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# A Hip Hop Episteme: Understanding Hip Hop Culture's Ways of Knowing and Expressing Knowledge through Time Travel and Traditional African and Afro-Diasporic Spirituality

Brandon N. Ekweonu , '20

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# A Hip Hop Episteme:

## Understanding Hip Hop Culture's Ways of Knowing and Expressing Knowledge through Time Travel and Traditional African and Afro-Diasporic Spirituality

Black Studies Senior Thesis

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Brandon Nnamdi Ekweonu

Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments**

Thank you Hip Hop. Thank you to the culture, through which, I have been able to experience a way of being and knowing that fulfills me and feels like my truth.

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<u>Dedications</u>

I dedicate this thesis project to Hip Hop, to African-Americans, to Black people, to our Black ancestors and descendants—all without whom, I would not have found my way.

I also dedicate this project to my friends, peers, and mentors who remained confident in me even when I lacked confidence in myself—who encouraged me, supported me, demonstrated an interest in my work and my thoughts, listened to me geek out, and made me feel like this was a valuable endeavor.

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**Introduction**

  Perhaps one of my earliest and most interesting Hip Hop experiences occurred early on in my childhood. I remember being in my mother's bedroom, and I think the lights were off. And I was using my mother's Sharp CD-C600 Mini Component System with the 3-CD Drawer Changer to play a CD copy of 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* album that she had purchased for me. I remember being really excited to be playing my favorite song on the album, "In Da Club" (I used to pretend it was my birthday and that 50 Cent was rapping for me, and, as a child, I didn't really grasp what he was talking about in the lyrics). The thing that makes this particular experience significant to me, though, was that I remember that the CD must have had a scratch on it because it would skip and start again right from the line in the chorus when 50 says "So come give me a hug". I don't remember whether or not I was disappointed to learn that my CD was scratched. What I do remember, however, is that I eventually got used to the song being played with that skip in it. I got so used to it that, even today, I can find myself rapping the chorus along with the song and reciting the lyrics as if the song *should* be skipping and playing out of order. That skip—that moment of discontinuity—in the song is kind of what makes it special for me and connects me back to that moment in my mother's bedroom so many years ago. It is not an experience that is easy to describe in words, but the bottom line is that it actually felt *right* that the song didn't play straight through without skipping. Something was added to the listening experience.

  Reflecting on the skip on my CD, I would consider that experience to be one of my earliest encounters with the wide expanse of possibilities that Hip Hop music and culture creates out of its engagement with modern technology and our conceptions of time. I will also add that,

over the years and through many more experiences, I have found that Hip Hop has offered many different forms of cultural expression for people to utilize within and beyond their communities. It is commonly understood that Hip Hop culture was born among the Black and Brown youth of the South Bronx in the 1970s. This Hip Hop genesis took place in the context of what is referred to as the Black Power Movement era, and it was propelled forward by a new generation of kids who were growing up immediately after what we remember as the Civil Rights Era. Confronted with a new set of obstacles as American conservative politics sought to immediately roll back on all of the perceived success of the Civil Rights Movement, this Hip Hop generation had to figure out forms of expression that aided in their collective survival, in their ability to share knowledge and power within their communities, and in their ability to disrupt the status quo and resist the pressures positioned against them by society and by the State. These young people began to engage in graffiti, breakdancing, MCing, and DJing, and these expressions would soon represent a Hip Hop culture that outlived and surpassed the expectations of many music and culture critics over the decades. Hip Hop culture has also, for so many, represented a medium through which Black and working-class people in the United States raise social and political consciousness within their communities. Today, we can see that the different forms of Hip Hop expression have gone on to influence and direct popular culture not only in the Americas, but around the globe.

Some folks look at the "state of Hip Hop today"—paying attention to the music and expression that manifests in popular media, in the mainstream, and in the commercial music industry—and they come to the conclusion that "Hip Hop is dead." In other words, some believe that Hip Hop culture has lost its way and forgotten its roots—that it has let go of the significance it once placed in the development of crafts like MCing and DJing and that it has actually worked

against consciousness-raising efforts. Many cats, however, believe that something more complicated than that has been taking place within Hip Hop—that there has been a divergence between Hip Hop culture and the commercial Hip Hop industry. This suggests that Hip Hop is not necessarily "dead", but rather that the commercialization of Hip Hop expression has created a new arena of cultural expression, in which we aren't seeing an accurate representation of what Hip Hop culture is. I am definitely one of those cats that believes that Hip Hop is very much alive. I believe that the way Hip Hoppers express themselves is constantly changing and morphing and branching out into new territory. I also think that when one directs their attention away from the mainstream, it becomes very evident that there are still so many Hip Hop artists engaging in practices that demonstrate that Hip Hop has, by no means, lost its way. In fact, I would argue that the culture, since its inception, has been involved in a constant process of creating its own ways of understanding the world and expressing knowledge. It is engaging not only with its own beginnings in the 70s but also its roots in African and Afro-diasporic cultural expression. Therefore, I believe that Hip Hop is involved in the construction of its own episteme that traces its origins to Africa, as opposed to the West, and creates opportunities for not only social and political consciousness-raising, but also for unique and particular ways of knowing and engaging in cultural expression.

In this paper, I seek to make a contribution toward the establishment of this Hip Hop Episteme[1]—this Hip Hop-unique way of knowing, understanding and expressing knowledge. This episteme is founded upon

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[1] I use *episteme*, here, to mean a way of knowing or understanding. In positing a Hip Hop episteme as having been rooted in Africa, I mean to associate it with an African (and a Black) way of knowing. I also mean to distinguish it from a Western, European, white episteme.

1. the establishment of Hip Hop time—a nonlinear temporality that is rooted in African and Indigenous cultural philosophies and cosmologies and

2. the manifestation of traditional African and Afro-diasporic cultural expressions within Hip Hop culture, as well as Hip Hop's creative ability to innovate these expressions through its own unique techniques and engagements with music technology.

By understanding Hip Hop culture to operate in a nonlinear temporality, retain traditional African culture, and give life to new expressions of that culture, we can understand Hip Hop to be developing its own, unique ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge—offering the possibility for Hip Hop to serve as a medium through which Black people can construct new Black realities.

In "Traversing Time," we explore the way in which Hip Hoppers, particularly DJs and producers—through interactions with music technology and a serious demonstration of skill and technique—disrupt a Western notion of linear time in order to create a "Hip Hop time" which is rooted in African and Indigenous cosmologies and conceptions of time. In breaking from the constraints of linear time, through Hip Hop, one is able to effectively perform time travel and invite others into a traversal of time, or in other words, into a different temporality.

In "Word to the Ancestors," we take a look at the different manifestations of African and Afro-diasporic cultural expression, spirituality, and cosmology in Hip Hop order to understand the deep connection that exists between Hip Hop and its African roots and to also recognize what Hip Hop expression offers to the longstanding traditions that exist within those roots. We take a close look, particularly, at the practice of paying homage or honoring one's ancestors as it shows up in Hip Hop. We also look at the manifestation of the ancient African trickster figure in Hip

Hop MCs. Finally, we explore an interesting connection between the vinyl, which holds significant symbolic relevance in Hip Hop, and the Kongo cosmogram.

On Terminology...

Throughout this paper, I often make reference to the DJ-producer and the MC-rapper. I use the hyphenation to represent the generational and technical relationships between the DJ and the producer and between the MC and the rapper. DJs and producers are both responsible for interacting with and manipulating the physical music technology. This includes playing, rewinding, scratching, and sampling the vinyl as well as utilizing the sampler machine and other equipment involved in the music production process. MCs and rappers are both responsible for using their mic skills and lyricism to engage in the oral tradition of communicating wisdom. There would be no producer without the DJ. It has historically been the DJ who rocks the party, while the producer does their work from the studio. Just as well, there would be no rapper without the MC. Many in the culture will attest to the distinction between the MC, who knows how to entertain and captivate audiences, and the rapper, who is skilled with their words but might not necessarily possess the same stage presence and ability to entertain. All MCs are rappers, but not all rappers are necessarily MCs. When I use the hyphenated terms, therefore, I am speaking to the full breadth of technique that belongs to the DJs and producers and to the MCs and rappers.

I make use of the term, sampling, quite often throughout this paper as well. The next chapter deals with the history and origins of sampling practices. Generally, sampling, within Hip Hop, refers to the producer's practice of recording a segment (or segments) of audio from a

record or song, using a sampler machine, and looping and/or otherwise manipulating the

sound(s) in order to create music.

**Traversing Time**

<u>Introduction</u>

Mainly through sampling practices, Hip Hop DJ-producers demonstrate the ability to travel temporally, through music, and to manipulate time. Hip Hop music disrupts Western conceptions of linear time and general linearity, and it allows us to engage with African and Indigenous conceptions of time and life. In locating ourselves outside of a Western cosmology and epistemology, we are able to conceive of concepts like time travel. From replaying and controlling the break on records to summoning sounds of the past to sample in their production, DJ-producers have developed the ability to time travel, using music. In doing this, they also create opportunities for listeners to time travel along with them. Working within the framework of African and Indigenous conceptions of temporality allows us to explore this form of time travel and to establish the basis for what we might consider to be what we might call "DJ time" and a Hip Hop temporality.

This chapter will lay out some of the history of Hip Hop deejaying and production and some of the ways DJs have shaken up our conceptions of time. It will also establish an understanding of African and Indigenous time as cycling and spiraling (as opposed to moving in a linear fashion). Finally, it will explore the way Hip Hop music and Hip Hop artists employ the principles of this nonlinear temporality in order to effect time travel.

<u>Finding the Break</u>

As we explore the many ways in which DJ-producers use sampling practices to manipulate time, it is important to understand more about the history (and perhaps the

"timeline") of the practices themselves. An appropriate time and place to start from is the time that is widely recognized as the birth of Hip Hop—DJ Kool Herc's Hip Hop parties at 1520 Sedgwick Ave, in the South Bronx, and the Hip Hop parties to follow. DJs like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambataa (among many others) practiced what we can consider the earliest form of "sampling"[2] in Hip Hop by creatively using records as instruments for creating engaging party atmospheres. Specifically, we can look at the practice of "finding the break", locating the segment of music on a record where most of the instruments and vocals drop out except for the drums and the bass. Often considered the most "interesting" part of the record (for its sonic qualities), Hip Hop DJs at this time would isolate and replay the break at parties. They often did this by playing two copies of the same record at the same time, each on one turntable—all connected to a large stack of speakers. As the break played on one record, the DJ would either move the needle on the other record or spin the record in reverse to queue up the break on the other side. They would then use a mixer to play the sound from the second record as they used the same techniques to reset the break on the first record. By doing this, DJs effectively "extended" the breaks and were able to provide more time for party attendees to enjoy the most interesting part of the record and for breakdancers (this is where the "break" in breakdancing comes from) to display their own skill on the dancefloor.

