the knowledge of the griot as well as their oratory skill, and the specific and privileged position they hold in society makes them feared members of the community, and a counter power to the noble.

According to Diawara, the domination of the nobles can be brutal and harshly felt by the lower classes of society. One of the main functions of griots is to defuse the tensions generated by the imbalance of power. Their oral production therefore plays a very specific role of social binding and maintaining of the status quo in these societies. Diawara notes that through the griots, the nobles “s’assurent la production de la version officielle de l’histoire du pays.” (Diawara 91) The set of oral skills and knowledge of the griots is therefore part of the main instruments of social control employed by the nobles. By building consensus on a common history and common values (to the advantage of the nobles), the griots insure acceptance of the state of things from all members of society.

Diawara offers an alternative interpretation of the meaning of the term *nyaxamala*, which illustrates the means by which power is consolidated through the art of the griot. According to him, *nyaxamal* is the association of the term *nayxa* (party, celebration) and *Mala* (bound). The *nyaxamala* is therefore directly associated with parties and celebrations (Diawara 39). Celebrations constitute major elements of social control. It is indeed through frequent communal, public or private celebrations requiring the skills of the griots, that the ideology of the dominant class and the display of their power are enacted and shared. While celebrations are often conducted at the request of the dominant class, the griots will not hesitate to initiate such an

event impromptu, just to remind their patron of their duties toward them. It is therefore during celebrations that the power struggle between griots and nobles is most palpable. We will later on see the signification of the social tension inherent to any griots' performance.

As a concluding part of this description of the social role of the griot, we can refer to Isabelle Leymarie's analysis of the griots in Wolof society, and more specifically their integration in modern urban contexts. According to her, the political parties of Senegal that were struggling for independence, used griots as their spokesperson toward both the indigenous population and the French authority (42). Today, former nobles often assume important governmental and administrative positions. Griots continue to play a role that is similar to the one they played before independence and that they still play in traditional settings. Some of them are now at the service of politicians. They continue to be the link between the elite and the public. They are still used as translators when politicians go into linguistically diverse areas for instance. (63,64) According to Ko Sene, a griot from Soumbedioune, the artisan and fisherman neighborhood in Dakar, whom I interviewed in the summer of 2009, griots today are more defiant toward the authorities. According to him, their attitude in the past was to speak along the lines of the nobles, but things have changed and griots embrace more and more the position of counter power they occupy, critiquing frontally their patrons and the power.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the social function of griots, in particular on how it relates to the power structure, we will discuss in more detail the griots' specific use of speech and the social power it confers upon them.

1.2.2- Language

1.2.2.a- Context and relation to history

We have seen that by the median position they occupy, by the particularity of their skills and the raw material with which they are dealing, griots play a very central role in society. Language is their domain of predilection and it seems only natural that the societies which gave birth to the griots display a peculiar appreciation of language in everyday interactions. Barbara Hoffman emphasized the very specific relationship Mandé people maintain with their language and how its codes regulate social life. According to her “the adjusting of speaking style depends on age, gender, caste, personal relationship or knowledge of each other.” (Hoffman 11) This in itself is of course not specific to Mandé societies. Language is always codified and adapted according to the context of utterance. Hoffman’s emphasis on a special relationship to language among the Mandé seems nonetheless to denote a fact that goes beyond her own potential bias, but is, in my opinion, inherent to West African cultures: a conscious and constant knowledge and emphasis on the power of words. Isabelle Leymarie describes a similar awareness of the power of language and of the mystical dimension ascribed to it among the Wolof. Reminding us of the propensity of Wolof people for elaborate speech and discussion, she evokes the rigid codes that regulate banal acts of daily interactions:

Les Wolof, éminemment pacifistes, s’efforcent constamment de neutraliser l’agressivité et d’éliminer les conflits manifestes. Le langage, capable d’exprimer des pensées potentiellement dangereuses, est soumis à divers mécanismes de contrôle. Les questions directes, susceptibles de constituer une menace sont évitées, et les salutations, généralement longues, et les plaisanteries servent à tempérer l’hostilité latente. (Leymarie 7)

Leymarie’s description makes explicit the Wolof understanding that there is power in speech and that this power must be controlled by strict social codes in order to maintain the social structure.

The codification of language, therefore, mirrors the structure of society, and the griots, who are the specialists and guardians of language, are here to maintain this social structure in place.

As we have already evoked, it is through historical narratives (both real and/or fictive) that the griots participate in the construction and maintenance of the social structure. Language itself constitutes an accumulation of communal experiences, and is therefore a direct link to the past of a people. Hoffman insists on the special relationship Mandé people bear with their past through constant references in their everyday speech (through naming as a reference to the clan for instance [12]). Mamadou Diawara leads us to understand the mechanisms behind the construction and utterance of historical narratives which are at the root of social cohesion and power structures among the Soninke. According to him: “Le contenu des traditions aristocratiques a trait au fondement même de la société et du pouvoir. Relater en détail les aspects qu’elle retient de son passé, insister sur les épisodes peu glorieux pour les autres — en particulier les ennemies — et multiplier à l’occasion les non-dits concernant les siens, tel est l’exercice auquel se livre chaque famille princière.” (70) This constant competition between noble families for position and reputation inside the social space is performed and perpetuated through oratory battles of griots, whose judges are the audience of the performance. Diawara clearly demonstrates that this competition for notoriety is an end in itself, as no family is trying to impose its own perspective. Rather, the perpetual dialogues and challenges among families insures the legitimacy of every noble family, thus consolidating the hierarchical system of castes. Diawara states:

Il est important de savoir qu’un récit ne vaut que par l’effet que son porteur produit en public, au moment opportun, face à un contradicteur. Tout érudit sait que l’adversaire potentiel produit un savoir dans des conditions similaires aux siennes ; chacun souhaite mettre son adversaire à quia après une joute oratoire. Celui qui réussit à convaincre s’impose ; cependant, il a toujours intérêt à ce que la discussion qui infirme ou

confirme son point de vue se tienne. Le monopole d'une lignée tuerait ce but escompté [...] Si le caractère secret de l'information n'en garantit nullement l'objectivité, il est en tout cas le signe du soin que chaque parti met à fourbir son arme, le verbe, dont la production tient à la fois de l'histoire et de l'idéologie. (Diawara 71)

In such a context, language in its historical dimension is clearly an instrument of the exercise of power, but also a weapon used by power to defend its position and attack the positions of competing factions. Beyond the rhetorical wars between different noble families, the real objective of the maintenance of the status quo vis à vis lower castes remains a priority. Competition among the nobles thus fosters social cohesion under the pre-established model of a caste-based society. Those seemingly antagonistic concepts of competition and social cohesion, and their interactions are particularly relevant to our study.

In a traditional context, the control of languages through the griot is the main instrument of dissemination of the ideology of the dominant class through historical narratives. History as it is displayed by griots, however, must be understood in constant movement inside the oral narratives that shape it. Through the art of griots, history assumes many different lines of descent (different family histories, clan histories etc.) that are in permanent dialogue and conflict. These competing narratives generally share common roots and common sets of beliefs, which are at the foundation of the sense of community. Griots, through their oratory battles, compare, connect and differentiate each lineage. The oratory battles thus participate in an internal power struggle, in a dissemination of the dominant ideology and in the display of an effective entertainment through a demonstration of oratory and musical skills. Griots remain the primary link between the narrative itself and its destined audience. Language is the medium griots manipulate, through different techniques, in order to convey the intended message. Transmission, through entertainment, is a central aspect of their art. The context of this transmission constitutes a

dangerous and unstable terrain where the will of the nobles, the agency of the griot, and the expectations of the audience intersect. The role of the griot is to negotiate this instable moment through speech by leveling the social tension that builds due to social stratification. The display of competition between griots indeed promotes social cohesion, through entertaining performances.

According to Thomas Hale, “the griot as historian emerges as a ‘time-binder,’ a person who links past to present and serves as a witness to events in the present, which he or she may convey to persons living in the future.” (Hale 23) This illustrates a dynamic interpretation of history, which parallels the Yoruba conceptions of time and the Ifá divination process itself. Indeed Hale adds: “The text of the griot is less a representation of the past than a contemporary reading of the past.” (Hale 23) Thus, through the griot’s literal reinterpretation (or re-performance) of past experience, society is constantly re-connected to its ancestral wisdom, which resonates with present realities and allows proper guidance for the future. Through his/her oratory skills, the griot can bring forth past deeds and wisdom, memories of ancestors as witness to the performance, which places the listener in an ambiguous position, at the crossing of past, present and future, at the center of the circle. Such evocations/invocations become very powerful whenever they are directed at one individual or group in particular, especially during praises. All eyes, energies, and temporal realities converge toward the target of the praise or insult, who cannot display any animosity or anger toward their verbal assailant, according to Mandé custom, which grants griots a certain immunity. Griots therefore use language as a way to request accountability in the face of history from all members of society.

What are the techniques used by the griots in order to convey their message? In other words, what literary genres are specifically associated with the griot’s art?

1.2.2.b-Literary genres:

To answer this question, we will use Thomas Hale's description of the different literary genres at the disposition of the griots of West Africa. We chose Hale's study for its broad spectrum and the generalist approach it displays. Hale's list of genres starts with Praises, which, according to him can be understood as either praise or insult. Praises can be made of living persons as well as ancestors, or of the griot him/herself. Praises can be both part of a larger narrative, an Epic for instance where they are used as transitions between episodes, or stand on their own in the form of poems or songs (117-123).

Hale then moves on to the genre of Genealogies, and summarizes the genre in the following manner: "The genealogy becomes a sacred thread linking past and present. Its function is to legitimize those in the present, while its art lies in the repetitions, the parallelisms, and the synergy of word and gesture." (124)

The next genre described by Hale is the Tale genre. Tales are shared by all members of society and not restricted to the use of griots. Griots are, however, masters of the genre. According to Hale, the difference in griots' recounting of tales is their knowledge of, and participation in, the power structure that gives their version a particular edge and relevancy to the social context in which they are performed (126).

Hale goes on to describe the Song and Poem genres performed by the griots. Similar to praises in length, Songs and Poems are short texts. In Mandé and Wolof contexts, songs and poems are interchangeable. The same word could indeed be sung in one context and spoken in another. (126) According to Hale, praises, songs and poems "may echo a tradition that goes back many centuries or be created on the spot for a person or event." (129) We can appreciate the fact that the line of demarcation between those three genres is not always clear.

Proverbs are also an important element of the griots' "arsenal". According to Hale, the proverb is a preferred device for two reasons. First they are "conveyers of cultural heritage", that is they constitute reservoirs of common wisdom whose mastery illustrates literacy in a specific cultural paradigm. Second, their indirect language is a subtle way of "revealing hard truths," which can be an effective means for a disguised critic (131).

Finally, the last genre described by Hale is the Epic genre. He asserts that the West African epic is similar in content to Epics found around the world. West African Epics generally describe the tribulation of a hero born under duress, who grows up and fights battles and is to a certain extent successful in conquest and in propagating the religion (132). Hale also describes the different movements that compose the West African Epic. "The narrative mode recounts the story, while the song mode highlights events in this story. The praise-proverb mode provides a transition between narrative events in the story." (134) According to his description, an epic can last up to 12 hours and reach 8000 lines. The epic also serves different functions such as giving a model for the relation of clans which is based on historical accounts. The Epic also builds national unity through the description of past alliances, common roots and heritage. Finally, the Epic is an enjoyable performance which also displays a plethora of customs and the people's moral prerogatives (136).

The griot masters a variety of genres which have different applications in performances. Praises are used to aggrandize or diminish a person or a group in the eyes of the community. Genealogies are stylized historical justifications, an identification which attests to the historical relevancy of a group or individual. The tale is the most "mainstream" or popular form of oral literature available and belongs to everyone. It displays historical elements, moral prerogatives, humorous situations, etc. Songs and poems, as we have suggested, often overlap with the praise

genre. Proverbs are containers in which the knowledge and wisdom of different societies are stored in condensed form and transmitted. They are keys which allow the understanding of codes of conduct in society and at the same time passports which validate one's belonging in the community. Hale refers indirectly to proverbs, as "The Palm-Oil with which the verbal art of the griot is eaten"⁶ (129), thus alluding to the omnipresence of proverbs in the art of the griot, to their absolute necessity in the recipe, and to their seasoning quality, adding the extra-flavor to the mix. Finally, (pushing the metaphor of cooking a bit further) the epic would be comparable to a gumbo. Using all the ingredients cited above, the epic is a meta-genre which is a *condensé* of historical facts, myths, traditions, shared beliefs, whose execution retains the mark of the performer (both due to its oral nature and the power structure that frames it), and whose end result is more than the sum of all its components. The epic is the exemplification of an all-inclusive, all-binding narrative which aims at structuring and re-enforcing social cohesion around shared sets of values. Samba Diop describes the unifying quality of the Wolof epic Njaanjaan Njaay. In this narrative, many ethnic groups are represented and linked one way or another to the figure who is at the origin of the Wolof empire. The Wolof, the Tukolor, the Sereer, the Peul the Almoravid, the Berber are unified under a common Wolof narrative (Diop 257). The status of *lingua franca* of Wolof in the region among those different groups illustrates the unity displayed in the Wolof tale. Diop nonetheless concedes that "The Wolof epic tale reflects values, beliefs, and a way of life that are specific to Wolof." (Diop 237) The tale is therefore building unity among different groups, but does not fail to display and therefore promote the worldview of a specific group. Wolof might be the dominant group in Senegal, Diop reminds us that "sentiments of belonging to a particular ethnicity still prevail in contemporary Senegalese society," and that

⁶ Here, Hale refers to an article by Bernth Lindfors on Chinua Achebe's use of proverb in his novels called "The Palm-Oil with Which Achebe's Words Are Eaten".

“the members of the various ethnic groups use the epic tales, genealogies, stories, and riddles performed in their various languages as points of relevance, as guiding cultural referents to which they can relate.” (239) Each tradition is thus performed in its specific language and context. Therefore, while epics and the art of the griot at large build unity between different groups, they are also agents of distinction between them. This represents another demonstration of the dynamics between competition (here, among different linguistic groups) and cohesion (under common historical narratives) which characterize the modes of interaction of the griots. We have already discussed these dynamics in the relation between competing noble families and the roles they play in social cohesion. We will develop further the idea of the art of the griot as an agent of cohesion/distinction in different domains.

1.2.2.c- Speech in music/musicality in speech:

Griots are artisans of both music and speech. These two elements of their craft are so intrinsically linked in their performance that they are sometimes interchangeable. Camara, for instance, breaks down the use of the Malinké verb *fó*, which both means to speak and play an instrument. The term *fólílá* is used to describe musicians. When translated literally, *fólílá* implies that griots do not “play” the drum or any other instrument for that matter, but “speak” the drum, or “speak” through it (Camara 106). Patricia Tang, in her study of Senegalese Sabar drumming, describes a similar blending of speech and music. Sabar’s basic structure is constituted of *Bàkk(s)* drummed pattern played over *rythme(s)* (from the French word, a *rythme* is a repeated short pattern that constitutes the foundation of the sabar musical structure). *Bàkk(s)* are longer phrases which can be compared to standardized or improvised phrases in a jazz solo. The griot Thio Mbaye, interviewed by Tang, gives the description of a *rythme* as something that runs or pours (*couler* in French). “But a *bàkk*, when you play it, there are refrains, one stops, one

restarts, one slows down, you see? One changes the tempo; one increases the tempo...” (Tang 113). While younger generations of griots tend to consider *bakk(s)* in their musical dimension and would not hesitate to improvise their own personal *bàkk(s)* to display virtuosity, older generations tend to focus more on traditional pre-written *bakk(s)* and can inform us of the original nature of *bakk(s)*. Griot Macheikh Mbaye explains that *bakk(s)* used to be speech phrases turn into musical phrases. Drummers would turn any sentence or proverb into a *bakk*, sometimes at the request of the audience, or would play pre-composed *bakk(s)* with specific meanings for specific purposes. The drum patterns would match the rhythmic pattern of the language. Still, according to Macheikh Mbaye, drumming was used as a mean of communication before colonization. If somebody was bitten by a snake, for instance, the griots would start playing a certain *bàkk* that griots in surrounding villages would recognize. They would then send a qualified healer to the area where the drumming came from. If no healer could be found, the griots of the village who received the message would play the same *bàkk*, thus becoming relayers of the message to other surrounding villages until a doctor could be found (Tang 114-116). Not only does this illustrate a fusion between speech and music but also the practicality of the art. Music, in mirroring speech patterns, becomes a concrete means of communication for the initiates. In addition to that, the transmission of fixed and meaningful drum patterns constitutes a cultural heritage which connects generations.

In addition to the speech quality of music in the art of the griot, we can evoke the use of the musical quality of speech. Speech itself is indeed often considered as an instrument among others in the art of griots. Samba Diop describes the conception of speech among griots as an integral component of the musical structure. Music is the framework upon which verses are built.

Here is Diop's description of the relation between the music and words during the performance of an epic tale:

One major difference between the instrumental accompaniment and the recitation of texts is that in the first instance there is almost no variation. Most of the songs and sequences of notes played on the xalam were created or composed in former times, usually after a battle or an act of bravery on the part of a hero. Therefore, the musical part of the performance remains more or less the same whereas there are variations in the recitation itself even though the epic tale was first composed a long time ago. (235)

Thus, according to him, the musical structure is not subject to major modifications in the traditional context of the epic performance. This prevalence of fixed traditional musical structure is demonstrated in the use of fixed *bakk(s)* and *rythme(s)* in sabar drumming, as Tang suggested. She has also demonstrated that musical improvisation is not absent in Sabar. Tang, however, indicated that younger generations of griots tend to rely more on improvisation than former generations. In any case, the oral performance seems more prone to modifications according to context than the musical structure. We can therefore assume a certain priority or at least a foundational dimension given to the musical element among griots. Diop later on suggests that the very composition of verses is determined by the musical structure itself. Here is Diop quoting Isidor Okewho on the subject: "...a feature that is common to most West African oral poetry is that 'the metric line is built on the basis of 'breath-groups' or 'rhythm-segments'; what this entails is that the singer endeavors to get in as many words as he can in a single breath, so long as this is done within individual segments of the rhythmic accompaniment from the background music' (I. Okewho 1977: 176)⁷" (Diop 253) We can here clearly observe that speech patterns are directly framed according to the music patterns. The music is the primary element that shapes the verbal utterance. Music and speech are therefore conceived as a unit, or rather, music is the basis

⁷ Okpewho, Isidore "Analytical Boundaries in the Oral Narrative." *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire*, 42 (1980) : 822-56

of the expression of speech and speech is dependent on the musical structure to find an expression.

To further demonstrate this, we can refer to Hale's example of the American linguist Charles Bird who, while doing research in West Africa, run into several issues while interviewing a griot in order to analyze his speech. The interview was problematic because the griot was playing *ngoni* (a four string lute similar to the *xalam*) while talking, which interfered with Bird's research plans.

I was nonplussed by it. I wanted language to analyze syntactically. The music was interfering a lot. [...] I couldn't use the data. I asked him to come back without the instrument. This time he drummed on the table. He needed something to drive his language. That struck me—there was an organizing force in the language. (143)

This example further illustrates a connection between music and speech in the Mandé context. Hale acknowledges that not all oral performances by griots are sung or accompanied by music; however, this example certainly points toward the centrality of music and musicality in the verbal art.

We can bring in another aspect of speech and music connections in West African contexts and discuss the very musical nature of Mandé languages. Indeed, Mandé languages are tonal languages, which means that a word can have a different meaning depending on its tone, or pitch. Thus, language itself integrates musicality in its Signifying structure. The griots know how to take advantage of this quality of Mandé languages in their narratives. The change of tones of a word to suit the pitch of a performance, for instance, might produce a change of meaning. The intended meaning of the word might be missed without the context. This tension between the pitch and the context in the determination of meaning illustrates the poetic quality of language,

according to John William Johnson⁸ (Hale 134). This multiplicity of meaning depending on both contexts and tones is one of the main elements of the griots' use of language that makes their performances particularly effective and powerful. It is through the play on form and meaning, which is even more pronounced in tonal languages such as Mandé languages, that the speech of griots displays ambiguity. Therefore, the ambiguity of language, that is multiplicity of meaning, has to do with both the phonetic dimension of language and the context of utterance, all of which determines interpretation. Ambiguity appears to us as the main technical agent of power in griot's speech.

1.2.2.d- The Power of speech

In *The Power of Speech*, Barbara Hoffman describes the question of ambiguity and interpretation. According to her, this question is particularly relevant to West African societies at large who are traditionally oral and where "polysemy is the norm: multiplicity of meanings can be ascribed to what seems like every word, more meaning than we have English words for." She also emphasizes the fact that the social context is determinant in the interpretation of a given utterance. (8) She uses Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* as central to the art of the griot. Heteroglossia describes the multiple interpretations possible in any utterance, as determined by the context. According to Hoffman, "heteroglossia implies ambiguity, multiplicities of meanings and possible interpretations, and various rationales for action based on differing perspectives" and is a "significant element" of the griot's power. (33) As masters of language, griots are well aware of the unstable nature of human communication and of the importance of the context of utterance. In *Griots at War*, Barbara Hoffman states: "The ability to target members of one's audience and to structure one's discourse so that different interpretations are made available to

⁸ Johnson, John William, and Fa-Digi Sisòkò. 1992. *The Epic of Son-Jara, A West-African Tradition*. 2d ed. 1st ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

strategically important persons who are listening is one of the marks of a highly skilled bard.”

(35) Griots are therefore constantly playing on the ambiguous nature of language. Their capacity to speak to different persons or group simultaneously, to mean different things in one single utterance, or to conceal criticisms under the guise of compliance are examples of the way the power of griots is manifest in speech. As we have already suggested, the power of the speech of griots appears both through the musicality of language (especially in Mandé cultures where languages are tonal) and through a larger play on polysemy, or heteroglossia, that has to do with the context of utterance.

As we demonstrated earlier, griots’ power derives partly from their knowledge about the nobles and the larger cultural framework, and partly from the intermediary position they occupy between the different groups that constitute society. The power of the griots is indeed the power of speech in that they are technicians of language, virtuosos of its aesthetic and semiotic dimensions, and at the same time a central mediating agent between factions of society that are set in oppositions through a hierarchical division of society. By mastering both the technicality of language and its contexts of use, griots demonstrate a level of cultural understanding that is probably unrivalled in the societies they represent. Both their linguistic mastery and their skills in social mediation (which are undoubtedly closely related) are elements that can bring together griots and the mythic god of fate of the Yoruba people, Èsù.

1.2.3- The Griot and Èsù:

1.2.3.a- Social mediation

In our description of Èsù in its West African context, we have discussed its integration in the daily life of Ifá worshipers and its direct impact on decisions pertaining to current affairs through the medium of divination. Griots assume a very similar function in diverse West African contexts and are present during most milestone events of life, private or public. Griots are, for instance, in charge of the ceremony in which they announce the name of a newborn to the community, eight days after the birth in Malinké society. The name is not given right away because it is believed that the newborn is not ready yet to be exposed to potential attacks. This constitutes another illustration of the power that Malinké and West African people in general place on words and names in particular. There is a common belief in West Africa that through the name of an individual, ill-intentioned persons or entities can perform magical acts of mischief. It is therefore natural to require that a qualified person, that is a professional of the spoken word who is familiar with its magical dimension, perform the duty of naming a new life. Names given to newborns in West Africa are generally referring to the name of one of the child's ancestors, generally one of the grandparents. The griot, when making the name public, will recount the deeds of the person from whom the newborn got his or her name (Camara 198), thus restating the link that exists between this new life, its personal heritage and the broader community.

Griots are also major actors during other special events of Malinké social life such as the ceremony of circumcision, marriages, death, etc. During circumcision, griots are in charge of the celebrations through music. They are also the witness to the courage displayed by the young boys. Any signs of cowardice might be brought back to the memory of the community at another

date. During marriages, the griots are the primary mediators between families. A female griot is also the witness of the virginity of the bride after the first night the newlyweds spend together. She is also the witness of the capacity of the man on that special night, as impotence can bring cancelation of the marriage (Camara 199-200). The griot will fill a mediating role between husband and wife for any dispute that might occur throughout life, and is also the primary arbiter during divorce. All those examples illustrate the centrality of the griot in West African social contexts. Griots are both the performers of the ceremonies marking different stages of life and at the same time the witnesses of these events. They are also constant arbiters in the conflicts that might arise from the division of society along its two main boundaries, namely caste and gender.

The griot also plays a central role of support to the ruling elite. However, as we have suggested and shall develop further in this chapter, they also constitute constant challenge to this establishment. As polyglots, Griots traditionally followed the rulers wherever they went to serve as translators and spokespersons. They were also respected advisors of the powerful due to their knowledge of different societies' customs and histories (Camara 204-205). This position of mediation between rulers is empowering to the griots. Indeed, Camara evokes accounts of griot who were spying between kingdoms, not necessarily serving any ruler specifically but sometimes their own interests. This intermediate position places griots right at the center of the political game between rulers which, despite the fact that they cannot participate in it because of their rank, nonetheless makes them privileged and respected actors.

According to Camara, the most interesting function of the griot vis-a-vis power is the mediating role they play between the ruling elite and the people. If the griots are transmitting the words of sovereigns to other sovereigns, they are also the voice of the sovereign toward their subjects. They are intermediaries who allow the dialogue between rulers and ruled. At the same

time, this intermediate position makes communication indirect and slow, thus removing the possibility of direct interaction between rulers and ruled. Griots are therefore an integral part of the power apparatus of the ruling elite. While Camara's description is based on pre-colonial historical documentation where this aspect of the mediating role of griots was very prominent and structured (Camara concedes that colonization destabilized, if not annihilated, the power of local chiefs, and consequently the power of griots as well [Camara 205]) griots to this day, as we have discussed through Leymarie's analysis of Wolof society, are still major mediating agents between the political elite and the population. Camara, however, characterizes the attitude of modern politicians as resembling more and more the traditional attitude of griots in their direct contact with the public through discourse (Camara 213).

As we have already stated several times, the griots' mediating position is a position of power. As attached to a noble, the griot is supposed to defend the views and interests of the patron. We have already seen that historical narratives fulfill, in part, this function. We have also suggested that the knowledge of the patron's secrets and the direct contact the griot has with the general public gives him/her power to manipulate the nobles for personal gain. Griots could indeed destroy the reputation of nobles by revealing certain things to the public. The intermediate position of the griots gives them agency in a society regulated by the caste system. The caste of the griot is thus both a source of limitation and a source of power. In *La Graine de la Parole*, Mamadou Diawara evokes the different conditions of the manifestation of the art of the griot, which can be either originated by their patrons or by the griots themselves. Indeed, the griot will not hesitate to find any pretext to initiate a celebration as a way to obtain more gifts from their patrons. Diawara describes three occasions that the griot Soninke will invoke as a pretext for celebration:

La *kuunyinde*, littéralement la salutation, est un euphémisme pour la sollicitation de cadeaux. On parle de *xenne*, l'« attaque » ou la « provocation », lorsque le poète s'adresse en public à son mécène, soit pour le remercier de ses largesses passées, soit pour le défier et lui arracher une promesse [...] On parle également de provocation lorsqu'un protecteur brutalise un dépendant et que celui-ci alerte l'aîné de sa famille qui prévient le chef des *geseru*. Les gens de la bouche envahissent la maison du fautif et des siens, qui sont obligé de les doubler de cadeaux... (Diawara 89)

We see that griots will not hesitate to take advantage of their position, thus directly challenging the nobles' authority. The structure of the Mandé and Wolof societies naturally grants griots this power through the social privilege of immunity from attacks of all members of society. Camara states : "L'inviolabilité dont ils jouissent les protège contre la violence des antagonistes. Leur personnage de "maître chanteur" éventuel leur donne une influence considérable sur tout le monde [...] Ce sont les personnages les plus renseignés sur la vie sociale et les affaires du pays." (203) In the next part of our analysis, we will explain through his/her specific functions and through his/her position outside normal societal behavior, both insures social cohesion and maintains social boundaries.

The above descriptions of the griots' mediating function in society allow us to bring together Èsù and the griot. As the agent of mediation between the gods and humans through Ifá divination, Èsù plays a central role in Yoruba life. Èsù's tricks are feared, but its authority and power are respected. Èsù's mediating agency can be extended to and understood as the condition of all contacts and encounter. Èsù is indeed the agent of communication (or miscommunication). The griot plays a similar role. The mediation of the griot takes the shape of mediation between the different castes and across genders, as well as mediation between the people and their history. Èsù's tricks could be compared to the griots' use of speech, which can be used for manipulation and persuasion and be dangerous in its consequences. The tricks Èsù plays on

humans and the propensity of griots to “harass” their patrons brings together the relationship between griots and nobles and the relation between Èsù and its worshippers. Griots are indeed constantly challenging the authority of nobles and the only way to appease them, momentarily, is a “sacrifice” of sort in the form of gifts. The sacrifice made to Èsù and other divinities of the Yoruba pantheon to insure harmony in social and cosmic interactions parallels the sacrifices necessary for harmony in Mandé social context. At the same time, griots are the arbiters of the social game in that they make sure that the rules are kept while they seem totally exempted from these same rules.

1.2.3.b-Forming/breaking boundaries

Griots enjoy a special status in society in that they seem not restricted in their relations to the other groups. They enjoy a large freedom of movement and speech. Camara says of the griot in relation to his/her matrimonial role as mediator that “Il peut à tout moment entrer dans un enclos domestique. Il peut plaisanter avec tous...” (200). This special relationship that the griot enjoys with all members of society is however not reciprocal since a noble is never expected to answer the familiarity of griots. In any case, the omnipresence of the griot as a witness in many situations of social life, and the knowledge of family histories they foster generate respect, fear and sometimes animosity (according to Camara) from other castes.

In *The Power of Speech*, Barbara Hoffman offers an interpretation of the relations between nobles and griots. According to her, Mandé society functions under the model of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, where individuals in a given society reenact structured mode of social behavior that they have learned most of the time from childhood. Bourdieu’s definition of *habitus* allows the reader to understand this relationship”

Les conditionnements associés à une classe particulière de conditions d’existence produisent des *habitus*, système de *dispositions* durables et

transposables, structure structurées prédisposées à fonctionner comme structure structurantes, c'est-à-dire en tant que principes générateurs et organisateurs de pratiques et de représentations qui peuvent être objectivement adaptées à leur but sans supposer la visée consciente de fins et la maîtrise expresse des opérations nécessaires pour les atteindre, objectivement « réglées » et « régulières » sans être en rien le produit de l'obéissance à des règles, et, étant tout cela, collectivement orchestré sans être le produit de l'action organisatrice d'un chef d'orchestre. (Bourdieu 88-89)

Thus, *habitus* describes the behavioral patterns associated with the different groups that constitute society. Bourdieu sees them as both structured and generating structure, in a collective manner but without firm enforcement, independent of external control, but maintained through mutual understanding. Applied to our study, we understand that griots, born in the caste system, naturally accept their condition, without questioning it, embrace the social behavioral patterns and cultural specificity of their caste, and willingly perform their part in the larger social context, thus maintaining a social structure that was already in place.

Hoffman uses Bateson's concept of *schismogenesis*, describing the coexistence of two different *habitus* and their maintained separation despite (or rather through) continuous contacts, in her analysis of nobles-griots relations of power. *Schismogenesis* is the process of differentiation that is the result of the prolonged contact of radically different cultures (Hoffman 71). Nobles and griots, through what is expected and received as "normal" behavior in accordance to their respective social positions, perpetually maintain the social boundaries that separate them. According to this model, Hoffman offers a view of these relations that is not hierarchical but interdependent. Camara describes the role of griots in relation to the noble as a "groupe de référence négatif" (176), which means that the griot's behavior demonstrates the taboos of the nobles. Camara states: "Leur conduite n'est pas seulement différente ou simplement autre, elle est opposé à celle des autres. Et c'est précisément dans son contraste avec

le comportement des hóró que la conduite des griots est intéressante.” (Camara 177) According to Camara the griots’ and the nobles’ behavior are opposed at the level of speech in that the nobles must always refrain from speaking loudly, from using inappropriate language and must generally use discretion, while the griot will talk loud in public, speak freely of sex, alcohol consumption (in a predominantly Muslim environment), display eroticism in songs and dances, etc. The griot will indeed express any human emotions through his/her art despite social limitation placed on what is acceptable for a man or a woman to say in public (135). Later on in his study, Camara describes the abstinence and modesty that must characterize the nobles’ behavior. As representing the top of the hierarchy, their behavior must be exemplary in the face of society. We must come back to Bourdieu’s description of *habitus* in order to understand the social function and meaning of such an opposition. On *habitus*, Bourdieu adds :

...l’*habitus* tend à engendrer toutes les conduits “raisonnables”, de “sens commun”⁹, qui sont possible dans les limites de ces régularités [...] et qui ont toutes les chances d’être positivement sanctionnées parce qu’elles sont objectivement ajustées à la logique caractéristique d’un champ déterminé, dont elles anticipent l’avenir objectif ; il tend du même coup à exclure « sans violence, sans art, sans argument », toutes les « folies » [...], c’est-à-dire toutes les conduites vouées à être négativement sanctionnées parce qu’incompatibles avec les conditions objectives. (95)

Then, the expected behavior of one group might not necessarily be the same as another one. This distinction between what is acceptable and what is considered anti-social is what characterizes griots-nobles relations. Thus, griots and nobles, through their respective behavior, or *habitus*, mutually reject the other’s. The opposition of the expected behaviors of griots and nobles insures the perpetuation of the caste system. By enacting their respective *habitus*, griots and nobles affirm their own positionality and thus strengthen the boundaries between them.

⁹ A. Cournot, *Essai sur les fondements de la connaissance et sur les caractères de la critique philosophique*. Paris : Hachette, 1922, 1^{er} édition, 1851, p.70. Print.

In his study, Camara applies Émile Durkheim's theory of the function of crime to the social function of the griot in the anti-social character he/she embodies. Camara explains Durkheim's theory in the following manner :

Le crime, entendez tout comportement individuel qui va à l'encontre des sentiments collectifs, des normes, a la vertu de réveiller brusquement la conscience que la société peut avoir de ses valeurs, et d'abord de sa solidarité et de son consensus. Contre l'acte scandaleux, le groupe se rétracte sur lui-même en une cohésion plus dense, affirme avec force son consensus et ses valeurs dans la sanction infligée au coupable. (163-164)

This theory, according to him, defends the idea of a potential function, or at least signification, of anti social behaviors in a given social context. Camara insists, however, on the fact that not all anti-social behaviors have signification. In any case, the anti-social behavior of the griot cannot be categorized as a dysfunction of the social fabric, as anti-social behaviors usually are. In Mandé and Wolof societies, there exists framed spaces allowing the expression of anti-social attitudes within the parameters of normal behavior. The griots in part fulfill this function. Griots' anti-social behaviors are expected from all members of society, it is an integral part of their social status and *habitus*. Indeed, their transgression is both determined from the outside in what people expect from them but also from the inside in their upbringing as griots, all of which is both a product and a condition of their social function. In their enactment of the negative behavior coded according to nobles' standards, griots fulfill an important function for society. The repressive mechanisms enforced by codes of social conduct which characterizes nobles' received behavior contrast, as we have seen, with the permissiveness and freedom of the griots'. These repressive mechanisms do not fail to generate troubles and frustrations among the nobles. By displaying the inner desires of the nobles, the griots' attitudes and performances fulfill a cathartic function for the nobles, as well as for all members of society (Camara 171).

When comparing the griot to Èsù we observe that they both play the role of “réfèrent négatif” around which the consensus of “normal” or acceptable behavior is built by becoming the embodiment of anti-social behaviors. It is indeed in the breaking of the boundaries, in the trespassing of the threshold, and through their immediate familiarity with all members of society (and the cosmos as far as Èsù is concerned) that Èsù and the griots are paradoxical guardians of social order and harmony. Here again, competition, in the sense that the griots’ behavior “competes” with nobles’, is an agent of social cohesion, but a cohesion that implies division under the strict separation of caste.

1.2.3.c- Balancing energies

The manipulation of language, which is the main aspect of the art of the griot and which demonstrates its influence on social constructs, can be read into larger concepts that permeate Mandé society. We will see that these concepts echo other ones that we have discussed in our analysis of Yoruba beliefs. Mandé social interactions are coded into two categories based on relationship between siblings in a polygamous household. *Fadenya* describes the relations between siblings sharing the same father, while *badenya* describes the relation between siblings sharing the same mother. The opposition between those two concepts defines the nature of all relationships in Mandé society. *Fadenya* is associated with the notion of competition and rivalry in reference to the potential tensions that can arise between half-siblings. *Badenya*, on the other hand, is understood as cohesion and solidarity between people (POS, 54)¹⁰. Both of these forces are coded as positive aspects of social relations, however, maintaining good relationship between members of society can only be achieved through a proper balancing of those two tendencies. Too much *fadenya* will cause aggressive behaviors, egocentricity, jealousy all of which can run

¹⁰ Hoffman, Barbara. *The Power of Speech: Language and Social Status Among Mande Griots and Nobles*. Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I (University Microfilms International), Indiana University, 1990. Print.

counter to social cohesion. Too much *badenya*, on the other end, can reinforce status quo and cause social stagnation (GAW, 33)¹¹. Griots, through their oratory skills, always navigate between these antithetical forces. Through their mediating function, between members of a family, between clans, between rulers, between castes, griots insure that *fadenya* and *badenya* can be expressed and balanced to maintain social cohesion, while allowing the potential for necessary transformation. Through the balancing of *fadenya* and *badenya*, griots are arbiters standing at the crossroad of social interactions.

It is interesting to note a potential semantic association between the concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya*, regulating social interaction in Mande context, to the previously discussed concepts of *ino* (expansion) and *isoki* (contraction), which are the two opposed dynamic forces which generate the visible universe according to Yoruba cosmogony. *Fadenya*, which represents competition and rivalry, could be associated to the concept of expansion (*ino*) as expansion requires going beyond previous limitations. Competition and rivalry can be a prerequisite quality for social expansion. The market place, for instance, is a space particularly favorable to *Fadenya/ino* (expansion). In the context of colonial expansion one cannot dismiss the determining effect of competition and rivalry between European nations. *Badenya*, that is social cohesion, can be assimilated to the concept of contraction (*isoki*) in that social cohesion often depends on the contraction, the closure of the social space as a protection from outside influence or threat as we have already evoked through Camara's description of Durkheim's theory of the crime (nationalism is a good example of social contraction/cohesion on a large scale). The family unit is the primary space of *badenya/isoki* (contraction). At the same time, this paradigm could very well be reversed as *fadenya* (competition), can foster *isoki* (contraction), while *badenya*

¹¹ Hoffman, Barbara. *Griots at War: Conflict, Conciliation, and Caste in Mande*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. Print.

(cohesion), can indeed mean *ino* (expansion). We see that these concepts interact in very direct ways, yet, *ino* and *isoki* reach beyond human interactions and regulate universal balance. The duality *Ino/isoki* indeed seems to rule over its social manifestation in the duality *fadenya/badenya*. In any case, only balance between those opposites, (*badenya/fadenya* or *ino/isoki*) can insure the harmony between collective and individual experiences, and between humans and the cosmos. It is as liminal agents between those two universal forces, as well as the articulation of those forces in human society, that the griot and Èsù must be understood. Fatunmbi taught us that the spiritual essence which regulates all matter and spirit, called *ashé*, constantly navigates between *ino* and *isoki*, creating the balance between them. He also taught us that it is Èsù who is responsible for *ashé*'s proper repartition throughout creation. A similar concept called *nyama* is prevalent in Mandé context.

To define the life force *nyama*, I will directly and extensively quote from Patrick McNaughton's description in *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge Power and Art in West Africa*:

At sorcery's base lies a phenomenon that generates its own fair share of ambivalence and disquiet among the Mande. It is perceived as the world's basic energy, the energy that animates the universe. It is the force that the Mande call *nyama*, which I refer to as special energy or occult power, and which most westerners would consider supernatural. The Mande, in contrast, are inclined to see it as both natural, and as a source of moral reciprocity. The missionary Father Henry said that *nyama* was hard to define; he called it force, power, and energy and then described it as a kind of fluid possessed by every living being (Henry 27-28) Monteil called it a fluid common to all of nature (Monteil 121). The Malian scholar Youssouf Cissé followed the colonial administrator Maurice Delafosse in saying that it meant life or endowed with life, spirit or endowed with animated spirit. Cissé added that it was the emanation of the soul's will (Cissé 192-193). Labouret described it in much the same way, adding, by way of illustration, that it was the power behind human thought and will, and the force that causes rain or the lack of it (Labouret 120). Dominique Zahan described it as a force that exists in all beings and inorganic matter, and is comparable to a vibration (Zahan 133).

The Mande believe that in concentrations, especially when they are massive and uncontrolled, this force is potentially dangerous, even deadly. People can learn to control it through sorcery, however, and thereby harness it to help them carry out their activities. Thus the linguist Charles Bird describes its essence most appropriately when he calls it the energy of action (Bird, *The Song of Seydou Camara, Volume I* Introduction). Nyama is the necessary power source behind every movement, every task. It is a prerequisite to all action and it is emitted as a by-product of every act. The more difficult the task, the more energy demanded and the more emitted. When the taking of life is involved, these energy levels will be particularly high. Thus, hunters must possess large stores of nyama and be capable of dealing with equally massive amounts when animals are killed and the life force flows from them. This is the reason why the best hunters have prowess as sorcerers. Soldiers and state builders must possess even larger stores of the energy or have access to individuals who have it and can use it, because the taking of human lives releases even greater amounts of it... When Mande tell folk stories, recount legends, or explain things to researchers, it becomes clear that they view nyama as a rationale for their most fundamental behavior patterns and as an explanation for the organization of their world. (McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths* 15-16)

We see here the similarities between the concept of *nyama* and *ashé*. These two concepts, that most probably describe the same energy, are crucial components in the organization of the respective societies they represent. We have seen that the repartition of *ashé* is attributed to Èsù. We shall see that the griot plays a fundamental role in the repartition and balance of *nyama* in society. Sorry Camara looked at the etymology of the caste of the griot called *nyamakala* (or *ñàmàkálá* in Camara's study). While, according to him, "*nyama*" could refer to "trash" or "mess," it is also referring to the universal energy described above. Camara emphasizes the importance of polysemy here, in that *nyamakala* might both designate the relation griots have with this energy, and their outcast and sometime despised position in society. Camara informs us that "*kala*" means "a handle". Therefore the *nyamakala* would be the one who handles the *nyama*. (75) The artisans of this caste hold a special relationship with this energy through the different raw materials that they manipulate, be it wood, iron, cloth, or for the griot, language. According to Hoffman, the *dalilu*, that is the capacity to perform a certain act (i.e. to manipulate

a certain form of *nyama*) is stronger among the *nyamakala* than among the nobles. The nobles need protection from the *dalilu* of others. The griot, on the other hand, through their skills in manipulating the *nyama*, which is very concentrated in speech, are “masters of the means of dealing with the *nyamas* of others.” (139, 140)

While Èsù is understood as the agent of the repartition and balance of the universal energy that creates physical reality, the griots are agents of the organization of social reality through *nyama*. Through the manipulation of these forces, Èsù and the griot appear to us as agents of magic. We will see now how is the magic of the griot manifested through his/her oratory skills.

1.2.3.d- Obscurity/magic

Hoffman, in *The Power of Speech*, offers us an explanation of the power of *nyama* in griots' language. She makes a reference to McNaughton's description of kono masks which “depict ‘obscurity fighting obscurity’”, “are designed to be unclear” (McNaughton, *Secret Sculptures of Komo* 44) and are characterized by a simple structure progressively ornamented by different layers of different materials including clay and blood (extremely rich in *nyama*). This layering illustrates the power behind obscured meaning and is used as a metaphor for the oral art of the griot by Hoffman (Hoffman 91). Hoffman calls *jelikan* a characteristic form of the griots' language and describes it as “simple syntactic structures whose meaning is made obscure [...], the most laden with *nyama*, the most powerful in its impact upon the hearer, and the most empowering for its speaker.” (91-92) *Jelikan* is employed in any oral form mastered by the griot, but is especially plentiful in the praise genre, “rated by the Mande as particularly *nyama*-laden.” The meaning of those short noun phrases is undecipherable to most nobles and sometimes to the griot speaking them as well. Hoffman also compares *jelikan* to another type of short and obscure

noun phrases used in Mande divination called *dibikan*, which means the language of darkness (darkness here is coded as not empty, rather as the unknown to most, concealed, secret, the obscure side of things). Hoffman states that, “in divining, what is in the obscurity of *dibikan* is the power to transmit messages from an unseen world.” (93) Hoffman describes this divination process as a nighttime activity where the client will hear “a series of conjoined nouns and noun phrases of the type “*musoya ni kele*” (womanhood and combat) “*jugu ni dimi*” (evil and pain).” (93-94) The speed and the murmur of the diviner render difficult the direct interpretation by the client but he/she can however generally grab a few words or phrases. The diviner then interprets them for his/her client. Hoffman states that “the syntax of *dibikan* is impenetrable to the non-initiate. It is obscured by the darkness, by the quiet, by the power of ambiguous form and meaning.” (94) The ambiguity of meaning displayed in Mandé divination undoubtedly echoes *odu* verses’ obscure signification in Ifá divination. In both instances, the text of divination must be interpreted by a specialist of this type of language in order to be applied to the personal experience of the client.

The same obscurity can be observed in the language of the griot (*jelikan*). Here is Hoffman’s description of the obscurity and layers of meaning in the context of griots’ *jelikan*:

Griot language, formally composed of noun phrases similar in structure to *dibikan*, is not whispered in nighttime privacy, but shouted and sung, most often during the sunniest hours of the day, in the midst of great crowds. This contextual inversion contributes a layer of obscurity which adds to *jelikan*’s *nyama*. Once again, the phrases are for the most part incomprehensible to the listener – another layer. They are uttered very rapidly, at times like verbal gunfire, bombarding the noble with more sounds that can be assimilated, causing confusion – another layer. The few images that are seized from the barrage, the name of a great warrior from the noble’s clan history, for example, or the name of a famous village, can evoke entire histories heard upon countless occasions in innumerable contexts, so that what is heard is not merely what is said by the griot at the time, but what has been heard on the same topic at different times, in

different places. The nyama grows thicker. The griot has called the weight of extraordinary achievement from the distant past into the living present of the noble “descendant”, a juxtaposition which invites comparison, thus encouraging the noble to swell with pride at the thought of being on a par with such heroism, or to sink with shame at the thought that his/her own reputation will not stand up to the scrutiny – in either case, the emotion thus stirred is literally dripping with nyama. (92)

We can appreciate here the obscure nature of *jelikan* through the use of layering. This obscurity is a source of power for the griot and a potential source of anxiety for the target of the narrative. *Jelikan* plays both on the historical evocation/invocation power of language and on the multiplicity of meaning embedded in this type of speech. *Jelikan* as “verbal gunfire” really constitutes the main weapons of griots in what could be considered as occult wars in which the tensions of society are negotiated. In *Griot at War*, Hoffman discusses the griot war that took place in Kita in Mali, which she attended and recorded. Here she gives an account of the event:

Over the three days we spent in Kita, what seemed to my eyes to be merely a joyous celebration with incessant music, song, talk, and dance was in fact also a battleground where forces beyond my reckoning were engaged in mortal struggle; where scores, some recent, some centuries old, where being settled and then upset again. The very music, song, and dance that seemed to flow so exuberantly were in fact part of the ammunition of that struggle, as were the talks, the speeches, the hours of oratory that I recorded. (37)

Some of the most prominent griots present are also described wearing tunics with objects and amulets stitched to it as protection against occult forces. The magic of language is therefore very much central to the art of griots, and conflicts are often settled through this medium if discussion itself cannot solve the issue.

Through Hoffman’s description, we are confronted with a decisive aspect of the power of griots. Griots’ mastery over the occult and magical power of words participates in the respect and fear griots inspire among all members of society (Hale 208). The relation words bear with *nyama* constitutes the Mandé conceptualization of the idea that words have power to manifest

reality. As in Yoruba contexts, magic can be used for good purposes or bad purposes, this only depends on the intentions of the person using these powers. Griots are thus feared for the potential harm they can do to anyone through their knowledge of both historical facts of individuals and communal life, and the occult power of words. The same idea of the magical power of words is present in the Yoruba context, and has to do directly with Èsù's capacity to manipulate *ashé*. According to Fá'lokun Fatunmbi, the term or concept *Esu Oro* refers to the power of words:

This aspect of *Esu* is related to the ability of the spoken word to create spiritual transformation through the use of incantations. Certain words that are used in *Ifá* or *Orisha* ritual have no literal translation. They are used because they contain tonal qualities that resonate with particular Forces of Nature. The power of resonance is the ability to create tonal vibrations that are similar to those frequencies generated by specific *Orisha*. When a similar frequency is established it has the power of attraction. In Western Occult terminology this is called "sympathetic magic". (Fatunmbi 15)

A parallel with *Jelikan* can be established here. The obscurity that surrounds certain expressions or words uttered, that have lost their original meaning or whose meaning is unknown even to the griot him/herself, hold a special power for the speaker and the listener. Words are here used for their musical quality alone, in their capacity to "resonate with particular Forces of Nature." The use of certain *bàkk*(s) whose meaning is unknown in sabar drumming is a prime instance of words reduced to their minimal sonic expression, a seemingly empty signifier (meaning is still present, it has just been forgotten or is forever postponed). Magic in speech, therefore, in West African contexts seems to spring from the historical dimension of words or expressions that have been transmitted and which bear resonance with the innumerable instances and contexts of utterance. Words are repeated for the sake of ritual in a sense. They hold their original meaning as well as the successive meanings they have been given and still hold a potential of re-interpretation in the present. We can speak here of *historical* or *temporal resonance*. The magical

element of language in this context seems also determined by the obscure nature of the words, in that the meaning has been lost, is hidden or is ambiguous, leaving different possible interpretations. The interpretation is always determined by the context of utterance and is therefore viscerally anchored in the present, but it still retains its own history and own potentiality. Indeed, the meaning of words evolve with time, yet former meanings are not erased, but forever present within the word itself. Any new utterance of the word in the present conjures past meanings and associations. Finally, the sound quality of the words and their capacity to resonate with the “Forces of Nature” as we have already suggested, demonstrates *resonance with the physical and spiritual world*. The magical resonance of words is therefore *temporal, spiritual and physical* in nature.

We have now come full circle, so to speak, in that we can interpret the griot as a human embodiment of the mythological god Èsù, principle of communication and indeterminacy. The griot, through the link it embodies between past, present and future, can move along the horizontal axis of the circle of creation of Yoruba mythology. The griot indeed connects past experiences and brings them to the present consciousness for re-interpretation and to open new spaces for future generations. Èsù plays a similar role in Yoruba society through divination, as we have already stated. In their use of magic in words—that is obscurity, ambiguity, polysemy—the griot is moving freely along the horizontal axis of the creation circle, thus connecting the divine and the visible realm. The griots do connect ancestors (living in the spiritual realm) with the living through the tradition and history they embody, but their manipulation of the magic of language further demonstrates a connection with the spiritual realm. Again, Èsù has been described as the direct agent of communication between the world of the gods and the world of humans through divination. The griot therefore constitutes the social embodiment of Èsù’s

principles in maintaining and balancing of social forces for the purpose of social cohesion. As in the Yoruba context of Ifá divination, it is through sacrifice, the sacrifice of agency through compliance to the rule for the lower castes of society, and the sacrifice of money or dignity of the noble during the performance, that the balance is maintained between ruler and ruled and that society can maintain its internal structure and balance. Furthermore, we can understand those two figures as embodiments of the human language at large. Their capacity to move freely in all areas of the Yoruba circle of creation, that is across time (past, present, future) and space (physical, spiritual), mirrors their ability to move freely across Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis, that is across the historical ordering of sounds, or syntactic axis, and across the magic in language, or music in language, that is the ambiguity, play on words, and polysemy that relates to the paradigmatic axis.

Let's now take a close look at diverse Afro-Diasporic cultural manifestations in the light of our analysis of two West African figures, Èsù and the griot.

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CHAPTER II: GRIOTS OF THE DIASPORA: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CAPOEIRISTA, THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POET AND THE RAPPER.

We have brought forth a description of two major archetypes of West African cultures in our first part dedicated to the griot and Èsù. We have depicted those two figures as embodiments of social and metaphysical mediation, liminality, ambiguity and magic through language. We also have described each figure's mediation characteristics as they relate to history. The centrality of those figures in West Africa and the persistence of African cultural elements in the New World make one suspect the large influence the griot and Èsù had on different cultures of the African diaspora. We have already discussed the presence of metaphysical or spiritual West African concepts in the New World in our description of Èsù and Ifá divination, especially through Afro-Brazilian culture. However, we have not yet described human embodiments of West African cultures in the New World. The following chapter will be dedicated to the description of specific cultural figures that seem to represent a re-interpretation of West African artistry in the New World. We will be looking for manifestations of griot-like figures in the Americas and the Caribbean. Our previous description of the West African griot will guide our steps. Our analysis of Èsù will also constitute one of the main theoretical frameworks for this analysis.

We have chosen to describe the capoeirista and capoeira *mestre* (practitioner and master of the Afro-Brazilian martial-art of capoeira), the Afro-Diasporic poet (primarily the work of poets of African descent in the United States), and the rapper (the verbal artist of hip hop culture) as New World embodiments of the West African griot. We will also try to understand how they relate to the Èsù. Let us first focus our attention on capoeira, its origin, development, inner philosophy, and the similarities it bears with the West African cultural tropes already presented.

2.1- The Capoeirista: The Afro-Brazilian griot-warrior

Developed in the fifteenth century on Brazilian plantations by African slaves as a self-defense system, capoeira has evolved to this day to become much more than just another martial-art. Modern capoeira indeed includes elements of music, oral literature (songs), dance, performance, history and ritual. The set of fighting technique is thus only an aspect of this complete art form which is actually considered as a game (*jogo*) by its practitioners. In *Capoeira: Roots of the Dance-Fight-Game*, Nestor Capoeira, a prominent *mestre* (“master”) of the style and scholar on the subject, describes the three phases of capoeira’s history that are generally recognized by all *mestres*, groups and historians of the art. According to him, capoeira’s history spans from “the slavery period” when capoeira was used by the slaves as a self-defense training system, most probably disguised as a dance due to the surveillance of overseers, to “the underground period” which followed the abolition of slavery and was characterized by a criminalization of capoeira and its practitioners, and finally “the academy period”, beginning in the 1930’s with the opening of the first academy. At that time, capoeira started to become legitimate in the eyes of the government and the public to later become one of the most prominent symbols of Afro-Brazilian, and Brazilian cultural specificity around the world (Capoeira 105-106).

Our study of capoeira as a New World manifestation of West African artistry will first focus on the history and context of the development of this game. We will then focus our attention on the technical description of the game itself. Then in a second part, we will try to understand how history is articulated in the very structure of the game and in its everyday practice. We will then describe the three fundamental concepts that define capoeira’s inner philosophy and which are the product of its history and the history of African experience in

Brazil, focusing more specifically on *malícia* as capoeira's central philosophical concept. We will finally present capoeira as a constant exploration, assimilation and synthesis of duality through the game. We will then be able to compare our understanding of the figure of the capoeirista to the two West African figures described earlier, Èsù and the griot.

2.1.1- Origin and description of the game

2.1.1.a- Origin and historical development

All scholars and practitioners agree that capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art, thus accepting the idea that capoeira was born out of the experience of African slaves on the plantations of Brazil and further developed by Afro-Brazilians. Many different groups of capoeira, however, argue over its point of origin. Some stress the fact that capoeira is an original Brazilian creation and that it does not exist and has never existed in Africa as such. Some other groups see it as a system created in Africa, brought to the new world by Africans and adapted to the conditions in Brazil. While both those hypothesis hold truth (capoeira is indeed certainly both an importation of African cultural tropes to the new world and a specifically Brazilian art form), the dichotomy surrounding capoeira's origin is a crucial aspect which mirrors not only a philosophical division that exists inside capoeira, but which permeates Brazilian society as well. While it might be true that capoeira originated from the *n'golo* zebra dance of southern Angola, which is the version that circulates among certain followers of the most traditional style of capoeira angola (among such groups as FICA and GCAP for instance), and while it is beyond doubt that capoeira is contextual and that it is a product of the cultural diversity that has characterized Brazil since colonial time, the question of a pure and singular origin is not vital to our understanding of the art. The art's aesthetic and history undeniably points toward an African origin, or African

origins. On this aspect, everyone agrees. I will therefore not spend more time discussing the question of origin and I will not focus either on the multiple possible origins of the term *capoeira* itself, because Rego Waldeloir has already discussed it in detail in its study and this point does not seem decisive to our study. We will just remember that both the origin of the game and the name remain difficult to pinpoint to this day.

