"The Writing's on the Wall": The Absence of Hieroglyphs in Rhetoric & Composition Discourse and Instruction

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Note to Listeners:
Throughout my presentation, I will use the terms hieroglyph and hieroglyphic, which are Greek words given to Kemetic writing, or in Egyptian terms, the Medu Neter. Although relying on Greek naming seems to further distance Egyptians from their rhetorical genius, which I hope my paper clearly explicates, I will use Greek terminology in my presentation in an effort to maintain clarity for an audience I assume is familiar with the Greek words. In addition to the words hieroglyph and hieroglyphics, I will use the Greek term “rhetoric,” because to date, I have not uncovered—and there may not be one—an Egyptian equivalent.

When I traveled to Egypt last summer, I went with the intention of being awe-inspired by the Pyramids of Giza, and I was, absolutely. However, after traveling to several pyramids, temples, and museums, I realized the magic in hieroglyphic writing, which, translated, means “words of God.” The more I learned about hieroglyphs—this sacred text that is considered the first example of written communication, this system that was so difficult to read, that some Egyptian royalty were even “illiterate,” if you will—the more I interrogated my own education, particularly my graduate school learning which focused on rhetoric & composition.

On temple walls, I recognized structures, postures, and symbols that I encounter often: be it the Washington monument, a downward facing dog, or the equal rights logo, these political structures, Buddhist movements, and corporate emblems were already written long before they appeared in the spaces to which they are often attributed. Immediately, as an assistant professor of English at Florida A&M University, I said to myself, “It don’t make no sense that my Black students continue to profess their inability to write when they are seeds of the first scribblers to have ever existed.”

As I traveled through Cairo, the Nubian Village, and Aswan and looked upon these intricate carvings of sacred text, I also began to feel detached from my capital S self—which is a feeling I imagine my students actually express in their professions regarding their so-called writing inabilities. All my life I had been engaged in African American Brain Bowls, Theodore Gibson Oratorical Contests, The NAACP, African American Heritage Clubs, and the like, yet I was far removed from African culture, history, and genius. While I was familiar with the Sahara Desert, the Nile River, Queen Nefertiti, and the Pyramids, I had not understood the influence that Africa has had on civilization, period—on language, on morals, on justice and order—all of whichinform what is
called the Ma’atian (Ma-yaw-tee-in) Principles. Africa is the cradle of civilization, and all of these years of not truly understanding its impact on humanity makes me feel as though I have yet to know myself. This feeling is best explicated through Molefi Asante’s 1998 The Afrocentric Idea, in which he claims: "If [African Americans] have lost anything, it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our platforms. We cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in borrowed space. . . . Our existential relationship to the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment” (8).

As I toured Egypt and photographed hieroglyphs—thus becoming re-acquainted with my African self—I contemplated at what time in my education I think I should have been exposed to Africa’s lexical genius beyond what is universally shared, and I could not free myself from the idea that graduate school was most conducive to such exposure.

I studied rhetoric & composition at the University of South Florida, and not one of the courses I was required to take mentioned Africa, not even the History of Rhetoric course. As a matter of fact, it was in that course that I noted St. Augustine’s African roots. (St. Augustine is responsible for the spread of Christian rhetoric, and he was born in Alexandria.) However, my white male professor who received his training at Purdue University did not support my statement—perhaps because St. Augustine’s claim to fame occurred while he lived in Rome working as a rhetoric professor, which, during the year 384, was considered “the most visible academic position in the Latin world” (Portalié, Eugène. The Catholic Encyclopedia.) So, he, like many rhetoric scholars, is attached to the idea that rhetoric is an invention of classical Greece. Quite possibly, too, my teacher’s commitment to Greco-Roman ideology is based on the fact that the term “rhetoric” was developed by Plato and refined by Aristotle (Lipson 9). But, maybe my white male professor was simply maintaining the white superstructure by denying a Blackness on whose genius such structures rely. According to Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, former director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “[T]here was a refusal to see Africans as the creators of original cultures which flowered and survived over the centuries in patterns of their own making and which historians are unable to grasp unless they forego their prejudices and rethink their approach” (Bekerie 2).

And so, Africa began and ended right there. And how unfortunate, because not only did I pass the History of Rhetoric believing that rhetoric began with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others, but I graduated from USF with a dissertation about a composition pedagogy grounded in Buddhist ideas of mindfulness and meditation, which, too, originated in Africa in what is called Kemetic yoga.
Since then, I have engaged my own Black students with a miseducation, if you will, that has informed my writing pedagogy for the past four years.