We can consider this the earliest instance of the time-traveling DJ-producer in Hip Hop. If we think about the ability of the song and the record to tell time and signify the passing of time (using different orderings of rhythms, notes, and beats), we can think of the manipulation of the record as a manipulation of time, itself. In the practice of rewinding the records in order to

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[2] This practice is not actually considered sampling, but the concept of manipulating a certain part of a record is central to the practice of sampling.

extend the break, the DJ repeatedly takes everyone in the party back in time (sonically) to a particular moment in the record. We might otherwise think of this as the DJ holding everyone in the party in one sonic, temporal space which they might further manipulate by altering the way the sound plays out of the speakers (either by speeding it up, slowing it down, or other methods). It is ultimately the DJ who will decide when the end of the song is, when it is time to enter the temporal space of a new break, and when (and if) the party will end.

Hip Hop popularized this use and purpose of the record. Records and record players were not necessarily designed to be used in the way Hip Hop DJs use them, and it is, in fact, not advisable to manipulate records while they are playing on a record player or turntable in order to keep from damaging the record or the player. As sampling practices emerged and evolved over time, DJ-producers gained more musical and technological tools that they were able to use and repurpose in taboo ways in order to gain more control over the sounds that they chose to manipulate. This means, of course, that they have gained more control over the way they can manipulate and traverse time.

Evolution of Sampling

A sonic tool that has become central to the modern forms of these sampling practices is the sampling machine (or the "sampler"). Tricia Rose writes, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994):

> "Samplers are computers that can digitally duplicate any existing sounds and play them back in any key or pitch, in any order, sequence and loop them endlessly. They also have a preprogrammed library of digital sounds, sounds that have not been 'lifted' from other previously recorded materials but may also be arranged in any fashion."[3]

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[3] Rose, 73.

DJ-producers utilize the functions of sampler machines to manipulate the sounds that they

sample in ways that are far different from how they were initially used in music. Rose points out

that

> "Prior to rap music's redefinition of the role samplers play in musical creativity, samplers were used almost exclusively as time- and moneysaving devices for producers, engineers, and composers. Samplers were used as short cuts; sometimes a horn section, a bass drum, or background vocals would be lifted from a recording easily and quickly, limiting the expense and effort to locate and compensate studio musicians. . . In fact, prior to rap, the most desirable use of a sample was to mask the sample and its origin; to bury its identity. Rap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged."[4]

Indeed, Hip Hop producers do not use samplers to save time or money in the studio, but rather,

to produce new musical creations by repurposing sounds on the records they honor. The sample

becomes central to the musical creation process, and this process can often lead to the creation of

completely new sounds. As the producer loops and alters the sample, it can become more and

more difficult (and sometimes impossible) to identify the original source material after hearing

the track produced by the Hip Hop producer. We are also able to think more expansively about

the capabilities of samplers. As they continue to evolve, samplers can now digitally reverse and

modulate sounds, and they are continuing to expand the ways they can manipulate the qualities

of a sound. These new tools and techniques have also created opportunities for DJ-producers to

expand their manipulation of time itself. For instance, on Outkast's 2003 "Vibrate," Andre 3000

reverse-samples the drums from "She Lives In My Lap,"[5] and on The Pharcyde's 1995 "Drop," J

Dilla reverse samples Dorothy Ashby's "Django." For many, the sonic qualities of reversing

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[4] Rose, 73.
[5] A song that shows up earlier on the same album, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*.

samples like these can serve to be an entrancing experience. On the Outkast track, the listener

could possibly interpret the reversal of the drums to hold a thematic significance because "She

Lives In My Lap" deals with a lover who is struggling to get the protagonist to commit to her,

while "Vibrate" encourages the listener to independently determine their own destiny (and to

masturbate). Therefore, the listener might interpret the reversed drum loop to signify a

redirection of focus from situations like the former to those like the latter. Regardless of thematic

interpretations, the reversal of samples, on its own, demonstrates Hip Hop's engagement with its

own temporality. This is explicitly exemplified in the music video for "Drop," which was

completely recorded in reverse.[6] As the MCs move through the video, they engage and interact

with their environment in a way that suggests that they are capable of moving backwards through

time.

     As Rose points out, the Hip Hop producer, much like the DJ, is extremely inventive with

sound, revolutionizing the way we use musical technology. In fact, the Hip Hop producer has

evolved directly from the earliest DJs. Joseph G. Schloss writes, in *Making Beats: The Art of

Sample-based Hip-Hop*, that "[a]s digital sampling became the method of choice for hip-hop

deejays (who, now that they used sampling, began to call themselves 'producers'), their

preexisting hunger for rare records became of paramount importance."[7] For the purpose of this

conversation on a Hip Hop episteme, we might consider the DJ, the producer, and the

DJ-producer as part of a larger lineage of Black musicians repurposing musical instruments and

technology to pioneer new forms of musical expression (as Black musicians have done within

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[6] The MCs of The Pharcyde even had a hired linguist help them learn the sound of their verses in reverse so that
they could recite them in sync with the reversed audio as the video was recorded. Source:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CBsxCUhNu0&feature=youtu.be
[7] Schloss, 37.

the genres of jazz, rock, etc.). In doing this, the DJ-producer enters this lineage of Black musicians who complicate the way we interact with the latest advances in music technology. And perhaps, in thinking about this as a *lineage* we may run the risk of suggesting that this process is linear and that one form of musical innovation completely precedes another. We should keep in mind that Black musicians are continuously inventing new ways of using the guitar, the saxophone, the turntable, the sampler machine, and their voices. In the realm of Hip Hop, for instance, many artists have moved away from sample-based music production and towards synthesizers and live instruments.[8] Therefore, we can also understand these practices as existing within a long and ever changing tradition of Black musical innovation. Furthermore, this would suggest that these Hip Hop practices exist as part of a fundamentally unique understanding of how to engage with music and musical instruments—giving to an argument about Hip Hop developing its own episteme.

While the DJ interrupts the record as it spins on the turntable (running the risk of damaging the record) to control the duration of the break on analog technology, the producer digitally (also sometimes utilizing analog equipment) manipulates the sample to even further manipulate the most compelling parts of their source records. With these tools, the DJ-producer controls the record, the break, the sample, and the party. By deciding which records to use, which parts to play, and when and how to play them, the DJ-producer creates a way of interacting with music technology that disrupts not only the way we think about playing the instruments, but also how we understand time.

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[8] One major cause for this shift is the obstacle of copyright laws that make sampling practices more difficult to navigate for artists who share their music commercially. In avoiding sample-based production styles, artists can worry less about being sued or having their music taken out of circulation for legal reasons.

Through the sampling practices that they have developed, producers have been able to not only experience time travel but also directly manipulate time when they manipulate sounds. To make and understand this argument, however, it is necessary to put forth definitions for time and time travel that may be a little different from those that we engage with in comics, cartoons, and science-fiction films. To be more pointed, it is necessary for us to do away with the linear conception of time that is generally held in the West. We need to shift toward a more disjoint, circular, conception of time—an African conception of time.

When some of us think of time travel, we may think of the classic plotline for a movie, cartoon, or comic where a character travels back in time, introduces a slight change to the timeline, and has to undo this change in order to save the world (or preserve the version of the timeline that they were a part of). In the West, time is generally thought of as linear, and people are thought to exist at a particular point in this timeline. There exists the concept of a beginning of time and an end of time, and it is generally understood that events occur one after another in order according to this timeline. This is a discrete, rigid sense of time that does not really allow for us to have the possibility to interact with other points in time. It also suggests that we are continuously *progressing* from some point to another—feeding into an idea of some point that represents the "beginning of time" and another that represents the "end of time". In doing away with this linear conception of time, we can think of our relation to time as being much less discrete.

For many African and Indigenous peoples, there exists a concept of time that is nonlinear and a reality where it is possible to have a relationship with those who have lived before us and

those who will live after us. Taking a spiraling or circular form, time is understood as cyclical.

We are not ever-progressing on a linear path from the beginning of time toward the end of time,

but rather, we are constantly moving around a cycle of life. We pass between the realm of the

living and the realm of the dead in different forms, and we are not moving in one set direction.

This conception of time is fluid, and it allows for us to think about time and the way we interact

with it more expansively than we can with Western, linear time. Kyle P. Whyte writes, in

"Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate

change crises,"[9] about

> "an Anishinaabe perspective on intergenerational time—a perspective embedded in a spiraling temporality (sense of time) in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life."[10]

In this spiraling temporality, we are allowed to interact with each other between the realms of the

living and the dead. In fact, we are not thought of as living at separate points at time necessarily,

but rather, we are all existing together at the same time. This is a notion of time that disrupts the

concept of one-sided dynamics between us and our ancestors or descendants. While we all live in

different times, we, in spiraling time, also all coexist and live alongside each other. Whyte

continues,

> "The spiraling narratives unfold through our interacting with, responding to and reflecting on the actual or potential actions and viewpoints of our ancestors and descendants. They unfold as continuous dialogues."[11]

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[9] An essay in which Whyte writes about how dystopian narratives about the climate crises in the Anthropocene era have been erasive of the experiences of indigenous people (many of whom have already experienced the "end of the world" that is depicted in these dystopian narratives).
[10] Whyte, 228.
[11] Whyte, 229.

In this spiraling time, we are meant to interact with people who lived before us and to actually be in continuous dialogue with people from other times. We don't necessarily alter a timeline by interacting with the past like what happens in a lot of typical Western science fiction plots. Rather, it is understood that interacting with the past, the present, and the future at once is all a part of our natural reality.