Nestor Capoeira in his study presents capoeira as a mixture of “different forms of fighting, dancing, rhythms and musical instruments, from different African ethnic groups”, basing his understanding on the different written accounts and drawings available from the beginning of the nineteenth century (Capoeira 120). According to him, the nature of black resistance in Brazil changed completely around the year 1810 to 1830; this transformation had a tremendous impact on shaping the style to its present day form. This shift was due to the political stabilization of the state of Brazil. From then on, any possibility of large scale rebellions by slaves seemed remote (slave insurrections had been recurrent up until then). Indeed, in 1835 the last major rebellion of slaves in Salvador, Bahia, led by the Malê¹² was crushed by the state. African resistance went from the creation of independent and free communities in the bush¹³ to a more defused form of cultural resistance. The consolidation of the state after the arrival of the king of Portugal and his entire court in 1808 to Rio de Janeiro (fleeing Napoleon’s army) and the successive laws passed to repress African cultural practices, forced African cultures to go further and further underground. The cultural practices of African slaves had been voluntarily tolerated up until this point for the purpose of the distraction for the slaves from plantation work and division among them in the perpetuation of the many different practices particular to each ethnic group (Capoeira 122-128). The relative tolerance of Brazilian slave masters toward

¹² Black Muslims, term referring to Malians.

¹³ These very well organized communities composed of escaped slaves were called *Quilombos*. Palmares (1605-1694) was the largest and most established one ever recorded.

African culture constitutes a major difference from the North American slave system which used every means possible to banish any demonstration of African customs from an early period. This probably accounts for the greater preservation of African customs in forms closer to the original in the Caribbean and South America.¹⁴

According to Nestor Capoeira, it is during that time that capoeira incorporated many different elements and started to solidify into the system that we know today. If the style indeed appeared in the rural context of the plantation system, it is also a system shaped by urban repression of African expression of freedom. The nineteenth century indeed saw an increase in freed blacks and a gradual demand for the abolition of slavery (Brazil was going to be the last country in America to abolish slavery in 1880). The movement of blacks from Bahia¹⁵ to Pernambuco and to the coffee plantations of Rio de Janeiro, inspired fear among the elites and white populations at large. The persistence of the *quilombos*, which had become free neighborhoods outside city centers, and the gradual but still partial independence of the black population, precipitated the instigation of tough repressive policies and attitudes toward blacks and the manifestations of their cultural specificities. Nestor Capoeira refers to the 30 or 40 years between 1850 and 1880 before the removal of the King by a military coup, as a period when “the most severe repression of the blacks in Brazil occurred.” (Capoeira 133) It was however during the Republic that the first penal code outlawed *vadiagem* (vagrancy, bumming around) in order

¹⁴ Many scholars among whom Marshall W. Stearns in *The Story of Jazz*, brought forth the hypothesis that the similarities in the music and culture of Spanish and Portuguese planters (influenced by the moors) and the general attitude of Latin-Catholics planter (French-Spanish-Portuguese) of “laissez-faire” toward their slaves, just as long as it did not come to interfere with plantation work, as opposed to the strict ban on any African cultural manifestations observed in the British-Protestant plantations of North America, account for the greater African retentions and syncretism observed in the Caribbean and Brazil. According to Stearns, the French and Spanish influence in Louisiana and New Orleans in general accounted for the presence of cultural practices closer to African cultural forms in this area. Congo square remains a symbolic example of a legal drumming space for Afro-descendants in America. (Stearns 19-25)

¹⁵ The state of Bahia was originally the center of the plantation system and is still to this day the center of Afro-Brazilian culture.

to control blacks. Capoeira, understood as synonym to *vadiagem*, was illegal during this period (134). As a result, capoeira went underground and some practitioners turned to crime. The *Maltas*, or “capoeira street gangs”, were feared by all members of society and had recurrent fights with police forces. Stories abound about street violence, legendary capoeiras endowed with superhuman skills. Capoeiras had proved their martial ability to the general public during the Paraguayan war (1865-1870) where they were employed as close combat special forces in charge of penetrating the trenches (134-135). During the Republic years, capoeiras were also used by politicians during elections to pressure opponents or manipulate the voting process, or as bodyguards (151-152).

Nestor Capoeira questions the common assumption that blacks who could not find a place in society after abolition turned to crime and took capoeira underground which precipitated the laws against its practice. He demonstrated that the systemic persecution of capoeiras (and black people at large) predated the advent of the Republic and of abolition, the period which saw a progressive emancipation of blacks from bondage. The constant and increasing repression on blacks in the period preceding the abolition must be understood as the condition which pushed those populations, and the capoeiristas in particular, to turn to crime. The culmination of accounts of street violence by capoeiras coincides with the outlaw status they were assigned by the authorities. The emphasis of the press of the time on the street violence associated with capoeira might only illustrate the authorities’ desire to legitimize repressive policies, or boast of the efficiency of the police to tackle the issue. The outlaw status of capoeira started with the republic and ended in the 1930’s with the apparition of the first official capoeira academy. When Getúlio Vargas came to power in 1930, he soon legalized capoeira and Afro-Brazilian religions. Capoeira, however, was controlled through a set of restrictions, such as the interdiction to

practice it outdoor and the necessity to obtain an authorization from the state to find a practice space. These conditions allowed the opening of the first capoeira academia even though this legalization process constituted an indirect way to control the culture. Manoel dos Reis Machado, known as Mestre Bimba (1900-1974), was one of the best capoeiristas of his time, an invisible fighter who would not hesitate to challenge publicly and beat any fighter of any martial art, and the creator of the first official school of capoeira in history. Bimba had the idea to bring capoeira to the upper classes of society in order to clean it from its bad reputation and association with criminality, while earning a living from it. Bimba is credited with modifying capoeira angola, the traditional form he had learned, to make it more prone to systematic training. He standardized the movements and created sequences in order to make learning more rational and “efficient”. He also introduced a graduation system similar to Asian martial art (using colored silk scarves instead of belts today, as a reference to the use of scarves for protection from straight razors neck cuts). Bimba’s teaching method for capoeira was in tune with Vargas idea of physical education and disciplining the body (individual bodies as well as the national body). Bimba’s new approach allowed the spread of capoeira throughout Brazil and the world (Capoeira 170-171). The style he created is known as “capoeira regional” and is the most popular style today, drawing more students than the more traditional style of “capoeira angola.” Capoeira angola designates capoeira in its multiple manifestations before Bimba’s innovations. Today, it is a style of capoeira more centered on traditions, rituals and connections to Africa. Around the time Bimba created his school another *mestre* rose to prominence, in part due to Bimba’s moving away from some of the tradition of capoeira angola. Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (1889-1981) known as Mestre Pastinha, came to represent capoeira angola in opposition to Bimba’s capoeira regional. We will describe in more details the differences between the two styles which have

become more and more obvious with time. Capoeira angola will remain our main object of study since it is more connected not only to many traditional and historical aspects of capoeira, some of which have been lost in the regional style, but it is also more conscious of capoeira's African roots and consistently attempts to bring to the front the Afro-centric aesthetic and philosophy of the art. Let us now describe the game itself in its many different aspects. I will base the description of the angola style from both my own personal experience learning it (I have been consistently practicing capoeira for about 7 years) and the literature available on the subject. We will finally briefly describe the main differences between capoeira angola and capoeira regional.

2.1.1.b- The game

The game of capoeira is composed of different elements that are brought together during a singular ritualized event called a *roda* (*ronde* in French; meaning “circle” or “ring”). The term *roda* both describes the event as well as the circular physical space created by the participants. The *roda*, includes the *bateria*, which designates the musical ensemble and which is placed at the top of the circle. It also includes the primary audience forming the circle and most often constituted of potential players of the game, along with the secondary audience of spectators standing outside the circle (especially during outdoor events), and finally two players inside the ring. A traditional *bateria* is generally composed of three *berimbaus* (musical bows) of different sizes, two *pandeiros* (tambourines), an *agogô* (a double steel or wooden bell), and an *atabaque* (tall, wooden hand drum somewhat similar to the Afro-Cuban conga). The *Berimbau* is composed of a bow called *verga*, a metal string called *arame*, on which is attached a *cabaça* (“gourd”) used as a resonator. The string is struck with a stick called *bagueta*, while the hand holding the *berimbau* holds a coin or rock called *dobrão*, applying it to the string to modify the sound. Through the *dobrão* the player can make three distinct sounds, a high tone, a low tone,

and a buzz sound (sort of indistinct, metaphorical “white noise”, in between the high and low tones) when the *dobrão* is not pressed against the string but only gently rests on it. The biggest *berimbau* called *gunga* or *berraboi* is the most important instrument in the *roda*. It starts and ends the game, gives directions to what type of game must be played and indicates potential threats that might appear outside the *roda*. It also regulates the speed of the *roda* which can vary greatly in the angola style. The second *berimbau*, generally called *medio*, complements the *gunga* by playing its inverted rhythm or *toque*. For instance, the *toque de angola* (BBLHS¹⁶) played on the *gunga* is coupled with *São Bento Pequeno* (BBHLS) played on the *medio*. The *viola* (the smallest *berimbau*) is playing any of the two *toques* played by the *gunga* or the *medio*, but embellishes them. It is a solo instrument.

When a game is initiated, the two players enter the circle on each side of the *bateria* and crouch before the main *berimbau*, generally held by the *mestre* or the senior or most experienced player of the event. When the music begins, the *mestre* starts by singing a *ladainha* (litany), songs of various lengths, always following more or less the same melodic structure and often describing important historical or philosophical components of the art. *Ladainhas* can either be taken from an immense pool of pre-written traditional songs, with some having clearly identified authors, or can be improvised on the spot, possibly commenting on the specificity of the event, or the game(s) played. The game can be at all times abruptly stopped by the *mestre* and reset through a *ladainha*. At the end of the *ladainha*, the *mestre* transitions to the *louvação*, also known as *chula*, which initiates the call and response part of the *roda*. *Chulas* are a form of greeting to the event for both the participants and the broader audience. Here is an example of *louvação* taken from the CD *Capoeira Angola Salvador Brazil*, by Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho (GCAP):

¹⁶ B=Buzz tone; L=Low tone; H=High Tone; S=silence.

Iê, É hora é hora (líder, leader)/ Iê, É hora é hora, camará (coro, chorus)
Iê, vamos embora/ Iê, vamos embora, camará
Pela barra afora/ Iê, Pela barra afora, camará
Iê, viva meu Deus/ Iê, viva meu Deus, camará
Iê, viva meu mestre/ Iê, viva meu mestre, camará
Iê, quem me ensinou/ Iê, quem me ensinou, camará
(Moraes)¹⁷

Following the *louvação* are the *corridos* which are call and response songs. The chorus is generally sung at the beginning by the lead singer. *Corridos* comments on and guides the action in the *roda*. The corpus is constituted by a set of pre-composed songs, often metaphorical which have specific meaning related to the game itself. The two players start playing whenever the first *corrido* starts, not until then. Usually, the *roda* ends with a specific *corrido*. *Corridos* fulfill different functions within the *roda*. For instance, there are *corridos* to motivate the players to play respectfully and beautifully, discourage from grabbing each other, comment on cowardly attitude in the *roda*, congratulate a nice move or a good player, build or re-energize the cohesion in the *roda*, end the *roda*, etc. *Corridos*, carefully selected during the games by the *mestre*, are therefore not just background music. They are actually participating actively and commenting on the whole dynamic of a capoeira event, both inside and outside the *roda*.

The description of the physical game is a difficult task. Points of reference from other martial arts are difficult to use as capoeira's aesthetic is very peculiar, although some of the techniques are similar to other fighting styles. Indeed, novice martial artists from other styles often misinterpret capoeira in general, and capoeira angola in particular as non-martial, ineffective in combat and impractical. I have already stated that capoeira is more than a set of fighting techniques, but its history of violence is a testimony to its efficiency in combat for self defense purposes. Its miss-interpretation by neophytes only seems to demonstrate capoeira's

¹⁷ Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho. "Chula." *Capoeira Angola Salvador Brazil*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1996. CD.

effective embedded deceptive approach. The *roda* is a live event that must be witnessed if one wants to begin to fathom its depth. Greg Downey, in the Prelude to *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning From an Afro-Brazilian Art*, managed to give a realistic, detailed and exciting description of an angola *roda*. We will focus on his account, break down the parts which focus on movements and comment on them. Here is how it starts:

The two capoeiristas weave around each other patiently on the floor, cartwheeling, crab-walking, spinning, and sliding close to the ground. The game resembles a slow motion, acrobatic pantomime of a fight. The attacks are more implied than actual. Most kicks pass close to the other player, forcing him to move and respond with a counterattack. The players joke for superior position, demonstrating uncanny flexibility and balance rather than simply striking at each other. They attack the space around each other with their legs and heads, using their arms merely to support their bodies. One gets the sense that each player is trying to herd the other one into an awkward position. (Downey 2)

What this extract demonstrates is the strategic aspect of a capoeira angola game. The use of the verb “to weave” is interesting in that it not only denotes the circularity which characterizes most capoeira moves, but it also illustrates patience, strategy and indirection inherent to the game. The “slow motion” execution of the moves, which are reminiscent of *tai chi ch’uan*, illustrates the focus that is laid on control over force or speed. The slow speed at the beginning of a game allows the body to warm up slowly, thus avoiding injuries, but it also denotes a major aspect of the art: communication. By moving slowly, the players can study the movements of their opponents, and respond in real time to them. This exchange really starts as a friendly dialogue, a conversation between the two. Downey goes on:

A kind of bodily conversation develops between the two, simultaneously cooperative and competitive, aesthetic and agonistic. Only hands, head, and feet touch the ground. The game looks choreographed, so smoothly do attack, counterattack, and counter-counterattack flow one into the next.

The first passes of the game are deceptively slow, but they're a competition as certainly as the quicker and more overtly aggressive exchanges that follow. For now, the game develops low to the ground in a series of acrobatic evasions, sweeping kicks, bent handstands, spine-twisting back bridges, and cagy cartwheels. (2-3)

We see here how the game evolves from slow, basic movement to more elaborate ones. After the friendly greeting exchange of the first few moves, the game becomes more elaborate through more acrobatic movements. From an outsider's point of view, the scene might indeed seem staged and more dance-like than an actual competition, but the players know that the pressure is building and that in every "implied" attack, there is a potential armful, if not deadly, blow. This always fragile balance between cooperation and competition defines the game of capoeira.

Downey describes how the game evolves:

When the rhythm quickens, the players open up their postures, and the game becomes more heated. Moving faster now, no longer staying so close to each other or the floor, they stumble and pirouette. Their legs suddenly reach out in kicks from unexpected angles. The capoeiristas look off-balance, smiling, their eyes wandering in a studied, deceptive disinterest that conceals complete concentration. They strive to trip each other or await the perfect moment of vulnerability for an artful counterattack. (3)

We see now that the speed as well as the stake of the game has dramatically accelerated, following the impulsion of the *mestre* and the whole *bateria*. The speed of the exchanges brings potential danger to the situation as control must be maintained in order to avoid injuries or the degeneration of the game into a violent exchange. We also get a sense of the deceptive dimension of the game, in which players always try to conceal their emotions, moves, intentions in order to create surprise. The exchange goes on:

Then one player unwisely cartwheels too casually over the other's *tesoura*, a leg "scissors" that slides along the floor at ankle height. When the reckless player reaches, extending to vault over the top of his adversary, he leaves his body exposed. The player doing *tesoura* lunges into the upside-down victim's open belly with his forehead—a *cabeçada* or head-

butt. The target can't close his legs quickly enough to cover the "opening." The cabeçada sends the target tumbling, disjointed, to the ground. The cabeçada was perfectly timed and beautifully executed. (Downey 3)

In this extract, we clearly understand that stepping in the *roda*, always presents a risk, whether ridicule, injury or even death. Although capoeira is a game, the movements executed with the body transforming members into weapons and have proven deadly many times in the past. This excerpt also demonstrates capoeira angola's strategic dimension. Observation, dialogue, deception and patience are key here. The players will wait for a perfect opening and grab the opportunity at the right time to defeat an opponent metaphorically. Deception and indirection therefore characterizes the angola style. The tensions between players can sometimes escalate into physical violence although the most advanced players, while demonstrating skills and power, would generally not engage in violence. Violence seems to be more frequent in the regional style which focuses less on indirection, dialogue and deception, but focuses more on the perfect execution of the movements and the competitive aspect of the game. Certain regional schools have even created contests with sets of rules, where music is totally absent; a sort of MMA or UFC championship of capoeira, thus moving further and further away from capoeira angola practices. Mestre Nô, reputed *mestre* and founder of Capoeira Angola Palmares often makes the distinction between being violent, as modern capoeira has become according to him, and being dangerous, which implies more reflection and judgment. Capoeira, by using implied movements and avoiding contacts, remains a game. The potential for danger and fight, however, is always present which partially accounts for the game's ambiguous nature.

If this description is a realistic account of an angola *roda*, one must be aware that there is many different *mestres* and schools of capoeira angola and that each have their own interpretation of music, songs, movements, aesthetics and philosophy of capoeira etc. However,

a lot of these schools and *mestres* regularly meet during common events where they can share and display a common understanding and practice of capoeira, constantly building unity inside the genre. This description, if it lacks certain elements that would definitely qualify the games as representing the angola style, cannot be confused with a regional *roda*. The sheer matter of the evolution of the tempo from slow to fast is one of the indicators. Let's map out the main difference that we can observe between those two genres, remaining aware that some schools seems to navigate somewhere in between those two. This in-between style is generally referred to as capoeira atual. Mestre Nô's school is often considered as one of them.

One of the first easily recognizable features that differentiate the two styles of capoeira has to do with the aesthetics of the games. Regional games tend to be faster and play higher than angola games, and less variation in tempi is observed. The movements in the regional style are standardized and more numerous than in angola, and almost always executed to their conclusion. Angola on the other end, displays a great variety of tempi as demonstrated in the excerpt, and tends to focus more on low and slow games, although high and fast game are also common. The movements are less numerous, less focused on acrobatics and more flexible in the sense that movements are more loosely executed and not always completed, but often used as feints. Indeed, movements are often initiated as a hint to the other player, and then abruptly broken to transition to another one, which might catch the opponent off-balance. While regional kicks are often high, fast, far from the opponent and synchronized between the players, angola kicks are often low, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, but when executed, most of the time they aim to hit the target, and are not executed to their conclusion, but only implied. Sometimes, they do reach the target, but are rarely dangerous as control over movements is the rule. If a player is hit, it is generally considered that both the players are responsible, the target for not dodging the blow,

and the attacker for not controlling his/her movement. *Angoleiros* (angola practitioners) often reproach regional players their constant kicking in the air, not aiming, but only demonstrating speed. The Regional players reproach angola's inefficiency in fights as too weak and not practical. This idea comes from angola's focus on deception, where players always dissimulate their games, while regional focuses more on display. The systemic approach of the style brought by Bimba makes the dialogue between the players more predictable, while angola is characterized by unpredictability, deception and trickery. In both styles aesthetic is important, but in angola, it becomes an integral part of the strategy of the game, not just a demonstration of skills. The standard movements in regional tend to format the games of practitioners while more variety in styles among different players can be observed in angola. Angola also focuses more on theatricality. Movements of dance, exchange of words, miming are frequent in traditional angola and almost absent in regional. This illustrates, according to me, the greater depth of the angola style which goes beyond a pugilist approach to the art manifest in the regional style. Some rituals have also disappeared such as the *chamada*, which is a sort of interruption of the game where one player calls the other for a waltz-like exchange of a few steps until the game resumes. The *volta no mundo* where the two players stop the game and walk around the circle, either to catch their breath or mark a pose after one of the player fell for instance, is also not as frequently used in capoeira regional.

In *Rings of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*, J. Lowell Lewis stresses the aesthetic and philosophical differences between the genres as an opposition between Western and African conceptions:

The object of the ludic style¹⁸ is more in line with African aesthetic: to make the game as beautiful as possible by harmoniously combining all the elements, by balancing competition with cooperation. The object of the

¹⁸ Angola style

agonistic style¹⁹ correspond more closely with the contemporary Western traditions: the emphasis is on the individual achievement more than group effort, competition is central, and nonmartial aspects, such as music, tend to recede into the background. (Lewis 114)

This distinction illustrates the first incentive for the creation of capoeira regional by mestre Bimba himself, taking capoeira out of the street, replacing its illegitimacy and bad reputation with a formal and legal context. His opening of the style to middle class whites meant changing some of capoeira angola distinctively African traits in order to make it more appealing to his new audience. If today, both styles of capoeira are practiced by all, capoeira angola remains much more centered on African aesthetic and consciousness than the regional style. The division in capoeira indeed mirrors the division we have described in Afro-Brazilian religious practices illustrating further Brazil's racial and cultural division.

2.1.2- The Capoeirista, a New World griot-warrior

2.1.2.a- Relation to history

We will develop the idea that historical consciousness is central to the art of capoeira and that it is present in many different forms. The omnipresence of history in capoeira constitutes a fundamental aspect of the art. This dimension of the Afro-Brazilian art is similar to what we observed in our discussion of the West African griot. While the griot focuses on the history of his patrons and the broader community, the capoeirista is the guardian of the history of capoeira itself. The history of capoeira, however, symbolizes the history of black people's struggle for liberation in Brazil, as well as the historical link to Africa. The capoeirista is the human vector of history within capoeira and in the broader community. The capoeirista and the griot therefore assume similar functions in maintaining a link to the past through the transmission of historical

¹⁹ Regional style.

narratives. The expression of history in capoeira materializes during the ritual of the *roda*. The *roda* constitutes a metaphorical connection to Africa. We have already evoked the circle as a universal symbol of creation in Yoruba cosmogony. The *roda*, as a metaphor of life, is also a metaphor of the universe and the interactions that take place in it. Fá'lokun Fatunmbi described an aspect of Èsù that is particularly relevant to our understanding of capoeira's historical dimension through ritual. He describes *Esu Opin* as the aspect of Èsù which has to do with establishing sacred boundaries:

Whenever a sacred space is established there is almost always some manifestation of *Esu* present as the guardian of the ritual boundaries. When *Esu Opin* is placed at a sacred site, it also has the function of keeping that area charged with *ase*, which *Ifá* identifies as the primal source of transformation in Creation. (Fatunmbi 16)

Through the *roda*, a space is created which is particularly loaded with *ashé* and which allows communication between the different realms of existence. The past can therefore be re-created, ancestors are called through music to attend the event, even *orishas* are called to witness the *roda*. Some capoeira practitioners are also candomblé adepts, and the *atabaque* drum, which is common to both universes, is directly associated with the calling of *orishas* in candomblé and West African Ifá worship (Merrell 110). Floyd Merrell evokes the fact that candomblé and capoeira circles bear great similarities, not only in the *atabaque* rhythms played, or in the invocation of *orishas* in both candomblé and capoeira songs, but in the very form of the dances (in particular the *ginga*; swinging movement from left to right which is the primary movement of capoeira). According to Merrell, "Each Terreiro is like an African island in a foreign land; it is a re-creation of Africa." (109) Through its aesthetic, through the instruments (the *berimbau* is a case in point), through the evocation of *orishas*, of places (Angola, Luanda), people (*male*, *mandinga*, which we will define latter) present in the songs, each capoeira *roda* is a

mythical/mystical re-creation of Africa. According to Greg Downey, “songs are frequently said to be the living memory of capoeira, its oral history.” (Downey 74) It is through the transmission of song repertoires and the constant composition of new songs that the history of capoeira and black experience in Brazil is perpetuated. Like the griots in West Africa, “capoeiristas sing history.” (75) According to Downey:

History is not recalled as long-ago events to be contemplated [...] When capoeiristas sing past events into nearness, they remind those at a *roda* that the art arose through violence and struggle. History appears in a poetic mode, calling players to experience the present in new ways.

Later he adds:

The rhetorical form in which history is sung—often in the first person, as if the singers themselves were protagonists in past events—encourages capoeiristas to experience the modern art as an echo of the past. Through a form of poetic projection, past events are brought close, and singers are inclined to take up the postures attributed to fallen heroes, who were fearless, aware of danger, mistrustful of authority, and yet playful in the face of violence. (75)

Thus the past is re-enacted in the present every time a *roda* is performed, through music, through the practitioner’s internalization and embodiment of past deeds, past capoeira practices, movements, comments, and attitudes. The past becomes alive in a new context. Capoeira has the capacity to refer to former realities while adapting to present conditions. The modification of the style and its capacity to integrate new elements demonstrates its mediating dimension across time. The repetition in the present of a tradition of the past illustrates both capoeira’s historical continuity and pertinence, as well as its potential for adaptation. J. Lowell Lewis states in that regard that “the game functions as a sign *of* history, preserving cultural patterns from former times, and as a sign *in* history, evolving along with changes in the social order.” (Lewis 8-9) The linking of past and present is reminiscent of the griot’s perpetuation of traditional narratives and musical structures in present day contexts and *Ifá*’s *odu* verses constant re-interpretation by the

babaláwo through divination. We will now see that myth plays a central role in the transmission of historical consciousness in capoeira.

If the songs are filled with historical references, and their evocation/invocation power is obvious, the format employed, and their use in the *roda* context leads one to ponder on the shallow and fragmentary nature of these accounts. History bits are scattered here and there and no chronological logic is resected during a *roda*. Connecting the dots to create a coherent historical narrative is a difficult task. History is often entangled in mythology and it seems hard to separate the two (Isn't myth part of the very nature of all historical narrative?). One figure emerges from capoeira's past and seems to represent, in part, the history of African struggle in Brazil; the *malandro*. Downey described this figure as a "legendary rogue or hustler who survived alone in Brazil's urban streets on his cunning." (Downey 57) Stories about famous *malandro* abound and indeed led to the solidification of this concept in the psyche of the capoeirista. The concept of *malandragem*, which refers to the activities and outlook of a *malandro*, constitutes one of the cornerstones of capoeira philosophy. Downey evokes the individual character of these accounts referring to the deeds of solitary figures overcoming great challenges. He makes the connection between the escaped slave who had to protect himself from the *capitões do mato*, "heavily armed bounty hunters sent on horseback to recapture fugitive Africans" (57), and the urban figure of the *malandro* and the street gang violence associated with them in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term "*malandro*", however, was more specifically associated with the street violence of Rio de Janeiro. According to Downey, the focus of these stories changed in the early twentieth century from Rio to Salvador, Bahia. The *bamba* is the Bahian term that describes street organization and their members as well. Besouro Mangangá is the most famous of these street figures. Many capoeira songs make reference to

him and his deeds. A blockbuster movie was even dedicated to him in Brazil. He was famous for persistently and often single-handedly being victorious during epic fights with the police. He was said to have a *corpo fechado*, “closed body”, meaning that bullets or steel blade could not penetrate his body, making him potentially invincible (Afro-Brazilian folklore often makes reference to magical amulets which grants these kinds of power. Similar stories are frequent in West Africa as well.) His name Besouro comes from a poisonous beetle, due to his supposed ability to transform into one and fly away from danger. The story recounts that he died from being stabbed with a *faca de ticum* (knife made of *ticum*, a particularly strong wood) which was energized through sorcery to penetrate Besouro’s closed body. He is an important figure of cultural unification for capoeirista and a symbol of Afro-Brazilian resistance to oppression. Zumbi, king of Palmares (the most important *Quilombo*, or maroon settlement in Brazil during slavery) who led the resistance and died heroically during the Portuguese invasion of the Palmares territory is also a central unifying figure often referred to in capoeira songs. Whether or not capoeira was already in use in Palmares has been the subject of debate. Zumbi remains nonetheless a powerful symbol of African liberation, cultural pride and resistance to European oppression.

Following the tradition of Mestre Pastinha, the Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho (GCAP) has consistently followed the path of conservation and promotion of the history of African resistance against European oppression in Brazil through the different myths originating from capoeira history, from larger Afro-Brazilian history and a traditionalist approach to the rituals of capoeira angola (Downey 63). For Mestre Moraes, founder of the group and former student of Mestre Jão Grande (direct student of Pastinha), the outlaw image of capoeira only mirrors the outlaw image of blacks in Brazil at large, and is nothing but a symptom of racial

bigotry and economic exploitation. Thus the *malandro* is not seen as just another criminal, but as a symbol of resistance to oppression. What is perceived as having a negative connotation in the boarder society is valorized as a positive attribute within the oppressed group. Downey describes GCAP's historical emphasis as a sort of liberation epic which remains anchored in the resistance against racial oppression. He states:

The liberatory saga recounted by GCAP consists of four primary episodes: the art's African origin, the slaves' struggle against their masters, the government's persecution of urban capoeiras, and the survival of Capoeira Angola in spite of the creation of Capoeira Regional. (64)

Thus, according to GCAP, the very existence of capoeira angola today is a sign of a continuous resistance to cultural erasure of African presence in the new world. The focus on Africa is not only the affirmation of aesthetic and philosophical priorities, it is also a statement for the acknowledgment of African contribution to the cultures of the new world as well as a continuous fight against the erasure of the history and heritage of African civilizations worldwide. This cultural heritage is manifest in the historical content of the songs but also in the worldview and philosophical outlook it has produced over the course of five centuries of African presence in Brazil. We will now describe the three main philosophical concepts that define the art of capoeira and their centrality in capoeira angola in particular.

2.1.2.b- *Malícia/malandragem/mandinga*

Although not restricted in its usage to the world of capoeira in Brazil, the term *malícia* has a specific connotation within this universe. *Malícia* is the central philosophical concept of capoeira. It defines the attitude of the capoeirista both within the *roda* and in the greater *roda* of life (The *roda* is indeed always a metaphor for life). *Malícia* is in part comparable to treachery. Loosely translated as “cunning” or “mischief”, *malícia* differs from its English etymological

cousin “malice” but seems closer to the meaning of the French word. Floyd Merrell in his study of capoeira and candomblé defines *malícia* within capoeira as such:

It is a little bit of malice, but with a sly, clever roguish twist and an ingratiating gesture. It involves awareness of what’s going under the surface appearance of some form of social interaction between two people; then suddenly, at the propitious moment, the person with the subtlest *malícia*, cunningly puts something over on the other person before he knows what’s going on. It might include a dose of double-dealing, but with a wily, jocular quality. It might imply duplicity, but there’s an appearance of honesty; cheating without taking it seriously; guile with a little ironic humor; pretense for the purpose of playfully catching you off guard; trickery that is ingratiatingly revealed to you when you are taken in by it; a show of trust and then you are raucously yet jocularly slammed when you accept it.
(Merrell 13)

Malícia thus appears as a strategic dissimulation of one’s intentions in order to gain the upper hand over an opponent. Deception is the main mode of operation of *malícia*, the main strategy used by capoeirista within the coded, yet relatively free, interactions inside the *roda*. *Malícia* goes even beyond that. Merrell further describes *malícia* as an awareness of the latent tensions at work in any social interaction, and an ability to play on them using deception, double-entendre, humor, irony etc. “*Malícia* is one person’s creation of expectations in the mind of the other person and then acting contrary to those expectations.” (25) Merrell connects this social skill to the conditions of the slave. For a slave living on a plantation, skillful and deceptive social maneuvers were not just an advantage; but a necessity for survival. Dissimulation of one’s real intentions under the pretense of conformity to the rule allowed the slave some protective space for effective resistance. *Malícia* was the main skill that could help the slaves resist effectively against their submissive position. According to Merrell, *Malícia* is indeed “*an equalizer*” since it compensates for physical inferiority (Merrell, 26). Through our analysis of Scott’s work in the introduction to the present study, we have already evoked the performance quality of any

domination/subordination relation of power and applied it to the colonial context. This type of relationship implies the performance of the dominant, who must enact his own superiority even though it might only be an appearance. At the same time the subordinate must perform the script of the dominant, through submissive behavior if he wants to enjoy a certain amount of freedom. The world of capoeira ritualistically re-enacts and plays around these two polarities within the circle itself. *Malícia* articulates these tensions. As a theater of domination and subordination reflecting the greater theater of life, the *roda* is the locus of expression of *malícia* inherent to any human interaction. Within this set stage, the players can use *malícia* and assume an expression of superiority or inferiority, depending on the context and their ultimate intentions. One can gain advantage either by appearing stronger through intimidation, or one can appear weak and submissive in order to lead the opponent to loosen his/her guard and then create surprise. Theatricality is, therefore, one of the main agents of *malícia* within capoeira. Indeed J. Lowell Lewis notes that capoeira is “a kind of drama, a theater of domination and liberation.” (Lewis, 94) He describes the different techniques used inside the ring to score “metaphorical” points against an opponent. Intimidation, showing one’s skills or pretending to be mad are strategies that are often used to destabilize an opponent and gain psychological advantage. Other strategies include humiliations. Lewis describes one player mocking the gestures of another, or feigning fear by doing a sign of cross after an attack by the opponent for instance. Lewis also evokes pulling the pants down of the adversary or sitting on top of him. Facial expressions are also important to convey feigned emotions. He describes developing the faculty of peripheral vision as a technique which allows a player not to look directly at his opponent while never actually losing sight of him (Lewis 102). All this consists in what Lewis calls “body language” or translation of movements into speech. Movements indeed have meaning and Lewis’ description

of the kick called *bênção* (“blessing”) illustrates a historical dimension of movements and the meaning that can be ascribed to them. According to Lewis, the *bênção* evokes the tradition of the master giving blessings to their slaves. The slaves were supposed to ask for blessing from their masters whenever they would see them in the course of the day. The hypocrisy in the master’s blessing, who blesses the slaves one day with payers and with the whip the next day, is commented upon by the naming of this basic kick of capoeira. Lewis explains the *malícia* present in this association through the following example:

There is a common joke, or scenario, acted out using this kick, which captures an essential aspect of the principle of *malícia*. On his first day of class, the instructor offers his hand to a new student for a handshake in a gesture of welcome. When the student reaches out to take the hand, the master unleashes his ‘blessing,’ knocking the student to the ground or against a wall. The lesson to be learned, amid gales of laughter, is something like, “Never let down your guard,” or “Never trust anyone too far. (31-32)

Thus *malícia* finds an expression in the traditional movements (attack and escapes) and the whole range of body motion available to the *angoleiro*. Theatricality is therefore central to the art. Its expression through *malícia* demonstrates capoeira’s philosophical approach and its strategic dimension through a striving for control of human movements and emotions. Capoeira’s exploration of one’s physical and emotional limits proves useful to overcome difficulties both inside and outside the *roda*. To further illustrate this, I will recount a discussion I had with Mestre Camaleão about the ritual of the *chamada*, central to the angola style but generally absent from capoeira regional. When a player calls a *chamada*, he/she stops playing and stands with open arms, either facing or giving his/her back to the opponent. The opponent then approaches the *chamada* carefully and places his/her hands on the caller’s. Then a few steps are engaged back and forth, which I have described as waltz-like earlier, until the caller decides to resume the game by directing his/her opponent. This ritual breaks the game into a dangerous

and unstable situation where the two players are in close contact. Any of them can at all time break this apparently innocent dance and initiate an attack. Mestre Camaleão emphasized the fact that by opening oneself, the caller makes the situation look advantageous to the person called. However, this appealing position of superiority often hides a trick, thus the caller must approach carefully. Camaleão made a parallel with life, where we are constantly bombarded with open and tempting opportunities, which are deceptive and often conceal traps. The *chamada*, despite the fact that it breaks the regular structure of the game, remains a very significant space of exploration of *malícia* within the ring. Lewis adds another layer to this practice as he sees the *chamada* as a caricature of European dancing and as a possible critic of the hypocrisy of European societies in particular vis-a-vis Africans. The *chamada* would be a constant reminder to be distrustful of social conventions and the display of sympathy which might conceal unfriendly intentions, especially when coming from a known oppressor.

Malícia, not solely manifests in the movements and emotional display of the capoeirista, but in his/her speech and music as well. The form of the songs is one of the first elements that denotes *malícia* in capoeira music. Most songs, and especially the *corridos*, are in proverbial form, or using metaphors, but only occasionally direct description of social conditions (that would be more the domain of some *Ladainhas*, more descriptive in nature) (Lewis, 162). The short form, and the call and response structure which characterizes *corridos* is particularly prone to a play on the paradigmatic axis of semantics. *Malícia* is manifest in the indirect nature of speech that the songs display. They are characterized by ambiguity and hidden meanings to which only insiders can have access. We have also described the connection the *corridos* bear with the action inside the *roda*. Indeed *corridos* are used as comments, indications, and directions on what happens between the two players. *Ladainhas* can also be selected according to

the context, introducing a specific player, commenting on a previous game etc. Thus, *malícia* is clearly present in most capoeira songs, in their language and their characteristic ambiguity first, in their function as conscious agents that influence and respond to the game itself, but also in their historical dimension. We shall analyze the importance of historical facts and myth as well as African linguistic presence in songs in the final chapter of this study.

One final aspect of the verbal art of the capoeirista, which will resonate with our description of the West African griot and which constitutes a specific context for the display of *malícia*, is the existence of verbal duel between *mestres* or advanced players. According to J. Lowell Lewis this verbal dueling was more prevalent in the past. This aspect is also more characteristic of the angola style (171-172). It can be characterized by an exchange of meaningful *corridos* carefully selected according to context to get a point across, or improvised *ladainhas*, which can turn into a praise or insult game of give and take (similar to what we have described among griots.) In a filmed game available on Youtube channel between Mestre Guará and Mestre Liminha²⁰, we can observe that Mestre Guará interrupts abruptly the game and walks at the foot of the *berimbau* to initiate a *ladainha* and thus resets the game (at 3:41 in the video). If the mediocre quality of the video does not allow us to understand the words, one can sense from the tension of the preceding physical exchanges that some verbal argument is taking place. Mestre Guará concludes his song with a *Chula*, thus bringing in the participation of the whole assembly, as is usually the case after any *ladainha*. The audience is indeed always the witness of any explanation between two players. Once the audience has answered the calls of Guará, Mestre Liminah interjects by singing a counter *ladainha* without interruption in the music, as a way of responding to Guará. Then the *roda* seems to proceed back to a normal game with the *Chula* and

²⁰ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyU_HtQXkSc

then the introduction of a *corrido* led by Liminha. Mestre Liminha seems ready to start playing the game, when Guará interrupts him with yet another *ladainha*. The rest of the video is not available preventing us from witnessing a potential answer of Liminha. This example illustrates the use of speech to defuse physical tensions that might have built up during a game.

Competition here is manifest in both the physical game and the verbal art. Here is another example of verbal dueling between two experienced and well known players (and Nestor Capoeira's son, Guaxini do Mar and Itapuã Beiramar. At 1:32 right at the beginning of the game, the two players exchange friendly *corridos* referring to their respective capoeira names. Then, at 6:05, in the middle of the game, the *roda* is reset by Guaxini. He then initiates a *ladainha* that Itapuã Beiramar finishes. This exchange demonstrates cooperation rather than competition, praise rather than insult in verbal dueling. These two examples illustrate two central opposing aspects of the game of capoeira; competition and cooperation. We will see that the game always oscillates between those two extremes. What these two examples demonstrate, however, is both the importance of *malícia* within the verbal art of the capoeirista as well as the connection between the art of capoeira and the art of the West African griot.

If *malícia* can be assimilated to one of the main philosophical concept which defines Afro-Brazilian culture at large, but which is particularly central to capoeira angola, *malícia* can also be understood as a concept that dates back from slavery days in Afro-Brazilian consciousness and which had been developed up to the present period. *Malandragem* on the other hand, associated with the infamous *malandro*, yet possibly a concept defining Afro-Brazilian culture at large as well, is nonetheless a concept that is primarily urban and dating from the nineteenth century. The *malandro*, street 'hustler', to make a comparison with modern North

American urban imagery, is indeed an urban figure associated with street violence and criminality J. Lowell Lewis' describes the *malandro* in the following manner:

The development of capoeira in the urban setting was associated with criminality, in the minds of the police and the upper classes. This involved the creation of lower-class stereotypes, referred to by various terms, like 'capoeira' itself, and the more general category of *malandro*. This social type corresponds roughly to our 'street tough' or 'hoodlum,' with fairly wide range of possible variations from slick pimps and con-men to scruffy muggers, drunks, and pickpockets [...] A *malandro* is someone who engages in *malandragem*, which can signify almost any kind of shady activity. (Lewis 47)

If the *malandro* terminology might have very well originated from a stereotype associated with African descendant in particular in the urban context of nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro, it became a term denoting a street smart, independent and possibly dangerous type of urban survivor.

We have already described the *malandro* as a mythological figure in the universe of capoeira. Present in songs and in many journal articles of the time, the *malandro* fascinates for his freedom from the traditional norms of society, his capacity to challenge the authorities, the supposedly easy money he is making, his good manners and the potential danger surrounding him. For an oppressed black population in Brazil, the *malandro* becomes a cultural hero who challenges the subaltern position assigned to Afro-Brazilians. The *malandro*, the mythic hero and *malandragem*, the outlook and philosophical conceptions of the *malandro* are therefore celebrated in capoeira as positive values that symbolize Afro-Brazilian resistance. In a sense, *malícia* and *malandragem* are related. *Malícia* would be a broader term, while *malandragem* would be more specific to the urban setting, a more modern concept. Nestro Capoeira sees these two concepts as "sisters". Because they are closer to the feminine than to the masculine, closer to guerilla warfare than the way of fighting of the traditional army. Closer to the way someone who

is oppressed fights than those who have power.” (Capoeira 47) Nestor Capoeira develops a picture of the mythical *Malandro* as an idealized version of the real-life *malandro* (a “pale and distorted reflection of the mythical *Malandro*” ²¹(49)). The following description of the *Malandro* and his art, *malandragem* clarifies the point:

The *Malandro* “despises” violence and physical force which, in his way of seeing things, are characteristics of the stupid and ignorant. And that is a basic difference between *malandragem* and the macho way. The *Malandro* works through his intelligence, seduction, charm, and a deep and intuitive knowledge of life and human psychology. His tools are words. His greatest skill is the ability to analyze people and the situations with a speed and cunning that cannot be grasped by us “suckers,” “schmucks,” “normal” people who believe in moral laws and are chained by the conventions of the group or social class to which we belong. (48)

Using his knowledge of human psychology and interaction, the *Malandro* can find a way to “trick” his prey and take advantage of them. Language is his main weapon, and physical violence is only a potential resource for his own self-protection. Cornered, a *Malandro* would not hesitate to use it in order to escape. The *Malandro* is also primarily an assumed outcast who finds freedom outside the traditional boundaries of society. For very pragmatic reasons then, namely, their outcast position, the *Malandro* came to represent people of African descent in Brazil.

One final concept that we must at least acknowledge as it is another central aspect of the philosophy of capoeira, is the concept of *mandinga*. The word relates to the Mandinka or Mandé people that we have described earlier. Connection with the griots and the art of capoeira is therefore not far-fetched. The Mande people in Brazil known for their knowledge of herbal healing and magic. The term *mandingueiro* in the world of capoeira thus refers to a person with magical abilities. The term *mandinga* indeed refers to magic. Lewis describes the use of *patuá*, magical amulets used by capoeiristas as protection from harm in *rodas* or street fighting (Lewis,

²¹ Nestor Capoeira nonetheless recognizes that “there are a few *malandros* on our little planet who almost reach the status of the imaginary *Malandro*.” (49)

49). Besouro Manganga was known for having a *corpo fechado* (“closed body”) which was magically protected from blades and bullets. Only a specific type of knife made out of a specific type of wood and energized with a specific spell was able to penetrate his body and kill him. We have already described the use of amulet during the griot festival in Kita, through Barbara Hoffman’s account, as magical protection against the power of words. It is pertinent here to introduce the tradition wrestling style used in Senegal –lamb- a type of Greco-roman wrestling where punches are authorized and the fight stops whenever a contestant is on the ground. In addition to the presence of griots to sing the praises of the fighters before the fight, a *lamb* exchange, generally very short, is preceded by several rituals where the fighter eats or drinks potions and makes ablutions in order to protect his body and bring luck. Fighters also wear many different amulets for the same purpose of magical protection. In capoeira, through *mandinga*, an African conception is brought at the center of an Afro-diasporic cultural form. *Mandinga* refers to any magical quality of a player. It can for instance refer to the ability to disappear from view during a game, anticipate the move of an opponent (mind reading), controlling the movement of the opponent (mind control), but also one’s ability to close the body and be unattainable.

2.1.2.c- Exploration of duality

Difficult to define in its entirety, capoeira is characterized by a set of contradictory concepts that seem to work together. Neither dance nor fight, game nor serious matter, competition nor playful encounter, capoeira seems to embrace all possibilities and consistently strives for moderation and balance. In capoeira’s exploration of duality, we can infer its liminal character, always mediating between extremes. At the root of capoeira’s very existence, there is a necessity to bring together diverse cultural elements and have them dialogue with each other in order to create new paradigms for the purpose of resistance to oppression. Indeed the multitude

of cultures that participated in the making of this art account for its hybrid nature and its capacity to integrate new elements. Capoeira, as we have described, is a martial art which has proven deadly; it is a specific and codified musical genre; it is oral literature; it is dance, drama, ritual, the list could probably go on. Capoeira is all those things at once, yet not reducible to any of them. Capoeira undeniably displays aesthetic traits which position it as an African or Africanist art form. Yet the language used is European (Portuguese). This first contradiction makes us appreciate capoeira not only as a crossroad of genres, but as a crossroad of cultures as well.

Capoeira is without a doubt a reservoir of African consciousness, put together for the purpose of physical and cultural survival for the African diaspora in the new world (in Brazil in this case), and with time, it has become a medium of communication of Africanist worldviews to the global community. We have already suggested the presence of West African related concepts such as *mandinga* referring to Mande culture and more specifically the magic these populations were known for in Brazil. We can refer as well to Angola as a central place of reference in capoeira (GCAP and FICA groups even see Angola as the birth place of capoeira). Yoruba societies have also been instrumental in the shaping of the art, most notably through the undeniable links that exist between candomblé and capoeira. We can add that capoeira is also American in that these intersections of cultures took place on the South American continent and that significant elements from indigenous cultures of Brazil are present in capoeira as well. The name “capoeira” itself has been connected to a native word describing a type of bush in which escaped slaves were able to hide.) Capoeira is at the junction of many different cultures across time and space. In that sense, Capoeira is one of the first truly trans-Atlantic cultural practices, and its constantly growing popularity worldwide only demonstrates its universalist dimension through its capacity to gather different communities under a singular cultural entity.

In his description of capoeira, J. Lowell Lewis refers to it as play. He however makes a distinction between three different kinds of play that defines the genre; *tocar*, *jogar*, and *brincar*. *Tocar* in Portuguese means to play, but refers to playing an instrument. *Tocar* thus refers to musical play. *Jogar* is a more general verb for playing, but in the world of capoeira, it refers to playing the game itself, that is the physical play. *Brincar* in Portuguese refers to child's play and is understood as verbal play (*brincadeira*). Floyd Merrell also places Capoeira in the domain of play as opposed to game. The term “*jogo*” in Portuguese which is generally used by insiders to qualify capoeira, refers to both “play” and “game” in English. Merrell accurately differentiates the two:

Games are structured by rigid boundaries: here/there, now/then, we/them, permitted/prohibited, legitimate/nonlegitimate, and so on. If you don't fit one side of the opposing categories, you must fit the other side. It's like a life-and-death matter. You win, and, surrounded by adulators, you live to enter the contest on another day. You lose, and you lose alone; you are out of the tournament; you might as well be dead. If you continue winning, you are given virtual immortality status[...] Since play, in contrast, knows of no ultimate winners and losers, all boundaries become vague, fuzzy. There is no all-or-nothing demarcation between life and death as far as play is concerned. You don't play in order to acquire some sort of sham immortality. You play simply because you are alive. Life is most fundamental in play, with little or no concern over death, since it hardly enters into the equation. (46)

Thus play goes beyond the inherent dualism of the restricted and regulated world of games. Play brings the dissolution of the social framework of structured and sanctioned competition. Through play, human interactions lose their formality and rigidity, allowing new possibilities of exchange. Indeed, Lewis defines play as “a framework for contextualizing social encounters.” (Lewis 2) He describes it as a momentary loosening of the social bonds, allowing freedom to be expressed (3). Play is often contrived in the form of games in our modern society and understood in a specific context outside work time. Games, as demonstrated by Merrell, are artificially created systems

which perpetuate a winner/loser paradigm. Play on the other hand is open-ended and purposeless; it becomes a space of freedom from constraints. Lewis attaches the concept of play in capoeira to its roots in slavery:

...it follows that capoeira is able to express the ideal of freedom in play so well because it was an outgrowth of slavery. It has this in common with similar art forms throughout the Americas, many of which have flourished because they seem to embody this joyous sense of the potential for liberation, which is especially intense when it comes from an intimate experience of oppression. (4)

He then refers to the improvisational aspect of capoeira (much more pronounced in the angola genre) as a major aspect of play and compares it to the centrality of improvisation in jazz in the United States. Improvisation is indeed the expression of freedom through play. Play allows the dissolution of space and time through the extension of physical possibility and mental perceptions of time. As standing outside normal interactions, play is a central agent of exploration of the limits of social constructs. In the oppressive context of slavery, play becomes more than a practical mean for alleviating the burden of everyday life, but rather a sheer necessity for maintaining sanity. Capoeira, in the strenuous quality of its physical training and the specific focus on strengthening the back and hips, constituted a physical relief from, and conditioning for field work during slavery. Its playful characteristics make it an incredibly empowering agent of psychological and moral support which has probably helped the slaves bear the burden of constant psychological and physical oppression. Capoeira can be understood as a practice of resistance in that it allowed the slave to survive, that is tolerate the burden of the slave system through physiological, psychological and moral relief, but also as a mean of self-defense and liberation in its martial aspect. Liberation in capoeira is indeed simultaneously physical and psychological and is manifested during playful encounters. We can advance here the hypothesis that *malícia* constitutes the most adequate mode of expression of play that the slave developed as

a response to oppressive conditions and which found an outlet in capoeira. *Malícia*, in this respect, is the very agent of the liberation process which remains at the core of capoeira's philosophy and purpose.

In his study of capoeira, Merrell brings in semiotics to better understand the dynamic nature of the art. Merrell describes capoeira as "sign processing". He uses Pierce's theory of semiotics to describe capoeira's mediating quality. Merrell isolates Pierce's concepts of *firstness*, *secondness* and *thirdness* in order to deconstruct capoeira. According to Merrell, firstness is the thing itself, without any interaction with anything else. He takes the example of a *roda*. The *roda* as firstness is just a ring. Then, there is secondness which is something Other to firstness. In the case of the *roda*, secondness would be other *rodas* at other times in history. Thirdness, then is what mediates between the first two. It is connected individually to both and interconnects them as well. In Merrell's example, thirdness is the very process of interpretation of the *roda* as a *roda* in relation to referent *rodas* of the past. (70-74) We can interpret this theory in terms of Saussurean definition of the sign. Through this interpretation, firstness would be the *signifier*, that is, an empty sign with no meaning attached to it. Secondness would be the *signified* which refers to the potential meaning of the *signifier*. Finally, thirdness is the *sign* itself, that is, the association of both *signifier* and *signified* (form and meaning), the very thought process of association. We can assimilate thirdness to the principle of interpretation. It is the act of association of an empty sign to a referent meaning. Capoeira, in particular through its specific mode of operation called *malícia*, plays on this tension between form (appearances) and meaning (intentions). Capoeira is thus in the domain of thirdness. The centrality of deception appears as denoting capoeira's emphasis on the nature of sign creation and the ambiguity inherent to sign reading in a constantly flowing and shifting material world. Capoeira, through its play on the

unstable nature of reality and the perception of it, becomes indeed an agent of sign processing, constantly creating new out of the old, constantly in process. The emphasis on ambiguity denotes an awareness of meaning as unstable. Capoeira's capacity to integrate many artistic genres into a single coherent entity further demonstrates its malleable and mediating qualities. Capoeira becomes the art of intercommunication through controlled imbalance, calculated friction and strategic dissimulation. This unstable, in-between quality of capoeira is noticeable in many different specific elements of the *jogo*. For instance, Merrell refers to the *ginga* as an illustration of capoeira's understanding and demonstration of process (74). The *ginga* is the most basic movement of capoeira, a sort of continually moving defensive stance from which all movements originate. The *ginga* is liminal in nature as it is neither attack, nor defense, and always both at the same time, constantly oscillating between the two. At any given time, either a specific attack or an *esquiva* ("escape") can spring from it. Here is Merrell's understanding of the advantages the *ginga* gives to the capoeirista:

That way, you'll never be surprised that you aren't surprised when an unexpected turn of events occurs. For you expected the unexpected anyway. That way, you'll be able to enjoy the logical inversion, the brutal contradictions, the subtle ironies, the vagueness and ambiguity, and the allegories acted out in Capoeira and life. That way, you'll become a philosopher, philosopher of deceptive conformity and clever resistance. It is all play, of course, but dead serious play, ludic gamery, tight-lipped irony, grim humor, painful laughter, friendly trickery. (76)

Thus one finds balance in imbalance, determination in ambiguity, strength in weaknesses.

Capoeira is the art of reversal of paradigms, of assimilation of duality. The focus on inverted positions of the body has been described as reminiscent of many different African beliefs in which the spiritual world is parallel to ours (we have already described this understanding of reality among the Yorubas). Inverted positions in capoeira can therefore be associated to both the connection to the spiritual world, where duality disappears, but also as a metaphorical reversal of

earthy paradigms, not favorable to Africans in the context of the New World. (Lewis, 83) It nonetheless denotes a constant emphasis on multiplying one's position relative to one's center of gravity, and to the opponents, a focus on the multiplicity of points of view, a strategic and healthy flexibility of the body and the mind.

The mediation of firstness and secondness into thirdness is also manifest in the music of capoeira. The relation between the three sounds generated by the *berimbau* mirrors this idea of process and mediation. The buzz sound for instance is neither the high tone nor the low tone of the *berimbau*, but somewhere in between the two, yet something entirely different from both. It implies both high and low and brings a singularity to them in the very buzz it produces. The buzz sound is most of the time the first sound (repeated twice) that initiates and therefore mark the cycle of any capoeira *toque*. Thus *toques* seem to emphasize the importance of this central, ambiguous, inclusive, mediating element of the musical structure by constantly revolving around it. The buzz sound, as a sonic marker of capoeira's liminal character, stands out in the soundscape generated by the *bateria*. The relation between the three *beribaús* is also interesting to look at. We have already stated that the *gunga* and the *medio* play inverted *toques* (inverted around the double buzz, indeterminate sound, a pivotal element between the two tones). The *toques de Angola* and *São Bento Grande/Pequeno* would correspond to firstness and secondness respectively, while the improvisations on the *viola* (third smallest solo *berimbau*) which navigates between the two *toques*, would correspond to thirdness.²² The overwhelming presence of dialectic processes does not stop there. Indeed, we can refer to the game itself as being a clear demonstration of the exploration of duality inside the ring. As Downey suggested in his description of an angola game, the two players seemed to mirror each other's movements at

²² Here are the representation of the three main *toques* of the musical structure of a capoeira angola *roda*: *toque de angola*; BBLHS, *São Bento Pequeno*; BBHLS, *São Bento Grande*; BBHLL

the beginning of the game in a friendly exchange which turned more and more competitive and confrontational as the music speeded up.²³ The *bateria* in that sense is really the mediating agent between the two players, and the influence specific songs can have on the very game further attests of this interconnection between the players, the musical ensemble, and the larger audience, which is never completely passive but generally singing the chorus and interjecting live comments on the game as well. Through the mediation of the *bateria*, the audience, songs, *malícia*, drama, etc, capoeira mediates between two central concepts which regulate human interaction and that we have described earlier. Capoeira is indeed displaying and exploring the thin line between human cooperation and human competition (*fadenya*, *badenya*). In a broader, more universal sense, capoeira regulates *ino* and *isoki* (universal Yoruba concepts of expansion and contraction whose dynamic interaction characterize *ashé/axe* the vital energy of creation) for the individual and the community. In its communal dimension, capoeira allows conflicts to be expressed and neutralized in playful encounters. Thus, the capoeira *roda*, through its exploration of *ashé* manifestation, participate in the stabilization and harmonization of human interactions.