I don’t know why I did not conduct my own research re: St. Augustine. And I don’t know if doing so would have led me to Kemetic yoga or hieroglyphic writing, but this notion that my rhetoric & composition teachers who considered themselves experts in the field should have pointed my Black self there, is strong. As I recalled the hieroglyphs I saw that mirror symbols, advertisements, and philosophies that I often encounter in the States, I questioned why hieroglyphic writing is not discussed in conversations re: visual rhetoric, at the very least. And so, I planned to present a paper that invited listeners to consider hieroglyphs as at least an introduction to any discourse and instruction of visual rhetoric, which is defined as “a theoretical framework describing how visual images communicate” (Purdue Owl).

In other words, says Purdue University, “[Visual rhetoric] is one’s ability to understand what an image is attempting to communicate . . . [including] understanding creative choices made with the image such as coloring, shading, and object placement” (Purdue Owl). With that said, visual rhetoric is a “type of awareness that comes from understanding how images communicate meaning” (Purdue Owl). According to Sonja Foss in her 2004 “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory,” “In order for artifacts or products to be conceptualized as visual rhetoric, they must have three characteristics: they must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating” (304-305).

Undoubtedly, then, when I think of the ankh hieroglyph, for instance—whose adaptations are quite popular amongst African Americans who wear the ankh around their necks, tattoo it on their bodies, and recreate it in their art work—hieroglyphic writing embodies visual rhetoric as Foss defines it. It, therefore, is quite apropos to any 21st century classroom engaged in rhetoric and composition discourse, and especially one at an HBCU where Black students like the ones I teach are so detached from their African roots, that they succumb to a Western ideology that bastardizes their ability to create language. Moreover, considering the popularity of online memes and text messaging emoticons, a discussion on hieroglyphic writing is quite befitting to this visual generation. (And let me hasten to say, that I understand that hieroglyphic writing is a system that combines both logographic and alphabetical elements; therefore, my ideas are grounded in the logographic tenet of hieroglyphs. I am not at all suggesting that students learn to read hieroglyphic writing, but that hieroglyphs, like the ankh, are invited into rhetoric & composition’s grand narrative.)
The more I researched hieroglyphic writing in rhetoric & composition discourse, the more I realized and was surprised by how deep its absence in published research runs. Although visual rhetoric is a fairly “new” theory, the study of hieroglyphs seems like a no-brainer in this specialized area of study. According to Suzanne Webb in her 2007 “Visual Rhetoric belongs in the First Year Writing Classroom: Visual Rhetoric is Rhetoric,” “[R]emembering Sanskrit and Hieroglyphics—where pictures and letters intermingled to tell a story, and in so doing persuaded their respective readers—can help doubters visualize the power of the visual” (1). And though Webb mentions the significance of hieroglyphic writing to visual rhetoric, “There is a lacuna, especially in scholarship on rhetorical theory that needs to be addressed in so far as Africa’s contribution to the early development of rhetorical theory is concerned,” (4) says Cecil Blake.

In his 2009 The African Origins of Rhetoric, Blake argues that "the image of Africa rhetorically constructed by the West is one of an ignoble and barbarous past, unworthy of producing anything substantive; and that whites had the mission to save blacks from themselves and their inhumanity" (9). He goes on to claim that the myth of “The Dark Continent” is sustained by “established historiographical orthodoxy” written by revered European thinkers like Hume, Kant, and Hegel, whose works make “opaque the seminal contributions of Africans in many domains, in this instance in rhetorical theory” (9). In addition to Cecil Blake’s work, however, I did find research in African rhetorical theory by a few scholars including: Michael V. Fox’s 1983, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric”; Ayele Bekerie’s 1997, Ethiopic: An African Writing System, Its History and Principles; David Hut-toe’s 2002, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric in the Old and Middle Kingdom’s”; and Carol S. Lipson’s 2004, “Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric: It All Comes Down to Ma’at.” While Hut-toe’s essay does briefly mention hieroglyphic writing, none of the aforementioned works discuss hieroglyphs in terms of visual rhetoric. Instead, each text explicated the significance of The Instructions of Ptah (Puh-tah)-Hotep, which, says Fox, is the oldest of 50-60 surviving Egyptian wisdom books that “offer precepts of ethics, etiquette, and interpersonal relations” (10). It is the antithesis to Machiavelli’s The Prince, says Blake, (4) “[t]he source of the African origins of rhetoric” (xii). In other words, The Instructions of Ptah Hotep predates classical rhetoric by over 3000 years, and from it, says Hut-toe, comes “the idea that skilled speech is powerful” (5). So, while I found almost nothing regarding hieroglyphs and visual rhetoric, I discovered a handful of research about an Egyptian rhetorical style—an organized concept I never realized, but that supports my notion that hieroglyphic writing is a system worth examining in visual rhetoric classrooms and discussions.
My know-nothingness about *The Instructions of Ptah Hotep* reaffirms an occurring theme in my life: *The more I learn, the more I know that I know nothing at all.* I abandoned my research on hieroglyphic writing for a spell and gave my attention to *The Instructions of Ptah Hotep*, which is a manual of morals and ethical guidelines that an aging Ptah Hotep—an Ancient Egyptian first minister in the 5th Dynasty left for his son. It intends to situate its receivers in harmony with divine justice, Ma'at, and therefore—like the Greco-Roman approach to rhetoric & composition on which Western Education relies—is organized into five canons: **silence, kairos (time), restraint, fluency, and truthfulness.** Combined, these canons create one’s ethos, which, says Fox, “is not an adjunct proof, as it is in Aristotle, but is itself a form of proof” [emphasis mine] (16).