Among the Bântu-Kôngo people, the spiral and concepts related to spiraling time hold a very central position in religion and in understanding life. Denise Martin writes, in "Pan African Metaphysical Epistemology: A Pentagonal Introduction",

> "The image that expresses Bântu-Kôngo time is the cosmogramic altar or dikenga. The circumference of the circle is time and the four points are n'kama "dams" or "events". This image can represent time on a cosmic, a natural, or a human scale because people, animals, inventions, social systems, etc, are conceived and live through four stages: pregnancy, birth, maturity, and death (Fu-Kiau 1994)."[12]

In following this conception of time, we might consider ourselves to be constantly existing in a cycle, and in birth and death respectively, we exist at different points in the circle of life. In this understanding of time, it would make more sense that nothing ever is left behind in the past or lies far ahead at some singular "point" in the future. Rather, everything is continuously transitioning, at different paces, around the circumference of time. Martin goes on to travel around this cycle, describing what the different points of the circumference represent among the Bântu-Kôngo,

> "The cornerstone of the cosmogram is musoni. This is a time of beginnings: for the creation of the universe, a time of "the sparkle of the ongoing process of time and life" (Fu-Kiau 1994: 23), and formation of the physical earth. For nature, it is the time when a seed is put into the ground, the time of human conception in the womb, and the time an idea takes form in the mind. Moving counterclockwise to kala, this is the time during creation when the earth cooled as well as the time of the sun rising, and the physical birth

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[12] Martin, 214.

of a person. Tukula is the period of maturation. During creation, animals and human beings appeared on earth. In the human life cycle, it represents the peak of creativity. Luvemba time is marked by the separation of an androgynous being into male and female, thus the beginning of a new cycle of creation. At this point, the Bântu-Kôngo cosmogram spirals into another cosmogram and another aspect of time called ntangu a zinga/moyo or vital time."[13]

Note that Martin writes that this cosmogram "spirals" into another cosmogram and aspect of time. This is important in understanding how Bântu-Kôngo cosmology engages with the symbol of the spiral. Kiatezua Lubanzadio Luyaluka, in "The Spiral as the Basic Semiotic of the Kongo Religion, the Bukongo", demonstrates that the spiral is indeed the basic semiotic of the Kongo religion. Luyaluka writes,

"When a Kongo elder is asked about the origin of this temporal universe, the usual answer is "Nzâmbi wa lâmba luku tôngo beto bântu." Literally, this means: God has prepared the fufu (cassava bread), and we men are the condiment."[14]

Luyaluka continues,

"The fufu is a paste prepared by kneading cassava dough in a pot of boiling water. While it is being mixed by a spatula, the paste descends and ascends by spiraling. The cosmological meaning of these two spiraling movements is that we men came down from heaven and are tripping back to the celestial eternal plane through cycles of life."[15]

Thus, within this African conception of time, we exist in and between different cycles of life—between the realms of the living and the dead, the mundane and the divine. This allows us to break free from a Western conception of time that fixes all of us at our own respective particular points in the timeline. It allows us to understand ourselves as existing in a cycle—in a

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[13] Martin, 215.
[14] Luyaluka, 102.
[15] Luyaluka, 102.

spiraling time—with all those who have come before us and with all those who will come after us.

There is no hard, logical separation, therefore, between any of us reading this today, in the year 2020, and a young Octavia Butler when she wrote *Kindred*[16], in the 1970s. The same goes for our relationship to anyone who might be looking at this approximately another 50 years from now. What is interesting, then, is the ways in which we understand our abilities to engage with the past and the future—effectively taking part in our own particular forms of time travel. What is possible when we consider the ability of music to serve as the link or portal between different moments in time? Might we be able to argue that music has the ability to actually *send* people back and forth in time (perhaps, similarly to the way we see the main character in *Kindred* is sent back and forth in time)? In exploring these questions, it becomes ever more important for us to pay attention to the way Hip Hop artists and Hip Hop music engage with time and time travel.

Time Travelin'

Common begins his 2000 album, Like Water for Chocolate, with a track called "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)." As he communicates through the title, he pays tribute to Fela Kuti, a world-renowned, Nigerian musician and composer who is credited with being a pioneer of the Afrobeat genre and who passed away just a few years prior. Produced by the founding members of the Soulquarians[17], the musical instruments are played in a style that borrows heavily from Afrobeat (with the exception of the drums which were played in a more Hip Hop

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[16] In this novel, by Butler, the main character is moved, multiple times, back and forth through time between 1970's Los Angeles and plantation slavery.
[17] Founding members include Questlove, J Dilla, James Poyser, and D'Angelo.

style). The song also features Femi Kuti (Fela's son) and Vinia Mojica. "Time Travelin'" can serve as a very explicit example for demonstrating the capabilities of Hip Hop music as a means of traversing time (and space). Aside from its title, the lyrics that Common spits, as well as the sonic tribute paid to Fela, both exist as part of a musical, time-traveling experience.

In the lyrics for this song, Common speaks directly to the way music gives us the capability to time travel. Speaking to the world and to the listener, Common tells us to "Take this back and then, tell a friend \\ places and spaces you been, time travelin'." The words "time travelin'"[18] echo through for a considerable amount of time, and this takes place during multiple moments on the track. Throughout the verses, he relays to the audience a sort of disjointed account of his life and his traversal through time. I interpret that the disjointed nature of this account serves to assist the song in establishing a sense of time that is non-continuous and nonlinear. Common shifts between topics, seemingly following a stream of consciousness, and beginning his first verse letting us know that he was "a piano player in [his] last lifetime." Towards the end of the second verse, he says,

> "In a race against time, I was caught
> In the same game as you, but long live the sport
> It's Time Travelin'."

The verse ends with Common repeating the words again, "time travelin,' as the music fades out. Then, the music comes back, full volume, right on-beat, as Common begins to echo those words once again.

Paying particular attention to the production of the track, the listener is given the opportunity to travel spatially and temporally "back" to Fela's time. The traversal of time and

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[18] Source: https://genius.com/Common-time-travelin-a-tribute-to-fela-lyrics

space that Common connotes in his lyrics will prompt many listeners (especially those familiar with Fela and his sound) to hearken back to Fela's context, but the production of the track actually brings us there and back. Thus, whilst in the spirit of paying tribute, this track brings the listener into a temporal position that belongs to neither the present nor the past. By incorporating musical styles from Afrobeat, the production creates a bridge from the 70s and 80s (the height of Fela's popularity) to the dawn of the new millenium. Note that Afrobeat is not a genre that has passed, by any means, so it is not inherently a signification of an older era, but the fact that this song is paying tribute to Fela is what will allow us to consider that the producers are pulling in Afrobeat in a manner that traverses time. The incorporation of Afrobeat alone, however, is not enough to accomplish this traversal of time. The listener can also *hear* the architecture of this bridge between the eras through the producers' manipulation of Common's voice throughout the track. Particularly, the echoing of the words "time traveling" before and after Common's verses as well as the modulated quality of his voice can be interpreted as a signal that the listener is engaging in time travel through the sonic experience. All the while, the listener must still appreciate Femi Kuti's role on the track, as an artist that is still with us, and recognize that we are dealing with a musical experience that places us not quite in the past and not quite in the present. And with this, the listener might consider themselves to be time traveling.

One way many artists curate a time traveling experience is by sampling segments of sound from popular culture to mark a particular time or era. An example of a song that accomplishes this is Noname's "Blaxploitation". Executively produced by Noname and Phoelix, the song is named after a subgenre of film from the 1970s that is known for having highlighted and played on stereotypes about Blackness as well as having heavily influenced the film scene in

the United States with Black folks at the center and focus of the screen. Noname's song not only

carries this name, but it also contains samples from Blaxploitation films, at the beginning,

middle, and end of the track.

We might understand these film audio samples as transporting the listener back into the

70s, or rather, bringing the 70s into the present. The quick tempo and energy of the instruments,

accompanied by the quick-speaking style of Noname's rapping, also contribute to a sense of

urgency and a tone of high intensity that the samples already come with. Just as well, the lyrical

content that Noname delivers speaks, at many points, to instances of stereotyping that affect the

Black community today. Noname is in dialogue with the political context of the 1970s and

commenting on Black politics in the present throughout this song. It is partially in this aspect that

we might consider Noname as bringing the 70s to us instead of having us travel back. Take, for

instance, this excerpt from her first verse in which she brings her own personal politics into

question,

> "Eating Chick-Fil-A in the shadows, that taste like hypocrite
> Mmm, yummy tasty, mmm, mmm, yummy tasty
> Waffle fry my empathy, bitches just really lazy
> Maybe I'm a hypocrite, maybe I'm hypochondriac
> I'm struggling to simmer down, maybe I'm an insomni-black
> Bad sleep triggered by bad government"[19]

Here, Noname considers what it means to be continuing to secretly enjoy Chick-Fil-A while

knowing about the firm anti-LGBTQ+ politics and investment of its owners. She also, through

clever wordplay, brings attention to the impact of bad government and anti-Black policies on her

(and Black folks') ability to get some rest. She ends the second verse with the question, "Who

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[19] Source: https://genius.com/Noname-blaxploitation-lyrics

wrote the movie to America? It's still coming soon," perhaps to suggest that the story of America is like a Blaxploitation movie of its own. If we are to understand that this is what Noname is implying with this final line, we can surely look to the weaponization of stereotypes against Black people in the United States. At the same time, if we consider the plots of many Blaxploitation films and understand that they often involve revolution and opposition to the system, we may interpret this as a foretelling of what's to come for America.

Like in the case of Common's "Time Travelin'," the production of Noname's "Blaxploitation" is what actually guides the listener into a time traveling experience. Noname's flow rides along a bassline and drum loop that leads the listener all the way through the song. The music from these instruments on the track are played in a sort of circular way—repeating a four-bar loop throughout the entire track. Rose notes that "Dense configurations of independent, but closely related, rhythms, harmonic and nonharmonic percussive sounds, especially drum sounds, are critical priorities in many African and Afrodiasporic musical practices."[20] Also within this loop, the bassline and drums repeat the same pattern and rhythm in the first three bars and then undergo subtle variations during the fourth bar. Just as well, there are different moments throughout the track when either or both the bassline and the drums drop out for a brief moment before returning. Rose writes,

> "Rhythmic complexity, repetition with subtle variations, the significance of the drum, melodic interest in the bass frequencies, and breaks in pitch and time (e.g., suspensions of the beat for a bar or two) are also consistently recognized features of African-American musical practices."[21]

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[20] Rose, 66.
[21] Rose, 67.