To conclude on the capoeirista, we will recall his role as a guardian and transmitter of the history of African struggle in Brazil. Capoeira's historical consciousness is present in the reservoir of stories, myths, accounts about the continuous struggle for liberation of the Afro-Brazilian people, during the successive period of slavery, criminalization of the art and emergence of the figure of the *malandro* during the nineteenth century, and the more recent history of the development of capoeira academies and spread world-wide. Myths, as well as proverbial forms seem to be privileged mediums for the storage of historical narratives and wisdom that is constantly re-interpreted in contemporary contexts through the re-enactment of

²³ Mirroring the movement of the mestre or instructor is also a characteristic feature of capoeira's teaching strategies.

the *roda* ritual. We have indeed described *rodas* as mediums of expression of the history of the struggle against imperialist doctrines which aims at erasing African contributions to human development. Capoeira angola in particular, in its focus on the rootedness of capoeira in Africa, its Africanist aesthetics and its conscious emphasis on liberation seems to embody this continuity of African struggle in the New World. The *angoleiro* in this sense is indeed a griot of the New World in his participation in the perpetuation and construction of historical narratives that build a sense of community around a global Africanist world view and consciousness. *Malícia*, as it manifests in the ambiguous nature of the narratives and their form, constitutes a main agent of exchange and transmission of this cultural heritage of resistance. The lesser emphasis on *malícia* in the style of capoeira regional illustrates its partial disconnection from the roots of African struggle in Brazil. While still conscious of capoeira's root in slavery and African cultures, capoeira regional constitutes integration of the Afro-Brazilian art into the dominant white society to the detriment of some of its specifically African traits. This alteration of the game to fit the gym and the more rationalist approach associated with modern physical education as opposed to the more spiritual, intuitive and playful approach of capoeira angola illustrates what Mestre Moraes from GCAP has controversially called a "whitening" of the art (Downey 52). Indeed part of Mestre Bimba's modifications of the game was aiming at taking capoeira out of the street and making it more appealing to a white middle class audience and more "legitimate", getting rid of the *malandro* imagery associated with the game. This movement involved the disappearance of some of the rituals of capoeira angola, a lesser focus on music and theatricality. It specifically involved the lesser influence of *malícia*, the most important marker of African resistance, in the game and in the consciousness of the players. Indeed, *malícia* seems much less present in the regional genre than in angola. The "clean" aesthetic of regional also denotes differences from the

looser, more irregular patterns of angola. Mestre Cobra Mansa accounts for the differences of style in the unwillingness of middle class white people to “put their hands on the floor, to get them dirty, or to perform the animal-like movements of *capoeira angola*” (Downey 180). The “clean” aesthetics of regional is illustrated by the style of Grupo Senzala for instance. This group is often credited for taking Bimba’s approach one step further in the 1960 by standardizing the movements, focusing on uniformity, speed and body strength, and adding acrobatics taken from gymnastics and other techniques from other martial arts to integrate them to the game of capoeira. The result is more or less what one might encounter in a typical regional *roda*, today: very fast short and acrobatic games with almost automatic succession of kicks and escapes, where exchanges are “synchronized” and “formulaic” (Downey 180). If the genre is much more popular than angola, it is probably due to its standardization and athletic display, which seems to fit more the dominant discourse and uniformization of late capitalism. Capoeira regional has nonetheless lost a lot of the philosophical, ritualistic and playful aspects that one encounters in an angola *roda*. When the two styles are brought side by side, it might be hard for a neophyte to understand that these are two aspects of the same cultural practice, as aesthetics are so different. I must however nuance my description by acknowledging the existence of groups, generally referred to as *capoeira atual*, or contemporary capoeira such as Mestre Nô’s Capoeira Angola Palmares, and Mestre Suassuna’s Corda de Ouro, that navigate between the two styles. Their interpretation of the angola game however, in my view does not manifest the same playfulness, theatricality, dialogue, in other words *malícia*, that is found in the more traditional angola schools.

Malícia as a play on ambiguity, appearances, and intentions, defines the specificity of capoeira angola, but is also the direct philosophical link to the history of African liberation. This

philosophical element can thus be understood as the link to the African continent itself. Indeed, a parallel between *malícia* in its diverse manifestations (physical, musical, verbal) with the art of the griot and Èsù's trick seems not far-fetched. Both Èsù's and the griot's attributes seem to be characterized by a specifically West African type of *malícia*. It seems that in the world of capoeira, cultural concepts that exist in West Africa have become prominent and played an active role for the purpose of the survival of African populations and their cultures. Our former hypothesis of Èsù as an agent and symbol of physical and cultural African survival and presence in the New World, and the griot as a referent for the New World Africanist artist seems to have found a direct embodiment in the figure of the capoeirista.

We have already recalled capoeira's relation to history. Groups such as GCAP, through their focus on the African roots of capoeira and on the history of the struggle for liberation of Africans in the New World, advocate the necessity to remember and honor the participation of Africans in the progress of the human race as a whole. This historical consciousness and understanding is much too often put aside in the global dominant discourses on civilization and human progress to this very day. At a more subtle, basic, energetic level however, capoeira and especially capoeira angola, when it reaches its highest level of achievement, participate in the normalization of human interactions and allow an individual and group to reach beyond dualism while affirming Africanist values. The circle is the very locus of expression of universal principles that are at the core of capoeira. The circle is a medium for the recreation of the past in the present as well as for the communication of the spiritual world and the physical world. The circle ritual and the music allows the concentration of *ashé*, through the canalization of human consciousness at the center (all eyes and energies are indeed focused on the two players which are thus soaked in *ashé*), and the expansion of energies outward through music and songs. This

movement, flow of energy thus created allows a better connection between all the realm of existence; past, present and future, earthly and spiritual through simultaneous and successive movements inward and outward, simultaneous contractions and expansions. The different energies of creation at work behind human interactions (*badenya/fadenya*, *ino/isoki*) can thus be negotiated, always under the watchful eyes of the community (physical and spiritual) which acts as witness and arbiter. Interactions in this particularly charged environment can reach a climax which allows individual and communal blocked energies to flow (catharsis) and be expressed in interactions through movement, songs and music. The high energy level makes this space a dangerous one, where one can lose oneself by falling into the traps of polarity, dualism, i.e. the extreme manifestation of human competition for power, prestige etc. One can also choose a different path, and affirm his/her own individuality inside a communal space, reconciling the two energies of *badenya* and *fadenya* and thus stabilizing *ashé* inside the ring and outside in the greater ring of life.

2.2- The African American Poet: On the battlefield of language

After discussing the art of the capoeirista, we will now turn to the description of a major figure whose contribution to the defense of Afro-Diasporic cultures, of the rights of people of African descent and of a global consciousness of Africa cannot be underestimated. In this section, we will understand to what extent the Afro-Diasporic poet can be assimilated to a New World manifestation of the West African griot, and how the liminal and ambiguous character of Èsù is manifest in the poets' craft and position. We will focus our attention on the North American context, describing the evolution of style and try to understand the forces at work in the shaping of the African American verse tradition. We will focus on key periods and genres

spanning from the era of the publication of the very first poems by African Americans during slavery, to the black art movement of the 1960s. Our discussion of the first published black poets in America will raise the question of the ambivalent position in which they found themselves. Their art and life was indeed characterized by tensions between their deference to white society and European literary standards and outlook on one side, and their condition as slaves, outcasts within this very tradition and culture on the other side. We will describe the utilitarian, pragmatic dimension of African American poetical tradition in our discussion of abolitionist poetry. We will then move to the question of representation in public discourse through a brief description of the minstrel show and the literary genre of dialectical poetry which is often associated with it. This will lead us toward our discussion of the Harlem Renaissance movement. We will describe the new approach of some of the writers of the time who consistently attempted to connect vernacular cultural forms to written poetry. Finally our discussion of African America poetry will move toward the black Arts Movement of the 1960's and the overtly defiant attitude those writers displayed vis-à-vis the hegemonic discourse which was still largely oppressive toward blacks. Our study will demonstrate the constant tensions between acceptance and assimilation of Western artistic standards and the affirmation of African American cultural specificity. We will try to map out the way in which poets of different époques have tried to negotiate these tensions through their art.

2.2.1- Early African American poets: The emergence of a tradition

2.2.1.a- The first poets

In the introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates remind us that “from 1760 to the present, almost *half* of the Afro-American literary tradition was created when its authors and their black readers were either slaves or former slaves.” (Davis, Gates xv) This historical perspective replaces the literary tradition of people of African descent in the United States as emanating from slavery. It seems therefore impossible to sever the driving force and evolution of this tradition from the consciousness of racial and economic oppression of Africans in the New World. In this regard, what is true of the United States is also true of the broader Afro-diasporic world. Slavery and its associated traumas determined greatly the arts of Africans in the New World. The early apparition of the first published texts is a testimony to the vital necessity for African slaves to find a place within the tradition of letters. In a context where learning basic reading and writing skills was prohibited to the slaves, and teaching them could be punished by law, the very fact of learning and teaching reading and writing constituted an act of resistance to systemic racial oppression (Davis, Gates xxiv). For many slaves, acquiring the skills of reading and writing was understood as a major “pathway from slavery to freedom” as Frederick Douglass puts it in his autobiography (Douglass 32). Literacy, inside the dominant Western cultural paradigm, is an integral and central part of the structure through which power is distributed in society. In this context, the acquisition and mastery of reading and writing skills constitutes a means that can allow one to climb the social ladder to a certain extent. In the context of slavery, Africans could actively employ their learned literary skills for their own protection and the defense of a communal fight for freedom and equality. As we will see, literacy

ultimately became a tool used to combat the general erasure of African cultural presence in the New World.

Literary societies formed by African-Americans were already active in the late 1820's and 1830's and participated actively in the fight for abolition through the publication of tracts, pamphlet etc... (McHenry 23-25). Early African American poets, by their very existence (and their particularly early apparition) constitute major actors of the continuous struggle for liberation in the US. For blacks, acquiring literacy was not only a concrete means of subversion of the slave system itself, but at its very onset, a direct challenge to the European tradition which casted Africans as inferior on the basis of their pre-supposed natural incapacity to learn reading and writing and the virtual absence of literary traditions in Sub-Saharan Africa (Davis, Gates xxiii-xxv). The extensive literary corpus of African American literature today attests of these writers' constant struggle to oppose and dismantle racial bigotry and inequality. By their constant and prolific literary production African American writers found a way to fight the oppressor's rhetoric using the oppressor's tools. The poet, by his choice of format, is in a particularly strategic position for the defense of Africanist world views and aesthetics, and consciousness of African struggle in the New World. The specificity of Afro-Diasporic cultures have often been understood in the light of the centrality of music and the specificity of the musical forms it displays, even by southern slave masters in the United States (Levine 5). Poetry, as a medium that brings the musicality of language to the forefront, is therefore a weapon of choice. The early development and profusion of poetry in the African American literary corpus attests of to a particular aesthetic inclination. We will see that the evolution of African American poetry displays an evolution in style. Poets indeed demonstrated through their art a progressive movement away from European formal standards, moving closer to black vernacular forms and

folk traditions, in search of renewed inspiration and the affirmation of cultural values anchored in the traditions of resistance to oppression and connection to African roots. If the first poets of the tradition generally demonstrated a style that had more to do with European forms than West African ones, the contents of the poems were in tune with the struggle for survival, and freedom of the slaves, or at least showed concerns for the conditions of the slaves. As we move forward in time, we see that folk traditions and in particular musical forms such as blues and jazz, started to greatly influence poets and helped shape African American literary tradition. We will see that African American verse will move toward a greater integration of aesthetic and thematic elements borrowed from African American's extensive musical tradition. We will now discuss the very first figures of African American poetry.

Jupiter Hammond (1711-1806) is the first African American writer to be published in the United States in 1760. Hammond's poetry displays a pride in his Americanness, yet a longing for freedom. He was also a fervent Christian, which certainly influenced his rejection of Africa as heathen. He saw himself as a role-model for the slaves. He thought his responsibility toward them should be focused on helping them focus on salvation in the after-life rather than seeking freedom and justice here on earth (Neff-Mayson 15). His religious fundamentalism illustrates how Christian instruction of the slaves could coalesce with the interests of the slave masters. According to Neff-Mayson, "Hammond shows a strong tendency to believe that the black man is actually deserving of his tribulation; he repeatedly signals the spiritual failing of his people, actually appearing to believe that the enslavement of the Blacks, albeit extremely undesirable, is perhaps not completely unjustified" (Neff-Mayson 16). Because of the environment which determined his upbringing and his Christian outlook, Hammond was unable to challenge the conditions of his enslavement. He thus participated in the justification and validation of slavery

through his conciliatory perspective. His existence as a writer nonetheless attests to a movement toward emancipation which could no longer be tamed. Indeed, the publication of the first black poet opened the doors for other poets whose messages would be more challenging to the establishment of slavery. His verses, however, already displayed a characteristic feature of the African American Literary tradition; orality. As a preacher, Hammond always conceived of his poetry as material for oral performance, using repetition for instance as a major rhetorical tool.

Phillis Weathley, Hammond's contemporary was the first African American women to be published in the United States. Her poetry was determined by the aesthetic criterion of the time (couplets in iambic pentameter). Her work also displayed her perfect assimilation of the values of the Puritan society of the time and a certain resignation to her enslavement. She nonetheless demonstrated a conscious connection to the African continent and a defense of her fellow slaves. Africa must have been more than a remote memory for her, as she was born in the Senegambia region and brought to America around the age of 7 or 8. Weathley, however conveyed a similar bias, as observed in Hammond's work, toward Africa in some of her verse. The ambivalent attitude toward the African past and the desire to defend the slaves seems to characterize not only her work, but early African American poetry as well. The poem *On Being Brought From Africa to America*, for instance, displays a rejection of Africa as "Pagan", and embrace the idea that blacks can reach salvation and be "refin'd"(that is, assimilate white standards and thus reach morale and spiritual elevation) (Shield 18). Her position as "the beloved "pet" of Boston society" (Neff-Mayson 26) and her own prejudices did not prevent her from caring about her fellow bondsmen. In 1939, Saunders Redding described her skills as "the sedulous copy of established techniques, and her thoughts the hand-me-down of her age." (Redding 11) Neff-Mayson, however, would later describe a more ambivalent character, whose "poetic career was spent

shifting between verses penned to please a white intellectual community and those written about the bondsmen with whom she felt a singular intimacy.” (Neff-Mayson 27)

In the work of the very first black poets that were published in the United States, one already observes a sense of responsibility with regards to the living conditions of the slaves. As slaves themselves, the oppression of blacks in America could not leave them indifferent. Their acceptance and promotion of the dominant values of the time, however, certainly contrasts with the conscious fight for freedom that would characterize the work of later poets. Their participation and transmission of the dominant discourse of the time must also be understood as the very condition for the publication of their work. Indeed, their existence in print was determined by their capacity to assimilate and reformulate the moral and aesthetic values of the dominant discourse. If the message and form of early black poets were certainly in tune with the standards of the oppressing culture, they at least brought the question of African bondage to the front within mainstream literary circles and challenged racist assumptions about blacks’ incapacity to write. To a certain extent, the very existence of black poets was indeed already radical and subversive for most whites, and even more so for slavery advocates of the south.

2.2.1.b. Abolitionist poetry

The next generation of poets would be much more engaged in the defense of the slaves and against the plantation system of the south. The progressive liberation of enslaved blacks from the south, their movement north facilitated by the Underground Railroad, the Haitian revolution, all participated in a shift in black people’s consciousness and their attitudes toward the dominant discourse. African-American poets at the time played a central and active role in the abolitionist movement. Their poetry became a weapon used against the plantation system, by raising awareness to the necessity of abolition both inside white and black communities. In

Redemption Songs: The Voice of Protest in the Poetry of Afro-Americans 1760-1880, Heather Neff-Mayson divides abolitionist verses by African American authors into three categories. The first category she describes is called *didactic* poetry, which aimed at recounting slavery's tragic and atrocious reality in order to generate an emotional impact on the audience. The second category of poems to which she refers, focuses on the readers' spiritual uplifting, in particular the black readership, through *heroic* narratives about the struggle for liberation. Finally the last genre was *historical* and depicts the political, social and historical dimension of black experience in order to raise awareness about the continuous struggle for liberation of Africans in the New World (Neff-Mayson 4). It appears that from its very onset, African American literature, and poetry in particular, fostered a very pragmatic goal. Poetry indeed constituted a concrete mean of liberation and this ultimate objective is reflected in the thematic and the forms of this literature.

In a sense, the *didactic* genre of abolitionist verses fulfills the same function as the slave narrative in its denunciation of the reality of slavery to a public who might not have been aware of the true living conditions of the slaves at the time. The verse form appears as a truly efficient means of relaying abolitionist ideology. Neff-Mayson describes poetry as "quickly read and easy to commit to memory, it expressed its message in simple and concise language and it roused a clear emotional response through its rhythms and images." (56) The poetry was presented at public readings, which generated a greater impact on audiences. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (*Bury Me in a Free Land, A Double Standard, Learning to Read*) and James Monroes Whitfield (*America*), are the two major figures chosen by Neff-Mayson to illustrate the genre of *didactic* abolitionist poetry. The abolitionist *historical* genre, however, was more focused in relating and bringing back to the memory, events of significance in the struggle of blacks against oppression. The aim was to rally more people to the cause of abolition by anchoring its drive in the

continuum of African resistance. For instance, Elymas Payson Rogers' political satire in *The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise Considered* is described by Neff-Mayson as an "integration of events from different chronological periods into a continuum of political development in the antebellum United States." (86) Roger's poem demonstrates a similar approach to the historical consciousness construction achieved by the West African Griots. The poem's attempt to bring together diverse historical elements for the purpose of creating social cohesion, here in the mobilization against slavery, indeed recalls the strategy displayed in West African epic narratives. In *The Spirit Voice or, Liberty Call to the Disfranchised*, Charles Lewis Reason appeals to the disfranchised blacks of New York through the evocation of a spiritual call from the long tradition of resistance to slavery. In the poem, the forces of nature echo the past deeds of unknown freedom fighters into the present (96). The poet aimed at mobilizing blacks in New York to protest their political disfranchisement and claim the right to vote. Indeed, if blacks in the north were not slaves, they were certainly not free and far from reaching full citizenship. In Reason's poem, history is materialized in the recount of specific deeds, but emanating from a "spirit voice," itself emerging from nature. The voice manifests as a call to continue the struggle and protest. The poem plays on the evocative power of language through the invocation of a communal past of resistance. We can easily connect this use of the invocative power of language to our previous discussion of *Ifá* verses, of the griot's artistic craft, as well as capoeira's ritualistic approach.

To illustrate her category of *heroic* poems, Heather Neff-Mayson chose George Boyer Vashon's *Vincent Ogé* which depicts the true story of a failed insurrection led by a free man of color in Haiti in 1791. She also chose James Monroe Whitfield's *To Cinqué*, dedicated to Joseph Cinqué who led the insurrection aboard the slave ship *l'Amistad*, gained control of the ship

before landing on the coast of Long Island and being reclaimed by the Spanish government. Finally, Neff-Mayson chose Charles Reason's *Freedom* "which chronicles in painstaking detail the major struggles for equality that have occurred in human societies throughout the ages of man" (114) and which she understands as "an ambitious attempt to find meaning for Blacks in the history of whites, an attempt to authenticate the Afro-American experience by equating it with the suffering of other races through time." (118) The choice of specific historical figures who played a central role in different insurrections against their oppressors serves, here again, a pragmatic purpose. The evocation of heroic deeds encourages each individual who is concerned, either remotely or directly with the liberation of Africans worldwide, to find the personal resources and courage to engage actively in the struggle. Focusing on individual figures, which are presented as beyond the average person in their actions or capacities, is a way to incite the audience to go beyond individual limitations and build cohesion around meaningful symbols. We have seen that Zumbi and Besouro fulfill the same function in the consciousness of capoeirista's and blacks in Brazil. The hero of West African epics such as Sunjata, founder of the Mali Empire and Ndiadiane Ndiaye, founder of the Djolof Empire, are comparable figures who are used in narratives to build social cohesion around a common history and a set of values. *Odú* verses and to a certain extent, the narration of the deed of the Yoruba gods themselves (some of which used to be humans) in the corpus of songs and poems peripheral to the *odú* illustrates a similar strategy among the Yoruba. Through mythical narratives of epic heroes, poets, griots, capoeiristas and *babaláwos* can fulfill a mediating function between disparate populations and build cohesion. In the case of the abolitionist poet, and the capoeirista, the cohesion is defined in conflicting terms against the clearly identified enemy of racial oppression. What endeavors such as Charles Reason's *Freedom* demonstrates, however, is the universalist dimension of the

struggle against inequality and unfair treatment. In the evocation of the long history of oppression of man by man, in its universal dimension, the poet makes use of the weight of the past to summon an understanding of the continuity and perpetuation of unfair treatments and oppression as well as re-inscribing African populations and in particular Afro-Diasporic populations within the broader continuum of human history.

When concluding on the *heroic* verse tradition of abolitionist poets, Neff-Mayson stresses the assimilationist quality of these verses. In “assimilationism,” one must understand the assimilation of the standards of the dominant culture, mostly based on Eurocentric conceptions of literature, language and art in general. Neff-Mayson states:

The effect of cultural blending which created Afro-American literature is perhaps best exemplified in the heroic verse of the antebellum black poets. While their poetry shows a strong and convincing sense of racial pride and unity of purpose, the majority of these poets, who were born and raised in the North, seemed to believe that assimilation of the stylistic devices of Anglo-Saxon literature was nonetheless, the most effective means of drawing attention to the condition of their race. The imbalance between sincerity of their ideas and the inappropriateness of their literary technique is often disturbing and dissatisfying to the modern reader, who may find in them a basic contradiction; while it is certain that the black nationalist and abolitionist movements both had a positive effect on black self-awareness and self-esteem, even these were not enough to overcome the poet's sense that black improvement hinged on an integration of the intellectual standards of the white world. (119)

If her analysis focuses on abolitionist *heroic* verse, it could very well be extended to early African American poetry and literature at large. Having no written literature available as model for the creation of a specific African American tradition, and being constantly maintained in a submissive and subordinate position in all aspects of public life, one can understand the forces that drove early poets to base their own production on the standards of the oppressors. If the form was “conventional”, that is in line with the dominant aesthetics, we have seen that, early on, the content was somewhat in tune with African American preoccupations. The very materialization

of this literature in print remained, however, determined from the outside by the interests of a predominantly white elite. The very framework of abolitionist thoughts was indeed largely controlled by whites. In this context, the integration of white standards meant more than the simple integration of the codes of the dominant culture, but also implied the erasure or dissimulation of African cultural specificity and historical consciousness. Advancement in the world of the whites could be equated to surrendering to their values which even in the “free” North, were largely detrimental to blacks. For the black population, the assimilation of white standards necessarily meant the assimilation of the inferior status of blacks that it implied. The concession of assimilation was nonetheless a necessary step for the presence of black voices inside the dominant discourse, which in itself participated in the critic of racial bigotry. Within a contrived framework, conformity to the rule still allowed black visibility. This visibility constituted a sign of the potentiality for advancement for blacks within American society. It also allowed the expression of the unfair nature of racial oppression through the voice of its victims, which both called for black action and the need to evolve for whites. We will see that the next generation of poets would still manifest the same tension between the assimilation of Western standards and the defense of African American progress within the dominant discourse. We will see that some poets found the aesthetic and ideological basis for their work in folk traditions, thus connecting more deeply with the history of resistance of African Americans and with the African roots of their culture as well.

2.2.2- From Assimilation to affirmation of cultural specificity and racial pride

2.2.2.a- The minstrel show and dialectical forms

When Blacks left the South after emancipation, they hoped to get rid of the segregation that prevailed there under Jim Crow Laws. They expected better jobs (or simply jobs), better schools for their children, better housing. For the most part, the migration did not answer their hopes. Segregation did exist in the North, but in a different way. De jure desegregation in northern cities was a rather recent phenomenon. Black people in most northern cities had to wait the years until 1870-1880 to see a significant attempt of the authority to dismantle institutionalized segregation. In New York for instance they were not allowed to vote until the civil right act of 1873. In *Harlem: the Making of a Ghetto*, Gilbert Osofsky explains that at that period “serious restrictions on negro rights that had existed in some forms since colonial times were done away with (...) New legislations permitted negroes to travel on transportation facilities, attend theatres, eat at restaurants, and be buried in any cemetery which served the public” (36). However, this attack on de jure segregation did not remove de facto segregation. In the public discourse, Black people were still largely misrepresented as lazy, childish, irresponsible, docile etc. The best illustration of the generalization of these stereotypes is found in the popularity of minstrel shows using black face at the time. Born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, minstrel shows displayed white actors wearing black face make up and performing caricatures of black people and their culture. Those shows played a significant role in advertising and cementing racist ideology in the United States and abroad. Osofsky explains that minstrel shows “portrayed a people in an image so totally reverse of what Americans considered worthy of emulation and recognition. (...) The negro was conceived as lazy in an ambitious culture; improvident and sensuous in a moralistic society; happy in a sober world; poor in a

nation that offered riches to all who cared to take them; childlike in a country of men.” (40)

Through the minstrel show, black people were further alienated from mainstream America. By 1840, African-Americans were also performing in black face makeup. While embracing stereotypes was the condition for black artists to display their craft and earn a living, it also became a locus of resistance to the dominant racist discourse. Minstrel shows performed by blacks were sometimes making fun in subtle ways of the stereotypes imposed on African Americans, as well as defending abolitionist thoughts. So while being an instrument that spread racist ideology, minstrelsy was used by blacks as a tool of resistance. The range of movement was nevertheless restrained in the limits of white acceptance and prejudices toward blacks.

In *To Make a Poet Black*, Saunders Redding connects the tradition of minstrelsy to the derision and ironic mechanisms developed by the slaves as a protective strategy in the face of the absurdity of racial oppression and the harsh living conditions that were imposed on them. These mechanisms became central to the slave’s attitude, especially when in contact with the oppressor. The art emanating from a constrained experience would logically mirror a specific outlook on life. According to Redding, laugh came to the front in the period following emancipation which was characterized by an extreme violence toward blacks, whether in the North or in the South. It is around the same time that the minstrel show became a main genre within national popular culture. We have described the main stereotypes that were casted on blacks through the minstrel show, but the stereotypes also touched on their specific use of language. African American vernacular speech was misrepresented and exaggerated, denoting black people’s pre-supposed inability to speak “proper” English. It is in this context that Paul Dunbar wrote poems in dialect form. Although he was not the first poet to use this format, he was one of the most prominent black poets of his time and was much criticized for making that choice. We must note that

Dunbar's use of dialect forms in poetry does not constitute the majority of his literary production, but it nonetheless brought more attention to his work than the more "conventional" poems. Redding was among the strong critics of dialectical poetry. He defined Joel Chandler Harris dialect as "skillful and effective misrepresentation, a made language in every sense of the word, conveying the general type impression of untaught imagination, ignorance, and low cunning with which he believed the Negro endowed." He also called Dunbar's "a bastard form", criticizing its false representation of the vernacular (52). The dialect form was indeed often interpreted by black critics and authors as a distortion of what Redding calls "pure English" (59), as well as a misrepresentation of African American vernacular forms. According to James Weldon Johnson, the emphasis on the use of dialect denoted an assimilation of racist ideology. Humor and pathos were the two limitations to dialectical poetry which Johnson interpreted as symbolizing white people's misrepresentation of black culture. Dialectical poetry, as well as minstrel shows, were highly popular among whites at the time, which in the context of racial oppression raises the question of representation and authenticity. Tony Bolden in *Afro-Blue: Improvisation In African American Poetry and Culture*, recognizes Dunbar's achievement in transcribing the sounds of the vernacular. According to him however, "Dunbar believed complex artistic expression and black folk culture to be mutually exclusive" and that it was the reason why he "could not question the hegemony of the dominant culture [...] or develop a suitable form to explore the depths of African American culture." Bolden also criticizes Dunbar's depiction of a "romantic southern past" which reproduced and reinforced the stereotypes of the time (4, 5). The use of dialect, however, cannot be totally dismissed as simply misrepresenting black culture and stereotypical. Indeed, while minstrel shows allowed the expression of black artistry and even challenge to the establishment, dialectical poetry granted poets some space for

the contest of hegemonic discourses and affirmation of cultural specificity. Fahamisha Patricia Brown, for instance, does see a subversive quality to the dialectical form used by Dunbar. She describes the poem *An Ante-Bellum Sermon*, written in dialect, as a re-creation of the ante-bellum preacher in which the preacher appropriates scriptural written texts and turns them into language that his audience can understand. In the poem, the preacher indirectly becomes Moses. Indirection is central when the preacher warns his audience that he is not talking about the present situation (ante-bellum South) but of ancient times, and that himself must not be confused with Moses. Subversion is indeed manifest in the preacher's way to say one thing without saying it, as Brown points out. Through the preacher's subversion of the message of the bible and the face of compliance he displays (by making explicit that he is not talking about the present situation and therefore is not calling for emancipation), Dunbar seems to give an indirect message to his contemporaries. Indeed, in the very last lines, the preacher uses the term "citizen" to indirectly describe the aspirations of the slave. The fight for citizenship, however, seems more to translate the aspirations of Dunbar's era than those of the preacher's. The interruption of the word by the preacher before the end of its utterance ("citiz'—" (Brown 19)) seems to denote the highly subversive nature of this statement which led the preacher to catch himself before the end of his utterance. Thus, Dunbar, through this subtle emphasis indeed signifies to his contemporaries. Brown states:

Dunbar was writing in the context of the late-nineteenth-century American life, with its imposition of Jim Crow legislation and its rollback of citizenship rights for the former slaves and their descendants. His re-creation of the antebellum preacher and his sermon speaks indirectly to his own readers: My language, this plantation dialect of the minstrel show, is not only for your entertainment. It masks a more serious intent. (Brown 20)

Dismissing dialectical poetry as solely an oversimplification, a misrepresentation characterized by gross stereotypes seems indeed to ignore the role such a strategy can achieve in the context which saw the rise to national popularity of black face minstrelsy. Embracing the stereotypes imposed from the outside on African American culture was a mean for black artists to display their craft and earn a living. It was also, as Dunbar's poem seems to suggest, a locus of disguised resistance to the dominant racist discourse. While being an instrument spreading racist ideology, minstrelsy was used by blacks as a tool of resistance. We must emphasize that the medium of minstrelsy was not chosen by black artists to express their disapprobation of American society. It was rather imposed on them. The question for African American artists who were conscious of their responsibility toward the fight for liberation was not to find elements from their culture to defend the rights of the African American people, but rather to fight oppression within whatever cultural space was granted to them and find ways to carve new spaces within this restrictive framework. Dialectical poetry at its best represents this movement toward the visibility of African American cultural specificity within a format still largely determined by European/white standards.

We have already alluded to the strategic display of a performance in tune with the dominant discourse as a protective shield for the oppressed through our description of Scott's theory of hidden and public transcripts in the introduction to this work. As public transcripts, we have presented minstrelsy and dialectical poetry as means of gaining material advancement for black artists by getting paid for their art, while unfortunately participating in the perpetuation of stereotypes of blackness within the dominant discourse. One must acknowledge, however, that the oppressive context of the time would not allow the expression of any radical challenge to the establishment from African American artists. Indeed, only a compliant, cheerful and submissive

representation of blackness could be allowed to reach mainstream exposure. Such a predetermined and contrived framework of representation did not exclude completely the possibility of subversion as we have witnessed in Dunbar's work. Deceptive compliance indeed can become a strategy for hidden resistance. We must add that the visibility the minstrel show achieved allowed at least some authentic aspects of African American vernacular cultural forms to reach mainstream white audiences, even though through what remained mostly a medium defined by caricature.

2.2.2.b- The Harlem Renaissance

The period following the First World War was going to mark another evolution in African American culture and society. These changes were described by Alain Locke as the coming of the New Negro. Following the participation of blacks in WWI and their triumphant return home, black people would no longer remain passive and accept their inferior status in a country they had built and fought for. The right to full citizenship seemed to be the next step for blacks in America. The attitude of the New Negro represented a shift from the "Old Negro" who was seen as accommodating, submissive, the perfect yet imaginary image of blackness portrayed in minstrel shows. The apparition of the New Negro also represented the massive shift of black populations from rural field work to urban industrial work. New challenges, in the form of increased repression, but also new hopes characterized that period for blacks. Harlem soon became the black Mecca, where major black entrepreneurs, artists and intellectuals were concentrated. Locke considered that the New Negro was "acting as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with the Twentieth Century civilization". He also believed that African-Americans should foster "a sense of a mission rehabilitating the race in world esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been

responsible.” (Locke 30) Nathan Irvin Huggins sees in this presupposed superiority of African Americans to the Africans and in the sense of mission to “save the race”, a clear statement of American pride and assimilation of the puritan values of self-reliance, self-determination and mission to the world that came to define American cultural specificity partially. The New Negro was therefore a call to African Americans to take their stand within the American mainstream cultural and social landscape which was unfortunately still largely oppressive toward them.

The self-affirmation and self-determination of African Americans meant getting rid of the image of the Old Negro, this figure that is “more of a myth than a man”, “a creature of moral debate and historical controversy”, “an historical fiction”, a figure which “the Negro himself had contributed his share [...] through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence” (Locke 21). The practical ways to achieve this evolution were interpreted differently by the different critics of the time. For some, as we have previously described, it meant the rejection of dialect forms of literature, which were assimilated to literary minstrelsy. This movement away from representations of vernacular forms in written texts was sometimes accompanied by a movement toward a larger assimilation of Anglo-Saxon standards. The deference artists of the Harlem Renaissance displayed toward the Western literary tradition is implicit in the following words of James Weldon Johnson:

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (Johnson 9)

This statement displays a narrow understanding of literature and art. It indeed implies that only Western notions of what constitutes great art determine artistic value. It denotes a cultural bias which places Africa from the onset in a position of cultural inferiority in that it posits that

Africans have not yet produced “great literature and art”. This cultural bias clearly signals the assimilationist tendency in this author and many others of the time who could neither fully appreciate their African heritage nor their African-American heritage. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance often displayed elitism in the sense that they promoted the “elevation of the race” through the acceptance of “high standard culture”, namely, white America’s standards. The rationale was that by assimilating the codes of European high art, black artists would gain acceptance and respect from the academy and from white society in general. For instance, the period saw the first attempts of African American composer in symphonic orchestration. William Grant Still’s *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) was the first symphony composed by an African American composer. Scott Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha* defended the triumph of light and education over superstition and darkness. While some Blues artist dissociated themselves from Christianity and embraced African American mythology, some artists of the Harlem Renaissance dissociated themselves from black mythology and everything that was associated to what they understood as reminiscent of the Old Negro, to embrace Eurocentric approaches to art and culture. The desire toward assimilation into mainstream American society for African Americans often meant the rejection of African American cultural specificity and historical consciousness as we have already stated earlier. Nathan Irvin Huggins describes the disconnection of African Americans with their past. (60) The trauma left by slavery was a barrier that was not easily overcome and which hindered the possibility of a serene and impartial look on the past. According to Huggins, the values of self-reliance and individual freedom that defined the American hegemonic discourse were in contradiction with the experience of African Americans. According to him, “the shame that black men felt about their past was a measure of how much they had drunk up the values of the white American world around them.” (61) He saw direct

consequences to the erasure of African American historical perspective and assimilation of white values in that the “shame of the past made the Negro reject much of the reality of his people’s condition” (62), thus perpetuating racial oppression through implicit consent. He evokes the role education played in formatting consciousness, removing the possibility of a pride in the heritage of Africa and the struggle for survival under and after slavery, while promoting Anglo-American values. For Huggins, “the so-called Old Negro was merely carried within the bosom of the New as a kind of self-doubt, perhaps self-hate.” (65)

Despite a tendency to dismiss the past and a condescending attitude toward Africa, many black writers of the time still found beauty and pride in their heritage. Indeed, Alain Locke, advocate of the New Negro, found inspiration in the art of Africa. He understood that African art and African American art were two separate things, the absence of the development of graphic and sculptural art in the African American tradition was one obvious sign of that discrepancy, yet according to him, black artists in America needed to connect with their ancestral roots in order to create genuine art (Huggins 79). This double attitude of rejection and acceptance of the past illustrates once more the constant dilemma of African American writers, and to a certain extent Afro-Diasporic artists at large. This tension was well described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his concept of “double consciousness”, as he conceived the nature of this dilemma:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double

self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 5)

This striving for the acceptance of both heritages, African and American, is the ambiguous position that each black person on the American continent had to face and each is still facing to this very day. It denotes the liminality between Africa and Europe, the attempt at fusion between the two, which characterizes Afro-Diasporic cultures. For black poets, double consciousness is manifest in the desire to integrate African aesthetics within a genre coded by European literary traditions. Bringing black vernacular forms within this format is the way African American poets chose to integrate a consciousness of the African past and a bond with the history of African resistance and survival in the New World within the cultural paradigm of the dominant Western culture. For instance, while James Weldon Johnson displayed a partial attitude toward Africa and oral cultures at large (as we observed in his call for an African or African American production of “great literature”), he nonetheless found merit in African American vernacular cultures and experimented with these traditions in his own poetry in *God’s Trombone* (1927). Although remaining adverse to the use of dialect, Johnson found necessary the integration of vernacular grammatical structures within written forms. Huggins describes Johnson’s verses as inspired by the “Negro preacher”, and infused with recognizable linguistic features, “euphonic and rhythmical” in character (77). A year before (1926), Langston Hughes had published *Weary Blues* which captured the rhythm, images and vernacular quality of the blues and fixed them into written poetry. Hughes’ poetry brought to the front the experience of the common African American person. *Weary Blues* also constitutes a direct acknowledgement of the centrality of

vernacular forms, of oral forms of literature, and African American musical traditions in the definition of African American literary tradition. Hughes' poems were not well received by some African American artists and critics of the time. Cuntee Cullen wrote in his review of *Weary Blues*: "...I regard these jazz poems as interlopers in the company of the truly beautiful poems in other section of the books. They move along with the frenzy and electric beat of a Methodist or Baptist revival meeting, and affect me in much the same manner."²⁴ Tony Bolden recognizes that Cullen "demonstrates a clear understanding of the blues poetics", however, he emphasizes Cullen's allegiance to British and mainstream American poetry as a sign of his "bourgeois politics", his lack of understanding of "cultural fusion", and his inability to "challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture and thereby participate in a more fundamental type of resistance" (Bolden 6). Cullen's criticism of Hughes blues poetry would be echoed by Redding in 1939:

Certainly none of the Blues, no matter how full of misery, and none of the Shouts, no matter how full of religion, ever gets beyond a certain scope of feeling. He [Hughes] can catch up the dark messages of Negro feeling and express them in what he calls 'racial rhythms,' but it is as the iteration of the drum rather than the exposition of the piano. He feels in them, but he does not think. And this is the source of his naïveté. (116)

Redding's claim makes explicit the superiority of European music over African and African American/Afro-Diasporic music. Ignoring the complexity of the drum, he seems unable to understand its language and therefore casts the instrument as inferior to the piano. Redding does not question traditional Western culture's arbitrary position as the axis of human development but re-articulates bourgeois ideology that accepts a form of artistic expression in line with hegemonic discourses.

²⁴ (Bolden 5)

Assimilation and defense of white literary standards, associated with the rejection of African American vernacular traditions (language, art, historical consciousness of racial oppression) as improper for written poetry is obvious in both Cullen's and Redding's comments. Their attitude also denotes a class related bias in which poetry is assumed as "high art", totally disconnected from poetic forms produced by common people. In this context, blues and any other form of "low art" cannot be integrated into the art of written poetry. In the opening sentence of *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, Hughes indirectly responds to Cullen by criticizing what he considers Cullen's betrayal of African American working class cultural heritage and bias toward the cultural standards of the oppressor. He states: "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet-not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be like a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.'" (Hughes 55) In this response, Hughes questions the condescending attitude of the black middle class and upper class who generally embraced white culture and standards, integrating the inherent misrepresentation of black folks and their culture it promoted. We must note that the tensions between classes became stronger when southern blacks, a predominantly lower class population, arrived in northern cities where a black middle class had already been established. The black middle class was afraid of this massive migration and did not want to be assimilated with the black lower class. The difference in appreciations between the writers of the time on the question of class illustrates the social concerns of the time. We will see that those questions will still be central to our following discussion of the Black Arts Movement and Hip Hop. The question of the commercialization of African American art was also raised by Hughes in the same essay:

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites." (Hughes 57-58)

Here, Hughes expresses his own interpretation of Du Bois' "Double Consciousness" within the context of popular culture and art in general. He also evokes the economic dimension of African American art in a capitalist context largely determined by white interests. This question is central to an understanding of the evolution of African American art and literary tradition in particular, which had been influenced from its inception by the economic superiority of whites. From the first poets, to the abolitionist verses, and the Harlem Renaissance, the publication of African American verse had been dependent on white patrons, which undeniably had an impact on this tradition.

2.2.2.c- The Black Arts Movement

The 1960s would see the rise of a new literary movement emanating from African American poets. The Black Arts Movement was described by Larry Neal as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" in his 1968 essay "The Black Arts Movement". The main actors of the Black Arts Movement were indeed largely inspired by Black Power activism. The nationalist discourse of black liberation advocated by the Black Power leaders was thus backed by cultural nationalism. The Black Arts Movement was a militant artistic movement. Art was understood as a mean of propaganda for the defense of cultural specificity and affirmation of sovereignty for African Americans. It applied the Black Power principles of self-determination and self-defense. The actors of the Black Arts Movement were advocates for gaining political and artistic freedom "by any means necessary", mirroring the defiance toward American society young black males displayed at the time. This period indeed witnessed recurring riots in major

American cities after the first major rebellion took place in Harlem in 1964. Riots culminated in April 1968 in a nationwide explosion of resentment and anger following Martin Luther King's assassination. This period characterized by the fight for civil rights was also a time of demand of recognition of African American culture and artistic achievement. The opening of Black Studies and Jazz Studies programs in major universities was understood as a major step in gaining institutional recognition of African American cultural achievements. Besides gaining the political and institutional tools for the self-determination of the African American people nationally, the Black Power movement aimed at repairing the harm that had been done to the souls of African Americans by advertising racial pride, encouraging the black community to regain confidence and respect in their continuous struggle for survival and their participation in the construction of America. Pride in African American artistic expression was one of the best ways to regain confidence in the worth of blackness. Artists of the Black Arts Movement found in folk expression what they considered the most radical, subversive form of genuine African American art. Black Arts poets thought that black folk vernacular culture represented best the specificity of African American culture, an art that was according to them less accommodating white standards and expectations. They naturally further developed the integration of black folk cultures in written poetry, initiated by some Renaissance poets. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) made clear in his 1966 essay, *The Myth of "Negro Literature"* that genuine African American art could difficultly emanate from the black middle class, as according to him, middle class status implied assimilation of white standards and denigration of black cultures. The question he and other writers of this movement raised was the question of the definition of literature and high art. Baraka stated:

Literature, for the Negro writer, was always an example of “culture.” Not in the sense of the more impressive philosophical characteristics of a particular social group, but in the narrow sense of “cultivation” or “sophistication” by an individual within that group. The Negro artist, because of his middle-class background, carried the artificial social burden as the “best and most intelligent” of Negroes and usually entered into the “serious” arts to exhibit his familiarity with the social graces, i.e., as a method or means of displaying his participation in the “serious” aspects of American culture. To be a writer was to be “cultivated,” in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was also to be a “quality” black man. It had nothing to do with the investigation of the human soul. It was, and is, a social preoccupation rather than an aesthetic one. A rather daring way of status seeking. The cultivated Negro leaving those ineffectual philanthropies, Negro colleges, looked at literature merely as another way of gaining prestige in the white world for the Negro middle class. (Baraka 166-167)

By questioning the assimilationist tendencies of the black middle class, Baraka questions the hegemony of Western cultural development and its definition of high art and literature. The battleground Baraka and other Black Arts artists occupied was both artistic and institutional. Reaching a definition of art, and literature in particular, using African American folk culture as a reference constituted a direct challenge to Western hegemonic discourses. The defense for the creation of African American studies in academic circles demonstrates an awareness of the necessity to gain control of institutional tools to define what would be the artistic and cultural priorities in tune with African American experience. The development of independent black theatres, focusing on poetry, dance, and music performances in addition to formal and ritual drama, illustrates a desire to focus on and promote cultural specificity.

Despite its short lifespan, the Black Arts Movement had a tremendous impact on African American artistic expression and American society at large. Its main achievement lies in its capacity to bring African American cultural specificity to the front while reconnecting Western conception of literature to “popular” art. Ishmael Reed expressed his understanding of the influence the movement had on the public in a 1995 interview:

I think what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. (...) Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.

Black Arts writers tried to find ways of expression that would be appealing to the common African American person. Their use of vernacular speech, their interaction with music and their general emphasis on the performance of literature were new elements that brought literature to a larger audience. According to them, literature and "great art" should not be disconnected from the base of society. The struggle over hegemony, over who dictates what art form is prioritized over another, was indeed class related and had large global political and social repercussions. Why should the culture of the dominant determine the standard through which other cultures were appreciated? In this context, Black Arts artists built the ideological framework for the creation of tools adapted to the critic of African American artistic production and an alternative to the dominant and often monochromatic discourse of Western academic circles. Tony Bolden emphasizes the fact that:

Part of the oppositional threat that Black Arts criticism poses [...] is that it calls into question the fictional opposition of such terms as 'popular' and 'critical.' Put differently, the problems of cultural nationalism notwithstanding, Black Arts criticism helped foster a consciousness wherein critical analysis was no longer contained within ivory towers; it was now alive and well in the concrete jungles of America. Such a criticism can create a community of writers, general readers, and critics." (Bolden 27)

The publication of works from different parts of the world in Black Arts Movement's related newspapers further illustrates the global perspective of cultural resistance embedded in the movement. Naturally, the nationalist struggle of colonized Africans raised nationalist hopes in the minds of American black leaders of the time. The Black Arts Movement was therefore in

tune with the general movement of challenge of hegemonic, imperialist discourse globally, especially within the scattered global Afro-Diasporic context.

The position defended by Black Arts activists, however, had major limitations which prevented their movement to embrace universalist ambitions fully. The main theoretical incoherence of the movement is obvious in Larry Neal's 1968 essay *The Black Arts Movement* where he describes "two Americas—one black, one white." (Neal 184) In this separation, appears the segregationist tendency which characterized the nationalist approach of those writers. For Neal, "...the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West" through a re-evaluation of "western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art." (Neal 186) The Manichean interpretation of history which led these writers to appreciate European/Western/white culture as a unified block, inherently in complete opposition to African/Afro-Diasporic/black culture could was not based on a profound challenge of racist ideology, but rather its integration, re-interpretation, perpetuation and strengthening through the reversal of the former paradigms of white supremacy. This position is made obvious in Neal following statement:

The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? These are basic questions. Black intellectuals of previous decades failed to ask them. (Neal 186)

This Manichean vision, a clear opposition between European/Western values and African or Afro-Diasporic ones, cannot be achieved without the denial of Afro-Diasporic cultural traditions themselves. Born out of the experience of Africans in the New World, Afro-Diasporic cultures

undeniably bear roots in both traditions of Europe and Africa while affirming their own New World specificity. Amiri Baraka already acknowledged this fact in 1966:

The American Negro has a definable and legitimate historical tradition, no matter how painful, in America, but it is the only place such a tradition exists, simply because America is the only place the American Negro exists. He is as William Carlos Williams said, "A pure product of America." The paradox of the Negro experience in America is that it is a separate experience, but inseparable from the complete fabric of American life [...] Thus, the Negro writer if he wanted to tap his legitimate cultural tradition should have done it by utilizing the full spectrum of the American experience from the point of view of the emotional history of the black man in this country: as its victim and its chronicler. (Baraka 169)

Denying and attempting to destroy European cultural manifestations and influence within New World black cultures, thus implied destroying in part what make these cultures what they are.

Larry Neal himself would later recognize the dead-end inherent to the essentialism advocated by the Black Arts and Black Power movements. In 1989, in *Vision of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, he writes:

We reversed the Manichean dualism that placed the symbolism of blackness on the side of Evil, and whiteness on the side of Good... [This] led to some contradictions, the most important of which was that our internationalism could not exist primarily in contradiction to white nationalism. We could never hope to develop a viable concept of self if that concept were purely based on hating... If we made the mistake of constantly addressing scorn and venom to white people, we would fall into the moribund category of the Negro leaders who seemed to be constantly affirming the black man's humanity to white people. (130)

The period of development of the Black Arts Movement saw a generalization in the blending of poetry and music. Artist such as Archie Shepp, Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets were involved in the Black Arts Movement and performed poetry with musical accompaniment, which prefigured Rap and Spoken Words. The centrality of the performance in poetry was one way to signal a connection to Africa through orality. Larry Neal proclaimed that "Poets must learn to

sing, dance, and chant their works [and] be a kind of priest.” (Bolden 33) Poets indeed became griots, we might add. The voice was all over again conceived as the main instrument of the expression of poetry. In a context of fusion with musical forms, words could be used for their sole sonic values. The concept of *score* described by Stephen Henderson in *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* in which the poem has no definitive written form, demonstrates an approach to poetry centered on performance. The written page merely provides guidelines for the oral production of the poem. Henderson states: “[There is] a lack of concern with performance in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM. A poem may thus differ from performance to performance just as a jazz performance of ‘My Favorite Thing’ would” (61). Tony Bolden sees this de-emphasizing of the written form as a proof that “literature can exist independently of the written page.” (Bolden 30) While oral poetry was nothing new, this blending of oral and written forms simply points at the arbitrary preference Western cultures had laid on the written word. Literature and literacy, in the Western traditional sense of the terms are understood as the mastery of the written language. Oral literature does not constitute high art, or even a possibility, in this model as both terms are understood as mutually exclusive. Writing in the Western World traditionally sanctions social stratifications to this day. The blending of oral and written forms in art thus directly constitutes a challenge of the class based division of society. Henderson also refers to the use of ‘*mascon words*’, which are words originating from the black vernacular, associated with specific meanings determined by historical resonance in the African American community. Henderson describes the significance of *mascon words* as “a massive concentration of Black experiential energy which powerfully affects meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry” (Bolden 44) This poetic potential of vernacular Black English was exploited by Black Arts poets. They could, however, be

completely ignored by persons not familiar with African American cultural traditions. Indeed, we touch here on the topic of cultural literacy. Literacy, in this context, implies understanding the codes and traditions of a specific culture. *Mascon words*, acting as reservoirs of African American experience, indeed hold a certain “energy” (*nyama/ashé*) which affects the quality of one’s speech as well as the way it is perceived. Cultural illiteracy will prevent an understanding of the deeper meaning or meaning potentials concealed behind the apparent, conventional meaning. The historical dimension or contextual relevancy can therefore be totally overlooked by someone missing the necessary cultural literacy. We will define this term more in detail in our next part.

The cultural vitality which characterized the period allowed the appearance of the Black Arts Movement. The new developments toward the democratization of poetry, and the blending of poetry and music, prefigured not only the apparition of Rap, but were also some of the first manifestation in the US of what was to become a major evolution in poetical practices of the few past decades, Slam Poetry and Spoken Words. Even though the Black Arts Movement was short lived, its influence and achievements can still be felt (and heard as most of the writers of the time are still active) in different fields of society. Following the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement constituted a necessary step of blending of oral and written cultures by furthering the anchorage of African American literary tradition in African American vernacular culture. One of the characteristic features of the Black Arts Movement, which contrasts with the Harlem Renaissance movement, however, and which insured its artistic specificity, was its independence from white patrons. Financial independence allowed a greater freedom of speech, but it was this same freedom of speech which brought a stop to the movement. The commodification of black art, which was already effective since the minstrel days, encouraged a

growing demand for salable black artists. Corporate America and philanthropic foundations would not publish or finance militant, overtly political and subversive art. A few Black writers were used as tokens representatives of black artistic creation while the variety of writers and artists who emerged out of the Black Arts Movement went back to anonymity.

Through our chronological but partial description of the evolution of African American poetry, we can appreciate the constant tension which has characterized the position of black people in America. This tension arises between the desire to integrate fully into American society while retaining cultural specificity and being faithful to the defense of black people's right and history. This dichotomy is manifest within the work of African American authors, and poets in particular, in the tensions between Western standards of literature which have largely determined the canons of American and global literature, and the cultural standards emanating from African American folk traditions and the connection they bear with both the history of African struggle in the New World and the African past. This tension was defined by W.E.B. Du Bois as "double consciousness". In terms of form, we have described a gradual movement toward a greater integration of black folk related cultural paradigms within the genre of written poetry. The first African American poets for instance, demonstrated a perfect assimilation of the moral, spiritual and aesthetic standards of Euro-American society. This assimilation was undoubtedly the very condition of their existence as published artists. They nonetheless displayed some concerns vis a vis the conditions of their fellow bondsmen as we have already stated. The generation of abolitionist poets assumed a much stronger implication in the explicit defense of the rights of African Americans and consistently attacked the unjust institution of slavery. We have evoked that these authors still remained true to the forms emanating from the cultural matrix of their white patrons. We have discussed poetry written in dialects as a major

attempt to bring forth Africanist and African American folk aesthetics to the medium of written poetry, but we have also raised the questions of representation and misrepresentation implicit in this choice of medium in an American context where mainstream misrepresentations of African American culture were the norm. We have discussed artists of the Harlem Renaissance who held true to the standards of the dominant society, but nevertheless demonstrated interests in African American vernacular cultural forms and started to experiment consistently with them in more “traditional” forms of poetry. This era also brought forth the question of class as a determinant factor coinciding with questions of racism and misrepresentation. Authors such as Langston Hughes started to defend the position that high culture and folk culture should not be separated and that genuine African American art should embrace the folk dimension of the culture. Finally, our discussion of the Black Arts Movement allowed us to appreciate the political engagement of those writers in the struggle for African American cultural visibility and political self-determination. The chauvinist approach of these authors, however, which implied a complete rejection of white standards and society, prevented this movement to fully embrace and recognize the intrinsically hybrid and syncretic nature of African American and Afro-diasporic cultures. The Black Arts Movement constituted more a reaction to white racism than a genuine and impartial defense of the history and culture of the African American people. The Black Arts Movement nonetheless brought to the front the question of the cultural hegemony of the Western world, and directly challenged the definition of literature as a strictly written form, bringing to awareness the performance aspect of literature and the existence of traditionally orally based forms of literature. The fusion between musical and poetry performances achieved by some of these poets undeniably illustrated the focus on orality of the movement, but also prefigured the apparition of rap music. Their implication in folk based language and narratives within written

poetry also prefigured the democratization of poetical expression through slam and spoken word poetry.