Stumbling into an Egyptian rhetoric that so closely mirrors Greco-Roman rhetorical philosophy—sans the Egyptian’s focus on silence—blows my mind just as much as seeing, first-hand, hieroglyphic writing. All I knew about historical rhetoric was grounded in Greco-Roman tradition, and as it were, I passed off my limited knowledge to my Black students—too many of whom are attached to the idea that they cannot write. Oh, but Ptah.

Cicero’s five canons were organized after Ptah Hotep’s. Aristotle’s three modes of persuasion were formulated after Ptah Hotep’s. Quintilian’s claim that an orator should be a “good” man was forged after Ptah Hotep’s. And Plato’s idea that the master of rhetoric identify rhetoric with justice came after Ptah Hotep’s. As my hyperbolic students often say after exposure to anything extreme: “I’m dead.”

A 10-day historical excursion through Egypt has ripped me from my preconceived notions about rhetoric and composition theory and from my classroom writing practices and methodologies—to say the least. But mainly, these historical Truths, which have been lost in what Bekerie phrases “biased concoction disguised as universal scholarship,” (2) is now hidden in academic data bases and tucked away in a declining number of African-centered bookstores. And so, I am presenting this paper, as a charge, if you will, to embrace the Sankofa spirit in order to remind our Black students of their humanity. I believe, as Denzel Washington recites in the 2007 *The Great Debaters* film, that we can help our Black students to find, take back, and keep their righteous mind by integrating more of Africa in our writing pedagogies and methodologies.

If the study of writing systems as Bekerie explicates it, “may help us understand thought patterns or how people organize their thoughts . . . [and] may enable us to probe the scope of human liberty that permits the creation of ways and means to improve and enhance ‘beingness’ and togetherness” (3), then writing teachers, at HBCUs particularly, should consider examining hieroglyphic writing through a visual rhetoric lens—which, because of the absence of hieroglyphs
in composition discourse, will require the likes of me to produce some research. This is a start. Additionally, if rhetoric “supports truth and justice,” and “is an essential civilizing agency,” says Craig Baird in his 1965 *Rhetoric: A Philosophical Inquiry*, then our Black students also should be introduced to *The Instructions of Ptah Hotep*—whose surname means “become at peace,” for too many of us remain at war with the other; too many of us are at war with each other; and so many of us are very much at war with ourselves. “By regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces, and believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any,” says Molefi Asante, “we will achieve the kind of transformation that we need to participate fully in a multicultural society” (Blake 8). In other words, by introducing our Black students to their native tongues, if you will, perhaps we Black writing teachers can help produce 21st-century writers, philosophers, and orators who can transcend political hash tags and create movements that are actually progressing—ones that are grounded in peace, as Ptah Hotep’s name affirms.

*Philosophy* does not come from the Greek root word *sophy*, which translates into “wisdom,” nor does it come from the Old French, *filosofie*, but, says, Theophile Obenga in his 1992, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa*, *philosophy* has etymological roots in the Ancient Egyptian word *sabe*, which means “learned” and is grounded in the Ethiopian concept called *filsifina*. With that said—and this is my final note—white men and predominantly white institutions should not continue to dominate the field of rhetoric and composition. Our history tells us that we are innately knowledgeable, that we offered the world its first mode of written and oral communication; our history tells us that we carry a rhetorical gene-ius. And we’ve seen it expressed: in the magic of Alice Walker, Martin Luther King, and Barack Obama; in the easiness of dirty dozens, hip-hop culture, and a bowl of collards. But we must go back and get it, and then we gotta share it, over and over and over again.

“History will be kind to me,” said Winston Churchill, Nobel Prize winning Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it,” he said. Churchill advocated for British international power, and therefore, fought against Kenyans and Egyptians, and he—like so many white others—wrote their own stories, which included their depictions of a skewed and denigrated Africa. More of us need to write our own stories, to interrogate the meta-narratives that inform our ways of being. And as Black teachers, we need to give our students the Truth about who they are; we need to help them uncover their natural abilities so that they can write themselves into an unfettered existence.