Rose also notes that these features are "not merely stylistic effects" but also "aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments." She continues, "[M]uscial elements that reflect worldviews, these 'rhythmic instinctions,' are critical in understanding the meaning of time, motion, and repetition in black culture and are of critical importance to understanding the manipulation of technology in rap."[22] With this, Noname and Phoelix demonstrate their ability to manipulate sound and rhythm in their production in a manner that is consistent with Black cultural conceptions of time. Cycling through this loop with subtle variations and rhythmic breaks, while also breaking the song up with samples of Blaxploitation movies from the 70s, the production on "Blaxploitation" creates a time traveling experience for the listener.

Schloss describes a particularly interesting case of a Hip Hop record and its relationship to the song that it sampled. Recall that the break on a record is considered to be the point in the record where the drums and bass are left playing, while (almost) every other instrument and sound from the record drops off. Also, recall the way the evolution of Hip Hop production and sampling afforded producers more ability to manipulate the sounds that they sample. Schloss describes, in the following excerpt, how these new ways of sampling essentially begun to shift our understanding of what we actually consider to be the break:

> "For example, the song 'They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.),' by Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth (1992) is based on a break from a late-sixties jazz artist. The break in this case, however, is not a moment of intense drum activity but a two-measure excerpt from a saxophone solo. Presumably one who was not already familiar with the hip-hop song would not hear those particular measures as being significant in the context of the original music. In contemporary terms, then, a break is any expanse of music that is thought of as a break by a producer. On a conceptual level, this means that the break in the original jazz record was brought into existence retroactively by Pete Rock's use of it. In other words, for the twenty-four years between its release and the day Pete Rock sampled it,

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[22] Rose, 67.

the original song contained no break. From that day on, it contained the break from 'They Reminisce over You.'"[23]

Particularly interesting considering our understanding of Hip Hop time, Schloss describes that way Pete Rock's sampling of[24] Tom Scott and the California Dreamers' "Today," retroactively brought this break into existence. Because the excerpt from the track did not fit within the common understanding for what constitutes the break on a record, it does not become a break until after Pete Rock samples it. In this way, we might understand the evolution of Hip Hop production and its innovation of sampling styles as an alteration of or traversal through time that producers perform, since it serves even to temporally complicate conceptions around its own techniques. We might understand Pete Rock to have actually gone back in time in order to bring this break on the record to life.

Continuing further into this analysis of specific sampling techniques and innovations as instances of time travel, we can look at the work and the legacy of J Dilla, an extremely influential and renowned producer within the Hip Hop community. Born into a musical family in Detroit and well known for being a part of the group, Slum Village, Dilla is known for significantly innovating what it looks like and sounds like to sample records. He pioneered a technique that some refer to as micro-chopping[25], in which, he chopped relatively small and numerous pieces of sound from records and completely rearranged them to form a completely

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[23] Schloss, 36.

[24] www.whosampled.com/sample/660/Pete-Rock-%26-C.L.-Smooth-They-Reminisce-Over-You-(T.R.O.Y.)-Tom-Scott-The-California-Dreamers-Today/

[25] "Chopping" is the name commonly used for describing when a producer is programming the excerpts of audio they are sampling. "Micro-chopping" refers to selecting and utilizing pieces of sound or music that are very short (relative to the sample clips that most producers generally use) and completely reorganizing the order in which they are played to create a new sonic experience.

new sound. On a number of tracks, Dilla would begin the track with an unedited sample of the original record that was long enough for the listener to recognize it. Afterwards, the drums he sampled and programmed in would come in and the listener would experience the new sound Dilla had produced using his micro-chopping technique. While it may be a stretch, we can consider the example that Schloss provided for us as we think about Dilla's micro-chopping technique and how it might also indicate that some form of time travel is taking place. Dilla demonstrates, throughout his music, precisely how malleable each record is to him. He is able to take different moments from a record and rearrange them so that the product is something that sounds different, yet still cohesive, and the listener is still able to tell that the track is utilizing sampled material. By speeding some sounds up, slowing others down, layering sounds over each other, and many other methods, J Dilla chopped and arranged samples in a way that producers all throughout the culture recognize and honor to this day. We might say that Dilla is manipulating the sense of time as it exists *on the record* and creating, with each of his productions, a new time—his own time.

Take, for instance, the track, "Don't Cry," on Dilla's 2006 album, *Donuts*, which mainly samples The Escorts' "I Can't Stand (To See You Cry)" (1974). Dilla opens the track with a few seconds of his own production, using the sample from The Escorts' record. He then includes a vocal sample from a comedy routine on a The Temptations Show record, featuring George Kirby. The sample includes Kirby saying "Alright, you sing it, and I'll show you how my voice would've made it unbelievable," and then Dilla plays a few seconds of the original "I Can't Stand (To See You Cry) record before abruptly taking the listener back to his manipulation of the sample. The inclusion of the vocal sample from the comedy routine serves as a representation of

Dilla confidently demonstrating his ability to flip the sample into something as "unbelievable" as Kirby is suggesting. While Dilla's juxtaposition of the music from the original record and his manipulated sample works to show the listener how talented he is as a producer, it accomplishes something else at the same time. In arranging the track this way, Dilla not only manipulates time on the record by rearranging the sample chops, but he also brings the listener between two instances of the same sounds. The track becomes a bridge between the original record and Dilla's new creation.

Taking a broader look at *Donuts*, the album interestingly begins with a track entitled, "Donuts (Outro)," and ends with a track entitled, "Welcome To The Show." By organizing the album this way, Dilla alters the listeners' conception of its structure. Dilla is possibly suggesting that the album could be played in reverse, beginning with "Welcome To The Show." It is more likely, however, that Dilla is signaling to the listener that the album can be played on a loop by considering the last track to be "welcoming" the listener back into the beginning of the album. We can see this because the same samples are used in the same way throughout "Donut (Outro)" and the very end of "Welcome To The Show." Both sample Gary Davis's "Stay With Me" and Shuggie Otis's "Not Available," and they both manipulate a vocal sample of someone saying "J Dilla," thereby, giving the album a circular structure as opposed to a linear one. By complicating the usual linear structure of an album, Dilla's album, *Donuts*, serves as a prime example of the DJ-producer's ability to manipulate and traverse time, bringing their listeners along with them.

Conclusion

By considering African and Indigenous conceptions of temporality and the way Hip Hoppers uniquely engage with time—particularly, through DJing and production techniques—we can grasp the idea of a nonlinear Hip Hop time which allows for Hip Hoppers to engage in time travel. The way that DJ-producers manipulate sound technology signifies that they understand and relate to time in a fundamentally unique way that does not adhere to the temporal laws of a white or Western episteme. Therefore, the development of this Hip Hop time suggests the development of a Hip Hop episteme.

**Word to the Ancestors**

<u>Introduction</u>

      Essential to understanding a Hip Hop episteme is acknowledging the culture's engagement with African diasporic traditions through the use of technology and oral and sonic practices that date back to ancient times. Through different means and methods, Hip Hoppers both draw from traditional African culture and spirituality and contribute new expressions of them in the very spirit of innovation that has driven Hip Hop forward historically. Following from a sense of Hip Hop time, a conception of time that is spiraling instead of linear, we will understand that Hip Hop, as a culture, draws upon African styles of expression and communication of ideas and philosophy.

      In this chapter, we will explore Hip Hop's engagement with African diasporic cultural tradition (specifically, the tradition of paying homage) and spirituality. From the ways in which crate-digging DJs revere their vinyl collections to the ways in which the sampling practices of DJs and producers invoke the voices of the ancestors, the DJ-producer participates in the long held tradition of honoring the ancestors and paying homage through Hip Hop. Just as well, the MC carries on the tradition of orality in African diasporic cultures through many different verbal techniques and lyrical practices. Venturing into the supernatural, Hip Hop has also maintained a connection to African spirituality. We see this in the way that artists communicate through African trickster methods and also in the relationship between the vinyl, itself, and its symbolic connection to African conceptions of nonlinear time.

Paying Homage: Sampling Practices

The acknowledgement and honoring of the ancestors is a tradition that has been ever present in African and African diasporic cultures throughout history. In many ways, this follows from an African and Indigenous temporality that understands us as spiraling through time because this temporality suggests that we are in constant communication with our ancestors and descendants. It makes sense, therefore, that the ancestors and the land of the dead play a largely influential role in everything that goes on in the land of the living in many Afro-diasporic traditions. Just as well, it is important to note the significance of recognizing those who are still with us. As we complicate our understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead in this Hip Hop time, we are able to recognize some of those who are still alive as living ancestors who we also must pay homage to. Therefore, we see this tradition of honoring the ancestors manifest throughout Hip Hop culture as artists in the culture engage with technology and orality to interact with their own (often musical) ancestors, regardless of whether they have passed away or not.

One straightforward way that we see this tradition manifest in Hip Hop is through the reverence that DJs and producers have had for vinyl. While vinyl has been long "outdated" by newer media formats for music (CDs, mp3 files, etc.), it has still continued to hold an important and longstanding role within Hip Hop culture. This is something that ranges from live DJing practices, utilizing vinyls on the turntables, to producers sampling directly from vinyl when they are making beats. While some of the reasons for this are practical, Hip Hoppers also express a vested interest in maintaining and keeping with tradition through holding onto the vinyl. As Joseph Schloss writes,

> "Many aspects of hip-hop deejaying practice, such as digging in the crates, have become central to the ideology of hip-hop generally, even for those who are not deejays themselves. On some level, most hip-hoppers hold some deejay-oriented philosophical positions, not only because they love deejaying for its own sake, but also because deejaying positions itself as traditional, and they are committed, on a more abstract level, to the idea of tradition."[26]

If we understand DJing as traditional, we might consider the commitment to DJing and to the idea of tradition as a form of honoring ancestors. It is important to note the significance placed, within the Hip Hop culture, upon the history of Hip Hop and its original forms, manifestations, and expressions.