From Jupiter Hammond's sermon poetry, to James Weldon Johnson's embodiment of the black priest in *God's Trombone* and the performance poetry of Black Arts poets, African American poetry always displayed a particular inclination toward the oral dimension of language within the context of print. African American poets tried consistently to build bridges between the ancestral, mostly oral forms of literature they inherited from Africa, already manifest in African American folk traditions and the written tradition of letter that was imposed on them in the New World. Fahamisha Patricia Brown expresses the median position between oral and written literatures African American poets assumed in the following statement:

Negotiating the space between the written page and the oral performance, the African American poet engages the written language in oral terms. Through the use of superallusive mascons and figures and performance modes drawn from vernacular culture, the poet achieves a kind of written orality. Writing in the presence of an implicit community/congregation, the poet writes responses to both oral and written cultural calls; the call-and-response structures are written into the poems themselves. In its language practice and in its performative nature, African American poetry and its making extend vernacular cultural practice. The poetry performs the word. (Brown 26)

This particular penchant for performance and orality, which are indeed inherent to the very nature of poetry, denotes a specific aesthetical preference which must be understood as both a reaction to Western standards and an affirmation of Africanist aesthetics. Brown goes on:

It is characteristic of many African American poets self-consciously to make use of the forms of oral traditions: epic, ballad or short narrative, panegyric ode or praise song, and short lyric. [...] The repetition of these forms and usages across differences of generation and gender argue for the existence of a definable literary convention and tradition. (Brown 30)

This literary convention is without a doubt in dialogue with both the Western/American context and the African ancestral past. The African American poet, often compared to the preacher must

also be understood as a Diasporic manifestation of the griot, especially through his/her implication in live performances of poetry. It is a connection to Africa and a constant dialogue with the Western world which defines this tradition. Brown states that the poets' "language practice serves as a site of resistance to cultural dominance, even as they speak the "masters'" language. Through language practice, the individual claims membership in a group and affirms a way of speaking and being in the world." (Brown 31) In that sense, despite assimilation of Western standards, one can find the affirmation of Africanist aesthetics in the constant striving of African American poets to bring to the front the oral quality inherent to poetry. Brown describes one specific aspect of this orality within writing which characterizes this tradition in what she calls "The Poetry of Preachment", and which goes beyond the literal equation of the poet to the priest, but describes not only a traditional connection to historical narratives and sacred texts, but also the didactic dimension of the art. Here is how she defines this specific genre:

Using the language that is both sacred and profane, African American poets within that mode explore the historical experience of their people, illuminating the past and giving political, social, and moral significance to everyday events. Their poetic reflections on the past are intended for the purposes of present-day enlightenment. These poems illuminate the lessons that can be learned from biblical or historical events. In the words of a common congregational response, poets of preachment "tell the story". Also, African American poets "make it plain." Their preachments take the reader/listener to school. (48)

Both the historical dimension, in which the past is brought to the present context for a better understanding of current affairs, and the very didactic form the art of the poet can embrace, recall the role of the preacher. Beyond the image of the preacher, however, we get here a sense of connection to the art of the West African griot. Eugene B. Redmond in *Drumvoices* described the black poet as a New World manifestation of the griot, for whom poetry and art in general is more than a simple occupation in which solely aesthetic problematic matter. The art of the poet/griot

constitutes the backbone of social organization, a major medium of communication between different factions of society as well as a tool to envision the future in a communal way. This understanding of art and poetry in particular is already at variance with the Western standards of the time in which art and poetry in particular were understood as having no purpose but art itself. Politics or social consciousness, were concepts which disqualified any cultural manifestation as art in such a paradigm. Brown evokes this dichotomy:

It is in the conflation of the roles of the teller of tales and the singer of songs with those of the teacher and preacher that the African American poet becomes the object of the most negative criticism. Under the dictum of the New Criticism that “a poem should not mean but be” and in a critical age when questions of authorial intent are out of fashion, poetic messages are deemed inappropriate. But it is precisely this conflation of roles that is rooted in vernacular culture. The person of words is expected to be a leader or teacher who gives voices and vision to her or his community. (49-50)

Thus African American poets are indeed modern griots of the diaspora as they have consistently tried to bring to the front the consciousness of the African past through thematic and aesthetic conscious choices, in particular in their emphasis on orality and folk traditions. It is within the vernacular traditions of black folks that they managed to make this link between their Western environment, the history of struggle, and the cultural inheritance of Africa. In that sense, African American poetry and the *odú* verses of *ifá* fulfill the same function of maintaining a communal historical continuum. The oral dimension in those poets’ writing has achieved a consistent critic of the Western conception of literacy as written based. These writers brought forth a new understanding of literacy and literature which constituted both a challenge to racist ideology and class-based oppression. Through the integration of folk-based oral forms in writing, African American poets have managed to democratize an art form which had been for the most part elitist within the Western tradition. Their hybridization of written and oral poetry also prefigured

new kinds of literacies redefined by the evolution of technology in the past thirty to forty years.

Hip hop poetics is a case in point as it constitutes a form of poetry that is both oral and written as we will discover in the following section.

2.3- The Rapper: Urban survivor

Since its inception in the South Bronx in New York in the mid 1970s, hip hop culture has not stopped growing and expanding worldwide. It is today a global phenomenon that goes far beyond the Afro-Diasporic context in which it has emerged. Rap, the verbal art of hip hop culture has become within the past 30 years “the most widely disseminated poetry in the history of the world.” (Bradley, xiii) One of the characteristics of rap is that it generally is a form of poetry that is both written and oral. Indeed, most rappers recognize working on the paper first and then performing the words live, giving a particular imprint on the genre. As such, its bond with former poetical forms emanating from both vernacular cultures and the African American literary tradition cannot be overlooked. While the rapper and the African American poet are historically, aesthetically and semantically connected, we will discover that hip hop and capoeira also bear striking similarities. Hip hop must be understood as a culture which is composed of many different elements or disciplines. Hip hop as a generic term regroups; rapping of course, which is the verbal art; but also DJ’ing and producing, which are two aspects of hip hop’s musical performance/production; breakdancing, also known as b-boying, is the traditional style of dancing associated with hip hop music; graphing (or tagging), is the graphic dimension of the art. Fashion, while not generally recognized as part of the traditional four disciplines of hip hop culture, is also an important element to consider. Capoeira and hip hop particularly intersect in the musical, verbal genres and in dancing. The hypothesis of a filiation between capoeira dancing

and breakdancing has often been brought forth by capoeiristas, breakdancers and scholars. The appearance of the first capoeira groups in the United States took place in New York and coincided with the inception of hip hop culture. One of the main differences between those two cultures is that the focus of capoeira, is on the dance, while the focus of hip hop is on the verbal art. This distinction is fundamental and determines in part the aesthetic and philosophical differences between those two strikingly similar cultures. Capoeira and hip hop are also very alike in the main philosophical dimension of both arts. We have already described *malícia* as determinant to the philosophy of capoeira, we will see that Signifying, as defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., corresponds to a very similar outlook in hip hop and rap in particular. Our discussion of hip hop culture and rap will first be centered on the distinctively Africanist aesthetic of the genre. We will then relate aesthetic prerogatives to the oppressive context which gave birth to this genre. Then we will describe the main manifestations of Signifying within hip hop culture, in particular at the level of language

2.3.1- Afro-Diasporic aesthetics/American context

2.3.1.a- Afro-Diasporic aesthetics

If hip hop culture must be primarily understood as an African American art form, the context of its birth greatly determined its Afro-Diasporic dimension and the Africanist aesthetic it displays. Part of the global spread and success of hip hop culture can indeed be accounted for by its already global nature at birth. The South Bronx in the 1970s was a multicultural landscape which mainly gathered black Americans, Latinos and West Indian immigrants. Dick Hebdige in his 1987 study of Caribbean music, reminds us that by 1930, almost a quarter of the population of South Bronx was West Indian coming mainly from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Jamaica and Trinidad.

(137) It is this multicultural cauldron which allowed the emergence of hip hop. The economic conditions, as we will see in our next section, were also instrumental in shaping this art form. A substantial portion of the population of the South Bronx in the mid 1970s was thus part of the African Diaspora. This concentration of black populations in one neighborhood allowed the creation of an art form which encompassed different aspects of those different but related cultures. Both a common understanding of Africanist aesthetic and the shared experience of social and economic oppression were the ingredients necessary for this culture to emerge. We will focus for now on the aesthetic dimension of this art.

Many of the hip hop pioneers were descendants or direct immigrants from the Caribbean. DJ Kool Herc is often cited as the pioneer of sound systems in America. These mobile disco systems were already highly popular in Herc's homeland of Jamaica since at least the 1950's (Herc moved to the US in 1967), where they were first used to play American Rhythm & Blues records in the streets during public dances. When Herc first started to organize dances in the Bronx, he started to play reggae records (the sound systems in Jamaica and American R&B records, had been instrumental in the shaping of this distinctly Jamaican musical style), but the sound did not really please the American audience. He then started to play American funk records. We already get a sense of the dialogues and circulation between different Afro-Diasporic communities through music in the influence American R&B had on Jamaican music and the later influence Jamaican DJ'ing and Dub had on American hip hop and techno. It is interesting to note that this kind of circulation was already a condition of the birth of jazz which displayed Latin influences from its onset.²⁵ Hip hop's verbal art, called rapping, started as the continuation of the Jamaican toast tradition, in which the DJ who played the records often

²⁵ Roberts, John Storm, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1979. Print.

commented live on the performance to encourage the crowd to dance, announce the next track, etc. While music and dance were the focus of the events at first, the verbal art took more and more space and finally became the most important element of the genre. Kool Herc was instrumental, not simply in bringing the sound system tradition to an American context, or in bringing the toasts on records, he is credited with the initiation of a technique which would define the specificity of hip hop's musical style. Herc realized that the section of the funk records he played which pleased the dancers the most were the instrumental, often percussive breaks. Herc started to isolate these short sequences and play them over and over again. The technique of "cutting" that he developed necessitated two turntables, a mixer through which he would juggle between two copies of the same record in order to keep the continuity of the beat and replay the desired sequence as long as needed. As I have stated, the break was often a percussive break; either a drum solo, or a particularly percussive section of the original song. One particular break played by Herc would become an emblem of the genre and of subsequent related genres of electronic music. This break was taken from the drum and bongo solo section of Jamaican Funk band, The Incredible Bongo Band's track *Apache*. This break is still frequently used today and constitutes one of the instantaneously recognizable sonic signatures of hip hop culture (It enjoyed particular popularity in the British born electronic genre of Drum and Bass in the mid to late 1990s). One example among many others, the break *Apache* illustrates perfectly the Afro-Diasporic dimension of hip hop from its inception. Taken from a Jamaican band playing an American musical genre (funk), replayed and re-interpreted in an American urban context, then reinterpreted in the sound system culture and electronic music of London in the 1990s, this break indeed illustrates continuous cultural exchanges between different Afro-Diasporic communities.

The break in general illustrates a specific Africanist aesthetical focus inscribed within hip hop music's very construction. Indeed, the break beat implies the isolation and focus on a specific portion of a song. Sometimes taken out of the intro, sometimes out of an interlude, the break beat means bringing to the front an almost anecdotic fragment of the original song. Isolating most of the time a percussive section and placing it at the center of the musical structure, hip hop embraces the drum as the main substance of musical construction. This centrality of the drum undoubtedly reflects the Africanist approach to the genre. Breaks would for instance often originate from drum solo sections of Latin funk or Latin jazz records, displaying a rhythmical depth and a similarity to African traditional drumming that is quite specific to this type of music. Tricia Rose describes the break in its context:

These break beats are points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic element of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying rhythms brought center stage. In the early stages of rap, these break beats formed the core of rap DJ's mixing strategies. Playing the turntables like instruments, these DJ's extended the most rhythmically compelling elements in a song, creating a new line composed only of the most climactic point in the "original." (Rose 73-74)

What this "most climactic point" refers to, I contend, is the reference to Africa embedded within African American musical tradition. It is the rhythmic element, the circularity of the drum which is the most compelling and recognizable marker of Africanist aesthetic in hip hop music. Halifu Osumare sees in the centrality of the drum in hip hop a connection to the cycles of nature and the human heart, but also a challenge to Euro-centric assumptions of beauty and refinement in music (circularity vs linearity). More importantly, it represents the affirmation of a distinctively Africanist aesthetic that is connected to dance. He observes the presence in hip hop music of layering and call and response patterns which according to him are characteristic of African and Africanist musical construction. He states:

Although hip-hop instrumentation obviously differs from West African drumming, the principles of multiple meter and cross-rhythms produced in call-and-response modes, along with upbeat accents that are emphasized as much as the downbeat—all converge to create a particular African-based musical methodology. These musical characteristics are found in African American swing, bebop, gospel, soul, funk, disco, and rap, as well as numerous Caribbean genres. (Osumare 45)

This aesthetic is indeed reminiscent of former styles emanating from the African American and Afro-Diasporic musical traditions, and indeed African American and Afro-Diasporic musical traditions are contained within the musical structure of hip hop in the very sources of breaks used by DJ's (primarily funk or latin records). Layering, that is rhythmical call-and-response (also referred to as polyrhythm), is brought to the front in hip hop which gives this music a very pronounced and recognizable Africanist structure. According to Osumare, this musical structure denotes a deeper philosophical approach on the part of African societies to community building and continuity which is enacted and consolidated through artistic performances, in particular musical performances. This approach is manifest in the repetitive and circular patterns which characterizes the Africanist aesthetic. Repetition in this context is not understood as mechanical repetition, but always implies a change or a break from the circular structure, as a sort of constant comment on it (repetition with difference). The break in hip hop musical structure only stresses this aspect of the Africanist aesthetic. According to Osumare:

Philosophically, Africanist-based rhythmic structure becomes a basis for creative individuality in conjunction with the orthodoxy of the group that *expects* its communally agreed-upon assumptions to be broken. In dialogue with the conforming repetitive background that circles in rhythmic “speech” phrases, the element of difference interjected by the soloist, be it a drummer, singer, horn player, rapper, or deejay, is a moment of creative agitation that urges the music onward. The dichotomy of individual and group—innovation and consent—is promoted by a dynamic sense of *process*, of becoming, inherent within the Africanist aesthetic. (Osumare 47)

This relative freedom of the individual within the restrictive structure of communal construction indeed characterizes African and Afro-Diasporic musical constructions. In hip hop, and rap music in particular, the communal space is delimited by the break, a sort of sonic marker of a common musical history, upon which the rapper can express his/her verbal rhythmic, melodic and semantic virtuosity. Within the circle of the loop generated by the break, the rapper can express his/her individuality. Osumare refers to a socialization of the individual through music and dance as characteristic of the Africanist aesthetic, what he calls a “dialogic negotiation of the self within a rhythmic improvisational context” (28). The cipher, that is the circle of participants in which break dancing and verbal battles take place, fulfill this social function within hip hop culture through a performance ritual.

So we have seen that the prominence of rhythm marked by the centrality of the drum through the use of the break characterizes hip hop’s musical construction. The verbal art of hip hop, rapping, also demonstrates a similar emphasis on rhythm, in the very quality of its speech patterns. Rap is a form of poetry. As most poetry, rap brings to the front the rhythmic and melodic quality of language. Rap’s use of rhymes constitutes one of its specificity, along with an emphasis on rhythm, in particular percussive sounds. While in traditional written poetry, rhythm is determined by the line, in rap, the rhythm is made explicit by the beat. The end of the line is therefore signaled by the end of the musical sequence. Rap verses are therefore always constructed in reference to the regularity and circularity of the musical structure, sometimes playing in sync with it, sometime playing against it. Adam Bradley, who analyzed rap’s specific poetics in his work *The Book of Rhymes*, describes the relation between the beat and the verses as follow:

The beat in rap is poetic meter rendered audible. Rap follows a dual rhythmic relationship whereby the MC is liberated to pursue innovations of syncopation and stress that would sound chaotic without the regularity of the musical rhythm. The beat and the MC's flow, or cadence, work together to satisfy the audience's musical and poetic expectations: most notably, that rap establish and maintain rhythmic patterns while creatively disrupting those patterns, through syncopation and other pleasing forms of rhythmic surprise. (Bradley xv)

He later describes the rhythmic relationship between the voice and the beat as an "antagonistic collaboration". (4) This play of the performer on time, relative to the beat, is what Bradley refers to as "flow". The flow of rappers is a major element of their individual style. We can refer here to our previous reference to Isidor Okewho's interpretation of the general quality of West African oral poetry, where, according to him, "the metric line is built on the basis of 'breath-groups' or 'rhythm-segments'" in such ways that "the singer endeavors to get in as many words as he can in a single breath, so long as this is done within individual segments of the rhythmic accompaniment from the background music" (Okewho 176). What is indeed a description of West African traditional oral poetry perfectly fits the description of what rapping achieves. Let's add that both the griot and the rapper display an interest in rhyming patterns (more or less regular, and more systematic in hip hop) and you can easily equate the art of these two figures, at least in aesthetic terms. We have also described the use of instruments that emulate the human voice and the use of the human voice as a musical instrument during our discussion of the West African griot's art. Similar strategies are present in rap music. The flow of the rapper constitutes the first demonstration of the use of speech as a percussive instrument. The machine gun like quality of the griot's verbal attacks described by Barbara Hoffman again perfectly fits the description of rapping. We will have time to appreciate the importance of the metaphor of oral skills as weaponry during our analysis of the corpus. We can note here the existence of beat boxing which is the emulation of the musical structure of a hip hop track by the human voice.

This technique is reminiscent of the scat technique of the jazz era. The use of sampling technology allows the sampling of the human voice from songs, political speech, new reports, etc, and their integration within the musical structure, sometimes with special effects added, to participate to the whole sonic landscape of the track. The use of vocoder, which achieves the fusion of the human voice with synthesizer sounds, is another illustration of aesthetic preferences that can be traced back to Africa. The more recent trend of “auto-tune” voice alteration techniques within the commercial rap music of T-Pain for instance, illustrates the continuity of this practice.

We have thus demonstrated aesthetic connections between the art of the griot and the art of the rapper. We will see that the parallels go beyond aesthetics. Signifying, as defined by Gates, describes a similar philosophical attitude towards the use of words. We will describe this concept’s manifestation within hip hop culture in section 2.3.2. We could add here that Signifying could be understood as a generic term denoting an African American or Africanist way of conscious use of the power of words. Osumare sees word power as “one of the first principles of the Africanist aesthetics.” (31) According to him, the power of words is referred to among different groups of West Africa, among whom the Dogon and the Bantu-speaking people, as *Nommo*. Osumare defines *Nommo* by referring to anthropologist Marcel Griaule’s 1948 *Conversation with Ogotemli*, (quoted from Janheinz Jahn’s *Muntu, The New African Culture*) in which Griaule relates the cosmological knowledge given to him by an elder Dogon priest. Osumare’s comments follow:

Ogotemli told Griaule, “since man has power over the Word, it is he who directs the life force.” Human beings, charged with cosmological duty, are equipped through *Nommo* to administer this life force and indeed to direct it. “Through the Word he receives it, shares it with other beings, and so fulfills the meaning of life.” Furthermore, Ogotemli instructed Griaule that “The *Nommo* is water and heat. The vital force that carries the Word

issues from the mouth in a water vapor that is both water and Word. The vital force of the earth is water.”²⁶ Thus, this ability to wield *Nommo*, viewed as a gift from God, Charges humankind with the vitality of cocreation with each invocation of word power. Simultaneously, each human has an attendant responsibility to the power invoked through verbal pronunciation (orality and singing) and physical gesture (embodiment and dance). (Osumare 31-32)

Osumare sees in the art of the rapper, the very expression of this understanding of the power of words. To him, the expression “Word up!” or simply “Word!” commonly employed by rappers to punctuate a statement or comment on someone’s, is a specific marker of rapper’s familiarity with the concept of *Nommo*. This expression even became a way of greeting someone who is inside the culture, very much like the word *axé* in capoeira. The similarities between the concepts of *Nommo* and *ashé/axé* are indeed obvious. *Nommo* seems to be the verbal manifestation of *ashé* energy. We will see how Signifying manifests the power of word, that is *Nommo*, within hip hop culture and the similarities it bears with capoeira’s own *malicícia*. We will first focus on the social, economic and material conditions that determined the appearance of hip hop culture

2.3.1.b- Hip hop as a response to an oppressive context

According to Tricia Rose, hip hop must be understood as part of the continuum of African American and Afro-Diasporic cultural developments, as well as an art form determined by the specific socio-economic context of its appearance. In *Black Noise*, she makes a detailed description of the social and economic changes the South Bronx was subjected to in the period around which hip hop started to develop. While focusing on New York, Rose makes explicit that the restructuration of the economy at the time was global and its impact visible in all major American cities. What made the appearance of hip hop possible in New York is indeed the conflation of socio-economic mutation and the large Afro-Diasporic communities present in this

²⁶ Jahn Janheinz, *Muntu, The New African Culture*, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961. (124)

area. Rose describes Robert Moses, an influential city planner who reshaped New York City from 1930 to the late 1960s, as one of the main actors of the socio-economic demise of the South Bronx. His project of Cross Bronx Expressway, proved devastating to communities living on and around the designated route. According to Rose:

In 1959, city, state, and federal authorities began the implementation of his planned Cross-Bronx Expressway that cut directly through the center of the most heavily populated working class area in the Bronx [...] Although he could have modified his route slightly to bypass densely populated working class ethnic residential communities, he elected a path that required the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings. In addition, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, some 60,000 Bronx homes were razed. Designating the old blue-collar housing units as “slums,” Moses’s Title I Slum Clearance program forced the relocation of 170,000 people. [...] black and Puerto Rican residents were disproportionately affected. Thirty-seven percent of the relocated residents were nonwhite. (Rose 30-31)

She concludes that “the newly “relocated” black and Hispanic residents in the South Bronx were left with few city resources, fragmented leadership, and limited political power.” (33) However, the physical restructuring of the city was not the only attacks of the elite on the poor communities of New York City. Global economic factors started to reshape the nature of the economy as well, which greatly determined the city’s new orientation. Rose describes the evolution from a blue-collar economy with relatively high wages to a white-collar economy with a substantial low-wage, low employment service sector mostly filled by blacks and hispanics. Racial and economic inequalities were dramatically increased during this period. (Rose 29) The near bankruptcy of the city and the state of New York precipitated a federal loan “accompanied by an elaborate package of service cuts [...] that carried harsh repayment terms.” (28) Social services suffered drastic cuts in consequence of this loan, which had large negative consequences on the lower classes of society. According to Rose:

Between 1978 and 1986, the people in the bottom 20 percent of the income scale experienced an absolute decline in income, whereas the top 20 percent experienced most of the economic growth. Blacks and Hispanics disproportionately occupied this bottom fifth. During this same period, 30 percent of New York's Hispanic household (40 percent for Puerto Ricans) and 25 percent of black households lived at or below the poverty line. (28)

Following the looting of stores that took place in poor neighborhoods of the city during the 1977 massive power outage, the media started to depict these areas as emblematic of American urban decay, social, economic and moral ruin, participating further in the racist discourse already embedded in the American media and society. (33) Our previous introductory description of the ghetto as a colonized space comes to mind here. The ghetto (the South Bronx is a case in point) is indeed a colonized space that is structurally enforced through economic and political means. Economic imperatives drive public policies which then bring the conditions for the demise of a whole category of population, the population that historically has been constructed as different, even antithetical, essentially inferior. At the same time, the imperialist rhetoric which pervades the American media seems consistent in blaming these populations for social ills, through what is presented as natural behavior, totally masking the socio-economic forces that determine people's outlook and responses. This essentialization of poverty and violence brings justification to repressive policies toward these populations presented as a menace to social order through the dynamic of imperialist rhetoric.

The younger generation of African descendants and hispanics of the South Bronx, however, found relevant responses within their own cultural heritage to answer and negotiate the challenges set in front of them. Hip hop, at its origin, constitutes a comprehensive system of cultural resistance to economic and social marginalization through the affirmation of cultural specificity, the challenge to hegemonic discourses of power and the reclaiming of public

space. We have already discussed musical and oral aesthetic continuity with African and Afro-diasporic traditions within hip hop culture, we will now focus more specifically on two aspects of the culture that we have not described yet, graffiti writing and break dancing. We will then discuss further the musical dimension of the art, in particular the specific use of technology it displays.

If graffiti and dancing are today more part of the background of hip hop culture—rap being its prominent sign—scholars and early participants of the genre have often described these two aspects as central during the very first years of the developments of the genre. Music was originally the main element of the culture, the one aspect that brought people to the events. But dancing and graffiti were integral parts of the display of skills during these events as well. Many pioneers often practiced several of these disciplines (the same is true of early actors of French hip hop for instance). If these elements are so central to hip hop's debut, it is in my view because they responded to one of the main drive and necessity behind the emergence of this culture; the occupation, or reclaiming of social space. This desire to regain control over the public space is made explicit in what many scholars have described as a focus on locality, on the neighborhood, the block, the crew etc. The block parties which characterized the first hip hop events constituted a concrete occupation of the sonic and physical space of the street, and a form of entertainment available for the whole community. Breakdancing for instance was not only visible during performances, but groups of dancers would most of the time practice outdoors, in hallways etc. as adequate spaces were hard to find. This consequently made their art visible. Reports of police arresting breakers for “disturbing the peace” have appeared in the press as early as 1980 (Rose, 50), and continue to this day. This constant visibility in the public realm denotes a defiant attitude toward the attempts to tone down and repress Afro-descendants and their culture in the

modern urban context. The battle for public space took on war-like proportions in the context of graffiti. Beyond the graffiti demonstrations during hip hop performances and the later integration of the art into museums and the broader realm of popular culture, graffiti remained primarily a street art whose canvas was the concrete urban structures, trains, posters, any visible physical space available to writers. This struggle for the occupation of public space places this art form, in its original manifestation, at the limit between personal expression and flat out vandalism. Subway painting has often been considered by the insiders as the most important discipline of the art, as it is the most dangerous and demanding form. For groups seeking recognition and exposure, the prospect of having your work travel through the city for everyone to see was worth the risk. Rose describes the commando-like approach to the realization of a masterpiece (a “piece”) on a train:

The execution of a piece is the culmination of a great deal of time, labor, and risk. Writers work out elaborate designs and patterns in notebooks, test new markers and brands of spray paints and colors well in advance. Obtaining access to the subway cars for extended periods requires detailed knowledge of the train schedules and breaking into the yard where out of service trains are stored. Writers stake out train yards for extended periods, memorizing the train schedule and wait for new trains to leave the paint shop. A freshly painted train would be followed all day and when it reached its designated storage yard (the “lay-up”) at night, writers were ready to “bomb” it. Writers climbed walls, went through holes in fences, vaulted high gates, and “ran the boards,” (walked along the board that covers the electrified third rail) to gain access to the trains. (42-43)

She then quotes Craig Castleman:

Trains frequently are moved in the yards, and an unwary writer could be hit by one. Trains stored in lay-ups are hazardous painting sites because in-service trains pass by them closely on either sides, and the writer has to climb under the parked train or run to the far side of the tracks to escape being hit. Movement through tunnels is dangerous because the catwalks are high and narrow, it is dark and there are numerous open gates, abutments, and low hanging signs and light fixtures that threaten even the slowest moving writer. (Castleman 50)

What these descriptions demonstrate is the amount of risk writers were willing to take for the sake of visibility. It is interesting to acknowledge that the risks taken were part of the excitement of the execution of a piece. Notoriety is undoubtedly part of the motivations, but one cannot dismiss the pleasure found in the challenge to the established rules of power within an oppressive and controlled urban context. The greatest challenge to the city authorities constitutes in the eyes of the oppressed the greatest sign of artistic achievement, which illustrates unequivocally the resistant and even defying dimension of graffiti writing and hip hop culture in general. The disproportionate measures taken by the Transit Authority to eradicate the phenomenon illustrates the importance and resonance of this struggle over public space.²⁷ Most western nations have now passed extremely repressive laws against graffiti writing, but this has not stopped the phenomenon. Contemporary artists such as Banksy (who uses stencil technique) demonstrate the vivacity of this art, its potential as social and political critic, and its anchorage as a street and folk oriented movement. What the struggle for public space illustrates is a form of ground based resistance to oppression in the constant affirmation of locality and expression of freedom.

This expression of freedom and resistance is also manifest in the attitude displayed in musical production through the specific use of technology musicians adopted and which came to define the style of hip hop music. I have already described DJ Kool Herc's innovative use of the turntables. But beyond its anchorage in Afro-diasporic practices, what Kool Herc's technique of cutting and his emphasis on the break represent is a rupture from the former tradition of disco mixing as well as a radical subversion of technology itself. A typical disco mix played in a nightclub of New York in the early to late 1970s implied playing tracks one after another, switching from one record/turntable to the other through the use of a mixer. The emphasis of the mix was on the continuity of the beat. Disco songs indeed displays very similar tempi (around a

²⁷ See Rose page 45-46 for a description of the response of the city.

100 to 120 BPM²⁸), and similar rhythmic structures. Sliding from one track to another without interruptions was therefore rather easy. What the break denotes, however, is the opposite approach. Emphasis is laid on rupture, not on continuity. Transitions from one break to another are generally abrupt and unpredictable. The technique of scratching, developed by Grand Wizard Theodore but turned into a real art of its own by Grand Master Flash, emphasizes further this idea of rupture and the use of technology to its limits. Scratching means moving the record back and forth against the needle while playing, generating ruff, edgy sounds. Virtually any sound can be scratched as any record can be used for that purpose. Scratching in itself constitutes what one is absolutely not supposed to do with a vinyl and a turntable, as scratching can not only damage the needle, and the turntable mechanism, but the record as well. Grand Master Flash demonstrated that combined with the cut technique, scratching could achieve incredibly creative sonic collages out of already pre-recorded musical materials, creating brand new pieces out of old ones. His legendary track *The Adventures of Grand Master Flash on the Wheels of Steels* released in 1981 is considered by many as one of the most influential track of hip hop music. It is a great demonstration of the musical creativity emanating from the use of turntable technology to its limits. Another great innovation of hip hop musical production would come with the use of samplers and drum machines. The same approach of pushing the technology to its limits, using it in a way that it was not intended to, was applied here. Samplers were originally equipments used to record sounds and play them back in a loop. They were studio tools meant for producers to save money on hiring musicians and time on the execution of the track. Instead of having someone play the trumpet on a record for instance, you could record the trumpet, play it back on the keyboard using a sampler. Samplers where thus annexes used mainly for embellishing the musical track produced. In hip hop, they become the main tool of musical production. Samplers

²⁸ Beat Per Minute.

allowed the perfection of the idea of the break. You could indeed record the whole break, place it in a loop and have it play for as long as you want. You can then add other sound layers to the rhythmic loop created, adding rhythmic and melodic complexity to the musical structure. Special effects can also be applied, in search of specific or new sound textures. Rap producers' use of sampling technology was subversive for two main reasons. First as we have said, they used this technology in a way that was not intended, by stretching the possibilities to the maximum, what Tricia Rose describes as "Working in the Red," (75) that is, in the distortion zone of the frequency spectrum of the equipment. Rose points out that hip hop music producers were not the only ones to work equipment in this way. Hip hop's specific approach to technology indeed echoes here with Afro-Diasporic aesthetic priority, as Jamaican dub producers already started to experiment with recording technologies in this innovative way since the late 1960s. This illustrates further the connection of hip hop to the diaspora and in particular the links between American and Jamaican music. The second subversive aspect of sampling came from its challenge of authorship and copyrights. Using pre-recorded materials for the purpose of musical composition constituted a breach in copyright legislations at the time, which was still based on written musical scores. Major record companies were prompt to adjust and regulate what they saw as a potential for further financial gain from this emerging culture. Sampling has been since restricted by different regulations, such as the idea that the original track should not be recognizable when sampled, or that the sample should not last more than 2 seconds, if one wanted to avoid copyright infringement. In 2004, a federal appeal court even ruled that any artist should pay for any use of pre-recorded copyrighted material, making the use of samples without permission definitively illegal.²⁹ We clearly see here how sampling challenges the structure of our modern capitalist mercantile society. This approach echoes with jazz and the concept of

²⁹ http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/techpolicy/2004-09-08-sampling-ruling_x.htm

scores, where a jazz tune once composed becomes part of the repertoire available for other musicians to play and modify at will, for the purpose of new live performances. Jazz musicians would also re-interpret songs from popular culture and modify them sometimes to the point that they would no longer be recognizable. This idea of constant re-use, recycling, regeneration runs counter to the logics of maximum profit and control of cultural production, inherent to a free market based economy. The displacement of ownership from the individual back to the community is a recurrent theme within afro-Diasporic cultures and hip hop demonstrates the same tendency. Dick Hebdige has described it as “versioning” in the context of Jamaican music, where a single release, especially if it is popular, will initiate the making by other artists of numerous versions of the same instrumental or lyrics. He gives a telling example of the importance of this practice in Jamaica through the song *Under Mi Sleng Teeng* by Wayne Smith. According to him it had been estimated that 239 versions of the song were released the very year of its appearance in the charts. (Hebdige 12) The same practice of re-use of hip hop instrumentals is also common, although not as systematic as in Jamaican popular culture.

Thus, we have appreciated the many ways in which hip hop pioneers challenged the oppressive urban environment imposed on them, first through reclaiming the public space, then through a subversive use of technology. These responses to urban and economic oppressive settings were however always informed by an Afro-Diasporic sensibility or Africanist aesthetic. In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose criticizes the position of cultural theorists who understand repetition as a cultural force determined by “industrial standardization” and which “represents a move toward a single totalitarian code.” (71) She points at Theodore Adorno’s interpretation of jazz as the “cult of the machine” as well as the position of Jacques Attali and Fredric Jameson on repetition within a mass production system. Rose argues that these positions tend to reduce

manifestations of repetition to the sole force of mass production, thus erasing black cultural specificity characterized by an integration of repetition as a central force of musical creation. Repetition as we have seen is indeed a central feature in African and Afro-Diasporic musical production. Rose referred to James A. Snead's characterization of the distinction between European musical structures and African or Diasporic ones in *On Repetition in Black Culture*. Snead argues that repetition is a fact of culture—we could extend this to the laws of nature, which answers to a series of repetitive cycles—and that the difference which characterizes European and African cultures lies in their responses to this phenomenon. According to Snead, European cultures try to mask repetition by affirming a sense of progression while African culture recognizes and affirms repetition as integral parts of their cosmogony. According to Rose, “Snead claims that European culture “secrets” repetition, categorizing it as progression or regression, assigning accumulation and growth or stagnation to motion, whereas black culture highlight the observance of repetition, perceiving it as circulation, equilibrium.” (69) Rose does recognize that black cultural practices, and hip hop in particular are well integrated to the mass production system and that as a consequence, they indeed manifest standardization of form and content. What Rose argues, however, is not to lose sight of the cultural specificity of the different Afro-Diasporic cultures which participated in the creation of hip hop. The emphasis on repetition manifest in hip hop culture is an aesthetical choice within a technological context that is indeed characterized by mechanical repetition. In hip hop, Africanist aesthetic priorities and post-modern material condition intermingle. I would therefore argue that the very medium of analog and digital electronic instrumentation, the use of digital loops from commercial recordings and the use of synthesized sounds in hip hop undoubtedly defines its modernist aesthetics. The tactical choices of sound organization and the specific use of technology it displays accounts for

it Afro-Diasporic dimension both in its prioritizing of repetition and in its “heterogeneous sound ideal”.³⁰ However, in rap music the beat is most of the time produced through electronic means and is characterized by sequential repetition. This mechanical repetition cannot transcribe the feel and the subtle variations of a James Brown performance for instance, or any other live recording or performance in which repetition constitutes the center of the musical structure. No matter how complex the composition, electronic music cannot imitate the “imperfections” of human musical performances which give them their specific human quality. Standardization and uniformization are undoubtedly embedded in the use of technology. What hip hop achieves in my view, is a humanization of technology through the constant push to its technical limits (and even beyond, according to the manufacturer’s guidelines), through its subversion, but especially through the rappers’ art. The rap musical loop represents mechanical repetition, the standardization and uniformization of our lives in a modern setting, the carceral nature of urban dwelling (especially in economically oppressed areas). The rhythmic perfection of the beat constitutes a rigid structure in which (musical) movement is limited. The loop itself can be interpreted as the incarceration of the break, its limitation and repetition within confined quarters. Metaphorically, it is the incarceration of African American musical history within commercial market structures that is criticized within hip hop’s musical structure. The rhythmic virtuosity of the rapper, in contrast, illustrates the rapper’s constant struggle to own this confined space and go beyond its limitations. Rap is thus a reflection on African American continuous incarceration within American history, from the plantation of the south to the urban contemporary context and high rates of incarceration.

³⁰ Wilson, Olly. The heterogeneous sound ideal in African-American music. In *New Perspective on music: Essays in honor of Eileen Southern*. Ed. Josephine Wright, with Samuel A. Floyd, Jr Warren Mich.: Harmonie Park Press. 1992.

2.3.2- Signifying languages/histories

2.3.2.a- Signifying: the language of confrontation

In the foreword to Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois' *Anthology of Rap*, Henry Louis Gates connects Rap to former African American vernacular practices which were part of his environment as a child. According to him the terms "Signifying", "playing the dozen", "toast" and "rap" all refer to the same practices. The name simply evolved with time. To him indeed, "Signifying is the grandparent of Rap; and Rap is Signifying in a post-modern way." (Gates xxii) He clearly evokes a continuum of storytelling practices in verse form emanating from African American vernacular cultures and demonstrating specific approaches to language use. To Gates, as we have already evoked in the introduction to the present study, Signifying constitutes the main rhetorical trope that permeates African American cultural practices. Here is a description of his own experience and interpretation of Signifying as a vernacular practice:

All of these subgenres emerged out of the African American rhetorical practice of Signifying. Signifying is the defining rhetorical principle of all African American discourse, the language game of black language games, both sacred and secular, from the preacher's call and response to the irony and indirection of playing the Dozens. These oral poets practiced their arts in ritual settings such as the street corner or the barbershop, sometimes engaging in verbal duels with contenders like a linguistic boxing match. These recitations were a form of artistic practice of honing, but they were also a source of great entertainment displayed before an audience with a most sophisticated ear [...] Everyone, it seemed to me as I watched these performances unfolding even as a child, was literate in the fine arts of signification. (xxiii)

Signifying therefore is a folk practice which implies a certain level of cultural literacy. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates establishes a connection between the expression of Signifying in the United States and Èsù, via the tale of the Signifying monkey. Kermit E. Campbell, in his study of the rhetoric and language of hip hop, also roots Signifying in African practices, but his approach centers on different traditions. He focuses on the verbal and/or dance exchanges that

took place before, or sometimes in place of battles in different cultures throughout Africa. He refers more specifically to the tradition of the Nguni of South Africa who, according to him, would make formal declarations of war through “taunting and dancing” (25). He then compares this tradition to a similar exchange between Sundiata and his rival Soumaoro taken from the West African epic narrative relating the creation of the Mali empire. He sees in these oratory battles a direct link to Signifying and the toast tradition. He also connects the art of Signifying to the art of West African griots, emphasizing circumlocution and indirection in their speech use—both qualities which according to Gates are essential to Signifying. (31) We have already evoked verbal battles in the griot tradition, as well as within capoeira. Battles are foundational elements of hip hop culture. They generally display dancing and rapping and take place within a ring (ciphers). Competition in music and graffiti writing is also important but formal battles are not the norm within those two mediums. In *The Book of Rhymes*, Adam Bradley describes a typical rap battle in which two contestants exchange words within the circle, until one of them hesitates, stutters, or is sanctioned by the crowd’s reactions. Bradley acknowledges the fact that such battles are still very frequent within underground hip hop communities, but we can add that this tradition remains also present within more commercial settings and under different forms (The diss-track³¹ for instance has not lost its popularity). (175) Many artists have emerged from underground battles to reach mainstream success, and this dynamic still persists to this day. Battles are characterized by “Freestyle”, that is, improvisation, and often consist of rhymed verbal attacks at one’s opponent. We have evoked the large presence of these verbal exchanges in Africa through our description of the griot, and Campbell’s work. Bradley goes further and refers to the art of “capping” in ancient Greece as a similar form of oral poetry battle. He also

³¹ A diss-track is a rap song which aims at attacking another person, generally another rapper. The rapper attacked would then launch his/her own diss-track as a response.

alludes to similar practices in tenth-century Japan, thus bringing a larger, if not universal dimension to the art of oratory contests in verse form. Bradley adds that “traditions of poetic expressions around the world are rooted in it.” (176) By giving a new life to an ancient practice, hip hop culture demonstrates its capacity to signify on the past. Indeed, by bringing to the front what Bradley sees as part of the origin of what we understand as poetry in a contemporary context, hip hop culture signifies on modern poetic practices. Past practices are re-actualized in the present.

Bradley emphasizes the competitive aspect of rapping by quoting Jay-Z and Lil Wayne, who often compared their art to boxing or fighting. But beyond being a fight with an opponent in a cipher, rap is primarily a battle with words. Here is a quote from Lil Wayne taken from Bradley’s study: “I just go straight in [the recording booth] and cut the music on. ...It’s sort of like a fight, I just start figthin’ with the words.” (177) Competition within hip hop is both a competition with other rappers, and a competition with oneself, in order to strive continually for improvement, for novelty. But while competition happens on records, its primary, most direct and powerful expression is found within the cipher itself. A comparison between the cipher and the capoeira *roda* is necessary here, as they seem to embody similar ritualized competitive spaces. Bradley’s description of the cipher as “a competitive and collaborative space,” echoes our description of the art of capoeira, which we have already described as an art form that constantly tries to negotiate the tensions between these two forces. Similarly to capoeira, hip hop is as much an individual art as a collective one. The extreme of individualist manifestations within hip hop, is certainly manifest in the most commercial aspects of the art while the community aspect might be found within the underground base of the culture. The fact that

freestyling and studio rapping are understood by rappers themselves as completely different skills is a manifestation of this dichotomy.

The centrality of competition, battling, contests within hip hop culture from its onset to the present period, define its combative dimension. Beyond the Africanist cultural connection, this focus can be interpreted as a response to the different structural forces which have shaped the socio-economic conditions of African American life in the ghetto. The competitive nature of the culture matches not only West African, and American cultural standards, but the concrete need of constant self-improvement in order to survive in the urban context of the time. Hip hop as a broad cultural entity can indeed be understood as a locus for the practice of ghetto survival, through mastering oratory (rap), bodily (break dance) and psychological skills (Signifying). This concrete goal of survival embedded in hip hop, brings the art closer to capoeira. Hip hop culture and rap in particular also create spaces for the expression of black rage and defiance toward an oppressive system. As described earlier, the era of hip hop saw the worsening of the living conditions of poor black communities in America. The frustration following Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's assassinations and the demise of black power, as well as the degradation of living conditions led to increased resentment and anger toward the American establishment. This anger is manifest within hip hop. The omnipresent metaphor of guns, automatic weapons, artillery in lieu of oratory skills and the technology of the rapper (microphones, samplers etc...) illustrates a constant focus on the combative nature of the art. A recent style of dancing born in Los Angeles called "krumping," consists of aggressive, body twisting, fast and explosive movement miming physical aggression of one's opponent. Krumping clearly illustrates the channeling of anger through artistic expression. This cathartic aspect of the art is also significant in the other facets of hip hop culture.

Let's move back to our comparison between hip hop and capoeira. We have already stated that capoeira dancing and breakdancing bear similarities. Both the aesthetic and the ritual forms of these arts are related. A lot of the movements are similar and both breakdancing and capoeira are competitive demonstrations of skills set within a ring. The martial dimension determines capoeira movements' aesthetic, but players also display certain movements for the simple purpose of demonstration of physical prowess and aesthetics movements that are not meant for self-defense (These movements are called *flóreos*). Capoeirista, and in particular *angoleiros*, also use a whole array of movements meant to trick or Signify something to the opponent. Hip hop dancing is not primarily martial and focuses almost exclusively on the aesthetic and Signifying aspects found in capoeira. If mock combats exist within hip hop dancing, as in krumping, or in the provocative and aggressive gestures recurrent during battles in a cypher for instance, the purpose is generally not self-defense training. This does not mean that break dancing training could not have some applications for self defense. Break dancing techniques, however, do not appear primarily martial as in capoeira. Thus, while *malícia* serves mostly the purpose of deception within capoeira, that is, the concealment of the intentions of the player, Signifying in hip hop dancing seems rather to serve the purpose of Signifying itself, that is, commenting on the performers' abilities, the crowd's response or any other aspect relevant to the time and space of the performance. In that sense, breakdancing emphasizes display rather than dissimulation. The break dancing battle is a Signifying one which materializes through movements. These differences echo with the focus hip hop culture has laid on rap as its main discipline, placing language as the principal weapon for resistance through Signifying. The reason for this discrepancy can be explain through the difference in context between Brazil and the United States. I would argue that the large size of Afro-Brazilian populations in particular in

the region of Bahia, made possible large scale rebellions which can be understood as the ultimate objective of a martial art such as capoeira within the context of slavery. In comparison, the possibility of successful large scale rebellions in the North American context was remote from the very onset of slavery, as slave populations were less important and more dispersed. The violent repression by the state of such potential for armed resistance displayed throughout American history, but more recently during the late sixties against groups such as the black panthers, also crushed the idea of a potential reversal of power. In this context, language becomes the main agent for social resistance, which explains the focus and importance of such tropes as Signifying. Signifying is indeed focused on language, and constitutes a manifestation of the combative, deceptive and subversive nature of African American vernacular forms of speech. Rap music corresponds to the bringing to the front of black rhetorical anger, virtuosity, irony, genius in the form of Signifying through vernacular forms. The warrior aspect of Èsù, protector of oppressed African descendants in the New World, poisoning (lyrically or rhetorically) their oppressors, has been present within black rhetorical practices from slavery to the modern era, and is indeed manifest and brought center stage in the verbal art of the rapper.

2.3.2.b- The vernacular and the breaking down of the literacy myth

The dichotomy between studio rap and the cipher illustrates a larger dichotomy which has determined human interactions for centuries, the division between orality and literacy (understood here as mastering writing and reading). Indeed, freestyling in hip hop music embraces orality and brings it to the forefront, while studio rap often relies on more elaborate lyrics which are often written down first and performed afterwards. While most commercially successful artists recognize that they compose their lyrics on paper, some like Lil Wayne claim that they never write anything down and always improvise when recording in the studio. This

quality is often praised by artists and audiences alike and illustrates further the Africanist aesthetic and philosophy which prioritizes oral forms over written forms. Despite a select few rappers who never write anything (or claim that they do not), rapping is generally understood as a hybrid form, navigating between writing and orality. However, Bradley emphasizes the fact that rappers themselves approach rap composition as a sort of freestyle, writing down ideas and rhymes that come up to them as they improvise on their own, often accompanied by a beat. (178-179) Rap on records could be understood as a pre-arranged freestyle, which gives rap music its impression of spontaneity to the listener. Rappers, in the lineage of African American poets and more particularly the poets of the Black Arts Movement, indeed achieved a fusion between orality and writing, but always prioritizing orality. Tricia Rose uses Walter Ong's theory of "post-literate orality" to describe the ambiguous position between orality and writing that the art of rappers occupy, neither fully oral in nature nor fully written. The concept of "score" described earlier comes to mind here. Rose states:

Although power is located in the oral presentation of rap, rap rhymes are not the "fixed, rhythmically balanced expression" that Ong refers to in his description of oral cultures but rhymes constructed in linear, literate (written) patterns. They are rhymes, written down first, memorized, and recited orally. In oral cultures, there is no written context to aid in memorization. [...] rap lyrics are oral performances that display written (literate) forms of thought and communication. (87-88)

Rose's characterization is problematic as it still assumes a profound dichotomy between literacy and orality, which implies imperialist structures of meaning. We will see that African American literary traditions and rap, have worked toward a breaking down of this dichotomy, and in my view succeeded in doing so. We will see that "literary tradition" will take on a much broader signification inside the theoretical framework of the new literacy theory approach.

We have seen that hip hop was— and is still to this day to a certain extent— a struggle for reclaiming physical space. It is also a struggle for reclaiming cultural space through what is the main locus of cultural wars, language. The fight that is behind rapper’s lyrical mastery is the defense of the vernacular, or rather vernaculars, that is the folk expressions of language with the cultural specificities and fluctuations it implies, as opposed to a standard form imposed by a state apparatus. In *Spectacular Vernacular*, Russel A. Potter re-articulates the variance between vernacular forms and standard forms. He evokes the standardization process of European languages achieved through violent enforcement strategies for the purpose of nation building. Achieving national unity under a common language indeed meant the erasure of difference, that is the erasure of vernaculars. (The imposition of English in Francophone Louisiana is a good illustration of this strategy here in the US.) The same process applied to European nations had also been employed in the colonial context, where part of the control of local populations, and part of their submission was achieved through the imposition of the language, culture and values of the colonizer. In this context of domination, the survival of vernaculars constitutes a major act of resistance to cultural uniformization. According to Potter, the vernacular is:

...a language without a nation, or rather, with a nation that exists outside of or against a nation, a culture whose condition is that of exile, wandering, and resistance to a dominant power. Within these counter-nations, the vernacular functioned for its speakers as a badge of identity, a tongue inseparable from their histories, a language that in its speaking called them together as a nation... (56)

Through the affirmation of language, of history, of common values, of this “badge of identity” that the vernacular form represents, oppressed populations participate in resistant discourses to hegemonic, imperialist domination. As languages anchored in local communities, vernacular forms are fluid and constantly evolving. To the contrary, standard forms which are supported by concerted state policies, structured through grammar, are indeed much more rigid. The

educational system and the media are structures that constantly enforce one dialect over others as the standard. James Paul Gee in *Social Linguistics and Literacy* reminds us that the choice of which dialect becomes the standard is always arbitrary. He adds that in the United States for instance, a form of black vernacular could indeed very well be the standard, had there been an inversion of power. (10) The main element which validates a specific dialect as the standard is the literacy apparatus which concretely enforces it. An array of set in stone grammatical rules, a corpus of literary achievements in that dialect celebrating few literary geniuses, and the institutions to maintain these structures characterize literate societies. According to Gee:

Claims for literacy, in particular for essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing, are [...] ideological. They are part of ‘an armory of concepts, conventions and practices’ that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or, at the least, the end point of a normal developmental progression (achieved only by some cultures, thanks either to their intelligence or their technology.) (57-58)

Literacy has thus been the main means of differentiation of cultural achievement globally. The colonized Africans have been historically constructed as inferior on the basis of their “illiteracy” as we have already evoked. In the national context, literacy serves the same purpose. Indeed, literacy, and access to it, is not equally shared within a singular national landscape, and still constitutes one of the main parameters determining social class stratification. The importance and interaction of race and class in the literacy divide is obvious in the distinction between black vernacular English and standard English in the US, or between standard French and verlan³² in contemporary France for instance. Literacy becomes one of the main agent of the legitimization and enforcement of social and racial oppression. In this context, Potter’s characterization of the vernacular as a “heteroglossaic space”, which he sees as “an arena for an ongoing struggle between colonizer and colonized”, is pertinent. (57) Maintaining vernacular practices within a

³² Vernacular, slang version of French often associated with young North and Sub-Saharan African descendants.

context that works toward their erasure or degradation and which constantly lays the emphasis on achieving literacy, that is, the mastery of the standard written form, is indeed resistance to oppression. Within the two national settings just described, Gee's analysis of Harvey Graff's study of the role of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada seems relevant as well:

...illiterates were considered dangerous to the social order, thus they must be made literate; yet the potentialities of reading and writing for an under class could well be radical and inflammatory. So the framework for the teaching of literacy had to be severely controlled, and this involved specific forms of control of the pedagogic process and specific ideological associations of the literacy being purveyed. While the workers were led to believe that acquiring literacy was in their benefit, Graff produces statistic that show that in reality this literacy was not advantageous to the poorer groups in terms of either income or power. The extent to which literacy was an advantage or not in relation to job opportunities depended on ethnicity. (58)

Gee argues that literacy education in the West does not participate in the transmission of skills that would make the individual more independent, critic or even productive, or grant him/her access to higher social status, but that it rather serves the purpose of transmitting the values of the dominant. According to him:

The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so. (36)

Both of these quotes illustrate that helping the "dangerous" elements of society to reach literacy, that is, giving them the keys to social integration, can be a double edged sword. While it might mean the integration of marginalized elements into the dominant discourse, their social disappearance in the mass, so to speak, it might also grant access to major tools of resistance to the most contentious elements of society, thus creating a potential for challenge of the dominant discourse. At the same time, the discourse on the presupposed superiority of literate individuals

and the control of the means of transmission, allows the transmission of the values of the elite, and the subsequent acceptance of social and economic hierarchy by the oppressed. Transmitting literacy indeed becomes a means of transmission, not only of a standard language, but also of standard values. The spread of literacy becomes a means of erasure of cultural diversity in that sense, and a direct challenge to vernacular forms. What Graff's study emphasizes, however, is that the imperialist discourse on race supersedes the discourse on literacy. This element becomes determinant in the discussion of the reception of rap music within mainstream discourses.

We have already evoked to what extent literacy constituted a means of integration for African Americans in the United States, as well as a positive tool for struggle against oppression, within our discussion on the black poet. Integration, however, generally implied the renouncement of cultural specificity as well as a critic of vernacular cultures, and anything related to lower class blacks for that matter. What comes out of the analysis of African American verse tradition is a consistently increasing attention to integrate orality and vernacular forms to written poetry. This general trend is a testimony to a constant challenge of hegemony through language. Hip hop, by its anchorage in the vernacular and focus on the oral nature of poetic expression, is directly in contrast to the dominant discourse on literacy, and in line with the African American poetic tradition. Signifying itself is the trope of black cultural literacy. Literacy, in that sense, can be understood as reaching beyond the generally received meaning of the acquisition of reading and writing skills. New literacy studies emphasize a breaking down of the boundaries between literate and oral cultures through a challenge of traditional literacy conceptions. According to Gee: "Literacy has no effects—indeed, no meaning—apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts." (59) Gee and other theorists of the new literacy movement advocate the idea that literacy cannot

be understood outside social contexts, and that the belief that literacy—writing and reading skills—constitutes a sign of cultural, intellectual, if not spiritual achievement, is one of the foundation myth—and an erroneous one— of modern Western societies. Gee presents his reader a much broader interpretation of literacy which comes to terms with essentialist, racist and class biased views on cultural values and achievements. Gee defends the idea that reading is always contextual, and that the cultural background which allows any act of interpretation is based in “acquisition”, that is cultural immersion in the practice (as opposed to “learning”). “Acquisition” is indeed the mode which determines vernacular language transmission while “learning” defines the transmission of standard forms. Gee States that:

One has to be socialized into a practice to learn to read texts of type X in way Y, a practice other people have already mastered. Since it is so, we can turn literacy on its head, so to speak, and refer crucially to the social institutions or social groups that have these practices, rather than to the practice themselves. When we do this, something odd happens: the practices of such social groups are never just literacy practices. They also involve ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing.

Worse yet, when we look at the practices of such groups, it is next to impossible to separate anything that stands apart as a literacy practice from other practices. Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs. (41)

What Gee points at here is that the education system’s emphasis on literacy learning presents literacy as disconnected from social factors, while according to him, the very literacy that is being enforced is the literacy of a certain social group whose vernacular form happens to match the standard. Indeed, these (mainstream) communities already practice the standard form as part of their *habitus*, to make use of Bourdieu’s terminology. Groups who do not have these practices as part of their everyday interactions are disqualified from the get go in the school system, as they do not have the cultural background which is required from them to succeed. Their relation

to the standard is purely based on learning and not acquisition. The arbitrariness of cultural standards appears clearly from this perspective.

We can follow Gee's train of thought and take it a step further by approaching literacy through its secondary meaning, which I have termed earlier cultural literacy, and which refers to the fact of being knowledgeable about a topic or a domain. We will see literacy more specifically as the ability to understand and converse in any form of discourse, be it written and oral languages, dance, music, social conventions, Signifying, the list goes on... Through this perspective, the idea of a "post-literate orality" seems out of place as orality can no longer be severed from literacy. Similarly, the term literature could refer to both oral and written forms. This conceptual move allows a breaking down of a major power structure. The term "oral literature" as opposed to "literature", for instance, implies a hierarchy. In the light of our new understanding of literacy, it appears that hip hop itself is a form of literacy. Rap lyrical art is a form of poetry, most people would agree with that fact. It is a form that is generally both written and oral, as we have evoked. Extending the African American poetic tradition which consistently mixed oral and written practices and which always integrated the idea that performance was central to the art of verse composition, rap music achieved something that even the Black Arts Movement did not achieve despite their folk based approach. Hip hop brought poetry back to the common people, and gave the incentive to everyone, and the younger generations in particular to care and get involved in poetry. The movement of Slam poetry and spoken word poetry, distinct, yet associated with the world of hip hop, demonstrate a similar trend. Hip hop's specificity when compared to those two forms is both manifest in its undeniable Africanist aesthetic and in its anchorage in the social and historical consciousness of black people in America.

2.3.2.c-Myth/Realism

In 1979, the song *Rapper's Delight* by Sugar Hill Gang put hip hop on the map as an extremely marketable musical product. While the song has been criticized as an unauthentic studio reproduction of what hip hop was at the time, it nonetheless brought to the front a central aspect of the verbal art; party theme songs. The celebratory nature of hip hop indeed grants a large space for the expression of such songs, which happens to go along well with commercial imperatives. *Rapper's Delight* also clearly displayed one of the main rhetorical manifestations of Signifying in hip hop; the ego trip. The ego trip, directly connected to the boast and dirty dozen traditions, is a sort of praise poem at the intention of the poet himself. It is an integral part of the dynamic of battles where rappers generally attempt to decrease the status of their opponents through insults while raising their own through self-praise. The ego trip has become one of the main markers of rap's rhetorical specificity. Three years later, in 1982, another important song reached mainstream success and brought to the front a different narrative perspective also characteristic of hip hop's lyrical dimension. *The Message* by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five is indeed the first song reaching mainstream commercial success that displayed socially "conscious" lyrics, that is, lyrics describing the reality of living conditions in American ghettos. The song is far from the boastful rhymes of Sugar Hill Gang, but focuses on describing harsh urban living conditions in a realistic fashion. The difference of perspective between these two cornerstone tracks of commercial hip hop represents one of the major tensions that permeates rap lyrics; the tension between social realism and mythical representations. These two aspects however are not in contradiction with one of hip hop and rap's guiding principle of "keeping it real", that is remaining authentic, uncompromised, and in tune with one's community, neighborhood etc... Indeed, vivid social commentaries on the living conditions of

blacks in the ghetto and critics of the perpetuation of racial segregation and oppression in America can be interpreted as “keeping it real” in a socially conscious way, we might say. In parallel to this approach, the boastful, exaggerated, mythical, sometimes grotesque self-representation of the rapper appears connected to some distinctly African American oral practices, traceable to West African. We might interpret this approach as “keeping it real” with authentic African American cultural traditions. Indeed, the boast of the rapper is a direct re-interpretation of African American oral practices, but it also reminds us of the praise song of the griot. In addition, the untamed nature of the rapper’s speech echoes with the anti-social characteristics of Èsù. The ego trip and the language of the rapper in general often make extensive use of explicit language. Similarly to what we have observed in the griot’s art and Èsù’s attitude, the taboos of society are fair game for the expressive range of the rapper. “Keeping it real” in that sense appears more as an aesthetic imperative which exhorts rappers not to sugar coat reality and where language is appreciated in its raw form. The truthfulness of the narrative described is not a necessity just as long as it appears credible and answers the aesthetic requirements of the audience. Thus the art of the rapper oscillates between the two poles of realism and myth. The intermingling of the two takes a decisive importance within commercial contexts, where questions of audiences’ perceptions and the history of misrepresentation of blacks and their culture in America come into consideration as we will see.