Schloss continues, in the same chapter, to outline another particular aspect of what he understands to be the code of "sampling ethics" that exist in the world of Hip Hop production: "One Can't Sample Records One Respects." We can understand this to be an ethical position that suggests a significance held in paying homage and honoring the ancestors. The idea of respecting a record connotes holding some sort of reverence for either the artist who originally created the music, the musical production itself, or both. Schloss writes,

> "This rule rests on three pillars: that sampling may be disrespectful to a great artist, that some music is so good that sampling does not improve it, and that sampling something that was already good is not sufficiently challenging. The first and second of these are telling in that sampling is not seen as being disrespectful to artists in general, only to particularly esteemed ones. The third pillar supports the idea that ego gratification and fun are a part of hip-hop in production; listeners are presumed to make an assessment of the degree of difficulty when they judge the accomplishments of other producers."[27]

With regards to the third pillar, we might consider its relation to our previous understanding of paying dues by honoring the history and tradition of DJing. This pillar demands that producers seek some level of challenge in making something that sounds good out of the music that they

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[26] Schloss, 110.
[27] Schloss, 120.

are sampling, so we might interpret the sampling of highly respected records as taking the easy way out and disrespecting the craft. With that in mind, we might understand this pillar as upholding the traditional Hip Hop production techniques and, subsequently, the pioneers of those techniques.

Regarding the first two pillars that Schloss offers, this idea that sampling could be seen as disrespectful to particularly esteemed artists is one that might leave one questioning whether Hip Hop production techniques could be said to engage in the act of paying homage. It couldn't quite be considered an act of paying homage if one believes that sampling certain records is disrespectful to the artists who created them. This is complicated, however, by the reality about this particular sampling ethic that Schloss points out which is that not all Hip Hoppers agree with this ethic. Producers that Schloss spoke to responded to this by saying "Nah. . . . If I respect a record, I'm samplin' the hell out of it!"[28] and "Nah. I don't agree with that. I mean there's some fantastic stuff that I have high praise for. But I'll still sample it. To me, it's the highest praise to sample it."[29] Therefore, while some might find it disrespectful to sample certain records that they hold in high regard, others, contrarily, view that high regard as more motivation *to* sample the record. To specifically seek to sample records that one respects can be more definitely understood as an act of paying homage and honoring the ancestors. An example of this includes Madlib's album, *Shades of Blue: Madlib Invades Blue Note* (2003), on which Madlib is invited by Blue Note Records to sample a number of different records throughout their catalog. This could be understood as Madlib's act of paying homage to the many great artists and records that live in that catalog. One can also look to the song "Ibtihaj," on Rapsody's album, *Eve* (2019),

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[28] qtd. in Schloss, 120.
[29] qtd. in Schloss, 120.

which samples Willie Mitchell's "Groovin'" (1968) in a manner very similar to the way it was

sampled on GZA's "Liquid Swords" (1995). It can be understood that Rapsody's intention on

this track is to pay homage to "Liquid Swords" as well as to GZA's ability as an MC because she

interpolates[30] lyrics from "Liquid Swords" for the refrain,

> "Now when the emcees came to live out the name
> And to-pa-to perform
> Some had to snort cocaine to act insane
> To before Pete rocked it on
> Now on to the mental planes to spark the brain
> With the building to be born"[31]

Furthermore, Rapsody actually features GZA on the track for a verse—giving voice to the MC

behind the "Liquid Swords" track she is honoring. Briefly looking away from the production,

note that the overarching theme of the song is about paying homage to the history, tradition, and

legacy of the practice of MCing. On top of all of this, the title of the track references and pays

homage Ibtihaj Muhammad[32]. Like she does with each of the other song titles on *Eve*, Rapsody

dedicates this song to a Black woman figure who Rapsody considers to be an influence or

trailblazer in their own right. The practice of paying homage is deeply embedded in the culture,

and it speaks to the ways in which Hip Hop maintains its own unique ways of understanding its

relationship with the ancestors within its own episteme.

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[30] "Interpolation" is the practice of playing a musical composition that was created by another artist (as opposed to directly sampling the audio from the original work). In Hip Hop, it is most often used in reference to the MC's practice of reciting lyrics that have been written and performed on past records and songs.
[31] Source: https://genius.com/Rapsody-ibtihaj-lyrics
[32] Ibtihaj Muhammad is the first Muslim-American woman to wear a hijab while competing in an Olympic fencing competition for the United States.

For many Hip Hop producers, the process of making beats can be considered sacred and spiritual. It only makes sense that the honoring of ancestors would hold a place within the artform. Negus I, another artist who gave their opinion on Schloss's ethic, said

> "I would definitely use a part of a song that I loved, because it has that spirit in it. And I would like to get some of that spirit. But I would have to put as much of my spirit into changing that sound and doing something to it, to make it worthwhile. I wouldn't wanna just use the [melody] and put a beat over it"[33]

This mention of spirit further makes it clear the way the process of sampling can be spiritual for producers. The significance that Negus I places in, not only the spirit that exists in the music, but also in the process of changing it significantly to produce something worthwhile is an example of ways in which Hip Hop DJ-producers use sampling and the vinyl to pay homage and honor the ancestors. Generally, we might come to the conclusion that whether a producer decides to sample a record that they respect or leave it alone, their justification for doing so is rooted in reverence for the original record. However, it will often be found that those who *do* sample records they respect do so in an intentional way and do so out of their regard for the record and original artist.

Paying Homage: MCs and Shoutouts

Another way that we can see the tradition of paying homage manifest within Hip Hop culture is through the tendencies of MCs and rappers to make references to figures that they respect and honor through their lyricism. Often, MCs will shout out other Hip Hoppers. This includes calling on peers and predecessors within the culture and recognizing each other as carriers of the cultures and its artforms. KRS-One does this on his 1993 track "Hip Hop vs. Rap,"

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[33] qtd. in Schloss, 120.

by making references to influential tracks by some of his Hip Hop contemporaries and predecessors which serve as his demonstration of what it means to *live* Hip Hop (as opposed to just *doing* rap). Bahamadia makes reference to and shouts out countless Philadelphia Hip Hoppers on her 1995 track, "Uknowhowwedu." Missy Elliott and Jay-Z, on Elliott's 2002 "Back In The Day," similarly make references to classic Hip Hoppers as they reminisce about the "good old days" of Hip Hop. Common loses his love for Hip Hop and then finds it again, respectively, on his two tracks, "I Used to Love H.E.R." (1996) and "HER Love" (2019). This tradition can also include MCs and rappers calling each other out as rivals (sometimes directly and other times in a broader sense). One of the most well-known instances of this is Nas's 2001 track "Ether"[34] which was a response to Jay-Z's "Takeover." Another example of this includes Kendrick Lamar's verse on Big Sean's 2013 "Control," where Lamar drops the names of a number of his MC peers, proclaiming that they cannot compete with him.  However, as it relates to the theme of honoring ancestors, we might focus on the tendency of MC-rappers to call on the names of both their living and dead ancestors and recall the lyrics and spirit of those ancestors (who sometimes, reside within Hip Hop culture, and other times, reside outside of it). This manifests in many forms—paying homage to figures who hold a religious, social, political, artistic, cultural, or some other unique significance to the artist. Through these acts of paying homage, MCs and rappers engage with a longstanding African and Afro-diasporic tradition of honoring the living ancestors and dead ancestors. In doing this, they also demonstrate their own (epistemologically) unique ways of understanding their relationships to the figures that they honor and offer new expressive capabilities to the tradition of paying homage.

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[34] The influence of "Ether," as one of the most notable diss tracks in Hip Hop history, led to the word *ether* becoming a verb commonly used to connote the "burning" or humiliation of another rapper on a diss track.

Beginning with an explicit example of an MC-rapper paying homage to a living ancestor, we can take a look at J Cole's song, "Let Nas Down", which appears on his *Born Sinner* (2013) album. In this song, Cole reflects on the experience of learning that he has let one of his largest idols, Nas (another extremely influential MC within Hip Hop culture), down by releasing a mainstream-style radio hit. Cole expresses how much of an influence Nas was to him in the first line of the first verse, "I used to print out Nas' raps and tape 'em up on my wall". In fact, Cole pays explicit homage to MCs, Tupac and Nas, and DJ-producer, No I.D., in the refrain for the song saying,

> "Yeah, long live the idols, may they never be your rivals
> 'Pac was like Jesus, Nas wrote the Bible
> Now what you 'bout to hear is a tale of glory and sin
> No I.D. my mentor, now let the story begin"[35]

Focusing more specifically on Nas, however, Cole says later in the first verse,

> "Fast forward, who'd a thought that I would meet him on tour
> I'm earnin' stripes now, a nigga got Adidas galore
> Backstage I shook his hand, let 'em know that he's the man
> When he said he was a fan it was too hard to understand"

In this excerpt from the verse, Cole continues to demonstrate the high regard in which he holds Nas as an influence when he reflects on the experience of learning that Nas is a fan of his music (specifically his lyricism). Cole explains throughout the song, however, that he went on release a radio-playable, mainstream hit in order to get his label (run by Jay-Z) to let him release his album[36]. Toward the end of the verse, Cole says

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[35] Source: https://genius.com/J-cole-let-nas-down-lyrics
[36] It is a common experience in the commercial music industry for labels to put a hold on releasing their artists' albums until there has been a significant amount of attention garnered around the albums through marketing efforts. This can often lead to labels effectively forcing artists to create songs and albums that appeal to more mainstream

"Dion called me when it dropped, sounded sad but sincere
Told me Nas heard your single and he hate that shit
Said, "You the one, yo, why you make that shit?"

According to Dion (No I.D., who is acknowledged in the refrain), Nas expressed that he hated

the song and was disappointed, after admiring Cole's depth of lyricism on other songs, that he

would put together and release a track so inconsistent with that. We might understand this whole

song to be J Cole's critique of a music industry (especially a commercialized Hip Hop industry)

that forces MCs to abandon true Hip Hop lyricism in favor of shallow, mainstream lyrics. What

is extremely significant for us, however, is the way Cole uses his admiration and respect for Nas

to frame that message. By understanding the bottom line of this experience as having been

ashamed of the fact that he let Nas down, J Cole is ultimately paying homage to Nas as a

personal influence and as an influence within the culture, and he is honoring him as a living idol

alongside other influential Hip Hop figures.[37]

     We can also consider a spiritually-motivated style of paying homage that manifests

throughout Hip Hop culture. Jay Electronica's album, *A Written Testimony* (2020)[38], like many

classic Hip Hop albums, is riddled with references to and samples of different figures that we can

understand to be particularly significant to Electronica. The introduction track, for instance, titled

"The Overwhelming Event," samples the voice of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, the

national representative for the Nation of Islam, of which Electronica is a member. In the sample,

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audiences in order for their music to be allowed by the label into stores, which can result in artists being forced to create and release records that they do not feel represent them accurately.

[37] It is worth mentioning that Nas has a track on his *Street's Disciple* (2004) album, on which he similarly pays homage to a living MC ancestor of his own. In the case of this track, titled "U.B.R. (Unauthorized Biography Of Rakim)," Nas honors and tells the story (or unofficial biography) of Rakim, an MC famously known as half of the Hip Hop duo, Eric B. and Rakim.

[38] While Electronica has been a notable figure in the rap game for many years, this project, heavily featuring Jay-Z, is actually his debut album.

Minister Farrakhan delivers the message, from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, that Black

people are the real children of Israel. By using Minister Farrakhan's message to open up his

album, Electronica underscores the significance of Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam

and their influence on him—paying homage to a living ancestor and a historically influential

African-American religion while setting the spiritual and political tone for the rest of the album.

Like the Nation of Islam, the Five Percenters (Nation of Gods and Earths) is another religion that

holds a lot of influence and significance in African-American communities, and this influence

shows up very often in Hip Hop music and culture. Poor Righteous Teachers, on their 1996

"Gods, Earths, and 85ers," sample Raekwon's (of the Wu-Tang Clan) "Can it Be All So Simple

(Remix)" where here says "Dedicated to the Gods and the Earths." On this track that teaches the

principles of the Five Percenters, Poor Righteous Teachers might be understood to be shouting

out the living ancestor, Raekwon, as well as paying homage to the Five Percenters.

      The tradition of shouting out Hip Hoppers who have passed away is one that has been

ever present in the culture. For instance, Phife Dawg (of A Tribe Called Quest) dedicated his

2011 song, "Dear Dilla" (produced by DJ Rasta Root), to the late J Dilla. Throughout the song,

Phife's lyrics speak directly to Dilla as if he were writing a letter to the deceased DJ-producer.[39]

With lines like "Hold tight, this ain't the last time I see you \\ Due time, that's my word, I'mma

see you,"[40] Phife demonstrates that Dilla's death has not severed the connection that exists

between them, and even though Dilla has passed on, Phife is confident that the two will meet

once again. Five years later, when Phife passed away amidst the creation of A Tribe Called

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[39] For the hook, DJ Rasta Root samples Q-Tip saying "Jay Dee, flip another beat for me" on Slum Village's track, "Hold Tight" (2000). Each of the four times the vocal sample is played, Rasta Root includes a different Dilla sample faintly playing in the background.
[40] Source: https://genius.com/Phife-dawg-dear-dilla-lyrics

Quest's album, *We got it from Here… Thank You 4 Your service* (2016), ATCQ dedicated a song on the album, "Lost Somebody," solely to his memory. Paying attention to Q-Tip's verse on this track, the listener will again notice this form of remembrance that involves the MC communicating directly with the figure they are mourning. Exemplifying this, Q-Tip ends his verse,

> "The one thing I appreciate, you and I, we never pretended
> Rhymes we would write it out, hard times fight it out
> Gave grace face to face, made it right
> And now you riding out, out, out, out"[41]

In both "Dear Dilla" and "Lost Somebody," the MCs who are paying tribute express the weight of the loss in their personal lives as well as in Hip Hop culture. In this way, the track serves as a medium for the culture to collectively mourn a Hip Hoppers passing and honor their being—even if they have transitioned into the land of the dead. By communicating directly with the deceased, these MCs demonstrate that those who pass away are not removed from our reach and that we can still communicate with them—a belief commonly held in African and Afro-Diasporic traditional religion and philosophy.

A final instance of honoring the ancestors that we can look at lives in Lauryn Hill's verse and other lyrical contributions on the Fugee's popular song, "Ready or Not" (1996). She ends her verse saying,

> "Believe me, fronting niggas give me heebie-jeebies
> So while you're imitating Al Capone
> I'll be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone"[42]

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[41] Source: https://genius.com/A-tribe-called-quest-lost-somebody-lyrics
[42] Source: https://genius.com/Fugees-ready-or-not-lyrics

In this excerpt, Hill is speaking to Hip Hop artists who are "imitating Al Capone" by identifying

with the imagery surrounding organized crime lords. She says that while they are "fronting" by

creating these images of themselves, she, on the other hand, would rather be identifying with

Nina Simone and the image surrounding her influence. Salamishah Tillet describes this in

"Strange Sampling: Nina Simone and her Hip-Hop Children",

> "Simone's presence in hip-hop has been on the rise since 1996, when former Fugees'
> member Lauryn Hill brilliantly rhymed herself into Simone's legacy rather than the
> hypermasculine American gangsterism that dominated the early-1990s hip-hop scene. At
> the time, the young Hill seemed more heir apparent to Simone's throne of sonic fluidity,
> political urgency, and bohemian black glamour than any other hip-hop artist."[43]

As Tillet writes, Lauryn Hill's reference of Simone, in this line, was followed by the

phenomenon of samples of and references to Nina Simone all throughout Hip Hop music

(especially interesting considering, as Tillet mentions, that Simone's own disposition toward Hip

Hop)[44]. And while we might question exactly how many of those are really paying homage to

Simone (Tillet argues that there are many who sample Ms. Simone in a way that does not honor

her at all), Lauryn Hill, in these few lines, is positing Simone as a role model figure. Presumably

in recognition of Simone's influence and expressions of social and political consciousness,

Lauryn Hill is looking to Simone as a figure she would prefer to emulate as an MC while she

defecates on the microphone of those imitating Capone. In this instance of honoring an ancestor,

Hill was paying homage to not only a then-living ancestor, but also to the spirit that the thought

of that ancestor evoked. Tillet writes,

> "Simone emerges as both a compelling singer and a cultural signifier, a virtuoso and
> political visionary, whose sampled voice, pianism, and performative strategy enable a
> diverse range of hip-hop artists to access and perform a version [of] what I am calling her
> sonic black radicalism."

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[43] Tillet, 119.

[44] Tillet quotes Simone as having admonished "Rappers have ruined music, as far as I'm concerned." (120)

In this way, what Hill and many other Hip Hop artists do in referencing Nina Simone is that they harken back to the Black radicalism displayed by Simone and her peers during what is referred to as the Civil Rights era. In accessing this "sonic black radicalism" artists are able to signify messages of social and political consciousness, and they often follow it by entering into a sort of lyrical dialogue with the figure they are sampling. We see Hill and another Fugees member, Pras, do something similar on the third verse of the same song when they sing the line, "The Buffalo Soldier, dreadlock Rasta", referencing the song by Bob Marley. In doing this, they acknowledge and honor Bob Marley, a deceased ancestor, and his message on the song, describing the experience of Black people stolen away from Africa and fighting for survival in America. Through these particular instances and many more we understand Lauryn Hill to participate in the Hip Hop tradition of paying homage, and in these cases, she pays homage to both living and dead figures who hold a sort of political significance for her. Neither Simone nor Marley were Hip Hop MCs, but they were artists who often wielded their voices and their music in the interest of Black political expression.

In these different examples and in those from the previous section, Hip Hop MC-rappers and DJ-producers demonstrate a diversity in the approaches they take to paying homage and honoring their ancestors. From the manner in which they sample particularly honorable records, to the lyrical recognition of those who have been influences within the Hip Hop culture and within the Black community, and even beyond these particular approaches, Hip Hoppers engage with and remain connected to a long standing African and Afro-diasporic tradition of honoring one's ancestors. Focusing more on the MC, there are many different reasons that might prompt

an artist to honor a particular living or deceased figure with a shout out or reference. Sometimes, this homage is being paid to other MCs who played a role in pioneering the artform, and other times, it is being paid to figures that hold a particular religious, political, or social significance. Nevertheless, these Hip Hop expressions of paying homage are central and significant to the practice of MCing. While they remain consistent with African and Afro-diasporic cultural understandings of the relationship between the living and the dead, Hip Hop's techniques and engagements with sound technology give new form and new life to the tradition of honoring the ancestors—demonstrating a Hip Hop-specific way of understanding relationships with the ancestors.

Traditional African Spirituality and Hip Hop Tricksters

It is often recognized that there is a deep spirituality in Hip Hop experiences for both creators and consumers of art within the culture, and there are many people who consider Hip Hop to be inherently spiritual. In the same vein, we can recognize the presence and influence of traditional African spirituality and religion throughout Hip Hop music. While recognizing that it can be an extremely spiritual experience for many, it is important to acknowledge the retention of ancient African spirituality in Hip Hop expressions. Hip Hop is a culture, so within it, Hip Hoppers do not just experience a Hip Hop time, but also a Hip Hop spirit, philosophy, and epistemology. Raquel Cepeda writes, in "AfroBlue: Incanting Yoruba Gods in Hip-Hop's Isms", "Throughout hip-hop's still embryonic life, Yoruba religious philosophy and aesthetics have consistently informed graffiti art, fashion, rap music, and breakdancing."[45] And while much of

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[45] essay by Cepeda in Chang, 272.