Most rap songs navigate between social realism and mythical representations, both of which are aspects of storytelling. Adam Bradley in *The Book of Rhymes* affirms that “...rap’s realism is as much about telling stories as it is about telling truths.” (159) Truth and myth indeed often intermingle within hip hop narratives, which is part of the reason which this genre is often misinterpreted. Bradley further explains that: “to tell a familiar narrative in a new way is the

motivating impulse behind a lot of rap storytelling.” (159) This accounts for the great importance that is placed on aesthetics within rap storytelling practices. Content is of course significant, but is generally not the priority, in particular in the most commercial manifestations of the genre. A singular familiar story could be retold a hundred different ways and sound new at every delivery. Additionally, the sonic dimension of the genre often dictates its reception. It is indeed the sound quality of the lyrics, the flow, the interaction with the musical background, the rhymes, that first strike the audience. The genre of gangsta rap, which has almost become a synecdoche for rap itself, thanks to its commercial success and the consecutive push it has enjoyed from the music industry, seems to embody best this tension between social realism and mythical representation. Gangsta rap is often described by certain rappers and commentators as “reality rap” which brings to the front the fact that stories about gangsters and pimps are indeed often fact based. Kermit Ernest Campbell in *Gettin’ Our Groove On*, describes a tradition of ghetto realism in novels which has latter given birth to blaxploitation movies and the genre of gangsta rap itself. (92-103) We can extend his comparison and assume that the primary form of “ghetto realist” narratives which has marked the history of African American cultural achievement is probably the slave narrative. The slave narrative has often been described as the first autobiographical narrative tradition within the African American literary tradition. Rap in general, and gangsta rap in particular are directly following this lineage through the intermediary of the blues. The themes of blues and rap lyrics often overlap, and both display a large use of the boast tradition, which accounts for the curious mix between realistic accounts and fantasy narratives that characterizes these two genres. Both the blues singer and the rapper are generally solitary individualistic figures, and generally tend to describe their own experience (real or imaginary) in the lyrics. Both rappers and blues singers have reported that what they sing as their own experience might

come from their actual experience, or from the experience of someone they know, or even be imaginary. The artist and the narrator of the song generally intersect in both genres and it is often hard to tell them apart.

According to Campbell the gangster/rapper's boastful self portrait is best demonstrated by the perpetuation of the myth of the "pimp" as a masculine ghetto folk hero. Campbell explains the fascination the pimp has generated in the psyche of young African American males:

This high regard many ghetto youth (especially males) hold for the pimp derives from any number of things—his flamboyant dress, fancy cars, easy living, sex appeal—but above all they are enamored by his exceptional ability to rap or use language to manipulate others, especially women. To be a pimp is in other words, to be a kind of trickster, one who by means of rhetoric can create from ghetto realities the illusion of ghetto grandeur.
(105)

Indeed, in an economically deprived environment, the pimp and other street hustler types represent the only images available of successful male figures. In addition, the illegal status of the pimp and gangster places them at odds with a system which has historically been oppressive to blacks. The male outlaw becomes naturally a cultural hero because of his defiant attitude and his anchorage in folk/street culture. The gender dimension is also significant here. In an American society whose traditional values are largely patriarchal and based on a rhetoric of self-determination and success, the constant economical, physical, moral and psychological repression imposed on black masculinity certainly promulgated the development of an extra-masculinity within black discourses as a symmetrical response. Any image of successful masculinity constitutes a sort of victory on oppression even though this reversal of power is anchored in a mainstream discourse of male superiority. The affirmation of black masculinity within the structures set by the oppressor, is therefore often to the detriment of black females (by necessity, to the detriment of black males as well). The physical and psychological domination of

the pimp over females and the ingenuity he displays in tricking clients out of their paycheck illustrates both an extra-masculinity and a manifestation of social and economic intelligence which reverses traditional social dynamics. Black machismo and misogyny in my view cannot be seen as an isolated fact of culture, but must be put in the oppressive contexts that promulgated its spread. Indeed, the very paternalistic nature of American culture promotes oppression of women in a myriad of ways. This phenomenon is not just a fact of African American culture. Let's add here that an analysis of the pimp imagery within mainstream American culture shades light on a double standard based on racial separation. We observe that "legit" white images of pimps, such as James Bond or Hugh Hefner, seem tolerated, if not celebrated, while their African American counterparts are generally despised. This double standard denotes the social hysteria which surrounds the manifestation of black masculinity, conceived as threatening ever since slavery days. The recent tragedy of the murder of Trayvon Martin is telling of the weight racial categorization still hold in society. But let's come back to our discussion of the pimp as a mythical ghetto hero. Beyond the image of a repossessed and larger-than-life African American masculinity, the pimp's most attractive characteristic remains the verbal and psychological mastery (shall we say literacy) that he displays. The pimp is indeed a trickster, whose trick is his own use of language. The pimp can easily be compared to Èsù in the overtly sexual character these two figures embody, as well as in the tricks they both perform. Where the comparison between Èsù and the pimp ends, however, is not in the amount of mischief that they can generate in human affairs, but rather in the purpose of their tricks. While Èsù's purpose is to maintain universal balance, the pimp's purpose is solely to maintain a positive balance in his bank account. In that sense, the pimp illustrates the egotistical, reckless, and violent individual that can emerge from the harsh living conditions of American ghettos, illustrating what Cornell West has

termed “the nihilistic threat”, which he sees as the greatest threat that African American communities across the United States have had to face ever since slavery days. Here is how he defines this threat:

Nihilism is to be understood not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational ground for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. This usually results in a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.”
(West 14)

Cornel West emphasizes the fact that this threat is more prevalent and dangerous now for African Americans than in the past, because the traditional cultural shields protecting communities from it are weaker. According to West, the tools for protection from this threat are part of the cultural inheritance of African Americans:

The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with the cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence.
(15)

He then points out that “until the early seventies black Americans had the lowest suicide rate in the United States,” while now “young black people lead the nation in suicides.” (41) West sees the progress of the nihilistic threat as a consequence of the breaking down of black civil society and cultural institutions caused by conditions set by “corporate market institutions.” (41) The apparition of hip hop music, as we have seen, is parallel to an unprecedented destruction of the social landscape of African American urban life, leading to a destruction of social structures. Hip hop music as a response and a survival tool in this context is also prone to express nihilist

outlooks. The pimp's, gangster's, hustler's omnipresence in gangsta rap narratives illustrate the disillusion of young black youth since the 1970s. An analysis of the pimp's rhetoric might, nonetheless, give hints to a certain mastery of human interactions necessary in the urban modern context ruled by competition for survival, and might help decode and understand the mechanics of global un-refrained capitalism as well. This is where the figure of the pimp intersects with our previous discussion of the mythical *Malandro*. What gangsta rap achieves in the myth of the pimp is a glorification of the positive aspects of this figure, namely, success with women, money, but most importantly, rhetorical skills and psychological mastery. Yet the mythological pimp cannot be separated from its very real and threatening human embodiment. This tension is one of the major ambiguities which lies at the heart of many rap narratives, especially gangsta narratives.

It is with no surprise that the two emblematic songs that we have chosen present images of the pimp and the street hustler. The different approaches to storytelling they display are manifest within their own interpretation of these figures. One is celebratory while the other one is cautionary. Here is an extract from *Rappers' Delight*:

Well, I'm Imp the Dimp, the ladies' pimp,
The women fight for my delight. (Sugar Hill Gang)

Here is *The Message*:

You'll admire all the number book takers
Thugs, pimps, pushers and the big money makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens
And you wanna grow up to be just like them,
huh, Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers
Pickpockets, peddlers even panhandlers
You say: "I'm cool, I'm no fool!"
But then you wind up dropping out of high school
(Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five)

These two songs indeed demonstrate two different approaches. *Rapper's Delight*, in its focus on the boast tradition displays the playfulness of rap's verbal art. The rapper's verbal masteries and success with women is equated to the pimp's via a metonymic displacement. The rapper becomes the pimp through his own verbal boasting. We will describe in more details this specific use of metonymic displacement in our final chapter. *The message*, on the other hand, demonstrates a form of didacticism present in rap songs, focusing on giving guidelines and warnings to the community. While the first two verses of the song describe the reality of ghetto life in a cinematic fashion, giving explicit and sensorial details, Melle Mel's last verse of the song constitutes the real "message". The warning he professes are prophetic as they foresee the global evolution of poor young black males in America. The incarceration rate of young black males indeed greatly increased since the release of the song. In *African American Families*, Angela Hattery and Earl Smith demonstrate a dramatic increase from roughly 335 000 inmates in America in 1970 to over two millions since the year 2000, and bring this element in parallel with the fact that almost half of the inmate population is composed of African American males while they only represent 6 per cent of the US population. (238-243) These numbers account for the disproportionate representation of black males within inmate population. We have evoked a continuum of physical containment of African American populations from the plantation of the south, to the modern ghettos, and have compared the ghetto to a colonized space in our introduction. We have also demonstrated that, if slavery was abolished in its traditional form, the 13th amendment which supposedly made it illegal, also legalized it under specific conditions, namely, if the person is convicted of a crime. The criminalization of black males in particular, and their consequent disproportionate representation in American prisons, indeed account for a continuum of slavery in the United States. We are confronted here to a complex dynamic where

blacks are clearly discriminated against in employment, education and any public services on a national scale (global as well for that matter), and unequally treated with respects to the application of the law. Gangsta rap, which has been part of rap's lyrical tradition from the onset of the genre in the late 1970s, always oscillated between realistic social commentaries on these conditions and mythological, fantasy narratives of greatness of the African American outlaw. It would be unfair to blame gangsta rap for societal ills that appear as the consequence of concerted policies, leaving black populations with no legal resources available for survival. Gangsta rap is indeed a reflection of social conditions which predated its apparition, indeed dating back from slavery. However, one cannot totally absolve artists from social responsibility. Gangsta rap has been commercially successful and encouraged by the major companies since the national success of NWA's debut album, *Straight Out of Compton* in 1988. Ever since, gangsta rap has been increasingly present in commercial rap and its popularity has not decreased. Questions of representations that arose during the minstrel show period are relevant today, as over 80% of gangsta rap's audience is white. The ambiguity rap and gangsta rap plays on is the superposition of the narrative voice and the voice of the rapper. It means that the real person, and its mythic self are superposed so that it becomes hard to tell them apart (the metonymic displacement that we have described earlier is the main rhetorical technique behind this approach). Here is Adam Bradley's description of the ambiguity surrounding the narrator in rap songs and its consequences:

Narrative and dramatic voices often interpenetrate in rap. The consequence of this fusion is that audiences often don't know what to make of the rapper's poetic voice. Is the "I" speaking to them simply a narrator relating his lived experience, or is it a character in a poetic drama the rapper imagines for us? As a genre, rap has found great artistic success in having it both ways; but it has come at a social cost. (163)

The “I” in rap songs is even not assimilated to the narrator, but directly to the rapper him/herself, as I have argued. This fluctuating identity is manifest in rapper’s tendency to choose a moniker (this tradition is also central to the blues). The line of demarcation between reality and fiction is indeed blurred, which can lead audiences to interpret lyrics literally, and miss some of the irony involved. We are here again facing the dilemma of African American “double consciousness”. Indeed rap is torn between its need for authenticity toward the African American community, which manifests in sometimes contradictory ways (realism/mythical representation), and the interpretation white audiences have of the narratives. Rap indeed navigates between a critic, comment or reversal of current stereotypes about blackness, and their validation. Within the commercial setting pre-determined by a few major companies, rap music is torn between the different forces of corporate interests, the artists self-interests, audience responses, the interests of the boarder community, and the notion of cultural and social authenticity. Interpretation of the narratives is key and cultural literacy, an understanding of Signifying, a clear historical perspective all play decisive roles. Racial prejudice in American mainstream media and consciousness seems to continue to determine the interpretation of African American artistic expression to this day. The confusion of the narrative and dramatic voices described by Bradley seems hardly to account for the double standard which determines that Martin Scorsese’s movies depicting the life of gangsters are celebrated as great art while Snoop Dogg or Lil Wayne’s narratives are seen as signs of moral decay. Adam Bradley articulates this problematic in the lines that follow:

If we understand rap simply as fact—as it would seem many Americans do—then it’s no wonder that so many are scandalized by it. But if we treat it as fantasy, as entertainment, then its offensiveness becomes indistinguishable from that of other explicit material that those very same Americans who criticize rap seem to have a voracious appetite for consuming when it comes in the form of movies or television, books or

graphic novels. Rap's difference from these other forms is not one of substance but of rhetoric, not of content but of packaging. That packaging is both the product of corporate media and the stuff of the artists themselves. (167-168)

Rap's ambiguous position between myth and realist accounts is part of its very nature. While a realist account of the realities of harsh living conditions is a way to bring awareness to these conditions, thus resisting them, mythical representations of folk heroes serves a similar purpose of resistance to oppression. Mythical representations allow the creation of "larger-than-life" figures which open spaces of potentialities for oppressed populations. At the same time mythical representations allow psychological release of frustrations through the projection of fantasy narratives of violence. When a rapper says he wants to kill a cop on records, he expresses what some African American might already feel toward the institution of the police, which has consistently oppressed them. The expression of this anger and hatred on record might indeed save the actual performance of the act itself. Rap's violence is often only a mirror of the violence of society and not its generating force as some critics of rap have argued. We must acknowledge, however, the fact that the focus of the record industry on the promotion of a monochrome version of rap, focusing on materialistic gain, violence, gangsterism, pimping, objectification of women etc, has an effect on society and certainly helps promote detrimental behaviors. We have argued earlier the importance of the power of words in particular in Afro-Diasporic context. In this perspective, rappers do hold responsibilities for their lyrics as word spoken certainly manifest reality. Cultural literacy of the audience is therefore necessary in order to understand and discern the mythical dimension of these narratives as well as their anchorage in the history of African American struggle and their formal connections to West African cultural paradigms. Cultural literacy is also important for artists who do have an influence on society and therefore hold responsibility for the message they portray.

As we have observed, hip hop culture's apparition was determined by the intersection of two important factors. First, the large Afro-Diasporic population present in the South Bronx determined the expression of a specific Africanist aesthetic through this culture. Secondly, the experience of oppression shared by these populations and the socio-economic conditions in which they were set influenced directly hip hop's very format and inclinations. We have described the large influence Latin music and Jamaican music had on the genre. We have also discussed the influence capoeira potentially had on certain aspects of this culture. Those diverse influences and the African American oral, literary and musical traditions shared a common Africanist aesthetic which defined hip hop's orientation. We have brought to attention the Africanist dimension contained within the break. The break beat is primarily an agent of musical history, as it brings to the front pieces of recordings, most of the time, yet not necessarily, emanating from Afro-Diasporic musical traditions, and re-interpret them in a new context. The break is also a manifestation of repetitive, percussive structures, which clearly places this form within an African cultural continuum. We have interpreted repetition as an intrinsic element of the Africanist aesthetic, through Osumare's description of the "dialogic negotiation of the self", which repetitive structures allow. The repetitive structure indeed represents the community (that is, in the case of hip hop, the cipher and the communal history contained within the break) as a context in which the expression of individuality can take place through the improvisation of the soloist (dancer, rapper, musician etc...). The freedom of the soloist, alternatively expressed along or against the continuity of the beat, is characteristic of the Africanist aesthetics. Tricia Rose describes the emphasis on the break in hip hop culture and in rap in particular as a choice which integrates the instability (potential breaks) of the social structure in which this style was born. She states:

These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, plan on social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics. (Rose 39)

This analysis of hip hop's rhetorical strategy within the context of the break mirrors Merrell's description of the *ginga* within capoeira as a state of continuous imbalance which confers the capoeirista a certain understanding of the unstable nature of reality and chain of events, always expecting the unexpected. A conscious knowledge of the unstable and shifting nature of reality is the best preparation one can have against arbitrary and sudden changes. This embedded understanding of instability, ambiguity, rupture, etc, is characteristic of Afro-Diasporic contexts which have been greatly determined and influenced by the experience of slavery and continuous racial oppression. Osumare observes Rose's emphasis on rupture as "“social dislocation” due to historic black marginalization.” (Osumare 47) He sees, however, the expression of the break as integral part of the Africanist aesthetics, thus connecting it to ancestral African cultural practices. According to him, the integration of rupture within continuity is a fact of African cultures rather than the consequence of social rupture within oppressive new world contexts. Osumare indeed emphasizes the process-oriented quality of the Africanist aesthetic as opposed to a European approach which favors the thing, the cultural artifact itself.

We have already described the process-oriented nature of the cultural manifestations of our two cultural referents, Èsù and the West-African griot. We already discussed rappers' and griots' similarities in detail. We will therefore now focus our attention on the Yoruba god of fate. Èsù has been described as both the agent of communication and rupture between the different planes

of existence, whether social, spiritual, historical etc. We also described Èsù as the guardian of *ashé*, the energy of creation. It is in its quality of agent of *ashé*'s repartition that Èsù performs tricks on humans, bringing elements of rupture, in order to incite them to change their behavior to fit universal laws and harmony. *Ifá* divination has been described as the medium through which humans can read the signs of the universe through a set of verses containing the experience and wisdom of the people. I will here put in parallel rap music and *Ifá* divination. Both of these cultural paradigms rely on the storage of knowledge through the use of poetic verses. We have discussed rap's storytelling, which constitutes its own strategy for historical narrative construction, in both its realistic and mythical dimensions. But while *Ifá* relies on pre-written verses, rap seems to focus on constant lyrical novelty. Rap is indeed a corpus in perpetual creation, for future generations. The medium of digital recording insures the transmission of this tradition. We also described the fact that form superseded content and that similar stories could be told and retold in myriads of ways (the myth of the pimp and the story of the ghetto boy are two recurrent themes of hip hop narratives which we have already encountered in our two examples). It is through intertextuality that the trope of repetition establishes a reservoir of themes for constant re-interpretation within hip hop's verbal art. The accumulated knowledge of the story told in hip hop narratives, the recurrent themes, the "mascon" words, the vernacular forms, all participate in the consolidation of the genre in a comprehensive historical/mythical narrative where successive generations of rappers can find inspiration. The creation of a rap tradition is in that sense similar to the creation of a new *odú* corpus in a new context. In a similar fashion one could interpret the art of the DJ as sonic divination, bringing to the front pieces of musical history, memory, and having them dialoguing. Each sample could be understood as a specific sonic *odú*, that is associated with others in a single musical track. This association

implies artificial, yet meaningful communication between them, as well as their re-interpretation in a present context. In that sense, the DJ/producer's mixing board is a modern manifestation of *Ifá's* divination tray, and the 16 mixing faders of the console become the 16 sacred nuts or cowries (*Ikin*). If the DJ is the sound *babaláwo*, throwing the sacred faders/nuts and interpreting musical history in a contemporary context for contemporary use, the rapper can be seen as the human embodiment of *Èsù*, translating this musical reformulation into a language humanity can understand. Indeed, as I have already evoked, rappers generally compose their verses over an ongoing beat. It is therefore the musical structure which usually inspires the words. The work of the rapper is indeed a work of interpretation, of translation of sonic forces into human language. We have already described this method of composition in our description of the art of the griot, in particular through Charles Bird's work. Rapper's literacy is indeed both verbal and musical and this manifests in the quality of their speech. While rappers embody *Èsù's* position of interpretation, they also embody many of its distinctive traits. Rappers are ambivalent, contradictory figures. They use trickery which manifests through their own rhetorical strategy called Signifying. They are often oversexualized characters, violent, anti-social, and un-refrained in their use of language. Their outcast position in society allows them to be mediators. The rapper's language fulfills a social function of connection between different social (and spiritual?) realms. They are indeed both insider of poor black communities (or pretend to be so) and outside of it, becoming commentators and representatives for the exterior world (exterior to these communities). They sometimes make great profit of this intermediary position while participating in the spread of stereotypical images. It is indeed within the context of the market that their mediatory characteristic is most obvious. They can bring change in society through their capacity to stir passions in the audience, but can also bring chaos when their words are

miss-interpreted or taken literally. We have thus presented a clear parallel between not only the rapper and Èsù, but between the rapper and the griot as well.

Before moving on to the last chapter of our study, which will be dedicated to the textual analysis of our literary corpus, and a more complete definition of Signifying, I would like to emphasize hip hop's global dimension. Indeed, hip hop has become a global phenomenon, in part due to the cultural imperialism of the United States, in part due to hip hop's multicultural origin and Africanist aesthetics, and in part due to its anchorage as a comprehensive culture of resistance to urban imperialist oppressive discourses. Global hip hop is at the cross road of all those sometimes colliding, sometimes confrontational forces. Hip hop culture undoubtedly profited from the broad diffusion of American culture world-wide as a medium for its expansion. The Africanist aesthetic is a major asset for its spread, especially within Afro-Diasporic contexts. France for instance, which is often described as the second market in the world for rap music, displays a large African (North and sub-Saharan) and Afro-descendant population which embraced the style from the early 1980s to the present day. Oppressed socially and economically, Africans and their French descendants found relevant tools for active resistance in their specific urban and social context. In Senegal, hip hop culture is also large and expanding. Rap represents a modern re-interpretation of traditional oral poetry (most notably the *taasu* and *taxuran*) and enjoys great popularity. Rappers in Senegal, as well as in other countries of North Africa and the Middle East, most notably Tunisia, appeared on the map as significant social forces of contestation, participating actively in the revolutions and protests that shook these areas in the spring of last year. The movement "Y'en a marre!" ("Enough Is enough!") in Senegal for instance, which gathered many actors from civil society and several rappers against former president Abdoulaye Wade, was instrumental during the successive protests which eventually led

to the democratic shift of power after the election of Macky Sall in march 2012. Hip hop appears thus as a global Africanist force which can have a positive impacts on African and Afro-Diasporic contexts world-wide. The movement of the Africanist aesthetic, however, has reached beyond the sole context of the African diaspora. Its great popularity in Japan, and Korea for instance account for hip hop culture's and the Africanist aesthetic's universalist dimension and their potential for contesting and resisting oppression globally and in all its forms.

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CHAPTER III : SIGNIFYING: A GLOBAL CULTURAL THEORY FOR THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

We have already described the concept of Signifying within hip hop culture, in particular in its competitive dimension. We have observed through Henry Louis Gates and Kermit Ernest Campbell that some form of Signifying was already manifest in the traditions of oratory battle of Africa and found an expression within African American vernacular traditions such as the boast or the dozen. Rap music constitutes the latest large scale display of Signifying within African American culture. The world-wide spread of this culture illustrates the universalist dimension of this rhetorical principal. We have also evoked the similarities between capoeira and hip hop and the connections between the concepts of Signifying and *malícia*. We have observed that *malícia* was more predominant in body language within capoeira, while Signifying appeared as a trope defining verbal expression. These two concepts nonetheless correspond to two different manifestations of the same principle within two different but related Afro-Diasporic cultural entities. These two concepts are indeed similarly connected to former West African traditions. As tropes of ambiguity, indeterminacy, deception, trickery, Signifying and *malícia* are indeed New World manifestations of rhetorical strategies used by West African griots, and attitudes exemplified by the Yoruba god of fate Èsù. Èsù's tricks and the griot's verbal ambiguity are instruments of social, historical and spiritual mediation, as we have demonstrated. We shall see that Signifying is the rhetorical agent of this mediation. Let us describe Signifying more in details by referring to Gates' theory. In our analysis, we will describe it as the most prominent Afro-Diasporic rhetorical principle. We will first unravel the tension between the oral cultures of Africa and cultures based on writing that is intrinsic to this trope. This tension is particularly relevant to the African American context. We will see that Signifying constitutes the negotiation of this tension which has defined the nature of the incomprehension between European/Western cultures and African ones. We will then describe intertextuality as one of the main modes of

expression of Signifying. Black intertextuality is defined as communication between different texts through citation, repetition, Signifying revisions and comments. Finally, we will look at Signifying's role in the construction of historical narratives and how the tension between realistic accounts and mythical representations are negotiated, in particular within hip hop culture. We will analyze different poems, capoeira songs and hip hop songs, to illustrate our argument.

3.1- Signifying voices: African linguistic presence in the New World

3.1.1- Signifying: An African-American rhetorical trope

It is within the African American tradition that the concept of Signifying emerges. Bearing undeniable West African traits, Signifying is nonetheless the result of the extended contact between African and European cultures in the New World. The same is true of *malícia*. Gates brought forth the hypothesis of Signifying's origin in the West African mythological figure of Èsù. We have already discussed the importance this figure occupies in traditional Yoruba society as agent of communication between the planes of existence (past/present/future, spiritual/material worlds). We have described to what extent the West African griot could be interpreted as a human embodiment of Èsù's liminal and ambiguous character, as well as the similarities of their roles in society. We have in our second chapter described the capoeirista, the black poet and the rapper as New World griots, embracing attributes similar to Èsù's and the West African griot's. Signifying and *malícia*, which we will now understand as similar concepts in two different contexts, are the modes of expression of Èsù's and the griot's rhetorical principle within the context of the New World. Signifying is thus irrevocably anchored in the Diaspora, yet unquestionably African. It is both determined by its African (West African?) roots and its American expression. Signifying is the rhetorical gift Èsù granted African populations for

discursive self defense within the oppressive context of slavery. Principle of ambiguity, mediation, indirection, Signifying (or a proto version of it) allowed Africans in the New World to make sense of the new oppressive environment they inherited, and helped them integrate the European cultural paradigms imposed on them through their own particular African cosmological traditional heritage. Signifying indeed epitomizes the cultural negotiation between Europe and Africa achieved by Afro-Diasporic cultures. The fact of the similitude between *malícia* and Signifying is telling of the relevance, resilience, universalism, and pervasiveness of this trope. Gates has defined Signifying as implying a “confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white.” (45) Afro-Diasporic texts,³³ must then be understood as double, both in their very form, and in their interpretations. Indeed, the double context of the reception of Afro-Diasporic art (white and black, European and African) is always determining, to various degrees, the nature and impact of this art. Gates sees this cultural divide manifest in the words themselves, at the level of the sign. He refers more specifically to “signification,” which bears a different meaning in white American linguistic circles and in black ones. He sees in the difference between the black linguistic sign “Signification” and the standard English sign “signification,” an illustration of the “classic confrontation between Afro-American culture and American culture.” A confrontation that is both “political and metaphysical”. According to Gates:

“Signification,” in standard English, denotes the meaning that a term conveys. It is a fundamental term in the standard English semantic order. Since Saussure, at least, the three terms *signification*, *signifier*, *signified* have been fundamental to our thinking about general linguistics and, of late, about criticism specifically. These neologisms in the academic-critical community are homonyms of terms in the black vernacular tradition perhaps two centuries old. By supplanting the received term’s associated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic

³³ By text, we mean any cultural artifact or performance, that is, a text is what can be composed, performed, put together, then read, interpreted. We can refer here to the latin origin of the term; *Texere*. (to weave)

pun of the profoundest sort, thereby marking its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers. Their complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people. [...] [T]o revise the term *signification* is to select a term that represents the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation. Few other selections could have been so dramatic and meaningful. (46-47)

The choice of the term “Signifying” might have been consciously made to revise and comment on the standard meaning of the term, as Gates suggests. The standard term “signification” emphasizes the stability of meaning of words, a direct correlation between the signifier and the signified. What African American “Signification” emphasizes, however, is the plurality of meaning, it is the possibility to mean different things through a single signifier. The signified is generally not singular when the trope of Signifying is employed. The emphasis laid on the variance between standard approaches and black vernacular ones on meaning production stresses not solely the difference between standard and vernacular forms of language in general, but more particularly a major difference between European/Western and African approaches to language use, as we will see. On the emphasis that is laid on the polysemic dimension of Signifying through the variance between standard and black vernacular definitions of “signification,” Gates states:

The relation that black “Signification” bears to the English “signification” is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. That, it seems to me, is inherent in the nature of metaphorical substitution and the pun, particularly those rhetorical tropes dependent on the repetition of a word with a change denoted by a difference in sound or in a letter (agnomination), and in homonymic puns (antanaclasis). These tropes luxuriate in the chaos of ambiguity that repetition and difference (be that apparent difference centered in the signifier or in the signified, in the “sound-image” or in the concept) yield in either an aural or a visual pun. (45)

The similarity in the visual sign (Gates chose to mark difference through the capitalization of the “S”), contrasts with the difference in the sounds. The sound difference is materialized through

African American vernacular English pronunciation, but the most significant difference between the terms lies in semantics. It is the historical connection to African rhetorical traditions and the history of black struggle in the New World that are added as layers to the original meaning of the standard English word. Repetition, here, happens at the level of the signifier and difference at the level of the signified. Gates adds:

It is not sufficient merely to reveal that black people colonized a white sign. A level of meta-discourse is at work in this process. If the signifier stands disrupted by the shift in concepts denoted and connoted, then we are engaged at the level of meaning itself, at the semantic register. Black people vacated this signifier, then –incredibly- substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition. Rhetoric, then, supplanted semantics in this most literal meta-confrontation within the structure of the sign. (47)

The materiality of the sign is the very locus of emphasis in the trope of Signifying, its stability is the basis for the affirmation of a potential plurality of meaning. This focus on polysemy constitutes Signifying's rhetorical move which supplants semantics. Gates compares the standard English structure of signification as the combination of a signifier to a stable signified, to the black vernacular Signification as the combination of a signifier to rhetorical figures. The signifier becomes the vehicle of rhetorical strategies, yet the original signification is still present. Gates adds:

Just as jokes often draw upon the sounds of words rather than their meanings, so do the poetry of the Signifying Monkey and his language of Signifyin(g). Directing, or re-directing, attention from the semantic to the rhetorical level defines the relationship, as we have seen, between signification and Signification. It is this redirection that allows us to bring the repressed meaning of a word, the meanings that lie in wait on the paradigmatic axis of discourse, to bear upon the syntagmatic axis. This redirection toward sounds, without regard for the scrambling of sense that it entails, defines what is meant by the materiality of the signifier, its thingness. (58)

Applied to our understanding of Yoruba cosmogony and our earlier superposition of the circle of creation to the Saussurean sign diagram, the materiality of the sign (the signifier), expressed at the level of the syntagm, is the basis for a game of polysemic substitution. We can equate the materiality of the sign to its historical dimension, as its materiality is only defined through its repetition in time, through its successive utterance. Through repetition, a signifier might remain stable over time, but its signified will vary, adding layers of meaning, masking former ones. On the vertical plan of “linguistic” existence, the paradigmatic axis, the polysemic dimension of words constitutes the evocative power contained within words, the very act of subjective interpretation in context, in other words the connection between the materiality of the signifier and its immateriality, defined by its potential for plurality of meaning. Words, whether uttered (sound) or written down on the page (signs of ink on a page or pixels on a computer screen), are primarily potential empty signifiers, they are material. They are vehicles for meanings and concepts initiated by the person uttering or writing the words. The meaning is indeed not intrinsic to the material object, but always dependant on the intentions of the enunciator. Once uttered or written, it is only through the listener’s or reader’s act of interpretation that this materiality reforms as thoughts or concepts, which are immaterial and timeless in nature. Yet, the original intended meaning might have been lost or transformed through this material vehicle. Thus, Signifying plays on the fluid communication between the different planes of material and spiritual existence. The intermediate position of Èsù and the griot illustrates this fluidity. Indeed Èsù is the god of interpretation and ambiguity, while the griot is its human embodiment. Signifying plays on two levels of meaning. It plays first on the evocation of chronological evolution through the focus on the materiality of the signifier, what we have called historical resonance earlier, and which manifests itself on the syntagmatic axis (syntax is itself the

chronological dimension of language). Secondly, Signifying plays on the timeless, immutable connection of the material universe to the spiritual world through language's capacity for polysemy (what we have already presented as the resonance with nature, that is material/spiritual resonance), which manifests itself on the paradigmatic axis. We will see that Signifying's play on the syntagm, the historical dimension of language, is done through intertextuality and Signifying revisions of former texts. This revision, this historical connection between texts, is also the basis for a rhetorical play on signification through the tension between historical reality and mythical representation, as we shall see in our final section. We can here refer back to Snead's understanding of the recurrence of repetition within black cultures. Snead defined one of the major differences between European/Western cultures and African/Afro-Diasporic ones in their relation to repetition, in particular in how they relate to the inescapable reality of repetition in nature and culture. He stated that European societies tended to erase, or mask the inevitability of repetition through a sense of progress, while African cultures would recognize, embrace and even emphasize repetition in culture. The masking of repetition conceals a mechanical repetition centered on economic imperatives of growth, which ignores the cycles of nature, or rather capitalizes on them. At the level of language, this means the rationalization of the sign through impoverishment of its semantic dimension, a reduction of its polysemic potential. Indeed, limiting the repetition of signifiers, creating more words to describe concepts mechanically reduces polysemy within language. The rationalization of language demonstrates a tendency to associate a single signifier to each signified, thus reducing the possibility of association, ambiguity, and evocation. In the most extreme manifestation of this approach, words become solely relevant in their practicality, in their technical capacity to accurately describe the real. We could compare this to a blockage of the *ashé* contained in words. *Ashé* is not allowed to flow

freely. Snead illustrates this dimension through evoking the fact that France and England, for instance, try constantly to erase borrowings from other languages and maintain a uniform standard, trying to refrain language's natural tendency to evolve. "L'Académie Française," and its "immortels" illustrate the idea of a language preserved from the threats of influences and evolution, immune to the reality of oral vernacular language use, and even sometimes dictating them. The mechanical repetition of the standard language and the literacy myth enforced through the education system serve the purpose of imposing a dominant ideology, as we have already evoked through James Paul Gee's work. The rationalization of language mirrors the rationalization of nature and human life as well, to serve capitalism's ever expanding greed for profit. Vernaculars in general, affirm evolution, polysemy, and fluidity as inherent to language use. It is through the centrality of the tropes of repetition with difference that black vernaculars achieve this.

According to Gates the (S)ignification divide is characterized by the fact that "signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time," while "Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations." (Gates 49) This tension between standard English and black vernacular is characteristic of the main tension between European and African cultures. The literacy divide that we have discussed already is indeed the locus of this tension. Writing can be interpreted as the fixing of language within pre-established artificial rules, leading to a subsequent impoverishment of the polysemic dimension of words through a multiplication of signifiers (which we can equate to a blocking or capturing of *ashé* within a rational system). Literature in written forms and poetry in particular are attempts to bring back the natural tendency of language to generate plurality of meaning. The play on sound

associations and polysemy constitutes an attempt to reproduce in print the fluid manipulation of the *ashé* in language, which characterizes oral performances. African cultures in that regard seem to place polysemy at the center of the discursive context, as we have already evoked through Barbara Hoffman's experience with Mande culture or Isabelle Leymarie's familiarity with Wolof society. We shall elaborate more on this dichotomy in the section that follows.

Before we move to our discussion on the tension between orality and writing, the notion of performance and the voice within written texts, we will comment on selected pieces to illustrate our understanding of the trope of Signifying. We will first look at a capoeira song which seems to demonstrate the transmission of Èsù's and the griot's rhetorical indeterminacy, indirection and ambiguity, and its practical use in the context of slavery. The capoeira song *Vou dizer a meu sinhô*, is a *corrido*, that is a call and response song used during the games. Many capoeira songs come from the public domain and have therefore no identified authors. *Corridos* are frequently used as comments on the games and sometimes give live directions or advices for the players to follow. Here is a version of this song:

Vou dizer a meu sinhô
Vou dizer a meu sinhô
Que a manteiga derramou
E a manteiga não é minha
E a manteiga é de ioiô

5 *Vou dizer a meu sinhô*
 Que a manteiga derramou

E a manteiga não é minha
E a manteiga é de ioiô

10 *Vou dizer a meu sinhô*
 Que a manteiga derramou

A manteiga é de ioiô
Caiu na água e se molhou

*Vou dizer a meu sinhô
Que a manteiga derramou*

15 A manteiga é do patrão
 Caiu no chão e derramou

*Vou dizer a meu sinhô
Que a manteiga derramou*

20 A manteiga não é minha
 É pra filha de ioiô
 (Public Domain)³⁴

The song refers to the spillage of butter (*manteiga*). Yet, the person responsible of the spillage remains unknown. The word “ioiô,” which generally means “child”, refers more specifically to the children of the master in the context of slavery. This word, however, seems here to refer to both the children and the master himself. Indeed, in line 20, the term “filha de ioiô” illustrates the polysemic dimension of the term. In any case, the fact of the responsibility of the spillage is diverted here toward the person who will suffer from the spillage, that is the master himself or his children. By focusing on the fact that the butter is not his own, the slave seems to redirect the attention away from any responsibility. Indeed, since it is the master’s property, it is the master’s responsibility. This rhetorical move puts emphasis on the responsibility of the master toward his slaves who cannot own anything, therefore cannot be held accountable for any “accident.” This sort of passive resistance is characteristic of survival techniques within an oppressive context. It exemplifies the play on the Signifying quality of language. It illustrates the use of indirection to signify disapproval. Slaves would indeed often voluntarily sabotage work on the plantation, under the guise of accidents in order to signify discontent, or for indirectly asking for favors. The

³⁴ <http://capoeira-music.net/all-capoeira-songs/all-capoeira-corridos-songs-v/vou-dizer-a-meu-sinho/>

Translation:

I will tell my master

I will tell my master that the butter has spilled/melted. (Chorus)

But the butter is not mine, the butter is the master’s.

indirection of Signifying/*malícia* constitutes a concrete means of resistance in this context. Polysemy seems at work here in a more significant way through the word “*manteiga*”, which refers also to a type of bean, but more significantly to flattery, compliments, sweet-talk or smooth-talk. Parallel to Gates’ emphasis on the fact that African American rhetorical strategies seem to be defined through the revision of the term which denotes meaning production within standard English (i.e. “signification”), one of the most broadly shared song of capoeira, which embodies a similar approach to language, elected “*manteiga*” as its main signifier. Indeed “*manteiga*” is the most repeated word in the song. The fact that it refers both to food, that is orality, and sweet talk or flattery, that is one of the main strategies of Signifying, is probably not an accident. The song can therefore be interpreted as Signifying to the master that his own sweet talk does not work on the slave (it is indeed spoiled, not good for consumption). It also affirms the slaves’ own mastery of this deceptive use of language, through the affirmation that the “*manteiga*” is not the slaves’, but the master’s. In the context of slavery, if both actors use deception and trickery, the nature of the relation is biased by the imbalance of power. The slaves, therefore, cannot be blamed for using deceptive strategies as his/her inferiority justifies self defense. As a disguised critic of the slave master’s deceptive use of language, this song echoes our previous discussion on the re-interpretation of the “blessing” (*benção*) within capoeira. We thus clearly have an illustration of a form of Signifying (*malícia*) present within a song of capoeira known by most practitioners as it is very commonly used. It illustrates the centrality of this trope and its acceptance by all as a defining characteristic of capoeira’s philosophy. While we have already demonstrated Signifying’s West African roots, we clearly see through this song that this trope is also a direct heritage from slavery days.

We shall now move on to a poem called *ACCOUNTABILITY*, composed by Paul

Laurence Dunbar in dialect form, which illustrates a similar approach:

ACCOUNTABILITY

FOLKS ain't got no right to censuah othah folks about dey habits;
Him dat giv' de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits.
Him dat built de gread big mountains hollered out de little valleys,
Him dat made de streets an' driveways wasn't shamed to make de alleys.

5 We is all constructed diff'ent, d'ain't no two of us de same;
 We cain't he'p ouah likes an' dislikes, ef we'se bad we ain't to blame.
 Ef we'se good, we need n't show off, case you bet it ain't ouah doin'
 We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'.

10 But we all fits into places dat no othah ones could fill,
 An' we does the things we has to, big er little, good er ill.
 John cain't tek de place o' Henry, Su an' Sally ain't alike;
 Bass ain't nuthin' like a suckah, chub ain't nuthin' like a pike.

15 When you come to think about it, how it's all planned out it's splendid.
 Nuthin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended;
 Don't keer whut you does, you has to, an' hit sholy beats de dickens,--
 Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o' mastah's chickens.
 (Paul Laurence Dunbar)³⁵

We will not linger on the dialectical aspect of the poem as it relates to the oral dimension in writing which is the topic of the next section of this study. The dialectical form is nonetheless relevant to our purpose here, especially in its social dimension. We have already evoked the harsh criticism from most African American poets contemporary to Dunbar, and from the Harlem Renaissance in particular, that his and other poets' use of dialectical forms have raised. This type of poetry has been compared to a form of literary minstrelsy, misrepresenting African American language and culture. The high popularity of this type of poetry, especially among white audiences, indeed mirrored the popularity of the minstrel show. I would argue that the rejection of his dialect poetry on this basis was not legitimate and constitutes a misunderstanding of Dunbar's aesthetic choice and intent. We have already discussed the constant tension between

³⁵ <http://www.dunbarsite.org/gallery/Accountability.asp>

the need for cultural authenticity vis-à-vis vernacular black cultures and the imperative of commercial exposure determined by white patrons, which has determined African American art, from the publication of the first poets to the present day. (Hip hop and other African American art forms are certainly no exceptions to this.) In this context, the use of dialect forms can be interpreted as a way to remain faithful to authentic folk culture while reaching a large, and sometimes white audience. Even though stereotypical representations were certainly at work, they only become problematic in the perception white audiences had (have) of black people and their culture, and not necessarily in how black artists saw and represented black vernacular cultures. I would tend to think that the rejection of this form of poetry by the black artists of the time certainly sprung from their own biases toward black vernacular culture and the fear of the judgment white society made of black people and culture, rather than from a genuine concern of accuracy in representing black cultures. To me, this particular poem of Dunbar illustrates perfectly how a poem written in dialect can be faithful to African American cultural prerogatives, defend a certain idea of social justice and equity, while being entertaining for both black and white audiences. First of all, as Tony Bolden pointed out, Dunbar's representation of a form of black vernacular in print is quite successful in transcribing its sounds and structure. If one remains stuck on the signs written on the page, the poem can appear hard to read, but when focusing on the sounds, reading becomes much easier. This shift in perception from the visual materiality of the sign to its sonic materiality is already Signifying on the tension between oral and written forms of language. Beyond this primary formal negotiation of duality, the core of the poem is based on a set of binary oppositions denoting balance and equity in the world. The poem appears as a philosophical lesson emphasizing the natural order of things, and the rightful place everyone and everything occupy in creation. This idea of the natural order of things has been

broadly used in the legitimization of slavery. Darwinism in particular has been instrumental in the justification of evolutionary theories on cultures and civilization, placing Europe as the high end of a progressive human development. This dimension appears in the poem, especially in line 2, (“Him dat giv' de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits.”) which seems to emphasize certain attributes of animals as natural to species, fitting into the Darwinian model. The poem seems to signify on this dimension, but could be (mis-)interpreted as a legitimization of slavery, in a certain sense. Line 14, “Nuthin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended;” goes in the same direction, emphasizing the fact that what happens is always intended. Therefore slavery is indeed fulfilling some sort of natural godly plan. The poem also echoes the biblical story within Genesis about the curse of Ham and his son Canaan which had been used successively by Arab Muslims and European Christians to legitimize the enslavement of black people. This interpretation of the poem, however, is put into brackets, reassessed and subverted by the final line. The ironic twist it brings makes one reconsider the whole poem. The natural order of things and the natural balance which exists in the universe is here invoked to legitimize the stealing of the master's chicken, not the institution of slavery. In other words, the philosophical lesson is double-edged; the first part is indeed a rhetorical trick. The natural order of things is employed for the legitimization of a subversive act toward the master. In that sense, the power of the master is delegitimized and slavery condemned as unnatural. Indeed, the words “We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin’,” (line 8) illustrates the fact that slaves did not choose the conditions in which they were placed, and that their behavior is conditioned by this reality. At the same time, the poem works both way and seems to allude to the forgiving of white for oppression since they too are victims of their own exploitative attitudes. This poem is thus double voiced and ambiguous as it seems to legitimize slavery on the

surface, while it is indeed a fundamental and profound critic of its unfair nature. The poem evokes the fact that the natural order of things will help balance inequity and that acts of malevolence toward whites are indeed legitimate in this unbalanced context, which is somehow revolutionary. Thus, under the guise of submission, the reader is in reality confronted to a challenge of the established rules. The poem repeats and subverts the codes of slavery to legitimize resistance. The poem is a comment on the critics toward dialect poetry as well, in the sense that the form and content are not to be taken literally, as a perfect reproduction of stereotypes and a legitimization of oppression, but must be understood in the context in which they stand, the context of white's misrepresentation of black cultures, as a critic of slavery's inherent inequality. Indirection in criticism is both characteristic of the slave's rhetorical strategy and West African rhetorical tropes, as we have already stated many times and demonstrated through the previous capoeira song. It also demonstrates how Signifying can be used to speak to different audiences at once. What this poem achieves, and both dialectical poetry and the minstrel shows at their finest achieve also, I would argue, is allowing a mediation, a dialogue between black and white discursive universes using common cultural frameworks available at the time. These frameworks were determined by the stereotypes that were already largely at work in society, they nonetheless create spaces of communication between these universes, allowing the building of more solid bridges later. Interestingly enough, the minstrel show was one of the first instruments of the spread of African American cultural manifestations on a global scale. We will see in our section on black intertextuality that the subversive reformulation of former tropes, which is present in Dunbar's poem, is also a major aspect of Signifying.

To conclude this section, I chose the poem *Theory on Extinction* by contemporary African American poet Kenneth Carrol, as it displays many different aspects of Signifying in a single poem. Here is the entire piece:

THEORY ON EXTINCTION

(or what happen to the dinosaurs? for my son, thomas)

1 they were crushed by a gigantic meteor
 they froze to death
 they starved to death
 they didn't wash their hands
5 they didn't brush their teeth
 they got really bad report cards
 they believed in gods that did not look like them
 they evolved
 they assimilated
10 they died waiting for john brown/jesus christ/& forty acres & a mule
 they died fighting someone else's war
 they didn't eat their vegetables
 they used porcelana & faded to death
 they overdosed on activator
15 they wanted to be white or arab or greek
 they wanted to be anything but dinosaurs
 they never read dinosaur history
 they never read dinosaur literature
 they read ebony and thought they had it made
20 they read jet and thought they had made it
 they joined the republican party
 they kept shooting at their own reflections
 they got nose jobs/lip jobs/hip jobs
 they would do anything for a job
25 they were scared of revolution
 they thought malcolm x was a fashion statement
 they stopped shouting in church
 they were mis-educated
 they pissed off the great dinosaur gods
30 they wanted to be like the people who despised them
 they were, when they were here, a strange species
 they are long gone son,
 but you can see them
 at the smithsonian
35 just ask for the
 great
 negrosaurus wrecks. (Kenneth Carrol)

The first feature that strikes the reader of this poem, which is in tune with the Africanist aesthetics, and constitutes one of Signifying's main rhetorical tropes, is the use of repetition. The repetition of the deictic "they" is the primary element of focus. It is repeated throughout the poem, until the last five lines. The break from the repetitive structure thus highlights the punch line. The use of this deictic is Signifying in its repetition, as it denotes a plurality of referents. Indeed, "they" can refer to the dinosaurs of the title, but also to the African American community at large, it might refer more specifically to portions of the African American community, the persons who act as described, or to some mythical hypothetical African American community that has already disappeared, or again to African American children who must conform to basic rules of living. The vagueness and multiform quality of this deictic is emphasized through repetition which generates ambiguity. It is the materiality of the word "they" which is emphasized through repetition. Multiple and simultaneous interpretations are then possible. The poem speaks to different audiences at once. Difference is achieved through the multiple audiences targeted by the poet. The first audience of this poem is explicit in the title. The poem was written for the author's son, as a sort of life lesson. The means used by the author to transmit this knowledge or guidelines are indirect, even deceitful. Indeed, through recounting the story of the disappearance of the dinosaurs, the author indirectly gives recommendations to his son. The poem thus appears as a trick. The disappearance of the dinosaurs, which seems at first to be the primary theme of the poem in the first three lines, soon turns out to be a trick used to give guidance on other practical subjects, such as the importance of brushing one's teeth, washing one's hands, etc. At the same time the story of the dinosaurs signifies on the history of the African American community. Cultural and moral guidelines about what it means to be black in America are included in this life lesson. Indirection allows the lesson to be accepted more easily.

Indirection also serves the purpose of speaking to the larger community as well. While dedicating the poem to his son, the author explicitly critiques certain behavior he observed, which he considers counter to the proper functioning of society, in particular the self-destructive behavior observed within the African American community, which might lead to its disappearance as suggested at the end of the poem. The warning is thus both to his son and to the larger community. The poem attacks assimilation (line 7 to 11), lack of knowledge about African American history and culture (15-20), violence, self hatred, etc. This poem is another demonstration of the use of indirection to get a message across to specific audiences. The rhetorical trick is a means of transmission of certain knowledges. We have described Èsù's tricks as a means of communication of universal prerogatives to the human community, a specific way to transmit knowledge and a call for transformation. Signifying, in its play on indeterminacy constitutes a similar approach, which proves especially relevant in the context of slavery, as demonstrated through *Vou dizer a meu senhor* and *ACCOUNTABILITY*. We will see now that Signifying is also manifest in the space which separates orality and writing. We will see that Signifying manifests in a play on the narrative voice in written and oral forms.

3.1.2- Voices: In-text confrontation of oral and written cultures

Let us now turn to the question of orality within the trope of Signifying. We will more specifically look at the tension between orality and writing which is implicit to Signifying. As we have described, Signifying implies bringing to the front the capacity of language to generate plurality of meanings. We have already discussed West African languages' tendency to play on polysemic associations, especially Mandé languages which are tonal. We have described this as the power of words, or the magic in language, manifesting on the paradigmatic axis of

signification, but which finds its basis for expression in the signifier itself, that is on the syntagmatic axis. We have just evoked that the ambiguity in signification, the plurality of interpretation was characteristic of oral cultures, while writing tended to rationalize language, reducing its capacity to generate ambiguity. Noel Amherd, in *Ifa Texts: Diversity and Discourse*, evokes this dichotomy through the interpretation that is often made of the *Ifá* corpus by literate readers (immersed in the culture of writing) of Yoruba culture. He argues against a vision which sees *Ifá* as “this philological ‘ancient written document’ said to be a corpus containing the totality of Yoruba culture, [...] a superior window into an equally monolithic Yoruba (T)radition, itself a passive self-sufficient, never-changing entity.” Instead, he argues that the “Yoruba discursive nature of signs [...] is actually an intertextual, metonymic chain of textual associations manifesting through performances, both physical and oral.” He adds that “any uttered text is a heteroglossic event. Meaning, through this perspective, is dialogic in the extreme, denying stasis while actually privileging difference and plurality.” (24) Amherd indeed sees the *Ifá* text as a fluid corpus, which is reinterpreted constantly through new performances, while always referring to former versions, or utterances of the material. The new associations of *odús* performed at each divination session allow new dialogues between texts, opening spaces for new interpretations. At the same time, the oral nature of the text implies the re-utterance with difference of former texts. The context of the performance, its very utterance, always influences the nature and the *odú* and its form as well. Amherd adds:

Internal to the text are multiple, simultaneous overlapping voices, each resonating within the utterance of the contemporary babalawo whose voice, as the author, is one of many. These voices reflect and refract the social language, its heteroglossia, resulting in their dialogic relationship with one another inside the text and, of course, metonymically reaching outside to other performances, other texts, both oral and physical, and to the social environment in sum. Unlike written documents, *ese Ifa* are

uttered and therefore are always *doing* something; the very purpose of an *ese Ifa* is to reveal, comment, provoke, evoke, invoke, to cause something to happen. Hence, depending upon the context, the *ese Ifa* will take a different form with each recitation, thereby shifting the structural focus from text-centered to performance-centered. (Amherd 26)

It is within the communal context of the performance that the heteroglossic dimension of oral texts is effective. The re-utterance of the text by the *babaláwo* in a new context echoes former performances. The text is repeated with a difference through new associations and in a new form. In addition to that, the plurality of simultaneous interpreting subjects places ambiguity and polysemy at the center of the speech act. Each individual *babaláwo* and each hearer of the message are new interpreting agents of the newly uttered text, adding semantic layers to a performance nonetheless characterized by the repetition inherent to rituals. The same categorization can apply to griots' verbal performances. Indeed, these are characteristics common to all oral performance contexts. Where I would nuance Amherd's approach is in his characterization of *Ifá's* text as "always *doing* something" as opposed to written texts. I would argue that written texts do the exact same thing as oral text, yet not as immediately. While they seem to differ in their capacity to generate ambiguity, written and oral texts are still both defined through their interpretation. Indeed, there is no text without an audience to recognize it as a text. Interpretation is the act of producing meaning from a text, whether uttered or carefully written (or any other types of discursive text for that matter). No matter the precision of the text, interpretation always generates ambiguity and a plurality of meaning. If written texts tend to generate less ambiguity, their interpretation is nonetheless always different, changing, evolving. It is then in the nature of the act of interpretation to generate ambiguity. An interpretation is always a subjective formulation. Any text read at one time by one person is interpreted a certain way, while another person might very well interpret it differently. Additionally, the same person

might interpret the same text in various ways at different times. A text written 300 years ago, for instance, will probably be interpreted differently today than it was at the time of its composition. Literature in print, and poetry in particular, as opposed to non artistic types of written texts, often constitutes an attempt to bring ambiguity at the center of discourse within the format of writing. It also always constitutes an imitation in print of the human voice (internal or external) in communication with an audience (although in an indirect way). Writing always refers to orality and cannot exist without the primacy of oral forms, as Walter Ong recognized in *Orality and Literacy*. (Ong 8) Thus, while oral texts are characterized by fluidity both at the level of the text itself and at the level of interpretation, written texts are fixed in form, yet always in movement through their interpretation. It is indeed in the very act of interpretation, that is the domain of Èsù who connects the text (*Ifá*, or universal laws/wisdom) to the audience (humanity), that meaning in its plurality is generated. It is Èsù who connects the sound-image (signifier) to the concept(s) (signified), thus connecting the material to the spiritual at the level of the sign.

If oral cultures tend to bring to the front language's ambiguity, it is for very practical reasons, as Senegalese scholar Mamoussé Diagne has argued in *Critique de la raison orale*.

Diagne states:

... si les civilisations africaines donnent une si grande place à la « fonction imageante » dans la variété de leur pratiques discursives, c'est justement parce qu'elles sont orales. [...] les civilisations africaines sont, pour des raisons essentielles et non-aléatoires, obligées de faire appel à des procédés originaux dans l'élaboration, l'acquisition, la conservation et la transmission de leur savoir. Le plus remarquable de ces procédés est le recours massif à l'image. Et elles sont contraintes de recourir à de tels procédés discursifs, justement parce que ce sont des civilisations de l'oralité, au sens qu'on a essayé de donner à cette expression. (40-41)

According to him, oral civilizations of black Africa are indeed characterized by a tendency to refer to the concrete world in order to express abstract concepts. Elements from everyday life are

often used to explain deeper philosophical or moral understandings of reality. Bringing back the signifier to the center of a play on semantic association within writing can therefore be interpreted as bringing back a defining aspect of orality within writing. If Gates described Signifying as “the figure of the double-voiced,” it for reasons that go even beyond the tension between the black and the white discursive universe that it tries to negotiate. According to him, both writing and orality are constitutive elements of the structure of Signifying. Gates states:

The figure of writing appears to be peculiar to the myth of Esu, while the figure of speaking, of oral discourse densely structured rhetorically, is peculiar to the myth of the Signifyin’ Monkey. Here, the vernacular tradition names the great opposition of its formal literary counterpart, the tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing. As figures of the duality of the voice within the tradition, Esu and his friend the Monkey manifest themselves in the search for a voice that is depicted in so very many black texts. The tension between them surfaces in the double-voiced discourse so commonly found here. (21)

What this represents, in my view, is a mode of Signifying which prioritizes the representation of the human voice (or rather voices) within writing. This denotes an Africanist aesthetic preference through a strategic focus on orality. We have described African American poets’ constant focus on the voice and the performance aspect of their poetry (part of what Fahamisha Brown called the “poetry of preachment,”) through the progressive integration and fusion of vernacular practices in written forms, as well as through Stephen Henderson’s concept of score and the performance poetry of the Black Arts Movement.