Hip Hop can be understood to have been influenced by traditional African spirituality, we should also note that Hip Hop also offers innovative techniques and unique, new expressions of these spiritualities (as we know Hip Hop to do with everything it utilizes). Describing this, Cepeda later writes, "Cadres of hip-hop's finest continue to innovate the traditions and superior musical and visual aesthetics rooted in Yoruba and Congo religious philosophy."[46] One contemporary example of some Hip Hoppers who are involved in the innovation of these traditions is the Hip Hop duo, OSHUN, who incorporate traditional Yoruba spiritual symbolism and practice in their music and performance. The duo is named after a powerful Yoruba orisha, associated with water, purity, fertility, love, and sensuality.[47]

One way in which Hip Hoppers (particularly MCs) demonstrate the influence of traditional African spirituality in Hip Hop is through the embodiment of the trickster figures of ancient African folklore. Halifu Osumare writes, in "(W)Rapped in Illusion: The Hip-Hop Emcee as Trickster",

> "[T]he hip-hop emcee is the current incarnation of the African trickster figure, known as Ananse among the Akan of West Africa, and transformed in the Americas into Nansi in Jamaica and Brer Rabbit in the U.S. South. The Yoruba of Nigeria also have an iconic trickster, Esu-Elegbara, a combination trickster-crossroads deity."[48]

Osumare continues to refer to the general figure of the trickster figure as Esu and cites Henry Louis Gates's analysis of the trickster figure. Osumare writes, "Gates reminds us that Esu-Elegbara's other sacred role as mediator of the crossroads is made perceptible through profane vernacular," and later, "The popular vernacular, often coming from the social margins,

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[46] Cepeda, 273.
[47] Source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun
[48] Osumare, 267.

is, therefore, the perfect playing field for the trickster deity."[49] The crossroads being referred to

are the liminal space between the divine and the mundane, the gods and humanity, or the living

and the dead. Understanding Esu's role in mediating at the crossroads, we recognize Esu as the

medium through which communication takes place between the two worlds. In fulfilling this

role, the trickster, or Esu, is understood to be he who holds wisdom and shares it with the people.

This is the role that the MC-rapper plays in Hip Hop. Osumare continues,

> "Another of Esu's personas is that of the divine linguist, an even closer connection to
> the "dope" rhymer's rhetorical strategies. As a master linguist, Esu-Elegbara translates the
> language of the gods to humans and vice versa and in the process becomes the master of
> literacy."[50]

Consistent with an African oral tradition that recognizes the value of the spoken word and

storytelling, the MC-rapper stands beside and on the shoulders of African storytellers and

tricksters. The master of ceremonies effectively fulfills the role of, as Osumare describes, "the

master of literacy" or "the divine linguist". Killah Priest, on "B.I.B.L.E. (Basic Instructions

Before Leaving Earth)" (1995), channels the divine linguist and communicates wisdom to the

listener about the different ways in which some religious institutions preach inconsistencies and

have been involved in the subjugation of Black people. It may be interpreted that, from his

research and experiences, Killah Priest is giving the listener some instructions on how to untrain

oppressive teachings from these religions before their time on Earth is up. He says, in the second

verse,

> "A difficult task I had to take
> I studied till my eyes was swollen and only arose when
> I found out that we were the chosen
> I deal with the truth and build with the youth"[51]

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[49] Osumare, 267.
[50] Osumare, 268.
[51] Source: https://genius.com/Killah-priest-bible-lyrics

In this particular excerpt, Killah priest describes the amount of effort that he invests in engaging with this knowledge and the way he chooses to communicate that knowledge with the youth who might not have accessed these truths. And it is important to recognize and credit the skill that it takes for an MC-rapper to be filling in the role properly. Fulfilling this role of the divine linguist requires a combination of acknowledging the spiritual power of the spoken word as well as taking the time and care to hone the craft of lyricism. Jelani Cobb, in *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*, recognizes the complexity of skill that MCs demonstrate and dubs them mathematicians:

> "The rhyme is mathematic: A set of twelve syllables can be broken into combinations such as 4/4/4, 6/4/2, or 8/2/2, and the skilled rapper is most often trying his best to organize his syllables in the least predictable arrangement. And this is why even the slickest of MC lyrics look sterile on the page. Rakim once predicted that an imitator was liable to break his jaw trying to recite one of the master's lines in his absence. Flow is the Rosetta stone of lyrical understanding. Since there is seldom the same number of syllables or words from one line to the next, the rapper doesn't speak at the same speed from one line to the next. This is lyrical long division. Rapping through a standard sixteen-bar combination, the MC has to manage an equal number of changes in pitch, inflection, and delivery— all while maintaining breath control. The craft comes down to this: the trickiness of enunciation, the constant variation of speed, the tongue-twisting elongation or contraction of words. The MC is the mathematician."[52]

As we continue to explore the significance of the lyrical prowess that the MC-rapper demonstrates and their connection to Esu—the divine linguist, the trickster—we can keep in mind our Hip Hop episteme and the significance of these oral techniques in communicating within that episteme. An analysis of the trickster's role in traditional African communities will reveal the practical use of trickster folktales as tools for teaching morals, values, principles,

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[52] Cobb, 87.

politics, and other forms of wisdom between members of the community. Shifting our attention

to communities of Africans that were forcibly transported from their homes and enslaved in the

Americas, trickster folktales reflected (and continue to reflect) wisdom essential to the survival

of Africans who had to (and have to) contend with the conditions of slavery and racial capitalist

exploitation. We might, perhaps, consider this to be a (necessary) innovation in the role of the

divine linguist as trickster tales in the Americas often involved the application of incredible

intelligence and wit (and often slick talking and clever language) for our divine linguist

protagonists to outwit "massa" and other oppressive, antagonistic characters.

With this in mind, we can understand, further, how the MC-rapper uses their role and

their skill to continue in this tradition through their lyricism. We can interpret their wordplay,

storytelling, and syllabic gymnastics as not only an exhibition of their lyrical capabilities, but

also as a dissemination of sacred wisdom rooted in collective Black survival. Osumare writes,

> "*Nommo*, as word power, is at the center of Esu's power of illusory multiple signs, as well as one of the first principles of what I call the Africanist aesthetic. *Nommo* is a principle that emphasizes the changing now, the improvisatory self."[53]

Osumare goes on to draw from the conversation between an elder Dogon priest, named

Ogotomeli, and a Western anthropologist, Marcel Griaule, to further describe the concept of

*Nommo*:

> "Ogotomeli 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.'"[54]

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[53] Osumare, 268.
[54] Osumare, 268.

Ogotomeli, here, explains what it means to wield word power, or *Nommo*. As we think about the

MC-rapper's utilization of language to communicate survival, we can use the priest's teachings

as an opportunity to further consider the MC's ability to imagine and create new realities through

their techniques. In other words, we might understand the MC-rapper to speak divine wisdom not

only as it relates to survival, but also as it relates to liberation and freedom. For instance, on his

1992 track, "Proper Education," Grand Puba teaches about the plight of Black people in the

Americas and the importance of Black people properly educating each other in the effort to

liberate each other—ending the second verse with the following,

> "I just catch my four, grab my button, put it on my lapel
> Grab my people and get out of hell
> See this is why we must teach our young black nation
> Proper education"[55]

Also consider the world that Nas and Lauryn Hill imagine in Nas's 1996 "If I Ruled the World."

While Nas, in the verses, details a utopia free of racism and poverty, Lauryn Hill sings in the

chorus, "I'd free all my sons. I love 'em love 'em, baby." And in 2014, the Wu-Tang Clan called

for Black folks to take on the task of creating a brighter future on their track, "A Better

Tomorrow." Masta Killa begins the second verse saying,

> "Allah said to save the babies from the cold
> Pour wisdom in the cup so the truth overflows,"[56]

and Cappadonna ends the third verse saying,

> "For all my people that's out there persevering through the storm
> Black fist, Staten Island, stand up, stand strong
> Penetrate through the gate and bring the Clan along."

[55] Source: https://genius.com/Grand-puba-proper-education-lyrics
[56] Source: https://genius.com/Wu-tang-clan-a-better-tomorrow-2014-lyrics

In the example from Masta Killa's verse, he explicitly demonstrates his role as divine linguist

and MC by sharing a message from Allah with the listener. In the example from Capadonna's

verse, he urges the listener to "bring the Clan along," recognizing that the wisdom that they

deliver, as MCs, will serve the listener well in their efforts to change the world.

Cobb also speaks to the theme of MC's demonstrating freedom through the freestyle, and

relates it to a more general theme of freedom showing up throughout Black culture:

> "The freestyle is the crucial element of hip hop, but also is a cornerstone of black culture
> that is in consistent rebellion against the strictures of form and convention. Thus what the
> MC calls freestyle the jazz musician calls improvisation– literally confronting structure
> with a riff on time. The kinesthetic genius of an NBA baller lies in his ability to construct
> physical freestyles, rebelling against the step-dribble-shoot simplicity of structure with an
> improvised use of body and time. This emphasis upon freedom of form emerges in direct
> relation to a group of people whose history has been defined by physical and time
> constraints. Free style— as in the opposite of slave style, understood?"[57]

Notice Cobb's attention to the complex relationship between freestyle and time and recall that, in

Hip Hop time, we are constantly complicating a Western notion of time. To borrow Cobb's

language, we can understand the MC to be *improvising*, to be confronting structure, and

engaging in an expression of freedom from constraint.

Once again, we must keep in mind that this relationship between Hip Hop culture and

traditional African culture is not one of unidirectional or linear exchange. Hip Hop, a culture that

encourages such strong and consistent innovation in its different forms of expression, offers

much to traditional African and Afro-diasporic culture. Osumare writes,

> "The power of music and dance to bolster and enhance the human spirit has been the
> bedrock of the survival of African-based cultures in the Americas, and is now the
> inspiration for that same power, through hip-hop, to propagate throughout the world."[58]

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[57] Cobb, 78.
[58] Osumare, 269.

And continues later,

> "Hip-hop must be interpreted, therefore, both within the Africanist aesthetic continuum and as an articulation of the postmodern moment of intertexuality. This bifurcated view of hip-hop culture allows both for its uses of the Nommo word power and technological wizardry of the twenty-first century. Hip-hop's ability to bridge eons of time and space makes this globally circulating subculture a potent and intoxicating sign of the postmodern times."[59]

Again, we arrive at an understanding of Hip Hop's ability to manipulate time and complicate Western notions of time—both consistent with traditional African culture and also offering new ability and technique to African diasporic cultural expression.