Let us focus now on the ritual of the *roda de capoeira* as exemplifying oral performance. The voice, here, is central to the event as it gives philosophical priorities, historical depth, directions to the event and commands to the players. The ritual, as I have already stated, is initiated through a type of song called *ladainha*, sung by the *mestre* (master) or the senior player of the event. The singularity of the voice of the lead singer, however, is always supported by a

multitude of voices through the trope of call and response (another manifestation of Signifying as we will see). Indeed, once the *ladainha* stops, the leader initiates the *louvação*, also called *chula*, which is a call and response greeting to the event. We have already quoted a *louvação* from a recording by the GCAP group in our second chapter. Let us look at another *chula* from the same recording:

Chula

Ìê, Viva Deus de céu/ Ìê, Viva Deus de céu, camará
 Ìê, viva meu mestre/ Ìê, viva meu mestre, camará
 Ìê, quem me ensinou/ Ìê, quem me ensinou, camará
 5 Ìê, Viva a malandragem/ Ìê, Viva a malandragem, camará
 Ìê, Salva a todos mestres/ Ìê, Salva a todos mestres, camará
 Ìê, é mandingueiro/ Ìê, é mandingueiro, camará
 Ìê, Jogar pra lá/ Ìê, Jogar pra lá, camará
 Ìê, Jogar pra cá/ Ìê, Jogar pra cá, camará
 Ìê, galo canto/ Ìê, galo canto, camará
 10 Ìê, corocóco/ Ìê, corocóco, camará
 Ìê, Ele é mandingueiro/ Ìê, Ele é mandingueiro, camará
 Ìê, Vamos embora/ Ìê, Vamos embora, camará
 Ìê, é hora, é hora/ Ìê, é hora, é hora, camará
 Ìê, menino é bom/ Ìê, menino é bom, camará
 15 Ìê, sabe jogar/ Ìê, sabe jogar, camará
 Ìê, tem fundamento/ Ìê, tem fundamento, camará
 Ìê, que o mestre ensinou/ Ìê, que o mestre ensinou, camará
 Ìê, jogo de mandinga/ Ìê, jogo de mandinga, camará
 Ìê, volta o mundo/ Ìê, volta o mundo, camará
 20 Ìê, que o mundo deu/ Ìê, que o mundo deu, camará
 Ìê, que o mundo dá/ Ìê, que o mundo dá, camará
 (Moraes)³⁶

³⁶ Translation:

Chula

(1-5) Long live God of the sky/Long live my master/Who teaches me/Long live *malandragem*/Cheer for all masters/(6-10) he is *mandingueiro* (magician/sorcerer)/Play over here/Play over there/The rooster sings/cock-a-doodle-do/(11-15) He is *mandingueiro*/Let's go/It's time, it's time/This kid is good/He knows how to play/(16-20) He has a solid foundation/That the master has taught/The game of *mandinga*/Trip around the world/Which the world gave/Which the world gives...

Before commenting on this text, I must first acknowledge the fact that *chulas*, *corridos*, and even *ladainhas*, are rarely uttered the same way twice. If the general structure and some lines of the songs are indeed respected, slight differences might appear, new lines might even be added to apply to the specific context of the utterance. The text is indeed always evolving and adapting to the context. Capoeira songs, by their oral nature, are fluid in form. In that respect, we can refer to Amherd's interpretation of *Ifá*'s text:

We ought to reconceive any written or published account of *ese Ifa* as a photograph of a moment in time. This snapshot synecdochically evokes the full context of the event but it does not contain that event. Hence, unlike reading a *written* poem by Ezra Pound or Wole Soyinka, we do *not* have "The Ifa Verse," for there is no "Ifa Verse" to have in the sense of there being one authoritative, central version around which all others might deviate or approximate. Maybe an even better analogy is a written transcription of, say, a John Coltrane improvisation. While based on the song's melody and structural chord changes, his utterance is unique with all of the expressive features of dynamics, intonation, incorporating spontaneous quotes of other melodies, responding to interest or noises from the audience, and his immediate mental and emotional state. When transcribed onto manuscript paper, this performative context is lost while converting what was an ephemeral utterance, lost after being voiced into a permanent inscription without change. (25)

African and Afro-Diasporic oral performances are generally characterized by a fluidity of the form. The interaction between the text and the audience inherent to direct contact greatly influences the performance. We will see that this multilevel dimension in the production and the interpretation of the text is present in capoeira. We will therefore keep in mind the limitations of the written format to transcribe fully the performative aspect of any oral, or musical event.

As demonstrated in the previous *chula*, each line is first sung by the *mestre*, then repeated by the audience present, as a means of communal greeting. The shout "Êê" functions as the main call initiated by the *mestre*, which is answered by the audience to call the community outside the *roda* to come, witness the event, and participate in it. Indeed, the audience outside the capoeira

setting is encouraged to join in and participate in the singing, or react live to the games. We have thus a multitude of voices simultaneously participating in the oral performance. The repetitive structure of the lyrics encourages the participation of all. The musical structure, also based on repetition, polyrhythmic layering, and short solo variations, sets the tone for expression of even more voices, each instrument responding and dialoguing with one another, while maintaining a continuous and repetitive musical frame. Repetition in the *chula* is materialized by the shout. The lyrics are thus clearly incantatory, calling on god first, then on the masters of the art, as witnesses to the event. The communal aspect of the performance affirms the plurality of meaning, denoting integration rather than exclusion. Indeed, the god that is called on is not a specific one, but potentially integrates all gods of all religions. A common god is assumed within capoeira, which is however not associated with any specific religion. Elements from Candomblé, Christianity, Islam and native traditions are all present in the various aspects of the ritual. The same pluralistic approach is true of the call on the *mestres*. Different students of different *mestres* might be present at any given *roda*, therefore, the communal response to the call “viva meu mestre,” (line 2) is an acknowledgment of all *mestres*. The call “Salva a todo mestres” affirms a sense of community, past and present, within capoeira, reenacted through a common ritual. It is also interesting to note that the relation master/student is directly referred to twice here, (line 3 and 17) denoting the importance of the transmission of knowledge and deference toward elders, both of which insure social cohesion. The evocation of transmission as central to the art constitutes an acknowledgement of the importance of linking past, present and future generations to insure the perpetuation of capoeira’s traditional rituals and knowledge. The *chula*, as we have stated, is followed by *corridos*, which are also based on the same structure of call and response that we have observed in the previous section. As soon as the first *corrido* starts, the game can begin, but

the voices of the *mestre* and the *berimbau* (sometimes overlapping, when the person holding the *gunga*³⁷ is the lead singer, sometimes distinct when the lead and the *gunga* are two different persons) still direct the ritual. The ritual of the *roda* appears to us as the expression of a multitude of voices, at different levels on the planes of existence. The *roda* allows the expression of the voices of the practitioners of the art first, through the songs. It is also a locus for the expression of a larger audience through their own interpretation and comment on the performance witnessed. It is finally the expression of voices from the larger spiritual community, including ancestors, former deceased *mestres*, orishas and other entities representing other religious groups.

We will now discuss a poem by Sterling Brown which illustrates the use of multiple voices and its relevance to Afro-Diasporic contexts, and the North American context in particular. The poem is called *After Winter* and illustrates in print the double-voiced quality of black texts. Indeed, the text demonstrates a shift between standard English and black vernacular English. The poem follows:

After Winter

He snuggles his fingers
In the blacker loam
The lean months are done with,
The fat to come.

5 His eyes are set
 On a brushwood-fire
 But his heart is soaring
 Higher and higher.

10 Though he stands ragged
 An old scarecrow,
 This is the way
 His swift thoughts go,

³⁷ The biggest *berimbau* leading the *roda*.

15 *“Butter beans fo’ Clara
Sugar corn fo’ Grace
An’ fo’ de little feller
Runnin’ space.*

20 *“Radishes and lettuce
Eggplants and beets
Turnips fo’ de winter
An’ candied sweets.*

*“Homespun tobacco
Apples in de bin
Fo’ smokin’ an’ fo’ cider
When de folks draps in.”*

25 He thinks with the winter
His troubles are gone;
Ten acres unplanted
To raise dreams on.

30 The lean month are done with,
The fat to come.
His hopes, winter wanderers,
Hasten home.

35 *“Butterbeans fo’ Clara
Sugar corn fo’ Grace
An’ fo’ de little feller
Runnin’ space...”*
(Sterling A. Brown)

This poem is clearly two-voiced. We observe that the separation between standard English and black vernacular English is denoted by the use of italics. This dichotomy illustrates the space of tension between the two discursive universes in which Afro-Diasporic texts circulate. The two voices here, however, are not in direct dialogue within the poem, they are just in contact through the text. The standard form embodies the narrative voice while the vernacular assumes the dramatic voice. In that dichotomy, the standard voice is clearly set in a position of superiority. Indeed the narrator is omniscient; he can hear the character’s thoughts. (line 12) The narrator observes the scene from a distance, and this distance between the two voices emphasizes the

distance between the two discursive universes they represent. This dichotomy illustrates W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness." The very nature of the voices, and their separation in the poem seems to denote hierarchy, which mirrors a social reality. The standard displays a neutral, distant tone, simply observing the scene, without passing judgment. Yet the narrator is here to present the character to an audience (the "winter wanderers" of line 31.) The distance set between these two linguistic universes gives the impression of witnessing an ethnographic documentary on black people. The narrator appears as the link between the inside of a poor black family and the larger community. To me, the form of this poem illustrates one of the main questions which has preoccupied Harlem Renaissance poets: How to represent African American culture without looking into vernacular cultures? How can the artist use vernacular forms in a way that would not participate in or further aggravate stereotypical representations? The poem seems to choose the strategy of containing the vernacular within a specific context, determined and framed by the standard, to give it a certain legitimacy, and the impression of authenticity through the presupposed objectivity of the observer. This separation illustrates the dichotomy between folk culture and the "high" art of poetry. While Sterling Brown was an advocate of the use of vernacular in written forms, (he indeed demonstrated its full use in poetry in *Southern Road* (1932) for instance) this poem seems to stress the gap that exists between the two discursive universes. At the same time the poem seems to try to bring the two voices in contact. The neutral, slightly empathic tone, seems to illustrate that understanding between these two universes is possible. In the 1985 documentary of the same name; *After Winter: Sterling Brown*, Sterling Brown recognized that this poem was a reminiscence from his childhood days on a farm in Maryland. He acknowledged that the "little feller" was himself. The dichotomy between the two voices takes then another dimension altogether. If we assume that the narrative voice is the

voice of the poet, looking from a distance at his childhood, in particular at his father's mindset, one can perceive the internal struggle Brown and African American poets in general experience through their artistic endeavors. Indeed, the tension between the two discursive universes, between the two voices in the poem, parallels the tension between assimilation of the standards of white society, upon which the development of African American poetry in print depended, and the faithfulness to familial history, that is the African American community's cultural heritage, and African consciousness in the New World, to a certain extent. Ultimately, through the metonymic displacement described by Amherd, the poem could be interpreted as a statement on the African American communities' mindset vis-à-vis their situation in America. Their minds and hopes are indeed perpetually focused on the potential of abundance ("the fat to come"), that is acceptance and full participation within American culture and society as equals to whites. They indeed perpetually wait on and anticipate the end of the winter of segregation and prejudice.

We will now look at Melvin Dixon's poem called *Heatbeats*, in order to illustrate another dimension of the play on the narrative voice which Signifying displays. This poem describes the progressive degradation of the narrator's health from what we can infer are AIDS related diseases. Indeed, both the author's premature death in 1992 from the illness, and elements from the poem itself, lead to this conclusion. The poem's specificity, however, lies in its rhythm, which I would argue acts as a voice of its own, producing meaning within the structure of the poem in relation to the words. The poem is indeed built on a binary structure. Each line is composed of two phrases, each composed of two monosyllabic words. This binary construct echoes with the title, as it evokes the binary beating of a heart. Here is the poem:

	Heartbeats	25	No air. Breath in. Breath in. No air.
	Work out. Ten laps. Chin ups. Look good.		Black out. White rooms. Head hot. Feet cold.
	Steam room. Dress warm. Call home. Fresh air.	30	No work. Eat right. CAT scan. Chin up.
5	Eat right. Rest well. Sweetheart. Safe sex.		Breath in. Breath out. No air. No air.
	Sore throat. Long Flu. Hard nodes. Beware.		Thin blood. Sore lungs. Mouth dry. Mind gone.
10	Test blood. Count cells. Reds thin. Whites low.	35	Six month? Three weeks? Can't eat. No air.
	Dress warm. Eat well. Short breath. Fatigue.		Today? Tonight? It waits. For me.
	Night sweats. Dry cough. Loose stools. Weight loss.	40	Sweet heart. Don't stop. Breathe in. Breathe out.
15	Get mad. Fight back. Call home. Rest well.		(Melvin Dixon)
	Don't cry. Take charge. No sex. Eat right.		
20	Call home. Talk slow. Chin up. No air.		
	Arms wide. Nodes hard. Cough dry. Hold on.		
	Mouth wide. Drink this. Breathe in. Breath out.		

The poem constitutes an interesting play on the narrative voice in the sense that the rhythm of the poem appears to serve as the basis for its lyrical content. The words seem to spring from the rhythm itself. This approach is reminiscent of the griot's approach to composition, as demonstrated in Charles Bird's interview quoted in our first chapter, or the composition

approach of most rappers, who use the musical structure as the basis for building their verses. Here, the rhythm of the heart is the organizing principle of the verses, the force driving the speech patterns. It influences the syntax and reduces it to a minimum, thus expending the Signifying potential of the words. This ambiguity, and the agency of the rhythm generate a duality in the narrative voice. The text could therefore be interpreted in several ways. One could interpret the text as emanating from one person, a narrator talking to himself. It could also be interpreted as a person talking through his heart, or even to his heart. We could also reverse the point of view and attribute the narrative voice to the heart itself. The heart, then, is speaking to itself or to the person it belongs to. The heart seems indeed personified through the emphasis on the rhythm. Despite the fact that the rhythmical regularity is maintained through the binary syllabic division, the visual regularity seems broken, in line 8 and line 12, as the author chooses single words of two syllables to evoke the pulsation. This visual break from the pattern seems to land on significant turning points in the poem. Indeed, the word “beware” (Line 8) directly follows the first enunciation of a series of symptoms from the disease. It seems as if the anxiety generated by the new symptoms had caused the heart to miss a beat. Similarly, on line 12, “Fatigue” follows “Short breath,” which is really significant in the economy of the poem. Indeed, this line is the first one to allude to the semantic field of breathing and asphyxia. This thematic will come back regularly until the very last line of the poem. Indeed, “No air” will be mentioned five times, and “breath,” eight times until the end of the poem, which actually ends on “Breath in. Breath out.” These “breaks” in the regular rhythm, these missed heartbeats, mark significant turns in the economy of the poem, which illustrates further the capacity of rhythm to generate meaning. Rhythm in language is by definition part of the materiality of the sign. It plays out primarily on the syntagmatic axis. What this poem demonstrates, is that emphasis on this very

materiality can generate meaning, and in particular, a plurality of meaning denoted by the different interpretations that can be made of the poem, especially through the ambiguity of the narrative voice. This play on rhythm and meaning is another instance of Signifying in print. The break from the regular rhythmic pattern, i.e. repetition with difference, is also reminiscent of Africanist approach, as it introduces a perception of meaning as fluid and fleeting. It again lays the emphasis on the unpredictability of existence, a sort of built-in coverage from chaos, which we have already described as particular to Africanist world views. The poem's theme itself lays the emphasis on the unpredictability and even frailty of human existence.

Finally, our exploration of the motif of the voice in verbal art forms from the African Diaspora brings us to hip hop. Hip hop artists' command of the narrative voice and the possibilities it offers is central to the art. Adam Bradley has described the use of the different modes of narration through a play on the voice as the main technique of rap's narrative approach to storytelling. According to Bradley:

Voice in storytelling is the governing authorial intelligence of a narrative. Voice would seem to be a given in rap: the MC and speaker's voice are one and the same. We assume that MCs are rapping to us in their own voices and, as such, that what they say is true to their own experience. All along, however, MCs have been taking far greater liberties with voice than their public stances of authenticity would suggest. Rap becomes much more interesting as poetry and rappers become more impressive as poets when we acknowledge rap as a kind of performance art, a blend of fact and fantasy, narrative and drama expressed in storytelling. (Bradley 162)

It is through this perspective that we will read The Notorious BIG's track *Gimme the Loot*, released on his first album "Ready to Die" in 1994. Here is the entire lyric transcription copied from <http://www.ohhla.com/> (The Original Hip Hop Lyrics Archive), with minor corrections of my own. I would just state a few words on the transcription first. The transcription we are using here uses annotations such as; "*Scratching*," or "*Sample*," at places where portions of

speech or songs taken from other recordings are integrated into the structure of the song, as a comment on the lyrics. The musical elements (just like rhythm in *Heartbeats*) are integral part of the Signifying structure of the song, it is thus important to include them in the transcription. The chorus of the song is also signaled as well as BIG's verses. I have also modified elements from the "ohhla" transcription, and added others whenever I found inconsistencies between the transcription and the original recording, or whenever significant elements were missing. The complete transcription of the song follows:

Gimme the Loot

Yeah

Motherfuckers better know... huh, huh

Lock your windows, close your doors

Biggie Smalls, huh... yeah

5 (*scratching* "I'm a bad, bad, man..")

[Notorious B.I.G.]

My man Inf left a Tec and a nine at my crib

Turned himself in, he had to do a bid

A one-to-three, he be home the end of '93

I'm ready to get this paper, G, you with me?

10 *Motherfucking right, my pocket's looking kind of tight
and I'm stressed, yo Biggie let me get the vest*

No need for that, just grab the fucking gat

The first pocket that's fat the Tec is to his back

Word is bond, I'm a smoke him yo don't fake no moves (what?)

15 Treat it like boxing: stick and move, stick and move

Nigga, you ain't got to explain shit

I've been robbin motherfuckers since the slave ships

with the same clip and the same four-five

Two point-blank, a motherfucker's sure to die

20 *That's my word, nigga even try to bogart
have his mother singing "It's so hard..."*

Yes Love, love your fucking attitude

because the nigga play pussy that's the nigga that's getting screwed

and bruised up from the pistol whipping

25 welts on the neck from the necklace stripping

Then I'm dipping up the block and I'm robbing bitches too

up the herring bones and bamboos

I wouldn't give fuck if you're *pregnant*

Give me the baby rings and a #1 MOM pendant

30 *I'm slamming niggaz like Shaquille, shit is real*
 When it's time to eat a meal I rob and steal
 cause Mom Duke ain't giving me shit
 so for the bread and butter I leave niggaz in the gutter
 Huh, word to mother, I'm dangerous
35 *Crazier than a bag of fucking Angel Dust*
 When I bust my gat motherfuckers take dirt naps
 I'm all that and a dime sack, where the paper at?
(*sample 1* "But he's sticking you, and taking all of your money..")

[Chorus 8X]
Gimme the loot, gimme the loot
40 (*scratching* "I'm a bad, bad, man..")

(*sample 2* "Mines is mines and, yours is mine") 2X

[Notorious B.I.G.]
Big up, big up, it's a stick up, stick up
and I'm shooting niggaz quick if you hiccup
Don't let me fill my clip up in your back and head piece
The opposite of peace sending Mom Duke a wreath
45 You're talking to the robbery expert
Stepping to your wake with your blood on my shirt
Don't be a jerk and get smoked over being resistant
cause when I lick shots the shits is persistent
 Huh, goodness gracious the papers
50 *Where the cash at? Where the stash at?*
 Nigga, pass that before you get your grave dug
 from the main thug, .357 slug
 And my nigga Biggie got an itchy one grip
One in the chamber, 32 in the clip
55 Motherfuckers better strip, yeah nigga peel
before you find out how blue steel feel
 from the Beretta, putting all the holes in your sweater
 The money getter motherfuckers don't have better
 Rolex watches and colourful Swatches
60 *I'm digging in pockets, motherfuckers can't stop it*
Man, niggaz come through I'm taking high school rings too
Bitches get *strangled* for they earrings and bangles
and when I rock her and drop her I'm taking her door knockers
And if she's resistant "baka! baka! baka!"
65 *So go get your man bitch he can get robbed too*
Tell him Biggie took it, what the fuck he gonna do?
 I hope apologetic or I'm a have to set it
 and if I set it the cocksucker won't forget it
(*sample 1* "But he's sticking you, and taking all of your money..")

70 [Chorus 8X]
 Gimme the loot, gimme the loot
 (*scratching* "I'm a bad, bad, man..")

(*sample 2* "Mines is mines and, yours is mine") 2X

[Notorious B.I.G.]
Man, listen all this walking is hurting my feet
But money looks sweet (where at?) in the Isuzu jeep
 75 Man, I throw him in the Beem, you grab the fucking C.R.E.A.M
 and if he start to scream "bam! bam!", have a nice dream
 Hold up, he got a fucking bitch in the car
 Fur coats and diamonds, she thinks she a superstar
Ooh Biggie, let me jack her, I kick her in the back
Hit her with the gat...
 80 Yo chill, Shorty, let me do that
 Just get the fucking car keys and cruise up the block
 The bitch act shocked, gettin shot on the spot
(Oh shit! The cops!) Be cool, fool
 They ain't gonna roll up, all they want is fucking doughnuts
 85 *(So why the fuck he keep lookin?)* I guess to get his life taken
 I just came home, ain't trying to see Central Booking
 Oh shit, now he lookin in my face
 You better haul ass cause I ain't with no fucking chase
 So lace up your boots, cause I'm about to shoot
 90 A true motherfucker going out for the loot

[Sounds of police followed by shooting]
 (*sample 3* "Take that motherfuckers")
 (Notorious B.I.G.)

What certainly strikes the listener and/or reader of this narrative is the extreme violence it displays. We will not comment on the content of the song as this is not relevant for our purpose here. We will refer back to it in our last section, which will grant a larger place to gangsta narratives. What I am more interesting in discussing here is the aesthetics, especially as it relates to the narrative structure and the use of voices. The italics here are my own, as they do not appear on the original transcription. They are used to highlight difference in the voice. Indeed two different voices are heard in this song. The voice of Biggie/BIG and the voice of "Inf" (Line

6) are exchanging verses as they describe their armed robbery frenzy around town. These two voices are both performed by BIG, using two different tones of voice, producing a dramatic contrast. Easy Mo Bee, who produced the track, stated that Biggie recorded both voices separately, asking him to leave spaces so that he could fill in the gaps.³⁸ The final result is more than convincing as we really have the impression to witness an exchange between two deranged minds in an obsessive compulsive hunt for money and violence. The use of different voices is very common in rap, especially in the storytelling mode, which is almost systematic to the genre. Sample 1 used in this song for instance, (“But he's sticking you, and taking all of your money...”) is an extract from rap song *Just to get a rep* by hip hop duo Gang Starr, which is also in the mode of storytelling. A portion of this song displays different voices reproduced through indirect speech by the narrator. Indeed, the following section illustrates storytelling in rap and the use of several voices:

Ten brothers in a circle
 Had the kid trapped, the one wit the hood, he said, "We'll hurt you
 If you don't run out your dues and pay
 Give up the Rolex watch or you won't see another day"
 See, they were on the attack
 And one said, "Yo, you wanna make this to a homicide rap?
 Make it fast so we can be on our way
 Kick in the rings and everything, ok?"
 (Guru / Gang Starr)

The reference to *Just to get a rep* in Biggie’s song, is relevant both in the use of voices as well as in the thematic, as we can see from this excerpt. Other references to other songs are integrated within *Gimme the Loot*, through the techniques of sampling and scratching. These references to other rap songs with similar or related themes and aesthetics, participate further in the multitude of voices within the track. Sample 2, for instance, is taken from Onyx’s *Throw Your Gunz*, which is similar to Biggie’s song in terms of the aggressive tone it employs, while Onyx’s lyrics are

³⁸ <http://www.xxlmag.com/magazine/2006/03/the-making-of-ready-to-diefamily-business/>

more metaphorical and not as realistic and violent. The chorus of Biggie's song is also introduced by a musical sample taken from James Brown's *Coldblooded*, adding another layer of signification. We see that both lyrical quotations and musical quotations are part of the Signifying structure, adding layers of meaning and complexity to the multi-voiced quality of the song. All these different layers dialogue within the structure of the song. This act of quoting other artists is almost defining hip hop as a genre, but is also recurrent in other Afro-Diasporic practices. It is yet another manifestation of Signifying, which we have already described as intertextuality, and which we will describe in the following section

3.2- Signifying revisions: Black intertextuality

We have already stated that Signifying laid the emphasis on the stability of the signifier while allowing plurality of the signified. It is indeed "the materiality of the signifier," (Gates 58) its manifestation on the syntagmatic axis, which is the focus here. We have equated the syntagm to the historical plane of existence within Yoruba cosmogony. Signifying, thus, plays on the historical dimension of the sign through its materiality. Signifying achieves a play on this historical dimension of language through the trope of intertextuality, to which we have already alluded. Intertextuality manifests itself in the use of repetition. It is through the repetition of certain themes, words, or expressions that intertextuality connects different texts of different époques in a Signifying relation. The "quoted" element from an original text is put in a new context, giving it a new life, a new meaning. Amherd has described this process in *Ifá* divination as a "dialogic relationship" of voices emulating the "heteroglossia" characteristic of social interactions. (26) He added that:

...it is this intertextuality that characterizes Yoruba oratures where texts signify to others, through particular aural icons, latently awaiting expansion, or where texts actually ingest other texts. This intertextuality generates performance where recitation becomes a discourse through metonymic chains of associated icons and texts. Texts and signs beckon toward other texts and signs... (Amherd 31)

Texts indeed communicate through metonymic displacement, where one text substitutes to another one through the repetition of some of its motifs, themes, words, etc. The use of “mascon” words for instance, which Stephen Henderson has described as “a massive concentration of Black experiential energy which powerfully affects meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry,” (Bolden 44) is one of the techniques of Signifying revision. Fahamisha Patricia Brown has identified two mascon words illustrating recurrent themes within the African American literary tradition: the “river” and the “train.” She analyzed their recurrence in different poems. (Brown 68-73) She also referred to call and response as a main agent of intertextuality within the tradition. She states:

Call elicits response in African American vernacular culture. A written text can function as a call. Texts can call and respond to each other as well as to their readers. Individual writers provide variations on common vernacular and literary themes. In the manner of individual soloists in a jazz group, African American writers enter an ongoing conversation. (Brown 29)

In this context, the repetition of former tropes is not just a simple copy of originals or former versions, but a Signifying one, in that it always constitutes a comment on the previous form. We will refer here to “Signifying revisions.” Gates described this dimension of Signifying as “critical signification, or formal Signifyin(g),” and used it as his “metaphor for literary history.” (107) Indeed, the repetition of specific recurrent tropes across different texts and time periods participates in the constitution of a literary tradition, its perpetuation, as well as an ongoing conversation and comment on it. In a similar fashion to the griot’s praise, the literary reference to

former texts can assume the form of a homage to the former piece or an indirect criticism, sometimes a mix of both. Gates adds:

Writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience. This mode of revision, of Signifyin(g), is the most striking aspect of Afro-American literary history. If black writers read each other, they also revise each other's texts. Thereby they become fluent in the language of tradition. Signifyin(g) is the figure of Afro-American literary history, and revision proceeds by riffing upon tropes. (Gates 124)

This riffing on tropes takes as basis the play on form, which at the level of the sign is a play on the signifier, as we have seen. This focus on the signifier (mascons are a good illustration of that) creates an echo across time which re-activates all former meanings contained within the signifier. The *nayam/ashé* contained in the word is activated, we could say, and new layers of meaning can be added in the new context of the utterance. We can here refer back to Barbara Hoffman's description of the *jelikan*; this type of speech of the griot whose phrases "are uttered very rapidly, at times like verbal gunfire, bombarding the noble with more sounds that can be assimilated, causing confusion," and in which "what is heard is not merely what is said by the griot at the time, but what has been heard on the same topic at different times, in different places." (Hoffman 92)³⁹ We have already evoked Signifying revisions of former tropes within hip hop through The Notorious BIG's song *Gimme the Loot* and the samples it contains. We have already evoked the fact that intertextuality is almost defining rap's musical construction through the trope of the break beat, which is Signifying revision by nature. We will see that the

³⁹ See Chapter I, page 66-67.

lyrical content also demonstrates a similar approach. We will also identify this trope in the art of capoeira and in African American poetry.

3.2.1- Mascons and historical revisions in capoeira

Let us look at the trope of Signifying through intertextuality in the art of capoeira. We will first focus on a few “mascon words” present in capoeira songs, that is, words which have a specific meaning within the art because of their repetition and the historical resonance they carry. If the word “*malícia*,” “*malandro/malandragem*,” “*mandinga/mandingeiro*” are obvious mascons within capoeira, we will look at other terms commonly found in many songs. The first category of words to which I would refer gathers words such as “*mandinga*,” and refers to the African roots of the art. The word “*Angola*” is the most obvious one, especially in the genre of capoeira angola. Another such word is “*Luanda*,” which refers to what is presently the biggest city and the capital of Angola, as well as the world’s third largest Portuguese-speaking city. Historically, references to Luanda are very relevant, as this place had been the center of the slave trade to Brazil between approximately 1550 and 1836. (Miller) The city was therefore the main point of entry to the new world for Africans. It becomes logically the main point of return to the African continent for the African descendants of Brazil. Here is a *corrido* referring to the city:

5 **Luanda ê Meu povo**
 Luanda ê, Meu povo
 Luanda ê, Pará
 Ô Teresa canta sentada
 Ô Idalinha samba de pé
 Ê lá no cais da Bahia
 Não tem lelê não tem nada

10 Ô não tem lelê nem lalã
 Ô lae laila
 Ô lelê
 Ô lae laila
 Ô lelê
 (Public Domain)⁴⁰

In another version of the song the word “*povo*” (“people”) is replaced by “*boi*” (“ox”) complicating the interpretation of the song. Here, the reference to the place is not obvious. It seems that the word is indeed used for its sole sound quality while the historical resonance it carries through the original meaning seems lost. The interpretation is not clear, especially in the version with the “ox”. The song still refers to music and dance, and to Bahia, the center of Afro-Brazilian life and culture, and in particular to the bank, (“*cais*”) which evokes the transatlantic trade. Here is another song taken from Mestre Jogo de Dentro’s record called *No toque do Berimbau*, referring to Luanda, and Benguela, which is another city south of Luanda. The location of these cities is the focus of the song here as it situates them in Angola:

5 **Angola me chama**
 Luanda, Benguela, Angola me chama
 Capoiera de Angola só entende quem ama
 Luanda, Benguela, Angola me chama
 Vou me embora para Angola, nem que seja esta semana
 Luanda, Benguela, Angola me chama
 Vou me embora para Angola, como já disse que vou
 Luanda, Benguela, Angola me chama
 (Ivens / Mestre Jogo De Dentro)⁴¹

Through this song, the root of capoeira in Angola is affirmed, and the connection maintained. This contrasts with the former song, which is associated with groups of capoeira regional. Mestre Jogo de Dentro is a student of recently passed away Mestre Jão Pequeno, former student of

⁴⁰ <http://capoeira-music.net/all-capoeira-songs/all-capoeira-corridos-songs-l/luanda-e-meu-povo/>

⁴¹ Translation:

Angola is calling me

Luanda, Benguela, Angola is calling me (Chorus)/ Capoeira de Angola, only those who like it can understand it/I will go to Angola, even if it is not this week/I will go to Angola, as I said I would...

Mestre Pastinha (founder of the first school of capoeira angola). The difference between the angola genre and the regional is therefore manifest in this song, in their approach to capoeira's African roots. While in the first song the relation is not obvious, in the second, it is the focus of the song. Another important mascon word within capoeira is "*dendê*." It refers primarily to the oil extracted from the *dendeizeiro*, which is a plant originally from West Africa, called Oil Palm, (*Elaeis guineensis*) and which can be found in a vast area spreading between Angola and Gambia. It was imported in Brazil during the slave trade, and its oil (*dendê*) became a staple of Bahian cooking. It is also extensively used during candomblé rituals. *Dendê* is in particular given in sacrifice to Exu, or used for other rituals associated with the divinity. Here is a *corrido* referring to this central cultural element:

Tem Dendê, Tem Dendê
 Tem dendê, Tem dendê
 No jogo de Angola tem dendê
Tem dendê, tem dendê
 No jogo de baixo tem dendê
 5 *Tem dendê, tem dendê...*
 (Public Domain)⁴²

In this song, and in capoeira in general, the term *dendê* generally refers to power, skills, *malícia*, or *mandinga*. This song is a vehicle for verbal play, as anything or anyone can be integrated in the lyrics and be referred to as "having *dendê*." Having *dendê* is indeed a compliment in capoeira. It refers both to a central cultural element of Bahian life, but also to one of the main element which connects Brazilian culture to Africa. It is not by accident that this oil is central in many candomblé ceremonies, which as I have stated already, are often focusing on the transposition of the Brazilian context to Africa. The importance of this oil in relation to Exu, for

⁴² Translation:

There's *dendê*, there's *dendê*

There's *dendê*, there's *dendê*/In the game of Angola, there's *dendê*/In the low game, there's *dendê*...

instance, is significant as Exu connects separate worlds. Here is another common *corrido* referring to *dendê*:

Sou homem nao sou muleque
O dendê o dendê
O dendê de mare
Sete dias no mar
Sete dias na mare
5 Eu vou dizer a dendê
Sou homem não sou muleque
Eu vou dizer a dendê
Sou homem não sou muleque
(Public Domain)⁴³

Another version of that song often circulates. The chorus of this more broadly shared version of the song says; “*Sou homen não sou mulher,*” which can be interpreted as somewhat derogatory to women. In the recordings of the group Nzinga Capoeira founded by Mestre Janja, she revises the song’s chorus in “*Tem homen e tem mulher,*” while line 3 and 4 state “*dendê de óleo amarelo,*” referring to the color of the oil. While the first version can be interpreted as a sort of initiatory experience, in which the narrator has spent seven days at sea, coming back a man, no longer a kid (*muleque*), the revision by Mestre Janja points at the imbalance between man and women which is implicit in the most popular version of the song. Indeed, many practitioners of the art are women, and some songs (this one in particular,) are male oriented, even sometimes plainly derogatory to women. Janja’s rhetorical move reinstates balance between the sexes. The three versions of the same song illustrates that constant Signifying revisions of songs are part of the verbal art of capoeira. The oral quality of the art indeed encourages fluctuations in lyrics as we have already stated.

⁴³ Translation:

I am a man, I am not a child

Oh *dendê*, oh *dendê*/Oh *dendê* of the sea/Seven days at sea/Seven days at sea/I will say to *dendê*/I am a man, I am not a child/I will say to *dendê*/I am a man, I am not a child...

I would finally refer to a specific element from capoeira's history whose representation in songs demonstrates the importance of Signifying revisions in the formation of historical narratives and dialogues. Many songs refer to the history of Brazil, and its iconic characters. Among the figure that stands out as central to the history of Africans in Brazil is Princess Isabel (1846-1921).

Princess Isabel the eldest daughter of Emperor Dom Pedro II and Empress Dona Teresa Cristina, governed Brazil as regent whenever her father was away. She is remembered for signing the Golden Law (*Lei Áurea*) on 13th May 1888, abolishing slavery, freeing all slaves in Brazil. Let us look at a *corrido* evoking Princess Isabel and the abolition of slavery in Brazil.

Princesa Isabel, Princesa Isabel
Onde está a liberdade,
Se a algema não se quebrou,
O negro quer felicidade,
O negro também quer ser doutor
5 Princesa Isabel, Princesa Isabel,
Liberdade do negro só tá no papel
Princesa Isabel, Princesa Isabel,
Liberdade do negro só tá no papel
(Public Domain)⁴⁴

This song is an open critique of abolition, denoting the discrepancy between *de jure* abolition (“no papel”) and *de facto* abolition, which is seen as still pending, so to speak. The word “*algema*” here refers to handcuffs, but is also a term used more generally to refer to oppression. Thus, the handcuffs are used as a symbol of oppression toward blacks, which not only resonates with the past history of slavery, but to contemporary oppression of poor black communities through lack of economic opportunities and criminalization. The abolition of slavery on paper

⁴⁴ <http://capoeira-music.net/all-capoeira-songs/all-capoeira-corridos-songs-p/princesa-isabel-princesa-isabel/>
Translation:

Princess Isabel, Princess Isabel

Where is freedom/if the chains are not broken/The black man wants happiness and success/The black man wants to be a doctor as well/Princess Isabel, Princess Isabel/The freedom of the black man is only on paper...

has not changed the oppression towards black,s and has not brought equal opportunity. Here is a *ladainha*, composed by Mestre Tony Vargas, using the same thematic:

Dona Isabel, que história é essa ?

Dona isabel que historia é essa
De ter feito abolição
De ser princesa boazinha
Que acabou com escravidão

5 Estou cansado de conversa
Estou cansado de ilusão
Abolição se fez com sangue
Que inondava esse pais

10 Que o negro transforma em luta
Cansado de ser infeliz
A abolição se fez bem antes
Ainda por se fazer agora

15 Com a verdade das favelas
Nao com a mentiras da escola
Ôh! isabel chegou a hora
De se acabar de essa maldade

20 E de ensinar pra nossos filhos
O quanto custa a liberdade
Viva Zumbi , nosso guerreiro
Que fez-se heroi la em Palmares

 Viva a cultura desse povo
A liberdade verdadeira
Que ja corria nos quilombos
Que ja jogava capoeira

25 Iê viva Zumbi...
Iê Viva Zumbi Camará
Iê Rei de Palmares
Iê Rei de Palmares Camará

30 Iê Libertador
Iê Libertador Camará
Iê Viva Meu Mestre
Iê Viva Meu Mestre Camará

35 Iê quem me ensinou
 Iê quem me ensinou camará
 Iê a Capoeira
 Iê a Capoeira Camará
 (Mestre Toni Vargas)⁴⁵

This *ladainha* indeed echoes the previous song in its questioning of the official version of history, which repeats the myth of the abolition of slavery. Tony Vargas criticizes, for instance, the work of the institutions which transmit what he sees as an inexact and deceptive version of historical truth, what he calls “*a mentiras da escola.*” (line 14) Instead, Tony Vargas emphasizes the fact that the real liberation from bondage is in the culture of the people, (“*a cultura desse povo/A liberdade verdadeira*”) and that this was anterior to the abolition, in fact as soon as the first Africans were put in captivity and shipped to Brazil. To him, the *quilombos* and capoeira are the real symbols of black people’s freedom in Brazil. An opposition between competing historical narratives is present in both these songs. By challenging the “official” version of history, promoted through education and the media, the verbal art of capoeira signifies both to the inside community of capoeira, and to the larger Brazilian and global community, on the ideology which sustains the official discourse. Tony Vargas’ song, in particular, re-inscribes the struggle of the people, through cultural resistance, as the real agent of liberation. The Signifying

⁴⁵ http://www.capoeira-infos.org/ressources/textes/dona_isabel.htmlcapoeira

Translation:

Mistress Isabel, whose history is this?

(1-4) Mistress Isabel, whose(what) history is this?/to have signed abolition/to be the good princess/who put an end to slavery/(5-8) I am tired of the conversation/I am tired of the illusion/The abolition was achieved through the spilling of blood/which flooded this country/(9-12) Which the black man transformed in struggle/tired of being miserable/The abolition was achieved much earlier/but can also be achieved now/(13-16) with the truth of the *favelas* (ghettos)/Not with the lies of the school/Oh! Isabel, the time has come/to put an end to this abuse/(17-20) and to teach to our sons/how much freedom costs/Long live Zumbi, our warrior/who became a hero in Palmares/(21-24) Long live the culture of this people/the real freedom/which already ran in the *quilombos*/which already played capoeira/ (25-36) Iê, long live Zumbi/king of Palmares/the liberator/Long live my master/who taught me/capoeira...

revision of national myths through capoeira's intertextual dimension constitutes an attempt to give solid basis for national reconciliation and unity.

3.2.2- Literary sampling and the theme of the battlefield in African American poetry

We will now focus on African American poetry. I will first analyze James Weldon Johnson's *O Black and Unknown Bards*, which is a masterful demonstration of the power and centrality of intertextuality in Afro-Diasporic cultures, as well as a great fusion of the discursive universes of African/Afro-Diasporic cultures and European/Western cultures.

O Black and Unknown Bards

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrels' lyre?
5 Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
10 As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
15 That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
20 These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

25 Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars

At the creation, ever heard a theme
 Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars
 How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
 30 The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
 Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
 That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
 That from degraded rest and servile toil
 35 The fiery spirit of the seer should call
 These simple children of the sun and soil.
 O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
 You—you alone, of all the long, long line
 Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
 40 Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
 No chant of bloody war, no exulting paeon
 Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
 You touched in chord with music empyrean.
 45 You sang far better than you knew; the songs
 That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
 Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
 You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.
 (James Weldon Johnson)

This poem demonstrates Signifying revisions at several levels. The first level of revision is positioned at the very locus of expression of Signifying, which we have constructed throughout our study; the space between form (materiality) and meaning (interpretation/evocation). In terms of form, the poem embraces standard English. The content of the poem, however, praises African American vernacular culture. The poem in that sense signifies on both linguistic contexts by putting them in contact. The poem indeed signifies on the Shakespearean sonnet, using a familiar rhyming structure (ABAB CDCD) set in motion through the use of iambic pentameters. The poem is indeed not quite a sonnet but certainly refers to it. The binary regularity of the rhyming structure, however, evokes the very rhythms of the spiritual songs the poem praises. The poem is thus a revision of traditional Western versification through its evocation of African American vernacular practices. In that sense, the revision of the sonnet is a Signifying one as the original

meaning of the word “sonnet” refers to “song” or “sound”. The praise that is made of African American vernacular culture, in particular in the evocation of the composition of songs, is thus directly Signifying upon Western traditional perceptions of versification as somehow linked to song composition. If Johnson embraces Western standards in terms of form, it is for the purpose of building bridges between standard English, which is his main instrument as a poet, and vernacular traditions to which he feels bound.

The second most obvious level of Signifying revision present in this poem comes from the use of the technique of quotation (literary sampling if you would). By quoting directly the title of famous spirituals, Johnson brings to the front not only the very materiality of the songs, through an evocation of their sounds and rhythms, but also their Signifying dimension, their meaning within the continuum of African struggle in the New World, as well as the history they carry. It is the history of cultural resistance in the New World at large that these quotations echo. The choice of songs Johnson made is significant in that both *Steal Away* and *Swing low*, for instance, have been described as demonstrating the double meaning that was often a characteristic of spirituals. *Steal Away*, for instance, has been described as a call for illegal retreats of slaves to secret meetings, or for escapes. *Swing low*, on the other hand, has been associated with the Underground Railroad; the chariot in the song indeed referring to the train, while the crossing of the Jordan river refers to the crossing over to the free northern states. These songs were supposedly used as concrete signals for action. The song *Go Down Moses* also refers to another instance of Signifying revision of biblical narratives. Passages from the bible have been read by black preachers as applying to the situation of the slave, in particular Exodus, in the Old Testament. By quoting spirituals who display both the Signifying revision of Biblical narratives and a manifestation of the double meaning that is recurrent within Afro-Diasporic cultural

traditions, Johnson chose indeed to lay the emphasis on the very rhetorical strategies which define the tradition, in particular in its relation to the dominant discourse. Doing so within the aesthetic parameters of the dominant paradigm is particularly significant. In the fourth stanza for instance, the dialogue between the two universes is complete when Johnson evokes a great German composer whose art cannot compete with the greatness of the spiritual *Go Down Moses*. Johnson uses the thematic of the spiritual *Steal Away* when referring to musical creation in both black and white contexts. He signifies on the achievements of the black bards and seems to suggest that they got closer to divine inspiration than the greatest of the European composers. Indeed, in line 25-26 he states of the German composer's art: "...in his dream / Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars," which echoes *Steal Away*'s "He calls me by the thunder." In addition, Johnson's line 29-30, "How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir/The blood..." referring to the spiritual *Go down Moses*, echoes the line "The trumpet sounds way down in my sanctified soul" in *Steal Away*. This lexical reference to the spiritual seems to imply that divine inspiration, defined by the "thunder" and the "trumpet," can only remain a dream, that is, an ideal to be achieved for the German composer, while the black bards have indeed put it to practice in their songs.

Despite the defense of African American vernacular practices, and the spiritual in particular, Johnson's poem nonetheless demonstrates prejudices toward black vernacular culture and black people at large. Indeed, the very rhetorical questions which frame the poem could be interpreted as a sign of incredulity as to the achievement of the black bards. How can they have reached the "sacred fire" (2) and "the beauty of the minstrel's lyre" (4) while being in "darkness" (3)? Johnson's rhetorical choice, while certainly an attempt at contrasting the degradation of slavery with the slaves' artistic achievement, resonates with the final line which says: "You sang a race

from wood and stone to Christ.” This line seems to reject former African religious practices, embracing the religion of the oppressor and equating it to spiritual elevation and progress. It introduces a rupture between the spiritual and the traditional West African practices which certainly influenced it. The whole structure of the poem is based on an unanswered question which is stated in the first stanza: “How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?” (line 2) The poem indeed does not seem to answer this question while alluding to it through intertextuality. The sacred fire can be interpreted as the fire of *ashé/nyama*, which represents the connection to West African cosmogony, rhetorical strategies, aesthetic preferences and understanding of the power of words. It is indeed through the heritage of the griot and under the divine supervision of Èsù, that the slaves managed to make the best of their desperate situation in the New World and create divine art. It is in the very “wood and stone” (48) of African languages and cultures, that slaves found the tools to manage to turn the religion of the oppressor, which has been one of the main instruments of their enslavement and continued oppression, into a tool for survival and subversion, and an effective weapon for self-defense, as well as a vehicle for great, universal art.

Finally, before moving to the use of intertextuality in rap music, I will refer here to one of the main recurrent themes of African American poetry, which is also central to hip hop culture and has to do with the notion of literature and art as a struggle, a battle. This theme indeed bears historical significance as it refers to the continuous struggle for survival of the African American people and their cultural heritage. It is a theme that connects different Afro-Diasporic forms as the oppression felt by Africans across the Atlantic world was of the same nature. Indeed, the previously quoted song by Mestre Tony Varga demonstrates a similar focus on the history of the struggle of black people in Brazil. To illustrate this theme, let us look at the poem *Battle Report* by African American poet Bob Kaufman:

Battle Report

One thousand saxophones infiltrate the city.
Each with a man inside,
Hidden in ordinary cases,
Labeled FRAGILE.

5 A fleet of trumpets drops their hooks,
 Inside at the outside.

Ten waves of trombones approach the city
Under blue cover
Of late autumn's neo-classical clouds.

10 Five hundred bassmen, all string feet tall,
 Beating it back to the bass.

One hundred drummers, each a stick in each hand,
The delicate rumble of pianos, moving in.

15 The secret agent, an innocent bystander,
 Drops a note in the mail box.

Five generals, gathered in the gallery,
Blowing plans.

At last, the secret code is flashed:
Now is the time, now is the time.

20 Attack: The sound of jazz.

The city falls.
(Bob Kaufman)

In this poem, the imagery of warfare is intermingled with the imagery of a jazz performance.

This association seems to play on the limits between metaphorical substitution and metonymic combination. Indeed, the substitution of terminology associated with warfare to the lexical field of jazz denotes metaphorical substitutions. On the other hand, the history of African struggle in America can be equated to the struggle for cultural survival. Therefore, jazz becomes a metonymic signifier of African American struggle itself. In the poem, jazz becomes the agent of resistance, and an offensive one. Jazz embodies this resistance in the physical world through the

poem's mixed imagery. The recurrence of warfare terminology within jazz itself, in terms such as "jazz combo", "axes", "chops", illustrates the idea that jazz, and African American culture at large, are metonymically associated with the struggle for liberation of the people. This poem plays on both axis of signification simultaneously, playing on the thin line of demarcation between metaphors and metonyms, which is indeed what Signifying revisions achieve. The substitution of "jazz" for warfare is metapchorical, while placing "jazz" in the context of struggle is metonymic in its evocation of the history of resistance. Jazz is not similar to an armed struggle (metaphor), it becomes the armed struggle within the poem (metonymy). We will see that the imagery of battle and warfare is indeed a recurrent theme in African American culture. Here is another example of the use of the battlefield thematic in African American poetry. The poem is called *For Sweet Honey in the Rock*, by Sonia Sanchez, and is a poem dedicated to the vocal female group of the same name:

For Sweet Honey in the Rock

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

5 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

10 *i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes
 amid rumors of death,
 calling out to everyone who would listen
 it is time to move us all into another century
 time for freedom and racial and sexual justice
 time for women and children and men time for hands unbound
 i had come into the city wearing peaceful breasts
 and the spaces between us smiled*
 15 *i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes.
 i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes.*

And they followed us in their cars with their computers
 and their tongues crawled with caterpillars
 and they bumped us off the road turned over our cars,
 20 and they bombed our buildings killed our babies,
 and they shot our doctors maintaining our bodies,
 and their courts changed into confessionals
 but we kept on organizing we kept on teaching believing
 loving doing what was holy moving to a higher ground
 25 even though our hands were full of slaughtered teeth
 but we held out our eyes delirious with grace.
 but we held out our eyes delirious with grace.

I'm gonna treat everybody right
 I'm gonna treat everybody right
 30 I'm gonna treat everybody right til I die.

I'm gonna treat everybody right
 I'm gonna treat everybody right,
 I'm gonna treat everybody right til I die.

come. i say come, you sitting still in domestic bacteria
 35 come. i say come, you standing still in double-breasted mornings
 come. i say come, and return to the fight.
 this fight for the earth
 this fight for our children
 this fight for our life
 40 we need your hurricane voices
 we need your sacred hands

i say, come, sister, brother to the battlefield
 come into the rain forests
 come into the hood
 45 come into the barrio
 come into the schools
 come into the abortion clinics
 come into the prisons
 come and caress our spines

50 i say come, wrap your feet around justice
 i say come, wrap your tongues around truth
 i say come, wrap your hands with deeds and prayer
 you brown ones
 you yellow ones
 55 you black ones
 you gay ones

you white ones
you lesbian ones

60 *Comecomecomecomecome to this battlefield*
called life, called life, called life. . . .

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

65 I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.
(Sonia Sanchez)

The poem develops the same concept of culture as the main battle field in the struggle for liberation. Indeed, the tension between the first stanza in italics (line 7-16) and the second one (17-27) illustrates the fact that cultural resistance, that is, non-violent resistance (*"life in my eyes"* (7, 15, 16), *"peaceful breasts"* (13)) is subversive to the point of triggering physical violence from the oppressor. The first part of the poem, from line 1 to line 27, seems to serve as a justification for the second part. By exposing the necessity for the protest, the violence with which it is met, and the determination of the protestors, the narrator tries to lead the audience to action. The call to action in the second half of the poem is achieved through the use of the trope of repetition. The incantatory tone of the poem evokes the spiritual tradition which is part of the band Sweet Honey in the Rock's repertoire, creating a resonance with African American musical and spiritual tradition. The poem is also a call for unity, connecting *"the spaces between us"* (14) in a common purpose of liberation through non-violence, that is through culture. The poem indeed suggests, through the reference to the band and the musicality it displays, that art can constitute a potent means of peaceful protest, even within a context of violence, and a potent call for unity.

I will finally refer to another manifestation of the trope of art as a form of struggle to oppression in evoking more radical and direct critics of oppression and affirmation of resistance in Claude McKay's poem *To the White Fiends*.

To the White Fiends

THINK you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?
5 Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match—out-match: am I not Africa's son,
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?
But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light
10 Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white
For thee to prove thyself of highest worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!
(Claude McKay)

The poem is based on an opposition between violence and spiritual elevation. This opposition is emphasized by the opposition between darkness and light. McKay plays on the resonance of these words as a way to revise stereotypes. Indeed, in the first part of the poem, the first line “Think you not I am not fiend and savage too?” signifies on the stereotypical representation of blackness, which was used to legitimize oppression. This line returns the stereotypes to the oppressor. This line is to be put in parallel with the last line of this first part, line 7 which says: “Black of that black land where black deeds are done?”, which signifies on the traditional association of the color black to evil, obscurity, ignorance, the unknown, in European imagery. The contrast is set in the second part, where blackness is associated with “light” (8) and “lamp” (14). Through the poem, the potential for violence is used as a warning to the oppressor. Violence from “white fiends” can indeed be met with equal violence in response. Yet, the poem affirms the moral and spiritual worth of black people, who despite the violence they endure,

manage to maintain moral prerogatives, in particular through their cultural achievements. This poem, in its provocative tone both evokes past violent rebellions of African Americans (Nat Turner's for instance) anticipates the defiant attitude of blacks in the 1970s and the violence of some Black Power advocates (Huey Newton and Jonathan Jackson for instance). This poem written around 1912 illustrates that the theme of black rage and the potential for violent reaction to inequality are important in this literary tradition. The verbal expression of this contained violence would become one of the landmarks of hip hop culture as we will see in the final section of this study.

3.2.3- Dead Prez: Signifying gangsta:

We have already alluded to the manifestation of intertextuality within hip hop music, first in our discussion of the break, which is musical quotation, repetition with difference by nature. Intertextuality is thus the very mode of expression of hip hop's original musical structure. We have evoked the use of sampling of lyrical lines as another aspect of intertextuality in Biggie's *Gimme the Loot*. We must be aware that intertextuality in rap is manifested at the level of the rapper's expression as well. If the genre displays a massive use of mascon words, both specific to hip hop's lexical universe and to the broader African American cultural heritage, it is also common for a rapper to quote an entire line directly from another artist's repertoire. Similarly, it is very common that a rapper quotes one of his/her former rap/recording, building a sort of resonance with his/her own personal "tradition." Intertextuality in hip hop, often navigates between homage and critique of former tropes. It is in this light that I chose to discuss an album which is entirely based on this idea of Signifying revision. I chose the 2010 mixtape called *Turn Off the Radio Vol. 4: Revolutionary but Gangsta Grillz* by hip hop duo Dead Prez, mixed by Dj

Drama. The concept of mixtapes is an important one within hip hop culture, as mixtapes were originally the medium of circulation of the musical form of the culture. Indeed, the first manifestations of hip hop music were live performances. People started to record those performances on audio cassettes and made copies that would circulate. Eventually, the DJs would start making their own cassettes as a means of promotion of their music. To this day, artists use that format to promote their art and test new materials at the local level before nationwide releases, for instance. In the popular realm, mix tapes are subjective selections of musical pieces copied on a tape, or a CD, a sort of personal “best of” compilation. In hip hop, it has become a selection of tracks sometimes blended together (mixed), selected by a DJ, and sometimes used as a background for the expression of a rapper or several rappers. DJ Drama is famous for his mixtapes featuring several famous rappers. The mixtape he released with Dead Prez in 2010 is part of his series called *Gangsta Grillz*, and features the duo’s two MC, stic.man and M-1, rapping on former popular, mainstream hip hop instrumentals. While this type of reuse of former instrumentals for the expression of new performers, new lyrics, is nothing new—indeed the concept of versioning in Jamaican music is common within hip hop as we have already observed—Dead Prez’s mix features Signifying revisions of original tracks, which constitutes a Signifying revision of the trope of Gangsta, in particular, in its commercial manifestation. Dead Prez has been known for their political positioning for social justice, their critic of the rap industry, and their Pan-African orientation. This mixtape, which was released as a free download on their web-site in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the release of their first album *Let’s Get Free*, constitutes a critique of the commercial approach of mainstream rappers and the influence of major record companies in shaping the mainstream discourse of rap music. This record contains some of the most acerbic social critique of the duo.