## The Vinyl and the Cosmogram

For those interested in semiotics and the way that the different symbolisms of Hip Hop might contribute to our understanding of a Hip Hop episteme, there is much to be found in the relationship between the vinyl, as a symbol, and the cosmogram of the Kongo religion. Recall "The Spiral as the Basic Semiotic of the Kongo Religion, the Bukongo", in which Luyaluka demonstrates that the spiral is the basic semiotic of the Kongo religion. In the essay, Luyaluka expands outwards from an understanding of the cosmogram as representing a circular motion. For our purposes in this section, I will lay out three ways in which this spiraling semiotic of the Kongo manifests epistemologically and philosophically in the symbolism of the vinyl.
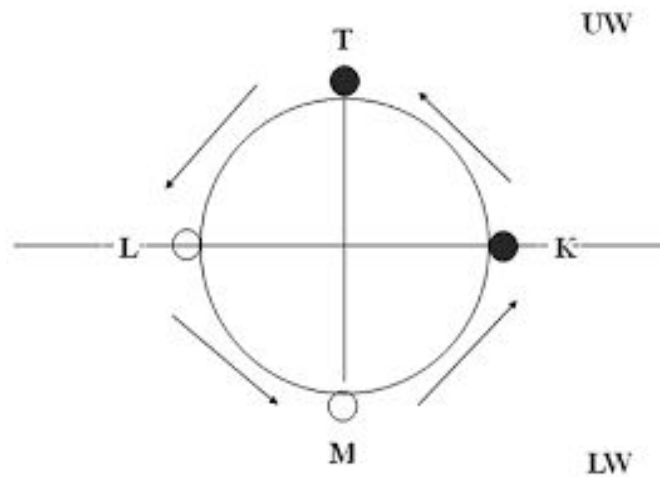
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[59] Osumare, 271.

Figure 1. Adapted from Fukiau (1994) in Luyaluka (2017).

We can start, first, by acknowledging the circular shape of both the vinyl and of the two-dimensional representation of the cosmogram (refer to Figure 1). The cosmogram represents the cyclical nature of life, and, in Figure 1, the arrows orient us in a counterclockwise motion around this circular figure (moving from Musoni time, to Kala time, to Tukula time, to Luvemba time).[60] Similarly, the shape of the vinyl is circular, however it usually spins in a clockwise motion when music is being played. Of course, this is only the very surface of the connections we can make between the two symbols. Paying closer attention to Luyaluka's paper and to the technology and application of the vinyl will reveal a deeper connection.

Going slightly further, we know that Luyaluka's position on the cosmogram is that it is a summary of the spiral and that the spiral is the basic semiotic of the Kongo. Recall the quote that Luyaluka pulls from the words of a Kongo elder, "God has prepared the fufu (cassava bread), and we men are the condiment" and that Luyaluka goes on to describe the spiraling motion that occurs in the preparing of fufu. When we pay closer attention to the technology of the vinyl and the vinyl player, we see that while the vinyl is shaped like a circle, the needle does not travel in a

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[60] Refer to page 18, in the last chapter, for the significance of each of these times.

circle around it. Instead, we see that the needle travels in a spiral around the record in order to

play the music encoded on the record. This spiraling understanding of the record does provide

for us a somewhat stronger understanding of the relationship between vinyl and cosmogram, and

yet, this connection can be strengthened still.

Digging even deeper, we can pay closer attention to the nature of the fufu preparation

process. Specifically, note that this process requires *both* clockwise and counterclockwise

motions. In practice, a person who is preparing the fufu is switching directions constantly in

order to properly prepare the food. Luyaluka writes,

> "The question here is what is the direction in which one must read a cosmogram,
> clockwise or counterclockwise? The answer is that both ways are correct; each direction
> gives us a precise meaning of the cosmogram as we will see it below."[61]

According to Luyaluka, the spiraling represents human beings constantly tripping through this

cyclical journey between heaven and earth with clockwise motions symbolizing ascension and

counterclockwise motions symbolizing descension. To make this final connection between the

vinyl and the cosmogram, we need to direct our attention, once again, at the DJ-producer and

their relationship to the vinyl (and this is fitting because it is Hip Hop culture, specifically, that

creates this connection between the vinyl and the cosmogram). When the DJ at the party is

repeatedly playing an instance of the break (clockwise) and rewinding the the record to find the

beginning of the break again (counterclockwise), they are recreating this multi-directional

spiraling motion that Luyaluka is describing in the preparation of the fufu and in the flow of life

in Kongo cosmology. When the DJ places their hand on the record to control the direction in

which it moves, they direct the sound that comes off of the record and they direct the life of the

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[61] Luyaluka, 105.

party. This is further intensified when the DJ employs a scratching technique, symbolizing a speedy and disjointed process of ascension and descension taking place in the party. We might also look to the way the producer cycles forward and backward (or up and down) through a record in search of sample material as an example of a Hip Hopper controlling the ascension and descension process that Luyaluka describes in Kongo cosmology.

The semiotic correspondence between the vinyl in Hip Hop and the Kongo cosmogram signifies an unspoken, implicit manifestation of traditional African cosmology and philosophy in Hip Hop culture. While Hip Hop did not invent vinyl technology, the way that Hip Hoppers' unique engagement with the vinyl relates to the Kongo cosmogram demonstrates a deep, epistemological relationship between Hip Hop culture and Kongo culture. Furthermore, the physical and immediate nature of Hip Hop's engagement with the vinyl (the way DJs actually manipulate the motion of the vinyl with their hands) might suggest that Hip Hop serves as a newer medium for a tangible interaction with the symbol of the spiral. Just as Luyaluka describes the way different Kongo cultures incorporate the symbolism of the spiral in their rites, Hip Hop offers new sacred practices that represent the ascension and descension of people through the spiral.

Conclusion

In these different ways, traditional African and Afro-diasporic cultures manifests itself within Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop develops its own way of engaging with the ancestors by paying homage and MCs embody the practices and principles of the African trickster figures who serve as the medium for communication between the mundane and the divine. Just as well, there exists

a semiotic parallel between the Hip Hop's vinyl the Kongo cosmogram that might suggest a deeper cosmological and philosophical relationship between Hip Hop culture and Kongo culture. Furthermore, since we might also understand Hip Hop to be constantly innovating its expression of these facets of African and Afro-diasporic culture, Hip Hop can be understood to be developing its own episteme, in which, these expressions would suggest a Hip Hop-specific of understanding, engaging with, and communicating knowledge.

**Conclusion**

We arrive at our Hip Hop episteme. In it, we understand a Hip Hop time which is rooted in an African and Indigenous temporality that is spiraling, as opposed to linear. In this Hip Hop time, Hip Hoppers find themselves interacting with the past, the future, and the present moment all at once. Through different techniques—finding and replaying the breakbeat, as well as engaging in different sampling styles and being intentional with how and why certain samples are chosen—DJs and producers demonstrate a unique ability to use modern sound technologies to manipulate time and effectively perform time travel. Existing in this nonlinear temporality, Hip Hop culture finds itself rooted, also, in traditionally African and Afro-diasporic forms of cultural expression while also innovating new forms of this expression, thereby being influenced by and also being an influence on traditional African and Afro-diasporic culture. We see this, especially, when we see the MC and the rapper engage in the Afro-diasporic practice of paying homage to the ancestors and when we see them embody the role of the African trickster figure, serving as a medium for communication between the mundane and the divine. We can also see this in the semiotic parallels that exist between the vinyl in Hip Hop and the Kongo cosmogram.

Just as well, our Hip Hop episteme serves as a departure point. If Hip Hop culture develops its own way of understanding the world and expressing knowledge, then it also has the capacity to serve as a medium for Black folks to construct new realities. Digable Planets, on their 1993 album, *Reachin' (A New Refutation Of Time And Space)*, do just what the title suggests throughout the album. At the end of the penultimate track, "Swoon Units," Butterfly relates,

> "And these cats asked me,
> 'Man! What are you cats doin' man?'
> I just laughed, haha,
> I said, 'Reachin' kid, refuting time, space, in rhymes
> Think of what you could do if time belonged to you. . .

Now hip somebody else, now hip somebody else"

As Butterfly demonstrates in this skit, an important principle of Hip Hop culture is, once you have received the knowledge, to hip somebody else. Therefore, while utilizing our Hip Hop episteme to refute Western time and space and construct a new reality, Hip Hoppers must communicate knowledge with each other in order to build that reality collectively. When they engage in the practice of understanding and communicating this Hip Hop knowledge, Hip Hoppers develop and operate within a Hip Hop episteme—with its own ways of engaging with time, knowing, and expressing knowledge,

A Note . . .

This thesis project was completed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being fortunate enough to have the means and to have summoned the focus to complete it, it should go without saying that my mind was often focused on the times at hand, times past and the times to come. So I thought it fitting to sample or honor some words that have helped me to think about the times. Quelle Chris and Chris Keys released an album, *Innocent Country 2*, on April 24th, 2020. At the end of one song, "Mirage", Big Sen shares the following words:

> "Yeah, feels good to be back. I spend most of my days now in my garden, growing food and medicinal plants and shit that we smoking on now-type-of-thing, and pondering the next moves, you know what I'm saying?
> Like, what the fuck is going on out here? We all know something is, you know, around the corner. And we feel it in our souls. It's manifesting itself in our art, even. The movies we make are largely dystopic and post-apocalyptic. I think we all just trying to make sense of it somehow. And that's cool. Sometimes, it just be them seasons. Predatory capitalism. And all the -isms, you know what I'm saying? And everybody's fed up. And people don't know what to do, so we make our art and art is beautiful. But art is also the truth. So we know you know. Come on, you know. You know you know you know
> So what are you doing about it? Most people just waiting for something to happen without even preparing for anything, you know what I'm saying?

Right now, Ukraine, power off. Venezuela, they shut the power off. Just this week, 44 million people, South America, power off. That's how we start modern warfare nowadays. We just cut your power and your internet off. Give that one week, without the little faucet running and your little water coming out and your 'frigerator not being on and shit and your diabetes medication not being cold. And you assed out
Make your actions match your ambitions to survive. You need to get ready like we are. That means being in shape. That means being in touch with your ancestors and your spirituality, you feel me?
What's gon' come to pass is what's gon' come to pass. All that voting and all that shit—you can do that, that's cool, but that ain't gon' stop it. It's—It's already on the way, you know what I'm saying? So. Just buckle up. Have a good time, you know? Security is largely a superstition. It does not exist in nature
Life is either a grand adventure or nothing, baby. Go have your adventure, 'cause I'm having mine
Big Sen, peace out, one love"[62]

I believe it necessary for our actions to match our ambitions to survive, and I also believe it

necessary to include each other in an ambition to survive collectively.

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[62] Source: https://genius.com/Quelle-chris-and-chris-keys-mirage-lyrics

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