The first track of the mixtape is based on the instrumental of Drake's hit song *Over*. It is called *Far From Over* and is not just a simple use of the instrumental, but actually a reinterpretation of the lyrical content. Stic.man indeed repeats throughout the mixtape; "This is not a makeover, but a takeover!" emphasizing the fact that the whole mixtape is based on the appropriation and reversal of the original tracks. What *Far From Over* displays is a multilayered re-appropriation of the song. Stic.man's first verse for instance is a reinterpretation of Drake's. Here are the two verses put side by side:

Over

[Drake]

Alright, bottles on me, long as someone drink it
Never drop the ball, fuck is y'all thinkin'?
Makin' sure the Young Money ship is never sinkin'
'Bout to +Set it Off+ in this bitch, Jada Pinkett
5 I shouldn't a drove, tell me how I'm getting' home
You too fine to be layin' down in bed alone
I could teach you how to speak my language, Rosetta Stone
I swear this life is like the sweetest thing I've ever known
'Bout to go +Thriller+ Mike Jackson on these niggaz
10 All I need's a fuckin' red jacket with some zippers
Super good smidoke, a package of the swishers
I did it overnight, it couldn't happen any quicker
Y'all know them? Well fuck it, me either
But point the biggest skeptic out, I'll make him a believer
15 It wouldn't be the first time I done it
Throwin' hundreds when I should be throwin' ones, bitch I run it - ah!

Far From Over

[stic.man]

RBG Dead Prez like Lincoln
Never fall off, what the hell was y'all thinkin' [2X]
We 10 years deep still real still eatin'
Still middle finger to the police and still mean it
5 This is RBG code it's more than just a pop song
If you don't know must ain't been out on the block long
Let me show you how to speak the language in better form
I swear this life is like the realest movement ever born
Truth is like a 44 magnum in this business
10 I'm out to go Jonathan Jackson on you bitches
Little homie you know you could catch cancer from them switches

15

Don't get lost in that liquor till it eats up your liver
Gotta spit it how I live it, I am my brother's keeper
Rappers integrity today is cheaper than some reefer
The whole game is blunted everybody want to be a stunner,
But where's the honor when the white man run it.

The very first couple of lines of Dead Prez's song announce the revision. By Signifying on the original song in terms of the rhyming structure of the original, and announcing that this is Dead Prez, and not Drake, we are already alerted that the content is going to be different. And indeed, as early as the following line (line 3) a major distinction between the original and the revision is set with the word "eatin'." Indeed, one of the cliché of commercial rap, and Drake does not depart from this tradition, is that the rapper states how much he/she smokes marijuana or drinks alcohol. Here, while one might expect the word "smokin'," for instance, stic.man chose a basic survival function, emphasizing normal behavior in tune with the group's constant focus and advertizing of a healthy lifestyle. Indeed, line 11 and 12; "Little homie you know you could catch cancer from them switches/Don't get lost in that liquor till it eats up your liver," signifies directly on Drake's focus on partying ("Bottle's on me" line 1, "Super good smidoke, a package of the swishers" referring to marijuana, on line 11). Stic.man, from the very onset, signifies on Drake's song and on the larger field of commercial hip hop (line 13-16). Later on, stic.man signifies on Drake's language, matching his verse and applying Signifying revisions to it:

[Drake]
I could teach you how to speak my language, Rosetta Stone
I swear this life is like the sweetest thing I've ever known
'Bout to go +Thriller+ Mike Jackson on these niggaz

[stic.man]
Let me show you how to speak the language in better form
I swear this life is like the realest movement ever born
Truth is like a 44 magnum in this business
I'm out to go Jonathan Jackson on you bitches

Here, stic.man seems to be schooling Drake on how to rap. He indirectly teaches him to “speak the language in better form.” He also signifies on Drake’s reference to Michael Jackson, as a way to criticize his commercial approach to art. Through this verse, stic.man defends a conception of art which goes deeper than “pop songs” (stic.man 5). Indeed, stic.man equates truth to a gun, and alludes to Jonathan Jackson’s violent attempt at liberating prisoners in a courtroom in the summer of 1970, as a metaphor for his liberating raps. Speaking the truth in the context of commercial rap is here equated to radical and violent activism for the purpose of liberation, which dramatically contrasts with Drake’s boastful and humorous approach. Stic.man’s approach echoes the theme of violence and warfare in the cultural realm, that we have just discussed through African American poetry. His rap is thus firmly anchored in a continuum of resistance to oppression, while Drake’s appears as a stereotypical repetition of commercially determined themes and outlooks.

In the second verse of the song, the Signifying revision takes another dimension through new layers of meaning. Indeed, Drake’s second verse in *Over* was inspired by the song *Hip-Hop*, a hit single from Dead Prez’s first album *Let’s Get Free*, released in 2000. Here is the original verse from M-1, followed by Drake’s revision in *Over*, followed by M-1’s re-appropriation in *Far From Over*:

Hip-Hop

[M-1]

	Uh, one thing 'bout music when it hit you feel no pain
	White folks say it controls yo' brain
	I know better than that, that's game
	And we ready for that - two soldiers head of the pack
5	Matter of fact, who got the gat?
	And where my army at? Rather attack and not react
	Back to beats, it don't reflect on how many records get sold
	On sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll
	Whether your project's put on hold
10	In the real world; these just people with ideas

They just like me and you when the smoke and camera disappear
Against the real world *echos*
It's bigger than all these fake-ass records
When po' folks got the millions and my woman's disrespected
15 If you check 1-2, my word of advice to you is just relax
Just do what you got to do; if that don't work, then kick the facts
If you a fighter, rider, biter, flame-ignitor, crowd-exciter
Or you wanna jus' get high, then just say it
But then if you a liar-liar, pants on fire, wolf-crier, agent wit' a wire
20 I gon' know it when I play it

Over

[Drake]

Uhh, one thing 'bout music when it hits you feel no pain
And I swear I got that shit that make these bitches go insane
So they tell me that they love me, I know better than that, it's just game
It's just what comes with the fame, and I'm ready for that, I'm just sayin'
5 But I really can't complain, everything is kosher
Two thumbs up, Ebert and Roeper
I really can't see the end getting' any closer
But I'll probably still be the man when everything is over
So I'm ridin' through the city with my high beams on
10 Can ya see me? Can ya see me? Get yo' Visine on
Y'all just do not fit the picture, turn yo' widescreen on
If you thinkin' I'ma quit before I die, dream on
Man they treat me like a legend, am I really this cold?
I'm really too young to be feelin' this old
15 It's about time you admit it, who you kiddin'
Man nobody's ever done it like I did it, uh

Far From Over

[M-1]

Yo, one thing 'bout music when it hits you feel no pain
Ten years later aint' shit changed
But the player's in the game [2X]
Still ahead of the pack, as Drake he studied my rap,
5 Matter of fact I give to that,
Cause at least he ain't sellin' no crack,
So I take my flow right back
Stop the beef, it doesn't matter how many records they sellin'
Cause all this bullshit they yellin'
10 Gonna start a hip hop rebellion
In the real world, don't have no boundaries and fears,
These word, sound, power that we puttin' in their ears
Can change the real world, It's bigger than diamonds in your necklace,
We out here doin' dope, toatin' pistols, actin' reckless

15 In the real world, you can't just act like you don't care,
 Cause what you gonna have left when the fame and fortune disappear
 If you a rapper, trapper, actor, finger snapper, copy cater,
 Or a money getting' cracka, just say it
 But then if you fake, snake, cake
 20 Claimin' that you pushin' weight, when you aint'
 Do I really have to say it?

The first element that strikes the ear is the very first line of these three songs, which we have already quoted in our introduction and which is a line from Bob Marley and the Wailers'

Trenchtown Rock, that goes: "One good thing about music, when it hits, you feel no pain." The repetition of this line creates an echo across time, which clearly illustrates the evocation power of sonic repetition. M-1 first quoted Bob Marley, then was quoted by Drake, and finally M-1 re-quoted Drake quoting him. We understand that intertextuality is an endless process, as the most relevant tropes within a tradition, can be repeated indefinitely, but are being revised at each repetition. The original context of the utterance is further and further removed every time a new layer is added. Let us compare our three versions. The "original" version by M-1 is a clear critic of commercial rap, and the illusions and lies it portrays. M-1 starts first by using the military imagery that we have already evoked in our analysis of intertextuality in African American poetry, presenting himself and stic.man as "soldiers" (4) leading an "army" (6). He then proceeds to his critique, reminding the audience that rappers are real people just like them ("just people with ideas" (10)), thus breaking the distorted image, which the industry and rappers through their narratives and videos in particular, are constructing. He criticizes the class and gender approach of the rap industry on line 14. Drake's revision of this verse, while borrowing a few lines (line 1, the end of line 3, and the end of line 4), emulating the general flow of the original, brings a totally different perspective, totally disconnected from M-1's. Only the sound quality of M-1 seems to have been maintained through rhythm and quotations. The materiality of the sign is

emphasized, and a new meaning is applied, but a meaning that masks the original, rather than comments or refers back to it. Drake's version seems indeed to display the opposite of M-1's approach, as Drake only seems to use his rap as a contemplation of his own greatness at the top of record sell, and the vanity of the life of the rich and famous, while embracing it. In *Far From Over*, M-1 re-appropriate his own lyrics borrowed by Drake, while appropriating Drake's instrumental. M-1 signifies on Drake's borrowing, evoking the fact that if his lines are quoted, it is because they were good (4). The expression "studied my rap" is interesting in that it denotes the fact that learning often implies mimicry. Drake certainly "studied" M-1's lines and reproduced his flow. M-1 places himself as the teacher, or mentor of Drake, as the elder, which echoes stic.man's "better form." M-1 also implies that he has no problem with Drake borrowing his lyrics, since studying them might have participated in Drake's success, possibly turning him away from crime ("Cause at least he ain't sellin' no crack" (6)). Indeed, a lot of rappers have claimed that rap turned them away from a life of crime, which would have certainly brought them to jail or to the cemetery. In the next line, M-1 claims ownership: "So I take my flow right back." (7) At this point the rest of the verse is dedicated to a revision of his own verse in *Hip-Hop*, building upon the original themes of the original song. M-1 indeed took his flow right back. The fact that this track is the opening track of the mixtape, which is a celebration of the 10 years of the album *Let's Get Free*, is relevant to this verse, which is a revision of one of the main tracks of this previous album. The chorus of the song adds a layer of intertextuality, both commenting on Drake's revision and on the original. Here are the two versions:

Over

[Chorus: Drake]

I know way too many people here right now
That I didn't know last year; who the fuck are y'all?
I swear it feels like the last few nights
We've been everywhere and back but,

5 I just can't remember it all
 What am I doin'? What am I doin'?
 Oh, yeah, that's right, I'm doin' me
 I'm doin' me, I'm livin' life right now mayne
 And this what I'ma do 'til it's over, 'til it's over
 10 But it's far from over.

Far From Over

[stic.man]
 I know way too many people here right now
 Listening to this mixtape like who the fuck are y'all?
 I swear it feels like the last few years
 In the mainstream everyone
 5 Forgot about reppin' the cause.
 What are we doin'? what are we doin'?
 Oh yeah, what about let's get free?
 Taking care of family this is the song of my life man,
 Cause all I know to be is a soldier for my culture
 10 And it's far from over.

Thus, stic.man turns Drake's self absorbed contemplation into a communal call for action.

Indeed, the "What am I doin'" becomes collective ("What are we doin'"). The answer which is centered on the narrator, and his dreams for more women, drugs and money (the "sex drugs and rock 'n' roll" of the original *Hip-Hop*, (Hip Hop 8)), "I'm doin' me," (Over 7-8) in Drake's, becomes a collective call for freedom which echoes the very title of the original Dead Prez album *Let's Get Free*. Thus, Dead Prez's use of Drake's instrumental is a pretext for self praising their own performance and re-iterating the original message of the 2000 song *Hip-Hop* in a new context ten years later. *Far From Over* is also the occasion of a major revision of Drake's commercial success *Over*, by clearly criticizing its lack of depth and its participation in the monochrome discourse of commercial rap. This "schooling" of Drake is a powerful way to prove the point made ten years earlier and re-iterate it. This multilayered re-interpretation illustrates the power of intertextuality, especially through the trope of Signifying revision. It also illustrates the two dimensions this practice can assume, that is quoting as a praise (close to what Drake has

done with Dead Prez's track *Hip-Hop*), and quoting as a critique (closer to what Dead Prez has done to Drake's track). Dead Prez's mixtape features many such revisions, some praising the original, but most critiquing through a repetition of the form and a revision of the content. We can refer here to their revision of Pat Benatar's 1980s love pop song *Love is a Battlefield*, into a critic of the commercial aspect of rap. The revision called *The Game is a Battlefield* compares rappers to drafted soldiers fighting for the benefits of corporate America in Iraq for instance, targeting women and children. It equates rap pioneers to homeless veterans (indeed the pioneers of rap never harvested the fruits of success of the genre they created). This revision echoes Bob Kaufman's *Battle Report* and the larger thematic that we have described. Dead Prez also revised Lloyd Banks' *Beamer, Benz, or Bentley*, into *Malcolm, Garvey, Huey*, turning consensual materialistic boast into a praise of Pan Africanism and Blackpower. They also revised *Wasted* by Gucci Mane, which presents a more than lenient display of the use, and abuse of drugs and alcohol (again, "sex drug and Rock 'n' Roll"), into *Don't Waste It*, a harsh critic of drug abuse, through a realistic depiction of its effects, and a call for personal responsibility toward the larger community. We can also refer to Dead Prez's revision of *God In Me* by R&B group Mary Mary, which seems to equate material and social advancement to the practice of religious worship (prayers). Dead Prez revises it into *The G in Me*, which presents the idea of God as intrinsic to human beings, not externalized into any specific form of religious worship, but connected to everyday life. The materialistic aspect, omnipresent in the original, is absent in this revision. The *G* of the title certainly refers to "Gangsta," which illustrate Dead Prez's approach to this concept. They indeed have developed the idea that *gangsta* should be used against the system, as self-protection, subversion and criticism. Gangsta is also often equated to self-discipline in their songs. They have described their own reversal of the concept of gangsta as *Revolutionary But*

Gangsta (RBG, also standing for “Red, Black and Green,” the colors of the flag of Pan-Africanism). In *The G in Me*, M-1 makes also an interesting reference to the *roda de capoeira* as his own personal form of religious practice. Indeed, the duo has referred on several occasions in their songs to their own practice of capoeira as in the song *Together*.

3.3- Signifying stories: The myth as history in process

In our second chapter (section 2.3.2.c), we have described the tension between realistic accounts and mythical representations within the genre of rap music, in particular in the sub-genre of gangsta rap. We have defined the demarcation between the two extreme manifestations of this dichotomy by using two major songs which were part of the earliest manifestations of rap’s commercial mainstream debut. We have described the song *Rapper’s Delight* as exemplifying the boast tradition present within hip hop (self-praise/ego-trip), while the song *The Message* demonstrated social realism and critic/comment, which is also inherent to the genre. The boast has been presented as part of the African American aesthetic heritage, while social realism appeared as a vehicle for didacticism and for critics of the unfair nature of the conditions black people are subjected to in America. We have described rap as navigating most of the time between these two extremes. We approached this tension through a discussion of the representation of the pimp as a folk hero for poor black communities within rap culture, and compared it to the myth of the *Malandro* in capoeira, described in our first chapter. We have also described the problematic raised by the glorification of the gangsta/pimp in rap narratives in a commercial context, in particular in terms of representation, impact on society, and perception from different audiences. Here we will develop the same questions raised in the second chapter by giving more examples. But first, we will discuss the myth and in particular its relevance in

primarily oral societies. We will then analyze occurrences of the mythical dimension within capoeira songs and African American poetry. We will end our discussion on the problematic of mythical representations within hip hop, in particular through examples from the French context. Let us look first at the myth within oral cultures.

3.3.1- The myth in African oral cultures

Both a cultural inheritance from West Africa and an emanation from the context of slavery in the New World, Signifying appeared to us as Èsù's and the griot's rhetorical principles of ambiguity, indeterminacy and mediation, finding a pragmatic outlet as a tool for resistance in the New World. We have demonstrated Signifying's manifestation at the crossroad of form and meaning, in the space between the stability of the materiality of the sign (the signifier) and its immaterial, ambiguous, plural, and fluctuating dimension (the signified). Signifying, just like Èsù and the verbal art of the griot, navigates in all directions within the Yoruba circle of creation, on both axis of signification (paradigmatic/syntagmatic). We have first shown how Signifying, through its double voiced quality, brought back to the front the propensity of language to generate a plurality of meaning. We have seen that indirection was one manifestation of this approach and have looked at repetition as one of the major tropes allowing a play between form and content. Repetition with difference within Afro-Diasporic contexts have been observed and analyzed through the trope of intertextual Signifying revisions. We will see that the myth plays on this mediation between form and content.

In *Critique de la Raison Orale*, Mamoussé Diagne presents the myth in black Africa as similar to the tale, in particular initiatory tales. The similarities, he argues, are situated at the level of the processes of dramatization, rather than in the content of discourse. Differences

between the two are observed in the aim of the narratives vis-à-vis the audience. According to him, the myth is characterized by the ritual dimension in which it is framed and by its secrecy and the exclusivity of its diffusion, while the tale has more channels for diffusion and aims at a larger audience. (157) What are, according to him, the common characteristics between the tale and the myth? According to Diagne, the tale is the type of oral literature (“orature”) which makes the most extensive use of the processes of dramatization. (123) Thus, the tale and the myth are characterized by their performance aspect in oral cultures, and more particularly in the dramatization of discourse. Tale and myths are storytelling devices. They tell stories and, in a certain sense, histories. If both take root in social realities, they also go beyond them. Tale and myth narratives indeed supersede history. Diagne describes the relation the tale bears to the social context which inspires it, as one of transposition of such context (or elements from it) in the narratives; what he calls a “complex mechanism of displacement and substitution.” (“un mécanisme complexe de déplacement et de substitution” (125)) Diagne adds:

Le conte permet la duplication de la pièce qui se joue dans l’histoire concrète des hommes par celle qui a pour lieux scénique l’imaginaire social. Avec, pour résultat, la possibilité de mimer, dans celle-ci, la logique et les lois de fonctionnement qui ont cours dans celle-là. Or mimer, c’est toujours transposé en démarquant, répéter dans la différence, et donc maintenir une dualité. Ce qui suppose qu’on soit en mesure d’isoler, malgré et au-delà de la richesse foisonnante du réel, les traits pertinents de cela qui est reproduit. L’imagination ne restitue pas mais recrée, par transposition, à partir de ces données de base et selon une combinatoire commandée par ses propres règles, un complexe d’images sur lequel elle peut indéfiniment « surfer ». » (Diagne 125-126)

Thus the narrative and its performance are anchored in social realities. However, if the myth finds its inspiration in the truth of historical reality, it is expressed in “l’imaginaire social,” that is in the domains of the potential, of dreams, fantasies, in what is beyond ordinary life. The transposition described is indeed a repetition with difference, reading the real through the lenses

of imagination. These lenses act as filters, as the myth and the tale select specific events from the real, highlight them as particularly relevant, and place them in contact with the unstable world of associations, symbols and meanings. Thus, both genres are characterized by a form of play with language and history, indeed a type of Signifying. Diagne plays on the polysemy of the noun “jeu” and the verb “jouer,” in that they both refer to the ludic dimension and to the possibility of movement granted to a loosely fixed mechanical part, illustrating the fluidity of the performance context in which these language “parts” taken from the real are placed. These solid linguistic elements seems indeed knit together loosely through a complex network of association and images. This loose association of words, concepts and histories, which escapes “normal” language use, echoes with our former discussion of Merrell’s interpretation of the concept of game (*jogo*) within capoeira (See 2.1.2.c). Diagne states:

Ni traduction littérale, ni simple reflet de la réalité sociale, le conte désarticule et ré-articule imaginativement celle-ci, en détecte — et, au besoin y introduit — le « jeu », au sens quasi mécanique où des pièces sont légèrement désemboîtées et qu’on dit qu’elles jouent. [...] Le jeu apparaît donc bien comme le lieu où confluent le réel et l’imaginaire. Ce qui a pour effet de déconnecter quelque peu la réalité social, de la larguer tout en la maintenant, pour ainsi dire, en dérive contrôlée. (Diagne 126)

Thus, by playing with social and historical reality, the tale and the myth rearticulate them in different contexts, allowing their interpretation in new fashions, suggesting possibilities of social evolution. On the other hand, their repetition in performance, as fixed patterns within the fluid structure of the myth, re-enforces certain characteristics for the purpose of transmitting an ideology and building social cohesion. These characteristics of the myth and the tale, as they relate to social realities, are to be brought in contact with our previous discussion of Èsù and the griot. Let us now examine how myths function on the level of the sign.

In the concluding section of his analysis of the myth (*Mythologies*), Roland Barthes defines it as a type of speech, (“une parole”) but a type of speech that is in itself “un message,” “un mode de signification, [...] une forme.” (Barthes 215) He goes on and states that “le mythe ne se définit pas par l’objet de son message, mais par la façon dont il le profère.” (215-216) Thus, the myth is always characterized by a manipulation of the form, which is the dramatization process to which Diagne referred. Through semiology, Barthes demonstrates how the myth constitutes a manipulation of the original meaning of a word (a concept), through the manipulation of its form (a sound/image). He defines mythical speech as a displacement of the sign itself. The sign, which refers to the concrete use of words (concept associated with an empty signifier), becomes the signifier in mythical speech. Through this shift the sign is partially separated from its original meaning, and assigned a new, or several new meanings. The original meaning is however not totally absent, but only masked because of this displacement. The original signified can indeed be invoked at any time for any specific purpose. Barthes states:

Le sens sera pour la forme comme une réserve instantanée d’histoire, comme une richesse soumise, qu’il est possible de rappeler et d’éloigner dans une sorte d’alternance rapide: il faut sans cesse que la forme puisse reprendre racine dans le sens et s’y alimenter en nature; il faut surtout qu’elle puisse s’y cacher. C’est ce jeu incessant de cache-cache entre le sens et la forme qui définit le mythe. (225)

Through this interpretation, mascon words appear as vehicles for the myth. The historical resonance mascons achieve make them particularly fit for the type of cultural references myths need for their own coherence. Their repetition in constantly changing contexts insures both the transmission of a definite ideology, as well as a certain fluidity of meaning and interpretation across time and space. This interpretation of the relation of myths to sign formation echoes our discussion of intertextuality. Intertextuality, and Signifying revisions in particular, constitute modes of transmission of myths, as the repetition of the myth through quoting, mascons,

references to historical events, historical figures, etc, allows its transfer into new contexts. Intertextuality also generates myths, as repetition of relevant or recurrent tropes can create a tradition. The repetition with difference of this tradition might eventually lead to the apparition of a future myth. The intertextual repetition of the myth over time, insures in a sense its permanence, its materiality. We touch here at the main distinction between tales and myths described by Diagne. According to him, the tale is profane while the myth is sacred. Its sacred dimension calls for a fixation of the form and content, within the parameters of the oral performance, which remains fluid by nature. Diagne develops this idea:

Discours dont la caractéristique essentielle réside dans la non-discursivité, le récit mythique est, de ce fait, soustrait à la possibilité de la contestation. [...] L'autorité dont il est investi lui vient, en partie, de son immutabilité et de sa stabilité non sujettes à révision : il ne dit pas seulement la Vérité, il **est** la vérité première dans tous les sens de ce terme. Il est, à ce titre, parole fondatrice de toute vérité. Toute parole véridique n'en étant que le doublet ou le prolongement, il ne peut être que la répétition indéfinie de lui-même. C'est pourquoi, l'homme ne peut que le re-présenter, le re-jouer, c'est-à-dire le répéter « à la lettre ». On se rappellera ce que nous avons dit sur ce point : la sphère du sacré préserve la parole des risques d'altération qui pourraient avoir des répercussions fatales sur l'ordre qu'elle instaure. Et la répétition littérale n'est pas seulement la condition de son authenticité, mais la garantie de son efficacité dans les circonstances de ses évocations successives. (Diagne 161)

In this passage Diagne refers to the relation of the myth to the enforcement, and perpetuation of the social structure, which has to do with the repartition of power. The myth, and its dogma, serves a concrete purpose. The myth, in its fixed form, participates in social stratification. Indeed, Diagne compares the impossibility of contestation, the impression of truthfulness of the myth in oral cultures, obtained through its repetition in fixed and contained forms (as much as orality allows), to a similar process in civilizations of writings. Cultures based on writing have, by default, the tools of enforcement of ideology through written down, immutable narratives, which permanently display and transmit meaning. It is, according to Diagne, through the

repetition of rituals that the fixity of the myth is ensured, and through the initiatory process, performing a selection within its audience, than the myth participates in the elaboration and perpetuation of social hierarchy. He states:

Créer un « lieu clos » désigné comme celui de l'initiation et du rituel, arracher au sujet la propriété et la responsabilité du discours qui s'y fait entendre et, par suite, confiner ce dernier au rôle de récitant et d'interprète, ce sont là des mesures qu'on pourrait qualifier d'institutionnelles. A quoi il faut ajouter que le scénario de la pièce dont l'homme n'est que l'interprète ressortit à une origine transcendant toute expérience humaine. Ce qui a pour effet de disqualifier par avance toute tentative « révisionniste ». L'acte de rééditer la pièce, en la jouant, n'est que la modalité par laquelle l'infini tente de se dire dans la sphère du fini – ce qui est déjà énorme pour celui qui en assume la charge. C'est pourquoi le statut d'acteur, et même celui de simple auditeur, n'est pas donné à tout le monde : c'est le résultat d'une ascension progressive, d'un véritable « percement des oreilles », et la possession d'une « tête chanceuse » (Diagne 162)

The “percement des Oreilles”, or “tête chanceuse” necessary to be granted access to the meaning of the myth alludes to the capacity of interpretation. In that sense, the myth is not readily available to anyone, or at least, the right interpretation requires cultural literacy, which we have already discussed in the case of hip-hop. One must indeed be able to read the signs, both in their historical dimension, and in their relevance to the context of utterance, to reach a meaning in tune with current realities. This process of selection sanctions social hierarchy in traditionally oral societies through the process of initiation, according to Diagne. Riddles and proverbs fulfill the same functions:

Chiffrer un mythe, c'est enclorre un savoir non partagé, réservé aux seuls initiés. Tant qu'ils ne sont pas parvenus à ce stade, les autres hommes ne percevront que des signes dont le sens leur restera obscurs. Comme si, à l'instar d'un palimpseste, il y avait superposition de deux textes dont il faut traverser l'un, le laisser derrière soi pour accéder à l'autre qui cèle et recèle l'essentiel. De sorte que l'examen de passage est d'abord le passage à travers des textes. (Diagne 119)

In the context of the New World, where Afro-Diasporic texts are by nature characterized by the double voice, or double consciousness, one must be aware, and understand the codes, of the two discursive universes in contact in order to interpret texts adequately as they relate to their context of utterance. The myth can indeed act as an agent of separation, of differentiation between the inside and the outside. The myth is often used as an instrument of identity formation for Afro-Diasporic populations, in opposition to full assimilation of the value system of the oppressor. Rejection from the mainstream of the African heritage, and the history of resistance, further precipitates the strengthening of myths about the African past or about the history of struggle, sometimes to the point of legitimizing violence against the oppressor. The inadequate reading of myths displayed within artistic expression from both sides of the discursive battlefield, can perpetuate misunderstandings between these universes, which are, in reality, intrinsically linked, yet artificially separated through culture. Let us analyze now instances of mythical display within our three domains of study.

3.3.2- History as basis for myths, or myths as basis for history in capoeira

We will first focus on capoeira, and in particular capoeira angola. We have already analyzed the use of mascon words within capoeira, employed as a means to keep the connection alive between the African continent and the Afro-Brazilian population. Words such as *mandingueiro*, *Luanda*, *Angola*, *Dendê*, etc, all bring to the front cultural aspects that refer back to the African past, thus maintaining the connection with Africa, a consciousness about the roots of Afro-Brazilian culture. The repetition and superposition of those mascons within the corpus of capoeira, constitutes a network which creates and perpetuates one of the main myths of capoeira: the myth of the transposition of Africa to Brazil. Remembering that a myth is always a

combination of social reality and social imaginary, but always saying a truth, we can begin to understand the importance and relevance of this myth. While the connections are indeed still present, in particular in the universe of capoeira, which is gaining more and more popularity in Africa, these two universes constitute two different contexts. To maintain this link, however, is to maintain the remembrance of a common past and envisioning a common future. Capoeira has nevertheless built its own universe, through myths that are connected to its history in Brazil, yet still in contact with the idea of resistance anchored in an Africanist world view. The capoeira corpus displays an array of songs praising its own history through places, and historical figures. We have already described Besouro, the famous *malandro*, whose story both echoes African mythical narratives (the use of magic indeed echoes the West African Epic of Sunjata, among others) and the history of resistance in Brazil. Another central figure is Zumbi, king of the largest and longest lasting quilombo (free societies organized by runaway slaves) in the history of Brazil; Quilombo dos Palmares. Let us analyze Mestre Moraes' approach to the history of Zumbi, as it relates to the larger historical narrative of the Brazilian nation. Here is a *ladainha* he composed in honor of Zumbi:

Rei Zumbi

A história nos engana
Diz tudo pelo contrário
Até diz que abolição
Aconteceu no mês do maio

5 A prova dessa mentira
 É que da miséria eu não saio
 Viva vinte de novembro
 Momento para se lembrar

10 Não vejo no treze de maio
 Nada pra comemorar
 Muitos tempos se passaram
 E o negro sempre a lutar

15 Zumbi é nosso herói
 Zumbi é nosso herói, colega velho
 Do Palmares foi senhor
 Pela causa de homen negro
 Foi ele que mais lutou

 A pesar de toda luta, colega velha
 O negro não se libertou, camarada!
 (Mestre Moraes)⁴⁶

What we notice first is that this song displays a similar approach to the two songs about Princess Isabel described earlier. This song indeed participates in the revision of the official historical discourse. Moraes refers to the dates of the 13th of May, which is the day of abolition of slavery in 1888, when Princess Isabel signed the Golden Law. According to him, this date is a lie of history, because signing this act did not end slavery, as blacks in Brazil are still not free to this day. Moraes replaces the 13th of May by the 20th of November, which is the date of Zumbi's death. Zumbi was the leader of Palmares when the quilombo was defeated in 1694. A raid from the Portuguese using artillery put an end to the quilombo. Zumbi continued the struggle, but was finally betrayed by a former inhabitant of the quilombo who informed the Portuguese about his hiding place. He was caught, put to death, beheaded and his head was placed in the central square of Recife as a warning against future resistance. By using his death as a reference and a symbol of the struggle of blacks in Brazil, Moraes indeed revises the official version of history. He places resistance to oppression as the central reference point for Afro-Brazilian culture and

⁴⁶ Translation:

King Zumbi

(1-4) History deceives us/it always twists everything around/as far as saying that abolition/took place during the month of May/(5-8) The of this lie/is that I still live in poverty/Long live the 20th of November/a date to remember (9-12) I don't see in the 13th of May/anything to celebrate/a long time passed/and the black man is still struggling (13-17) Zumbi is our hero/Zumbi is our hero, old friend/ He was the ruler of Palmares/For the cause of the black man/he is the one who fought the most/(18-19) Despite all the struggle, old friend/the black man did not free himself, comrade!

collective memory about slavery. Zumbi becomes the main symbolic figure of resistance to oppression. However, by stating that Zumbi is the one who fought the most for black people's liberation, and that despite this, black people are still not free, Moraes seems to suggest that the struggle must continue in homage to the freedom fighters of the past, yet, that armed resistance might not be the way to achieve progress. What remains is the symbol of Zumbi, as a reminder that the idea of resistance must live on and be manifested in the present context, which is still oppressive to blacks. If Zumbi is used as a symbol of African resistance to oppression by Moraes, he is often referred to as a great warrior who used capoeira for liberation in the narratives of many contemporary capoeira groups. There seems to be, however, no historical accounts supporting the theory of capoeira practice within Palmares. His figure is nonetheless used as a mythic signifier of struggle against oppression within the context of capoeira. Zumbi remains also linked to the broader consciousness of African resistance in Brazil.

Here is another song from Mestre Moraes which refers to his master's master, Mestre Pastinha, creator of the first school of capoeira angola. Mestre Pastinha is a mythical figure within capoeira, and in particular in capoeira angola. He represents African struggle in Brazil because of his fight for the preservation of capoeira in its traditional form, and the constant emphasis he laid on capoeira's African roots. He is referred to as a founding figure by most groups of capoeira angola.

História do Mestre Pastinha:

5 Iê
Tamanho não é documento
Isto eu posso lhe provar
Meu mestre bateu de sola
Num crioulo de assombrar
Apesar de muito baixo
Nunca levou prejuízo
Ele disse pro diabo
De ajuda não preciso

10 Essa peleja se deu
 Na ladeira da lapinha
 Entre o diabo malvado
 E o meu Mestre Pastinha
 Essa história meu colega
 15 Ele quem contou pra mim
 No lugar que eles brigaram, colega véio
 Nunca mais nasceu capim,
 Camarada !
 (Mestre Moraes)⁴⁷

This *ladainha* is also Signifying on history. Indeed, the previous *ladainha* presented history as deceitful, full of lies. This time, Moraes tricks us through his own interpretation of history. The fact of calling an imaginary or metaphorical narrative “history” is indeed Signifying on the western concept of history. To him, it appears, history is malleable and prone to inventions, exaggeration, etc. He seems to emphasize the idea that history is easy to manipulate, and can be used to transmit any possible things. His “lie” about the history of Mestre Pastinha, however, is true to a certain extent, if one knows how to read it. The metaphorical dimension of the song indeed opens spaces for multiple interpretations. The song is, for instance, a pretext for the transmission of an important philosophical concept, the idea that size does not matter in a fight. Here, size refers both to the physical, and the metaphysical, that is spiritual dimension. Indeed, if Pastinha defeated an intimidating Creole man (“crioulo de assombrar” (5)) in this world, he also defeated the devil, who is an immaterial entity. The song appears as an encouragement to trust one’s capacity, despite “size”, whether physical as in the roda, but also, in the sense of one’s rank within any hierarchy: social, spiritual, etc. Thus, while praising Mestre Pastinha, Mestre Moraes also opens spaces for the listeners in raising their own self-confidence, both within and

⁴⁷Translation:

The history of Mestre Pastinha

(1-5) Iê/Size is not a proof/This I can prove/My master defeated with his feet/A dark creole/

(6-10) Despite his short size/It never was a disadvantage/He once said to the devil/I do not need your help/This fight took place/(11-15) One the pathway of Lapinha/Between the ill intentioned devil/a my dear master Pastinha/This story my friend/He himself told me/(16-18) Wherever they fought, old friend/The grass never grew again/ Comrade!

outside the roda. The myth then serves a very specific purpose in the context of its utterance through the transmission of a practical message. This song also participates in the perpetuation of the myth of a central figure in the history of capoeira angola, and connects it to the larger history of Brazil and slavery in particular. The place of the fight with the devil, the “Ladeira de Lapinha,” is indeed an historical pedestrian pathway going up on the hills of Salvador, Bahia, which has been instrumental in the development of the city. If grass does not grow there, it is certainly because of the innumerable back and forth trips it has been and still is used for today. The evocation of this place also brings back to the collective memory, the history of slavery, as this path was used by the slaves to transport goods from the plantation to the port, and coming back up loaded with goods coming from overseas.

Here is another *ladainha* by Mestre Moraes, which is dedicated to his own *mestre*, Mestre João Grande.

Grande João Grande:
 Diga lá Mestre João
 Grande homem de valor
 Angoleiro respeitado
 Hoje em dia é doutor
 5 Tata kimbanda da Angola
 A você eu peço agô
 Foi só sair do Brasil
 N’zambi lhe abençoou
 Por manter a tradição
 10 Você merece respeito
 Orgulho pelo meu mestre
 Sempre carrego no peito
 Pelo povo americano
 De doutor já foi chamado
 15 O cartão de passe livre
 Logo lhe foi ofertado
 Quem é bom já feito
 Já disse o velho ditado...
 (Mestre Moraes)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Translation:

The Great João Grande

While more descriptive than the previous song, this *ladainha* nonetheless features a similar approach. This *ladainha* is indeed a praise song directed at Mestre João Grande, student of Mestre Pastinha. João Grande is praised for his status as an *angoleiro* (practitioner of *capoeira angola*), (3) but also for his work in preserving this tradition, (9) and transmitting it to a broader audience. João Grande was one of the first *capoeirista* to go abroad and publicize this art. He went with Mestre Pastinha to demonstrate *capoeira* at the World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966, and has taught in the US since the late 1980s. He opened a school in New York City, where he now resides permanently. He still travels regularly to give workshops. In the song, these travels are linked to the African deity N'zambi, the supreme god of the Bakongo people of Angola, who, according to Moraes, blessed him for his trips outside Brazil. Moraes also refers to his status of doctor, both in reference to his knowledge of herbs within the Angolan and Brazilian Indian religion of Kimbanda (“Tata Kimbanda da Angola” (5)), and to the Doctorate of Humane Letters from Upsala College which he received in 2003. Singing the praise of an illustrious *capoeira* mestre is a very important aspect of the mythical dimension of *capoeira* and an agent of its perpetuation. Songs can also praise famous places in the history of *capoeira*, such as the following, which only consists of an enumeration of names of popular historical places in Salvador, Bahia:

Igreja do Bonfim
 Igreja do Bonfim
 E Mercado Modelo
 Ladeira do Pelourinho
 E Baixa do Sapateiro

(1-5) I will talk about Mestre João/ Great man of value/ respected Angoleiro/ who is today a doctor/ Tata Kimbanda from Angola/ (6-10) To you I ask for agô (medicinal plant)/ He alone left Brazil/ With the blessing of N'zambi/ To maintain the tradition/ You deserve our respect/ (11-15) I feel pride for my master/ I always carry it in my chest/ By the American people/ He has already been called doctor/ (16-18) The key to the city/ Was offered to him right away/ He who is good, has it already made/ As the old saying goes...

5 Falar na Cidade Alta
 Eu me lembrei do Terreiro
 Igreja de São Francisco
 E Praça da Sé
 A onde fica as baianas
 10 Vendendo acarajé
 Por falar em Itapoã
 Lagoa do Abaeté
 Camaradinho
 (Public Domain)

In this song, the names of places are used as mascon words. By the evocation of specific places, the history of these places as a whole and the relations they bear with one another are re-called. The placement of these names in contact with each other within the song evokes a network of associations, of references to the history of the city. Through the celebration of the city, it is the art of capoeira itself which is celebrated. At the same time, this catalogue of famous names, within the context of capoeira, might be familiar to the practitioners (especially Bahians, and Brazilians) but most, however, have no reference points. These names are indeed empty signifiers that only evoke a vague history which situates Salvador as the city of reference for capoeira practitioners. Most practitioners might have never seen these places, let alone know about their history. The words nonetheless functions as instantaneous markers of a common history within capoeira. We are indeed confronted to the mythical aspect of language here, as signifiers are used in a specific context, holding specific signified, probably different for each listener, yet the original signified are still present, but masked, not directly available. This song illustrates the initiatory dimension of capoeira, in which progression in the knowledge of the art is sanctioned by an indirect access to its history. We could almost grade the progression in the art from hearing the song for the first time, to then being able to sing it, to being able to recognize the name of the places, to eventually visiting those places, learning about their history and how it relates to capoeira's history, and finally being able to understand the relationship which unites

those different places within the song and in the physical and historical reality. We have here different layers of understanding of the art through a song which denotes the knowledge based hierarchy of capoeira, especially capoeira angola, which does not generally use grading systems of belts.

Here is another song from the public domain, which plays on popular stereotypes about black people in Brazil.

Quando eu era pequenininho
Quando eu era pequenininho
Quando eu era pequenininho
Minha mãe mesmo dizia
Se ando limpo sou malandro,
5 Se ando sujo, sou imundo.
Ô que mundo velho grande, ô iaiá
Ô que mundo enganador.
Se eu digo dessa maneira, ô iaiá
10 Foi mamãe que me ensinou.
Se não ligo sou covarde,
Se mato sou assassino
Se não falo sou calado, ô iaiá
Se falo sou falador
15 Se não como sou mesquinho, ô meu Deus
E se eu como sou guloso!
Camarado!
Iê, viva meu Deus
(Public Domain)⁴⁹

This song is a Signifying revision of stereotypes about blacks in Brazil. It is a revision of the myths which have defined the position of blacks in society ever since slavery. The lesson it transmits is a wisdom that comes from experience and must be transmitted to future generations.

⁴⁹Translation:

When I was a very young child

(1-5) When I was a very young child/When I was a very young child/My mom told me/If I am clean I am up to no good/If I am dirty, I am a scum/(6-10) Oh, how old and vast the world is, oh iaiá/How deceitful it is/If I speak this way, oh iaiá/It's because mommy taught me so/(11-15) If I don't provoke, I am a coward/If I kill, I am a murderer/If I don't speak, I am too quiet/If I speak, I am talkative/If I don't eat, I am mean-minded/(16-18) If I eat I am greedy!/Comrade!/ Long live my God...

Indeed coming from the narrator's mother, this message appears as an important warning about the nature of race relations in Brazilian society. Yet, no reference is made of race in the song, which allows a larger interpretation. The song could thus appear as a warning about the deceptive nature of reality, where things are not always what they appear to be. This song also emphasizes the fact that no matter what you do, people who are prejudiced against you will remain so and interpret what you do as wrong and immoral.

3.3.3- Myth formation and demystification in African American poetry

Let us move now to an analysis of poems. Our first poem demonstrates the prevalence of praise poems in the African American literary tradition. Eulogies and elegies are indeed very common, and attest of the use of specific historical figures for the building of a specific African American cultural identity. It is therefore not surprising that most of the praise poems by African American authors are dedicated to black musicians, as music is one of the most broadly recognized domains of expression of a specifically African American vernacular tradition, as we have already evoked. The praise of jazz musicians in particular became almost a specific genre within the Black Arts Movement. Here is a poem from an author of the hip hop generation, Joel Dias-Porter, who was actually a DJ (formerly known as DJ Renegade). This poem is an eulogy of jazz trumpet player, composer, and superstar Miles Davis.

Subterranean Night Colored Magus

3 Moods in the Mode of Miles

Subterranean means underground

deep, profound

wasn't Miles one deep brother

deep as a mine shaft

5 decreasing to the motherlode

blue blowing undersongs

Miles on tenor trumpet

Ten or eleven levels deeper

10 Than the next cat
 Painting all up under the canvas
 Making it bleed All Blues
 Out the other side
 Blowing subterranean solos
 Underground rhythmic resistance
 15 Visual virtuoso
 Battling musical mafiosos
 Burrowing under they skin
 Miles, son of a dentist doing rootwork
 With a hoodoo horn hollering Bebop toasts
 20 He Petey Wheatstraw
 Satchmo's son-in-law
 a Signifying Junkie jumping cold turkey
 out the Lion's mouth
 shine below the deck of the Titanic
 25 blueing up the boilers
 Miles could blue like Bird
 feight like Trane
 early like Bird
 night like Trane
 30 wing like Bird
 rail like Trane
 Rumbling underground.

 Nightcolor is blacker
 than a million miles of fresh asphalt
 35 wasn't Miles a deepblack brother
 black and fluid as floating smoke
 black as the sky round midnight
 black as a tire turning for miles ahead
 black kettle stewing a Bitch's Brew
 40 so black, he was Kind of Blue
 Miles, slick as black ice
 cool as black snow
 sweet as black cherries
 On the Downbeat like a blackjack
 45 a black jackhammer
 black Jack Johnson
 black jack of all trumpeting trades
 Miles, Jack of Spades
 Was our Ace cuz he played
 50 nightcolors
 Deepblack, tripleblack
 shinyblack,
 cinderblack

55 ashyblack,
 quarterblack
 multi-meta-megablack
 All shades of Miles
 shifting harmonic gears
 in his chromatic Ferrari

60 Blowing Blue Moods
 with his black turned
 to the audience
 speaking coolly
 in the colors of night.

65 Magi are priests
 spell-wailing wizards
 wasn't Miles a deepblackmagic bother
 Magus, Magus? ask minders
 of the metronome

70 *Miles is secular* they say
 but we know you spiritual
 a soloing sorcerer with E.S.P.
 Lord have mercy
 you Rev. Miles tonally testifyin

75 from the Book of the Blues
 blowing muted magic
 as chapter and verse
 Making a joyful noise
 unto the Lord

80 or anybody hip enough
 to dig the scene
 You Magi Miles with crazy styles
 even sported Tutu

85 Miles, 1.6 sacred clicks of cool
 5,280 feet doing
 the East Saint Boogie
 moody as any Monk
 you were Live and Evil
 but In a Silent Way

90 Your holy brown hands
 cast brass ornamentation
 cast a net of chorded notes
 cast Milestones through
 the stained-glass windows of Jazz

95 conjuring in the key of We
 so deeply, so darkly, such magic.
 (Joel Dias-Porter)

The first thing we can say about this poem concerns the form. It is composed of three stanza of 32 lines, evoking the 32 bar structure popular in the jazz idiom. The indentation of certain lines also participates in the emulation of a jazz performance in that it evokes stresses and emphasis in certain sections of a solo, for instance. The repetitions also participate in the musical evocation of the poem. Indeed, on line 26 to 31, the alternation of the names of two African American geniuses of saxophone, who both played with Miles Davis, Charlie Parker (Bird) and John Coltrane (Trane), produces an ostinato figure, very common in jazz and reminiscent of African music's extensive use of repetitive structures. The ostinato on the comparison between Miles, Bird and Trane illustrates both the virtuosity of those musicians, in particular John Coltrane who made ostinato part of the distinctive traits of his personal style. The poem also evokes the use of musical modes, which was one of the main innovations Davis and Coltrane brought to the traditional use of chord progression in jazz. In modal jazz, the harmonic structure is generally based on one or several modes, extended and repeated for several bars, opening the harmonic space of the composition. Chord progression, on the other hand, often denotes a succession of rigid chords. What this distinction implies is a greater possibility for the expression of dissonance within a set harmonic structure using modes, while chords generally constrict the harmonic potential into a series of "right" notes to play within a specific chord. In that sense, modal jazz signifies on chord progression by bringing Africanist aesthetic within the harmonic structure of jazz, formerly defined by European standards of harmonic perfection. Modal jazz, indeed constitutes a form of musical Signifying, in that it seems to expand the potential of harmonic ambiguity (dissonance) within a certain structure. This movement toward the use of modes in jazz was paralleled by a progressive liberation of the drum from the sole purpose of time keeping, as well as an exploration of more complex polyrhythms. The use of color in the

poem is a way to evoke this use of modes. We are indeed witnessing the development of three modes, also referring to three themes within the poem. The first one is the theme of the underground, subterranean quality of Davis' music, represented by the color blue (the color of the very note of African harmonic presence in American music: the blue note.) The second theme is more a play on rhythm and sound around the word "black," sort of solo section in the poem, using a freer form. Finally, the last section plays on the theme of the sacred, magic aspect of Davis' music. By referring to the form of jazz in the form of a poem, Dias-Porter performs a displacement characteristic of the myth. The form of a jazz performance, which is its sign (both signifier and signified) is transposed into the written page, into the world of association and linguistic imagination. This transposition deepens jazz's potential of evocation, as well as Davis' cultural significance and historical resonance. The mythical aspect is further demonstrated by the use of mascon words directly in correlation to Davis' music. We have talked about the use of colors (Miles Davis started painting later in his life), but the most significant mascons used in this poem, refer to titles of songs and albums from Miles Davis' repertoire. We can refer to "All Blues," (11) which is the title of a track from the album "Kind of Blue" (40) (1959). "Round midnight" (37) refers to Thelonious Monk's theme made popular by Davis. "Miles ahead" (38) refers to an album released in 1957, which Davis recorded with Gil Evans. "Bitches Brew" (39) refers to an album from 1969, which displayed a fusion of jazz and rock, a revolutionary use of studio technology, and large bands (15 or more musicians) improvising on a funk structure. "Jack Johnson" refers to *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, released in 1971 as a soundtrack for a documentary on the heavy weight champion boxer. We can also refer to "sorcerer," "E.S.P.," (72) "Tutu," (82) "Live and Evil," (88) "In a Silent Way," (89) and "Milestone," (93) as all referring to titles of albums by Miles Davis. This intricate network of evocation participates in the creation

or re-creation of the myth surrounding Miles Davis (who himself created a myth around his own persona.) The final stanza refers to Davis' spiritual, magical, sacred dimension, which further deepens the myth. The use of the lexical field of magic and the spiritual world through such words as "Magi", "priests" (65), "wizards" (66), "deepblack magic" (67), "spiritual" (71), "sorcerer" (72), extrasensory perception ("E.S.P." (72)), "muted magic" (76) echoes with the nicknames of Miles Davis ("Prince of Darkness", "Sorcerer",) the constant evolution and exploration of his music, its power of evocation and its melancholy, as well as the exploration of the limits of harmony and dissonance which characterized his approach. Indeed Davis' music was magic in the sense that it always played on suggestions, silence, and subtle dissonances. The last line of the poem operates a recapitulation of the poems structure and its qualification of Miles Davis' art: "so deeply, so darkly, such magic." (96) "Deeply" refers to the deep connection he had with African American musical tradition, coming from Africa via the Blues, denoted both by the color blue and the underground, subterranean metaphor of the first stanza. "Darkly" refers to the color of his skin, denoting his confrontation with America's racial inequality, both within his art and in his public life. And finally the "magic," which he achieved through his art denotes the real mythical dimension of his art, always navigating between styles, between silence and sounds, between harmony and dissonance.

The following poem by Melvin Dixon combines the evocation of a person, and the evocation of a place to Signify on a larger history:

<p>TOUR GUIDE: LA MAISON DES ESCLAVES Ile de Gorée, Senegal He speaks of voyages : men travelling spoon-fashion, women dying in afterbirth, babies clinging</p>	<p>5 10</p>	<p>to salt-dried nipples. For what his old eyes still see his lips have few words. Where his flat thick feet still walk his hands crack into a hundred lifelines.</p>
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	Here waves rush to shore breaking news that we return to empty rooms where the sea is nothing calm.		where nothing's safe.
15	And sun, tasting the skin of black men, leaves teeth marks.	55	He smiles for he has spoken of the ancestors: his, ours We leave quietly, each alone, knowing that they who come after us and breaking in these tides will find red empty rooms to measure long journeys. (Melvin Dixon)
20	The rooms are empty until he speaks. His guttural French is a hawking trader. His quick Wolof a restless warrior. His slow, impeccable syllables a gentleman trader. He tells in their own language what they have done.	60	
25	Our touring maps and cameras ready we stand in the weighing room where chained men paraded firm backs, their women open, full breasts, and children,		
30	rows of shiny teeth.		
	Others watched from the balcony, set the price in guilders, francs, pesetas and English pounds. Later when he has finished we too		
35	can leave our coins where stiff legs dragged in endless bargain.		
	He shows how some sat knee-bent in the first room.		
40	Young virgins waited in the second. In the third, already red, the sick and dying gathered near the exit to the sea.		
	In the weighing room again he takes a chain to show us how it's done. We take photographs to remember, others leave coins to forget.		
45	No one speaks		
50	except iron and stone and the seas		

The main feature of the poem that I want to discuss here, has to do with the plurality of voices at work, and the different levels of reading it implies. The primary voice is the voice of the narrator, which is already plural (“we” (26, 34, 46, 55), “our” (25, 35), “us” (45, 56), “ours” (54)). The plural deictic refers to the narrator and the rest of the audience present to witness the narration of the secondary voice in the poem. The secondary voice is the voice of the tour guide narrating the history of the place, represented by the deictic “he.” His agency as a narrator within the poem is materialized in expressions such; “He speaks” (1, 18), “he tells” (22), “he has spoken.” (53) The third voice within the poem, comes from the place itself, which speaks to the audience and answers the tour guide in a back and forth call and response pattern. Indeed the voice of the place can be appreciated in the following lines: “Here waves rush to shore / breaking news that we return / to empty rooms,” (11, 12, 13) or again, “No one speaks / except iron and stone.” (49-50) The call and response engaged with the guide is suggested in the following line: “The rooms are empty until he speaks.” (18) Finally, the voice which is prevailing over the others is the voice of history, which seems to be denoted by the recurrence of images of the sea. The sea seems to be both the witness of the tour, and the witness of the history it suggests. Indeed, line 11 and 12, to which we have already referred, suggests this idea. The breaking news reported by the waves could be compared to an account from an eyewitness. The sea is also personified on line 51, as it “speaks.” The “empty rooms,” “breaking in these tides,” in the last stanza appears to be breaking against history. We are thus confronted with a multilayered conversation between the narrator of the poem, the narrator of the story, the narrator of history which is the place itself, and history which is manifest in all those voices, yet independent from them. The text demonstrates the palimpsest structure described by Diagne. Through the poem, we are told history, within a story (the guide’s narration which is already a myth), within a story (the poem). The historical

elements within the poem thus reach the reader as fragments, broken by the waves of time. The reader of the poem is the witness of the different stratifications of history through successive accounts. The place is the primary testimony to the history of the slave trade. The guide is the agent of the reproduction of this historical truth, using the remnants of the place and narratives he has heard or read, all reconstituted fragments stitched together for the elaboration of his own narrative. Then, the poem, witness to the narrative of the guide, reconstitutes it in written form, and through an even more fragmentary structure. What is left is only selected bits and pieces of historical truth, yet still accounting for the reality of what happened within these walls. Only the sea, and the sun, that is nature/god, knows what really happened in the past in this very place. Nature, however, is still here to answer the calls of the contemporary accounts which are being re-shaped. Through the guide's narrative, this place reaches a mythical dimension as representing the whole historical reality of the slave trade. Through a collection of historical pieces, linked through imagination, a past reality is re-created in the present and comes to represent a larger historical reality. The poem, repeats this myth, and adds a layer to it, representing the guide himself as part of this narrative. The guide is indeed represented as a multiform mythic hero within the poem, sometimes a "hawking trader," (19) or a "gentleman trader," (22) sometimes a "restless warrior." (20) Through this poem, Melvin Dixon managed to demonstrate the processes of myth creation, using elements from historical truth to build narratives which account for larger realities. He also accounted for the means of transmission of the myth itself through the different voices present in the poem.

Through the analysis of our next poem, we will try to demonstrate how a form of realism can signify on the myth itself. The poem is called *The Drama* and was written by Suliaman El-Hadi, former member of the Last Poets, a group of poets and musicians who appeared in the late

1960s and who are often considered to be among the forefathers of rap as their poetry was performed on live percussion or jazz/funk musical accompaniment.

The Drama

It's like a terrible dream designed to make you scream
But you know that this is our reality
It's a story of our loss and the devastating cost
To our future and our efforts to be free

5 Are you ready to relax and gather up the facts
 From the things I'm about to say
 It's a little tale of drama overlayed with pain and trauma
 And curtain call is each and every day

10 It's about a generation being erased from our nation
 Being programmed to self-destruct
 And amid the mass confusion they've created the illusion
 That the only thing that counts is the buck

15 It's a tale about our offspring being taught to do the wrong thing
 While sucking out a rhythm on a stem
 And there are even some brothers who would violate their mothers
 And eliminate each other on a whim

20 It's about the women crying as they watch the children dying
 And the playground is the place to buy some dope
 The crack vials laying around from carpet on the ground
 Beneath a tire hanging from a rope

25 It's a script about the old ones being frightened of their own sons
 As they watch the family structure disappear
 And instead of the protection for the years of their affection
 The only thing they got to show is fear

30 It's a tale about our males being locked away in jails
 And the father figure missing from the home
 And that old conspiracy to destroy the family
 Leaves the women and the children all alone

35 It's like a terrible dream designed to make you scream
 But you know that this is our reality
 It's the story of our loss and the devastating cost
 To our future and our efforts to be free

It's a tale of unemployment with the limited enjoyment

35 Of the basic things society should provide
 Of the people on the street who so seldom get to eat
 And are nonchalantly shuttled to the side

 It's the truth about our youth hearing lies instead of truth
 And the same distorted image of their worth
 And things that should be free in this rich society
 40 Have always been denied them since their birth

 It's about their attitudes with the emphasis on rude
 And inconsideration is the rule
 And youngsters think they're chilling while in fact they're really illing
 While ignoring good advice to stay in school

45 They are victims of oppression and the overall obsession
 To always keep people in their place
 And those making the decision seem to parcel out divisions
 With the underlying factor being race

 Yes it's still the same old story of deception, greed and glory
 50 That bought the ruling classes wealth and fame
 And though they tell you things are better—still they leave you wondering
 whether
 It is just another title to the game

 It's about the morning breeze blowing sneakers in the trees
 55 And garbage is the flower that you see
 It's enough to make you sick when they put you in a trick
 Then they tell you the achiever you should be

 It's about the people's sadness and their deeply rooted madness
 And the indignities to which they must submit
 60 For they know deep down inside this is surely genocide
 Just some slavery that possesses fringe benefits

 Yes I could go on my friend but this story has no end
 It's an everlasting tale of tears and woe
 We'll just have to make thing right or we'll always be uptight
 65 Because the system is designed for us to blow

 It's a terrible dream designed to make you scream
 But you know that this is our reality
 It's the story of our loss and the devastating cost
 To our future and our efforts to be free
 (Suliaman El-Hadi)

The poem plays on a major dichotomy, the opposition between reality and fiction. The lexical field of fiction is denoted by the title first, which points at performance and at the tragic dimension of the thematic of the poem. “Drama” is repeated once in the expression “tale of drama,” which illustrates the double meaning intended here, especially in the resonance with the words “curtain call.” (8) Other words referring to fiction include; “story” (3, 31, 49, 62, 68), “tale” (7, 13, 25, 33, 63), “illusion” (11), “script” (21), and “dream,” which comes back in the chorus. This lexical field is in opposition to words evoking the real: “facts” (5), “truth” (37), “Reality” (2, 30, 67).

Through this opposition, the poem attempts to Signify on certain myths that permeate society, myths that are counterproductive, and even destructive, in particular toward African American communities. The poem focuses on giving a realistic account of a social reality, multiplying vivid images. The first two stanzas set the stage, literally, announcing that the poem is a performance, a show, but a show that cannot be separated from reality. The “curtain call” (8) initiates the realistic description of the living conditions in poor African American communities. The realistic account is constantly balanced with the affirmation of its fictional nature: “It’s a tale”, “It’s a story”, etc. Through this opposition, the poet Signifies on a mainstream audience to whom the reality of economic exploitation toward blacks is invisible, or fictive, as they refuse to see the unjust nature of society, probably for the reason that they benefit from it. At another level, the poem signifies on the commercialization of African American culture, and the consumer attitude of white audiences. African American culture has indeed been constantly appropriated by the mainstream for profit, often erasing socio-economic factors, emphasizing the entertainment aspect of art. The poem criticizes audiences who fail to see the oppressive conditions which determine the relations of market exchange. At another level, the fiction that is

revised in the poem has to do with the lies and manipulations of the elites about the nature of race relations, based on economic oppressions ever since slavery days. The third stanza in particular, through expressions such as “old conspiracy”, “old story”, “script” evoke a premeditated and concerted origin of these conditions. The tension between the performance aspect and the reality described evokes the existence of a sort of smoke screen presented to the population, masking the reality of oppression. The poem clearly criticizes the fiction of black inferiority, which justifies and is justified by the economic exploitation of black people. The poem signifies on one of the main myths permeating modern society; the concept of race and the hierarchy which sprung from it in order to justify the exploitation of Africa, the kidnapping, rape and murder of its population, slavery, segregation, and the more recent criminalization and incarceration of black people in the West. The poem takes the myth backward in that it starts from reality to demonstrate that this reality was in fact based on an original fiction presented as the reality. Indeed, if the myth is based on reality at its origin, which has been put in contact with fiction, the myth nonetheless can influence and swerve reality in intended directions. This is through the myth of European and Western superiority that colonialism, imperialism and racism can be first validated by the majority and then perpetuated.

3.3.4- Gangsta: Outlaw mythology in rap

Let us discuss now the mythical dimension within rap using a few examples. We will more specifically look at the myth of the gangsta. We chose to focus on fragments of songs to illustrate our approach, and will analyze an entire song from French rap artist Booba to conclude this section. We have already stated in our second chapter that two major strategies of narration were present in rap. We have defined the first as mythical representation, through the trope of the

ego trip (self-praise). The second was defined as social realism. We have also stated that most rap songs navigate between these two extremes. Rap is generally a mix of real events, realistic fiction narratives, fantasy narratives or self-praises, all pretexts to the display of lyrical skills and the playful use of language. We have used the pimp as a major figure of urban black male mythology to illustrate the fusion between reality and fantasy which is inherent in rap. In our third chapter, we have defined myth as a play between social and historical realities, and the social imaginary. Rap, then, seems to navigate within the parameters of the myth, always Signifying on reality. Within rap's discourse, the most obvious subject of mythical representation is very frequently the rapper him/herself through the trope of the ego trip, as we have already stated. This has a consequence on the use of the voice. We have stated in our second chapter that the dramatic voice and the narrative voice were often intermingled in rap, which made interpretation problematic. The story told is often misinterpreted as the story of the rapper him/herself. Elements of a song might originate from the life of the rapper, but generally, a good portion of the narrative, sometimes all of it, is constituted of inventions serving the discourse. In the case of Biggie's song *Gimme the Loot*, for instance, we can imagine as possible, Biggie's participation in an arm robbery during his life of crime before he became a famous rapper, giving him special insights on the psychological dispositions of a "robbery expert." (Gimme the Loot 45) The violence displayed in the song, however, is certainly exaggerated for the purpose of entertainment. The song is, indeed, as much a demonstration of Biggie's talent for creating realistic, lively, terrifying, funny narratives, as it is a realistic account of a robber's mental process. The lyrical precision in the descriptions, the graphic quality of the speech and the dialogue form makes this narrative credible despite its delirious content. We observe through this song that Biggie is very aware of the play on the narrative voice, as he dramatizes his own rap

persona (Biggie) as a ruthless robber, while using his own voice to Signify another character. The similarities and differences between Biggie's two voices generates an uncanny feeling, as the listener gets the impression that there are two persons talking, while the voice of Biggie is still recognizable in Inf's voice. This strategy evokes the idea of a single character experiencing schizophrenia, or rather a dissociation of identity, fitting well with the hyper violence of the scene. It seems indeed that we are witnessing the inner dialogue of an insane person. Through this process, Biggie demonstrates the double-voiced quality of rap narratives itself, which make extensive use of the manipulation of the narrative voice for dramatic purposes. The stories are not necessarily to be taken seriously. (Isn't it true of any story?) The use of a rap persona as the prime actor of the tales he produces, however, does constitute a play on the ambiguity of the rapper's identity, which might be misleading to certain audiences. The split of Biggie's personality in the song, into two conversing characters (Biggie and Inf,) mirrors the dissociation and sometimes the superposition of the rap persona, that is, Biggie, and the real life person, Christopher Wallace.⁵⁰

Thus, rappers, through Signifying on reality, play on the mythical dimension of speech. Their self representation and the play on the narrative voice places rap narratives in the domain of the myth. M-1 from Dead Prez states in *Exhibit M*, taken from the mixtape described earlier: "My impersonation of myself is mythological," demonstrating the rapper's awareness of the play on identity that rap narratives represent. The vernacular itself is particularly prone to this type of play because of its more flexible nature, allowing more movement on both axis of signification. The displacement of the original meaning and context of utterance of words is one of the techniques employed by rappers. This strategy can, to a certain extent, allow them to subvert the stereotypes imposed on black people by society. By using the mechanisms of the myth, rappers

⁵⁰ Biggie's real name.

are able to reverse the myth defused in the media and the public discourse to their advantage. It is the strategy employed by Suliaman El-Hadi in *The Drama*, yet, he chose to use realism as a tool for reversal. Rappers generally choose to fight myth with the myth, repeating its patterns and revising them. Rappers sometimes do repeat the myths of the structure, with no revisions at all, simply embodying, that is, perpetuating stereotypes. This repetition of the oppressive structure's script does not constitute Signifying as it does not Signify on anything, but represents a mechanical repetition of preconceived patterns. By critically embracing stereotypes formally, rappers can subvert myths. This process is not far from what we have described in our discussion of the minstrel show, or through Dunbar's poetry, in particular in *ACCOUNTABILITY*. It is the same process alluded to by *Négritude* poet Aimé Césaire, when he states:

Parce que nous vous haïssons vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons
de la démence précoce de la folie flamboyante du cannibalisme tenace.
(Césaire 27)⁵¹

By embracing the myths that prevail in society, artists can re-appropriate them, make them lose some of their potency, manipulate them, use them for specific purposes or apply additional mythical layers to them, thus creating a space for expression within the constricted structure of society. By embracing stereotypes formally, rappers participate in a process of myth re-construction. Myth re-appropriation can work as a protective shield, a sort of invisibility suit, reformulating the dominant discourse, allowing one to move undetected, so to speak, giving an advantage to the artist to subvert and attack the structure from the inside. This strategy comports a risk, the risk of becoming the myth, thus only participating in its perpetuation. The "gangsta" attitude, which was already part of the early development of rap, (and which indeed predated rap itself) but was greatly developed in the 1990s and generalized in the past ten years within

⁵¹ Translation:

Because we hate you, you and your reason, we are claiming precocious insanity, blazing madness and persistent cannibalism for ourselves.

commercial rap, illustrates this tendency. By using the image of the outlaw which society has assigned African Americans by default, rappers can for a time challenge stereotypes by Signifying on mainstream discourses. We have alluded several times to the fact that the vernacular signifies on standard English. In that sense, just like Gates' black vernacular "Signification" is not the same as standard English "signification," "gangsta" does not have quite the same meaning as "gangster". The "gangsta" assumed by rappers is often not the glorification of violence and illegal activities that it appears to be, but rather a comment on it. The song *Locotes* by rap group Cypress Hill, is a good illustration of the ambiguity of "gangsta" narratives. It is very similar to Biggie's song in its theme, its cinematic approach to narration and its reversal at the end. Here is the last verse of the song, which comes after the description of a series of robberies by the narrator:

Locotes

[...]

One-time's not down with us,
 Now they're lookin' for my ride, but I'm on the bus.
 Don't turn your back on a vato like me,
 Cause I'm one broke motherfucka in need.
 5 Desperate! What's going on in the mente?
 Taking from the rich and not from my gente.
 Look at that gabacho sleepin', borracho from the cerveza
 He's sippin'. No me vale, madre,
 Gabacho pray to your padre.
 10 This is for the time you wouldn't give me the jale.
 4 and 3 and 2 and 1
 This ol motherfucker, got him a gun.
 Bla-on! I took one to the kneecap,
 Things happened so fast now I dropped my strap.
 15 Now I'm about to meet my maker,
 I thought I had it all figured it out for the paper.
 No longer will I be runnin',
 Last thing I heard was the fuckin' GAT hummin'.
 (B-Real/Cypress Hill)

Several important elements are present in these lines, which illustrate many rap narratives' approach to the gangsta ethos. On line 4 and 5, the violence and lack of empathy of the character is explained through the influence of his socio-economic background, and the desperation which it generates. The narrator also presents himself as a sort of Robin Hood, taking only from the rich and not from his "gente" (6). Gangsta rap indeed often plays on this reversal of paradigms, where the criminal becomes a folk hero. The end of the song is similar to Biggie's as it ends in the death of the narrator, shot by a drug dealer he had accounts to settle with (the Gabacho⁵² of line 9). Line 17, further illustrates that the life of crime is not a restful one as one is always on the run. Gangsta stories indeed often end up badly, just like in real life. "Gangsta" revises the term "gangster" through repetition with difference. Indeed, it is the notions of the racial divide and the socio-economic realities behind this attitude, through an emphasis on the linguistic divide, which are added as a layer of signification to the original standard English word. We witness a form of linguistic intertextuality, a Signifying revision of the original word to the more specific and contextual term "gangsta." In the same way, "nigga" revises "nigger." While the term "nigger" instantaneously evokes a long history of depreciation and violence inflicted on black people, "nigga" denotes a sense of unity against this same oppression. The revised term, however, does not lose its original meaning which can be re-activated for specific purposes. "Nigga" can indeed be used both to integrate, or to exclude. In the French context, we observe a similar re-appropriation of certain key (mascon) words. Derogatory words are assigned new functions and meanings while keeping the original meanings at hand. Thus the word "négro" is often used in rap songs. It refers to the derogatory word "nègre" (equivalent to "nigger") but is generally used in rap as a term denoting camaraderie. Context is important here as the original meaning of the term is still available to the rapper who can use it as an insult. These Signifying revisions of

⁵² A Spanish slang word for a white American.

terms illustrate the double-edged quality of language. The meaning of a single word can indeed change from one sentence to another. French rapper Sefyu, for instance, uses the word “Crouille” almost systematically in his songs. This word, which was used as a derogatory word denoting North-Africans in France, but has become obsolete, probably originates from the Swiss French word “crouille” which means, “gamin” (condescending word for “kid/boy”) as a noun, and “of bad quality” or “disappointing” as an adjective. “Crouille” in France might also be a re-appropriation of the Arabic “Khuya,” meaning “mon frère” (“my brother”). Thus, by using this word and assigning it the connotation of camaraderie, Sefyu not only signifies on the Arabic word “Khuya,” but also brings it back to the memory in mainstream discourse as a way to signify the perpetuation of discrimination. By signifying on the meaning of the word, Sefyu comments on the history of discrimination and racism in France (itself inherited from colonialism). To a former negative myth has been applied a positive myth which does not totally erase the original meaning as we have seen through Barthes. Sefyu’s use of “crouille” is double-edged, alternating between insult and camaraderie, sometimes denoting both. Barthes posits that “Le mythe est toujours un vol de langage” (239) (“myth is always a language-robbery”). In the case of rap, it is an armed-robbery, and Biggie’s song seems to be a case in point. We have already discussed the prevalence of the metaphor of guns associated to the skills of the rapper. Rapper Sefyu uses that same imagery in his song *La Légende*, which is an enumeration of clichés that permeate France’s mainstream discourse, about immigration and Africans or Afro-descent French citizens in particular. The chorus of the song is quoted below:

Mon esprit, ton hall, vos crânes, vont s'alarmer.
 La France n'a pas désarmé.
 J'ouvre ma gueule pour toutes les minorités, il faut s'armer.
 Fracture social mon frère, j' viens t'alarmer.
 5 La France n'a pas désarmé.
 J'ouvre ma gueule, (poh poh poh poh) mes mots sont armés.
 (Sefyu)⁵³

The chorus clearly uses the metaphor of language as a weapon. Language is represented as the main weapon of discrimination and simultaneously as the weapon of choice to fight those same discriminations. While the song's musical and vocal tone might appear to an outsider as rather aggressive, any careful observer will notice that this song is nothing but an answer to society's attitude at large. Sefyu simply states stereotypes one after the other as they are commonly circulated in mainstream culture, and call for a reaction against them through language rather than violence. The organization of the chorus illustrates Sefyu's play on the stereotypes and irrational fears of the mainstream about minorities. Indeed, the metaphor is stated in the last line, after the use of an onomatopoeia to denote gun shots. The dramatic effect here is obvious as one might get the impression that Sefyu is advocating armed resistance against the state, if one misses; "mes mots sont armés." (6) The line "Il faut s'armer," (3) then must be read as an advice to get more knowledge, in particular on issues relevant to oppressed minorities in France, on issues relating to colonization in particular. Sefyu's rapping style and sonic universe participate in a play on the contrast between form and meaning. Indeed, his rap is characterized by an extreme violence in the form. The instrumentals are often very dark and minimalist, saturated with sounds of guns loading and firing, sounds of handcuffs and cell doors locking, all of which creates an almost suffocating atmosphere. Sefyu's rapping style is characterized by a very deep

⁵³ Translation:

The Legend

My mind, your hallway, your cranium, will be alarmed./France did not disarm./I spit on the mic for all minorities,
 you must get arms/Segregation my brother, I come to alarm you/France did not disarm./I spit on the mic (poh poh
 poh poh) my words are armed.

and rough voice, eructing guttural sounds, with a strong accent evoking Arabic inflections as commonly found in the banlieue. His syntax is very syncopated, often reduced to a minimum as in the first line from *La Légende*; “L’histoire veut que la téss’ passe tête basse, paire de baskets Air Max et casquette basse,”⁵⁴ or in the following line from the same song: “La légende veut qu’Islam égale ex-voyous de cité, égale recyclage incité.”⁵⁵ One of Sefyu’s moniker is Zehefyu, which is a contraction of “Zehef” (“*énervé*” (“edgy”) in Arabic) and Sefyu. This dimension of his rap persona is materialized in his rapping style and voice. The message in his songs, however, is not advocating nor reflecting the violence of the form, as we have seen in *La Légende*, but rather calling for more education, learning, dialogue between sexes and generations, self-reliance and self-determination, self-critic, this within a framework of consistent critic of colonialism and its implications in contemporary French society. In the song *Sans Plomb 93*, from his second album *Suis-je le gardien de mon frère?*, Sefyu Signifies on the word “gangsta” itself in the chorus:

Sans Plomb 93

Ça défouraille, les cocktails sont dans la tess, eh oh !
 L’immigration n’est pas la pute de délinquance, ha ha !
 Ouais dans les cités y’a des GANGSTAS GANGSTAS !
 Dans l’gouvernement y’a des GANGSTAS GANGSTAS !
 5 Refoulés par les clubs dans les boîtes, eh oh !
 On a des gueules trop cramés d’après les médias, ha ha !
 C’est comme ça qu’on d’vient des GANGSTAS GANGSTAS !
 Comme Vladimir Poutine GANGSTAS GANGSTAS!⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Translation:

“The story goes like the project walks by head low, pair of air max sneakers and low base ball cap,”

⁵⁵ Translation:

“The legend says that Islam equals ex-thugs from the project, equals recycling encouraged.”

⁵⁶ Translation:

Unleaded 93

The guns are drawn, the cocktail are in the hood, eh ho!/Immigration is not petty crime’s hoe, hu hu!/Yeah, in the ghetto there’s gangstaz, gangstaz!/In the government there’s gangstaz, gangstaz!/We’re kicked out of the clubs and the bars, eh oh!/Our faces are too shady (suspicious/dark) for the media, hu hu!/That’s just how you turn like gangstaz gangstaz!/Like Vladimir Poutine, gangstaz gangstaz!

Here, through the repetition and emphasis on the word “gangstas,” which I have signified on the page through the use of capital letters, denotes its subversive usage. The comparison between the criminals found in the French ghettos (“les cités” (3)) to the criminals in the government, re-contextualizes the term. Indeed, through this association, the French ghetto, and their large population of African descendants or immigrants, cannot be solely blamed for violence and criminality, as is often the case in mainstream discourses, because it is already at work at the top of social hierarchy. Sefyu even gives a global resonance to the phenomenon by equating the small scale criminals of the banlieue to Vladimir Poutine. The song is characterized by the aggressive tone of voice which we have already described. The song even starts with sounds of automatic weapons, artillery, sirens, evoking a battle field. While the sonic landscape of the song, Sefyu’s tone, and the repetition of the word “gangsta,” might evoke senseless violence and aggression to a listener not acquainted with the codes of rap and its aesthetics, the message, however, cannot be mistaken as advocating violence. The use of the gun metaphor in the song illustrates the aesthetic priority of the artist, and his intent which try to negotiate the tension between the need for authenticity toward the community which he represents and the need to reach outside to a broader audience. Yet, the use of this imagery encloses meaning in a context which prevents its integration by all. The use of the gangsta ethos certainly creates exclusivity.

It is clear that a superficial and biased reading of the form might lead one to overlook the message of the song. In the song *Evolution*, Sefyu states: “Mon rap est trop dur parce-qu’on s’limite qu’à son aspect,”⁵⁷ (“My rap is too rough cause one won’t go beyond its appearance”) thus referring to the misinterpretation which the rough form of rap might generate. Form, however, is integral part of rap’s power to appeal, invoke and Signify. It is through a control of

the form that meaning is framed and shared. In that sense, the initiatory dimension of the myth, which we have described through Mamoussé Diagne's work, applies here. Indeed, one must be literate in the French socio-economic and historical context, in particular as it relates to the heritage and present reality of the colonization of Africa, its people, and descendants worldwide, in the linguistic codes of the vernacular used, in the linguistic and aesthetic codes of hip hop culture itself, in order to reach an accurate understanding of the message. If a true insider of the culture has generally no problem understanding the message of most rap songs, an outsider often rejects the form without even trying to reach the content. Rappers, just like Èsù or the griot, play on social boundaries, on the tensions between the inside and the outside. They are indeed often positioned at the limit between universes which have been artificially separated through cultures for centuries, always trying to build bridges between them. They act as a lense allowing the inside world of the banlieue to penetrate the mainstream, and constitute a medium for the outside to cast a glimpse of the inside. As we have described in the case of Èsù, the inadequate manipulation of the lense might generate misrepresentations. The market is a major public space where these mediations take place. The market, however, remains framed by the forces of exploitation. In this context, ambiguity of the form and content, sometimes run counter to the mediatory approach and participates in separation, re-enforcing social stratification.

Gangsta mythology generally makes extensive use of one of the main elements of the rap ethos; the ego trip, sort of fantasy tale of self-aggrandizement. The ego trip is the new model for myth construction in the digital age. Through the ego trip, the rapper creates a mythical double for himself, which participates in a collective redefinition of identity, both alternatively and simultaneously overturning society's paralyzing gaze and participating in it. The gangsta imagery which overtook American commercial rap since the 1990s and French rap since the year

2000 epitomizes rappers' relationship to myths. Stereotypes associated with people of African descent in the United States or France (which are respectively inherited from slavery and colonialism) are still persistent today. Myths portraying Africans as lazy, violent, and promiscuous are still part of mainstream discourses in those two countries. Gangsta rap constitutes a Signifying revision undermining those discourses at its best, and a repetition, display and validation of the same stereotypes at its worst. Most of the time, gangsta rap navigates between the two. While the promotion by the structure of the gangsta imagery as representing the totality of rap culture (even Afro-Diasporic culture to a certain extent...) perpetuates a racist discourse,⁵⁸ it also creates a potential space of social promotion for rappers. The use of this imagery also constitutes a locus of negotiation of identity, of struggle between competing discourses, a space of subversion of retentions from colonial thinking which still permeates society. Gangsta rap indeed always navigate somewhere in between the desire to access mainstream recognition and the need to criticize some of its aspects. We will see how French rapper Booba⁵⁹ navigates along those lines in his raps.

Booba is certainly one of the French rappers who makes the most extensive use of the boast within his rap. Through his ego-trip narratives, Booba created a mythical representation of himself, navigating between honest biographical elements and pure fantasy. Booba's rap can indeed be compared to a long autobiographical poem, in which fiction and reality interpenetrate. He is also well versed in the gangsta ethos. Booba was probably the first to develop the genre of gangsta rap in France while reaching mainstream success. Whether in his flow or lyrical content, his rapping differed from the former generations who reach mainstream recognition, in that it

⁵⁸ Indeed, rap is the medium in which African population are the most represented in mainstream discourse. The consolidation of the gangsta imagery within this genre, sole medium for expression for these populations, illustrates the discourse of criminalization applied to these populations in the media in general.

⁵⁹ Booba is one of the biggest selling artist in French rap history. He holds the record of legal mp3 downloads in France, all genres included in 2011.

was less conciliatory, more violent, darker, and displaying a vernacular language whose intonations were closer to the language of the street. He reached a mainstream audience in 2002 with his first solo album “Temps Mort.” In his songs, Booba often describes the difficulty of facing racism growing up in France as a *métis* (His father is a black man from Senegal, and his mother is white French woman). He describes life in the streets of Paris, with the daily hustles and constant harassment and confrontation with the police, his frustration with the school system, etc. He often makes references to Africa, and Senegal in particular, and condemns France’s attitude toward Africans, their French descendants and the silence surrounding colonization and slavery in mainstream culture. He also describes the lifestyle he sought all his life, in which money, cars, fashion, women, drugs and alcohol play a central role. For a public that is outside to the universe of rap, Booba’s persona matches the image of criminality associated to the French *banlieues* through the media, and the defiant attitude of some of its inhabitant vis-à-vis the mainstream and police forces. For an insider, however, Booba is the embodiment of resistance through defiance to a mainstream culture that is oppressive to the African and Afro-descendant populations living in the *banlieues*. Booba also represents an image of masculine success for French Afro-descendants. Booba often compares his rapping career to illegal activities, which sometimes creates the illusion that one can succeed through hustling. His use of the criminal imagery is however always metaphorical and never clear cut. In the song *Boîte Vocale*, the lines ; “Mc poursuivi pour rime contre l’humanité / J’vais surement prendre perpète, préparez les mandats / Moi j’suis toujours au mauvais moment au mauvais endroit,” (“MC trialed for rhyme against humanity/I’ll probably get life, prepare the committal order/I’m always at the wrong time in the wrong place”) illustrates his manipulation of stereotypes through a playful use of language. On many occasion, Booba expressed that he did not feel the need to

represent the *banlieue* (or at least not more than a Kebob sandwich: “J’represent la banlieue comme un Grèque-Frite” (*Le Duc de Boulogne*)), that he had no calling for telling the youth what to do, and that he saw himself as an entrepreneur who, through his success, demonstrates that one can succeed, even against the odds, if one follows one’s conviction and works toward one’s goals. In the song *On m’a dit* from the album “Temps Mort” he stated: “On m’a dit d’changer des mots pour pas qu’les p’tits m’suivent, pas grâce moi qu’ils pensent Tony d’avant leurs p’tits suisses.” (“I was told to change my words so the kids won’t follow me, not my fault if they think about Tony when eating their brownie”) This statement illustrates the idea that his narratives are fictional works and that they should be read as such, just like Brian De Palma’s movie *Scarface* is (“Tony” stands for Tony Montana, the main character of the movie.) Indeed, it is the condition of economic oppression and discrimination which made the figure of Tony Montana appealing to certain youth, not the narrative itself which is not a glorification of the gangster, but a reflection and a comment on a social reality. Through Booba’s gangsta imagery, his boasts and his critic of discrimination and oppression of Africans, by presenting a coherent narrative of success while keeping a defiant attitude toward a mainstream culture that remains stuck in an old colonialist mind-frame, Booba’s persona becomes an incredible source of pride for a discriminated population. His large commercial success among afro-descendant populations is a testimony to this. We cannot, however, ignore the potential negative effect his approach can have in promoting detrimental lifestyles. Despite the metaphorical dimension of the lyrics, the repetition of the recurrent tropes of the genre (materialism, money, drug dealing, violence, misogyny, etc.) that is, the repetition of the myth, participates in the diffusion of certain stereotypes. The responsibility which Booba seems to deny caught up with his personal life in 2007, when two men kidnapped his mother and brother and asked for 500, 000 Euros and two

dedicated CDs as a ransom. The kidnappers were indeed fans of his music. This tragic event (which ended well for his family) seems to illustrate the power of words which can indeed manifest reality. It also seems to denote that you cannot fight a myth with the myth itself and not participate in it. Indeed, you cannot fight the problem of discrimination and stereotypes by using the same stereotypes. While this technique might bring short-term results, in the long run, the stereotypes are not eliminated, just repeated. Roland Barthes teaches us that the function of the myth is “déformer, non de faire disparaître.” (229) (“to distort, not to make disappear”). Thus the stereotypes are not done away with, they are just temporarily neutralized and rendered inefficient in order to be reused. They, however, remain at the center of the structure of the myth. For Barthes, myth is also “une parole figée,” (233) (“a frozen speech”) in that it freezes language (and the stereotypes contained in it) in order to allow its manipulation. Thus, by using mythical language as a tool for reversal, as in the case of gangsta rap, one risks to remain stuck in a stereotypical position and solely become a living embodiment of the stereotypes. This phenomenon was certainly well understood by the record industry which seems to promote the gangsta imagery of rappers for profit, consequently promoting values that are detrimental to society at large and to black communities in particular. Thus, by assuming the myth of the gangsta, rappers both react against stereotypes and participate in them. Booba seems to be aware of this dynamic, in particular in his relation to the power structure. While presenting himself as “at odds” with the authorities, critiquing the unfairness of the system toward Africans, he profits from and promotes the capitalist system enforced by these same authorities. In *Garde la Pêche* he states: “L’Etat c’est Geppetto/J’suis une ghetto marionnette.” (“The government is Geppetto/I’m a ghetto puppet.”) Thus, he seems to evoke that his rap persona is a creation of the state, in order to manipulate the public opinion both inside and outside the ghetto. This statement

seems to denote lucidity as to his position, or maybe plain cynicism. It nonetheless illustrates the ambiguous position rappers occupy in the public space, at the crossroad of opposing universes, as we have already stated. It becomes, however, complicated to situate Booba as solely complacent or participating in the structure, as a large portion of his career (the majority) has been built outside the structure of the music industry. His first group Lunatic remained totally independent, and his first success as a solo artist, *Temps Mort*, was released through his own independent label in collaboration with a major record company. Booba released three albums with the major Universal Music, under his own structure called Tallac Records. Yet he regularly released mixtapes through totally independent structures. Since 2010, Tallac Records operates through the independent label, “Because Music”, which also promotes Sefyu’s music. He has released one album and a mixtape so far since the structure operates under Because Music. Thus, most of Booba’s discography has been without the help of major companies and radio stations. Booba often stated that if radio stations wanted to play his songs, it was fine with him, yet he would not alter the content to please the executives of the radio station. Both major companies and radio stations have been criticized by artists for influencing them to alter the form and content of their songs in order to be played or released.

Booba’s “Ma Définition”, taken from his first commercially successful album as a solo artist, *Temps Mort*, follows. This song exposes Booba’s outlook. The rest of his discography constitutes a succession of Signifying revisions of what he states in this song, granting over time, and through the trope of the ego-trip, a mythical dimension to his rap persona:

Ma Définition

On y pousse un peu d’tavers, skate, BMX

puis nique la RATP, tout ça rythmé de rap music.
 Ma jeunesse a la couleur des trains,
 RER C pendant l'trajet j'rêvais de percer, fier d'en être un.
 5 On cultive sa haine anti-flic ou gendarme
 alors on d'vient des boss du maniement d'armes.
 Mon peuple anéanti, temporaire seulement
 jusqu'à la rébellion de l'Afrique et des Antilles.
 C'est 9 ze-dou nous, on est p'tits,
 10 on veut niquer Paris, on connaît rien nous
 et y'a plein d'trucs à prendre, et puis t'apprends vite avec les coups,
 reviens avec tes couilles, tes potes, frappe avec les coudes.
 C'est pousser comme une ortie parmi les roses
 et y sont trop alors j'appelle mes Khros les ronces.
 15 C'est un état d'esprit, ne plie que si les pissenlits j'bouffe.
 Ne reçois d'ordre ni des keufs ni des profs.
 Haineux, de chez nous vient le mot vénéneux.
 La rue conseille, la juge te console souvent.
 Drogue douce ou c'est le bug, la rue t'élève et te tue ;
 20 alors laisse-moi tirer qu'j'm'assomme au teuh teuh.
 Grillé mais je nie, ici les hyènes ont une insigne,
 et j'espère qu'c'est pas l'un d'nous qui servira de gnou.
 La folie, le sang, la mélancolie, du rap, du fil rouge,
 des risques et du son, ma définition.

[Chorus]

25 J'viens des Hauts d'Seine, obscène est mon style, mon comportement.
 J'suis instable au micro, et dans la rue j'vis n'importe comment.
 J'm'en bats la race sauf des potes, la famille et l'cash.
 Y faut d'la maille, plein d'sky, y faut qu'j'graille, non ?!
 Ecoute, goûte mon flow, fils, car j'ai pas b'soin d'sponsors,
 30 le rap, mon crew et l'vice, c'est comme ça qu'j'm'en sors.
 Connu pour tuer les M.I.C. d'ici à NYC.
 Du sang, des risques et du son, ma définition.

Ma définition, j'en veux toujours plus,
 j'attends pas leur putain d'paye ou leur putain d'bus.
 35 Insoumis! j'fais des sous bêtement
 parce que j'veux voir c'pays en sous-vêtements.
 J'voulais savoir pourquoi l'Afrique vit malement,
 du CP à la seconde y m'parlent d'la Joconde et des Allemands.
 Ici le diable racole, fuit son rodéo,
 40 t'attache dans l'hall avec d'la coke, pisse sur ton auréole.
 Delabel, Sony ou Virgin,
 vous comprenez, mon style n'a pas b'soin d'vigile.
 Des plaques et des plaques, si c'porc d'Chirac était black.
 J'suis obscur, dors d'un œil comme un missile scud.

45 J'suis pas le bienvenue, mais j'suis là,
 reprends c'qu'on m'a enlevé, j'suis venu manger et chier là.
 Plongé dans la tourmente quand les fonds manquent,
 à force de m'plaindre, j'attends plus l'argent, j'vais l'prendre.
 Dérivé trop jeune, j'peux plus redescendre,
 50 et j'essaie pas d'être en chien d'janvier à décembre.
 Ou j'te fais jouir ou j'te fais mal, c'est très simple,
 ma définition avec des textes à prendre à 1 degré 5.

[Chorus
 (Booba)⁶⁰

The first striking feature of these rap verses is the density of the flow, which can be put in parallel to his latest albums, which display more sparse lyrics. This illustrates Booba's inspiration which follows the stylistic evolution of mainstream American rap. He moved from a

⁶⁰ Translation:

My Definition

(1-5) We grow there with a bit of a slant, skate, BMX/then fuck the city transit, all this set in motion with rap music./My generation has the color of the trains of my area/ (RER C) During the trip I was dreaming of making it, proud to be one of them./We nurture our hatred anti-cop or gendarme,

(6-10) so we become experts in any types of arms./My people annihilated, only temporarily/until the rebellion of Africa and the French Antilles./It's 9-2 here, we're young/we want to fuck Paris, we don't know shit,
 (11-15) and there's a lot of stuff to take, and you learn fast with each blow./come back with your balls, your homies, hit with your elbows./It grew like stinging nettles among roses/and they are too many so I call my homies, the brambles./It's a state of mind, will yield only if I push the daisies

(16-20) Receives orders neither from cops nor from teachers./Heinous, it's here that appeared the word poisonous./The street advises you, the judge often soothe your pain away./Soft drugs or you will crash, the street raises you and kill./so let me get a toké so I can knock myself out with the weed.

(line 21-24) Grilled, but I plead non-guilty, here there's hyenas with badges,/and I hope none of us will be the gnu./Insanity, blood, melancholy, some rap, some red wire./risks and sounds, my definition./

(chorus)

(25-32) I come from *Haut d'Seine*, my style is obscene, my behavior./On the mic I'm instable, and in the street I do my best to survive like a warrior./I just don't give a damn, except for my homies, my family and the money./We need dough, lots of whisky, I need to eat, right?!/Listen, taste my flow, son, cause I don't need a sponsor./rap music, my crew and crime, that's how I survive./Known as killer of MCs from here to NYC./ Blood, risks and sounds, my definition.

(Line 33-40) My definition, I never get enough./I don't wait for their fucking pay or their fucking bus./Disobedient! I make money dumbly./cause I want to see this country in bikini./I wanted to know why Africa was living poorly, from first to tenth grade all they talk about is Mona Lisa and the Nazi party./Here the devil solicits, run away from his rodeo,/ties you in the hallways with cocaine, pisses on your halo.

(Line 41-45) Delabel, Sony or Virgin./understand, my style doesn't need guards./Gees and gees, if the pig named Chirac was black./I'm obscure, sleep one eye open like a scud missile./I'm not welcome, but here I am,

(Line 46-52) take back what was stolen from me, I came to eat and shit here./Soaked in torment when money's tight./tired of complaining, I do not wait money anymore, I go get it./Drifting away from a young age, I can't come back down./and I try not to be broke from January to December./Either I make you come or I make you suffer, It's plain to see,/my definition comes with texts to absorb while intoxicated.

(Chorus)

sound close to the East Coast sound of the late 1990s, characterized by denser lyrics and faster tempi, exemplified by Biggie's style or the Wu Tang Clan's for instance, to the more recent trend of Southern rap, exemplified by Lil Wayne, denoting a slower tempo and sparser lyrics. His style in this song already demonstrates the abundance of different images and ideas, almost a new one for each lines, which is still characteristic of his later raps. Booba is indeed not a storyteller such as Biggie, elaborating long stories, but rather a praise singer using different metaphors and short proverb-like lines. The main object of his praise, in most of his songs is himself, or rather his rap persona; Booba. The first image which is developed in the first verse is the image of the ghetto youths as plants, indeed weeds, which manage to grow in between the cracked concrete of the *banlieues* ' urban decay. Indeed; "On y pousse un peu d'travers..." (1) illustrates the conditions in which ghetto youths are placed, which runs counter to their development, the concrete structures preventing their natural growth. The same metaphor is extended in line 13, 14 and 15, denoting this time the outcast status of Africans at large in France ("ortie parmi les roses"). As in Sefyu's *Sans Plomb 93*, socio-economic conditions, and the broader international context, here accounts for the behavior of the ghetto youths. The Pan-African dimension of Booba's perspective is indeed illustrated in line 7 and 8, prophesying the rebellion of Africa and the French Antilles against France's oppression. Indeed, in the line; "Mon peuple anéanti," Booba evokes a commonality of experience between Africa, the French Antilles and the youth of France's ghetto. In the second verse, Booba states his personal philosophy of self-reliance, rejecting help from the state and the oppressive system, represented in line 34 by his rejection of a salary and public transportation. It is from line 45 to 48, that Booba's recurrent ambiguous parallel between the life of crime and the business of rap is displayed. The repetition of this trope in his overall rap narrative, illustrates the central point of tension between accurate self-

representation and mythology on one side, and accurate representation of the ghetto population and Signifying on the mainstream image of these population on the other side. He states:

45 J'suis pas le bienvenue, mais j'suis là,
 reprends c'qu'on m'a enlevé, j'suis venu manger et chier là.
 Plongé dans la tourmente quand les fonds manquent,
 à force de m'plaindre, j'attends plus l'argent, j'vais l'prendre.

Thus, line 45 states again the outcast status of Africans and their descendants in France, but also affirms their presence as legitimate. The slogan; “We are here because you were there,” comes to mind here. Thus, Booba affirms his right to full participation in French society, and the right to enjoy all it has to offer. He affirms here his determination to reach his goals and claim his due. The phrase; “j’attends plus l’argent, j’vais l’prendre” might evoke illegal means to obtain money. In the ghetto of France, where unemployment of youth has been consistently over 50%, for at least the past ten years, the main resource which can insure a comfortable income seems to be drug dealing. Thus, while Booba certainly refers to his rapping as a hustle, the equation to drug dealing is easily understood. In his latter works, he became more and more explicit in this regard, stating for instance: “92, si tu veux pecho, 0.9 sur le recho⁶¹” (*Game Over*) (“92, if you want to grab, cocaine on the stove”) or on the same album “viens dans mon département, faire de l’argent facile pourquoi faire autrement.” (*Izi Money*) (“Come in my neighborhood, make some easy money there’s no better way”) If these lines can be interpreted as metaphorical, they nonetheless refer to a reality, and seem to justify if not promote destructive behavior. Line 40 in *Ma Définition*, however, clearly demonstrates the systemic conditions which allow and encourages such behaviors: “Ici le diable racole, fuit son rodéo, / t’attache dans l’hall avec d’la coke, pisse sur ton auréole.” Drug dealing is presented as an inescapable fate for young males in these areas. These conditions cannot be severed from the structural forces which generates them and can

⁶¹ “92” refers to his “department,” that is zip code, while “09” refers to extra pure cocaine.

certainly not be imputed to rap. Yet, rap artist, and artists in general for that matter, cannot be totally absolved of any responsibility in the promotion of certain behavior through their lyrics/art.

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CONCLUSION

Throughout our study, Èsù has appeared as the main African referent for our understanding of Afro-Diasporic rhetorical tropes. Following Gates' theory, we first tried to map out Èsù's attributes. Èsù appeared to us as an agent of connectivity and separation, both breaking

boundaries, and forming or reforming them whenever and wherever necessary. Metaphysical agent of all mediations, of all connections, Èsù's principles manifest themselves during all human encounters. The main defining encounter for Afro-Diasporic and African populations was undeniably the missed encounter between Europe and Africa, which sealed their fate. As Èsù revealed the tensions between the two brothers in the famous tale, Èsù is also the revealer of misunderstandings between Europe and Africa. Èsù's misinterpretation as the devil by Christian missionaries illustrates Europe's demonization of the African people at large. As we have seen, it is the human interpretation of the trick which brings chaos, not the trick itself. The inadequate reading of African culture by European invaders was determined by economic interests first which distorted the vision Europe would have of Africa for the centuries to come. To this day, the nature of Europe's global perception of Africa, its inhabitants and descendants is still largely characterized by this inadequate reading of Èsù's mediation, which has taken the form of institutionalized racism to support global economic exploitation. We have described Èsù's trick as opportunities for human evolution, a test of adaptation to the universal laws of transformation, of constantly changing contexts. The chaos which emerges from Èsù's trick only demonstrates human unpreparedness to change. While Èsù could appear as the agent of separation between Europe and Africa, a more accurate reading of the deity and its role would make it the very agent of their mediation. Agent of syncretism and hybridization, that is the sublimation of binary oppositions, Èsù naturally became the main deity in many Afro-Diasporic cultures. Its all-inclusive, mediating quality allowed the possibility of Africa and Europe to coalesce within singular cultural forms. This negotiation, however, was determined by the necessity of the survival of Africans in the New World. This survival could not have been achieved without the strong support of social structures that ensured the perpetuation of African traditions and their

integration in the new models of the oppressor. Èsù naturally became the agent of the survival of African populations and cultures in the New World, and the agent of fusion between the discursive universes of Europe and Africa.

Our definition of the West African griot made us understand his/her centrality in the different West African societies in which he/she appears. We have demonstrated that the griot represented a human embodiment of Èsù, acting as an agent of social mediation between different social factions. The griot's mediation was described as both insuring the consolidation of social structures, and their fluidity. It is the very liminal character of the griot, in its social milieu, which allows him/her to navigate and negotiate between the different groups. The status of "outlaw" of the social order, feared and respected for their skillful use of language, places griots at the edges of the social fabric. Their mediating function makes them the links which structure this fabric. The griots' ability to balance social energies and make use of the magical power of speech make them respected figures of society. In a certain sense, as an embodiment of Èsù, the griot acts as a *babaláwo* in his/her social dimension, reading the signs of social interactions, and transmitting an understanding of the current context through his/her own appreciation of historical truth and traditions. Griots are both agents of social stasis, maintaining the structure in place, and social evolution, by challenging the same structure. Through their different historical narratives, genealogies and myths, griots are the link between the past, the present and the potential. Just like Èsù, they are also the link between the spiritual and the material world. As interpreter of current signs and through their capacity to use the past and the tradition as referents, griots represent African artistry, which can be understood as art, fully integrated to the social structure, serving concrete purposes of social cohesion and evolution

(*badenya/fadenya*). Griots were undoubtedly models for the development of Afro-Diasporic artistry, such as demonstrated in the art of the capoeirista, the poet and the rapper.

We have presented the capoeirista as a New World embodiment of griot artistry. It is through his/her relation to historical narratives that their arts are connected. Indeed, the capoeirista is the repository of Afro-Brazilian culture, history and consciousness. The role of the capoeirista is indeed to transmit and preserve this heritage, through different myths which we have evoked in our third chapter. We have seen that the connection to Africa is a major theme within the corpus, but the connection to capoeira's history in Brazil seems to be even more profound. It is through the references to persons and places, which abound in the songs, that capoeira perpetuates its own myth. It is interesting that one of the mythological figures of the art is an outlaw figure; the *Malandro*. This not only mirrors the griot's and Èsù's antisocial attitudes, but also gangsta rap narratives. While the outcast or outlaw figures of the griot and Èsù seem to serve the purpose of building social cohesion around certain values, negatively displayed in the outcast's behavior, the outlaw in the New World, achieves the same purpose, but in reverse. It is the very outlaw status of the *malandro* which becomes the social referent in capoeira for instance, as the outlaws in Afro-Diasporic context is in opposition to a system which is oppressive toward blacks. The outlaw in the New World is therefore not a negative referent, but an ambiguous character whose defiance toward the system is a source of pride, also generating fear and respect. We have seen that myths were a privileged medium for the storage of historical narratives and wisdom in capoeira, and that the ritualistic context of their re-utterance in the *roda* allowed their repetition and successive re-interpretation in contemporary contexts. We have also appreciated the Signifying revision process at work in capoeira songs, in particular in the revision of official historical narratives which seemed disconnected from the reality of racial

oppression. Capoeira, and more specifically capoeira angola, acts as a counter narrative within the structure, constantly re-affirming Afro-Diasporic priorities. *Malícia*, the main concept of capoeira, which implies ambiguity, deception, trickery, negotiation of binaries, etc, appears as a concept defining Èsù's and the griot's rhetorical principles as well. *Malícia* is a philosophical link to the African continent itself, and the Afro-Brazilian form of Signifying.

We have observed through our description of African American poetry that a constant feature of this tradition was the presence of orality within written forms of poetry. Whether through the emulation of the preacher's voice, the use of dialectical forms, the integration of blues, jazz or other African American vernacular practices, or the oral performance of poetry, black poets have demonstrated a desire to Signify on the very format imposed by writing. It is the connection to African oral cultures determining African American cultural specificity which the poets have tried to portray in writing. That cultural survival of African aesthetic priorities manifest in the focus on orality took shape in the extensive use and play on the voice as we have seen through Brown's *After Winter*, or Melvin Dixon's *TOUR GUIDE*. We have seen that elements of style such as rhythm could become agents of meaning production as in Melvin Dixon's *Heart Beats*. One central rhythmic element determining Africanist aesthetics is the use of repetition. In the African American verse tradition, repetition is manifest both in its rhythmic dimension, which plays on the musicality of language, but also as one of the main tools of intertextuality through Signifying revisions. Both the musical dimension, reminiscent of Africa, and intertextuality are element that signal the working of the mythical dimension of language. For instance, *O Black and Unknown Bards*, by James Weldon Johnson, which we have used to illustrate Signifying revisions, can also be interpreted as building a mythical narrative around the achievements of the bards of slavery days. The evocation that the quoting of songs achieves, as

well as the praise tone of the poem, indeed evokes the building of a mythological portrait of the African American literary tradition as a whole, through its anchorage in the historical reality of slavery. The poem Signifies on the tension between the praise of the vernacular and the standard form as we have discussed. This illustrates further the tension latent in the tradition. In a sense, we could assimilate the African American poet to an outlaw, a linguistic outlaw. The very first poets for instance, by publishing their work while still being slaves broke the ban on literacy for slaves and the prejudice of black people's incapacity to master both the English language and the written format. Later, by achieving the fusion of oral and written forms, African American poets broke a major convention of the classical understanding of literature. The concept of score, the oral and performance forms demonstrated by Black Arts poets, and the many manifestations of black vernacular forms in written texts, all participated in the erasure or at least weakening of the literacy divide, which historically has been one of the main unbridgeable theoretical gap separating Africa and Europe. By bringing the vernacular in the high art form of written poetry, black poets were indeed on the battlefield of language and participated in the breaking down of racist discourses, as well as Signified on the structural enforcement of the standard forms of language.

Finally, we have discussed hip hop culture and rap in particular. The first phase of this discussion was focused on one of the main agents of intertextuality within this genre, which also defines the genre stylistically: the break beat. The break is a literal "mise à nue" of the musical structure of popular music from the 1950s to the 1970s, a reduction of the structure to its bare minimum. What remains of the original song is generally the most African elements, i.e. the bass and the drum. This aesthetic choice affirms the ongoing process of the drums, its structuring quality, and its centrality in the musical construction. Hip hop music therefore constitutes an

uncompromising aesthetic affirmation of an inalienable and immutable connection to both Africa and the earth through the affirmation of the drum. This aesthetic choice must also be put in contact to the conditions which generated hip hop. Hip hop and rap in particular are at the cross roads of the affirmation of a connection to Africa and the earth, the use of technology, and cultural resistance in an urban oppressive context. Part of the resistance to oppression was achieved through the humanization of technology through hip hop. The subversive use of technology it displays, constitutes Signifying both on technology itself, and on the rules of market based economy, in particular through its approach to recycling (old apparels, old records, old sound, etc) and in its subversion of copyright regulations. The re-appropriation of the urban space through block parties, break dancing and graffiti writing is another aspect of hip hop's Signifying on the structure.

I will now re-affirm the idea of the double voice in black culture as characterizing a culture both speaking to an oppressed black and a mainstream white audience. Rap narratives for instance, and Afro Diasporic narratives at large, always negotiate mainstream (i.e. white/Western) expectations, as well as the expectations internal to the Afro-Diasporic world (also described as the Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy) with which they are always in intertextual conversation (We have indeed evoked Reggae as a Signifying revision of American R&B, Rap as a revision of Dub Toasts, Dance hall as a revision of rap, etc.). Artists are the medium between the inside (The ghetto/vernacular/*roda*), and the outside (popular culture/mainstream). While bringing a source of pleasure to the inside by manifesting realistic narratives and/or fantasy narratives in line with aesthetic expectations, artists also feed mainstream curiosity about black experience. By bringing the outlaw to the status of mythical hero, Afro-Diasporic artists present an image of a defiant black hero who momentarily triumphs while being at odds with an

oppressive system. This same representation feeds the fear of black people within mainstream discourse as well. The idea of authenticity is central here, in particular within the context of the market, place of election of Èsù, potentially generating misinterpretations. Rap, and former artistic forms, when placed in commercial contexts determined by mainstream (white) cultural prerogatives, appears as a sort of ethnographic medium which represents, reformulates more or less accurately, the life in the ghetto. It thus echoes life inside, with its codes and values, but misrepresents it as well through generalizations. The imbalance of power between an artist and the commercial structure which distributes art, and the money involved in the transaction, necessarily influences the mediation in favor of the structure. In the long run, it is the stereotypes validated by the structure which prevail. The collapse of the rap persona and the artist has often led audiences to misinterpret the message of rap songs. The notion of “keeping it real,” illustrates the assumption that the artist speaks from personal experience. While it might be sometimes the case, while there might be some truths in some of those songs/narratives, these forms must primarily be recognized for what they are, that is, cultural products that serve specific purposes: serve the rhetoric of the dominant group, defend the culture of the oppressed, create identity along those lines, etc. If other art forms from the African-Diaspora suffered equally from misrepresentation (capoeira and its *malandro* figure illustrates this), the collapse that we have described and its significance in the public discourse seems specific to rap. This specificity can be explained both by the tendency toward realism in the songs, which was inherited from former African-American and African oral traditions, and the tensions generated by the mythical nature of the playful speech of the rappers. These elements were already present within previous Afro-Diasporic mediums. Poetry and capoeira songs display similar features, for instance. Where the difference lies in my view is in the very commercial context which determines rap’s production

and distribution. While gangsta narratives were already performed at the onsets of hip hop, their spread as representing the whole of hip hop culture has been encouraged by the record industry. A certain representation of blackness is promoted through the mediums of cultural mass consumption. The artist representing young black males from the ghetto must conform to the narrative of violence, hypersexuality, drug related stories, etc, constructed in the media, reinforced in the real world by the structure and inherited from colonialist representations. Rappers can be complacent in providing such narratives and persona for personal gain. While there is sometimes no connection between what artists relate in their songs and their actual experience, they are still presented by the industry and considered by the general public as genuine representations of the culture of the ghetto and black identity at large. I will not however deny that the crime stories they craft do not depict a certain reality. This reality is however certainly fostered by the structure to serve the imperatives of the domestic and global imperialist structure. The over-representation of these narratives defining commercial rap is certainly not an accident. Rapping appears in this light as not so different from minstrelsy, where cultural tropes emanating from the oppressive dominant paradigm are reformulated by artists for their own personal gain. Artists present themselves as authentic and the industry sells them as such. Record company executives could be compared to ethnologists in quest for authentic natives (Ghetto dwellers). But as in ethnology, the subject of the study cannot necessarily be trusted in the information he gives, especially if the “informant” is a master of language and Signifying. The information given by the “informant” might only be what the ethnologist expects. Conforming to the script, the “informant” might take advantage of the situation. It is a win-win situation for the subject and the ethnologist as both get what they want, but the narrative that emanates from this encounter is perverted by this problematic imbalanced relationship. Again, it does not mean that

the narratives or parts of the narratives do not manage to represent true situations, or subvert the structure in which they are framed, but what is interesting to note is the focus of the industry on certain types of narratives for specific ideological purpose, and the constant focus laid on “keeping it real,” which is both determined from the inside and outside, and which can be generative of cultural misunderstanding. We have proven that our three mediums (capoeira, poetry and rap) constituted fusions of the two cultural universes from which they sprung (Western/African). Their outlook, however, is necessarily determined by the oppressive nature of the conditions set against black people world-wide. It is when art acknowledges this reality while embracing the hybridity of form, that these narratives achieve genuine mediation between these two universes. Capoeira, which has been a potent tool for survival, has become associated with criminal and immoral behaviors during the period of its illegality. Today capoeira has become an ever expanding global community, spanning all continents, bridging the gaps of gender, color, language, socio-economic background, etc. African American poetical tradition, through its constant fight for the integration of orality within writings, that is the breaking down of the literacy myth, has led to the disappearance of the artificial construct between high art and low art, bringing poetry back to the common people. Indeed, the influence of this tradition on the recent movements of slam and spoken word poetry cannot be denied. These new forms of public, oral, communal, performance poetry, indeed represent the democratization of poetry. Rap is part of that movement, but answers to its own codes and imagery. Rap, much like capoeira and slam or spoken word poetry, is a global movement whose spread is probably unrivalled. Rap constitutes the medium of expression of oppressed urban youth globally. The recent role rappers played in the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East demonstrates the subversive potential of this art form, when it is free from the grasp of the market. In its underground form,

which is more vivid today than ever before world-wide, rap constitutes a real means of expression for underrepresented or oppressed populations. What makes our three domains of study so relevant in today's global economy and society, is not solely their Africanist aesthetics, which has become universally diffused and recognized, but also their inherent integration of cultural tools for the negotiation of the experience of dehumanization the extremes of capitalism has produced through slavery in the West. The oppressive system which has legitimized, organized and profited from the colonization of Africa, the slave trade and slavery is still at work today, and seemingly expending. It is characterized by the mechanical imperatives of profit at all costs (environmental, human, etc.). If the forms which emanated from the experience of slavery are today so popular and ever growing, it is because they integrated practical tools for resistance to such conditions, both inherited from African cultural matrices and developed in the very experience of slavery in the New World. Indeterminacy, deception, but more particularly mediation through a dialectic of integration of binaries, are the modes which Afro-Diasporic populations have inherited from Èsù and the griot. Today, these strategies and techniques, concentrated in tropes such as Signifying and *malícia*, are important tools which might help the individual and the collective to negotiate the crucial moment in human history that we are presently witnessing.

VITA

I was born in France in 1979 in the Beaujolais wine country, approximately 60 miles west of Lyon. I obtained a master's degree in Anglophone studies from Université Lumière Lyon II in 2007. Most of my two years of master were spent in the United States as an exchange student. I was selected for a semester in Tulane University in New Orleans where I specialized in African-American and Caribbean literature and culture, as well as Postcolonial theory. I also started to study jazz more thoroughly, both its history and practice on the drums. I have then spent a year at Brown University, still as an exchange student. I pursued my studies in the same fields and started to work on my thesis exploring the links between the African-American musical tradition at large and African-American poetry. I attended inspiring seminars on African-American culture with Tricia Rose and studied jazz performance with Dave Zinno. After completing my master's degree, I started to work toward a PhD degree at Louisiana State University. I studied African literature and culture, literacy theory, literary criticism, Postcolonial studies, Caribbean literature, and jazz performance. I also taught French language and English composition classes every semester during my five years stay at LSU. I completed my degree requirements in May 2012 and plan to graduate in August 2012.

It seems to me that I have not chosen the domain of study in which I have been working for the past 10 years. My upbringing in France, the segregation African populations are subjected to and the silence about France's colonial past in mainstream and academic discourses certainly shaped my inclinations and approach. Hip hop culture has been part of my life ever since the broadcast of the first TV show dedicated to hip hop culture which aired in France between 1984 and 1985 (H.I.P H.O.P). I discovered capoeira at the beginning of my Anglophone studies as an undergraduate in Lyon in 2002 and have been practicing it ever since. It has been part of my daily routine since 2008. My interest in African-American literature and in particular poetry

grew during my first years in the US. I then started to understand the scope and impact of this literary tradition. To me, the themes and aesthetics of all these forms already seemed coherent and connected to both the history of black presence in the Western World and Africanist world views. Henry Louis Gates and his study on the Afro-American rhetorical principle of Signifying gave me the theoretical framework to build this work.