5-2017

Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions

A.D. Carson
Clemson University, alcarso@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations/1885

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
A.D. Carson

Owning My Masters
The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions
A Dissertation for the Graduate School at Clemson University [OTR]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Intro [Dixie Remixed, or I Wish We Were So Great]</td>
<td>01:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Willie Revisited [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Impeach The President</td>
<td>02:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Internal Contradiction [The Showdown] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>03:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Talking To Ghosts [Featuring Bad Dreams] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Golden Silence [&quot;Live&quot; From Saas-Fee Switzerland]</td>
<td>02:34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The Song I Should Have Written [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Find The Ledge [Produced by Preme] [Featuring The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan]</td>
<td>04:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Take Two Listens [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>See The Stripes [Music by Preme]</td>
<td>05:58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>If I Could [Tell You] [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>SAT [Part II] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Time Tales Tell [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Waiting [Featuring Bad Dreams] [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Letter Home [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>02:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Ferguson, MO [November 24, 2014] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Message [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>02:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Sick [Featuring Truth] [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>02:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Documented [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>04:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>80's [Featuring Truth] [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>02:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Second Amendment [Shoot Back] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Familiar [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Word. [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>04:03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Scribbles [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Grading On A Curve [Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Trapped [Featuring Truth and Preme][Produced by Truth]</td>
<td>03:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Talking To White Folks [I Said It] [Produced by Preme]</td>
<td>05:19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhyme and Revolutions”

A Dissertation for the Graduate School at Clemson University [OTR]
The emcee steps into the cipher with stories to tell. For his work to work it must be dope. He must be
dope. Here dopeness is a response to Avital Ronell’s question about our “drugs” – it is a special mode of
addiction, the structure that is philosophically and metaphysically at the basis of our culture.¹ She prefaces
her question by stating, “Our “drugs” uncover an implicit structure that was thought to be one technological
extension among others, one legal struggle, or one form of cultural aberration. Classifiable in the plural
(drugs: a singular plural) they were nonetheless expected to take place within a restricted economy.”²

If, as is posited in A.D. Carson’s COLD, the aim is to “write in Hip-Hop” (referencing Karl Shapiro’s
celebration of the author of the poetry collection Harlem Gallery, in its introduction, stating “[Melvin] Tolson
[http://phd.aydeethegreat.com] is another attempt by its author, and consequently stands as evidence of the
policed body, the voice that comes from the body, resisting arrest and surveillance, making itself known

² Ibid., 13.
as that upon which law is dependent. Its evaluation and adjudication in a “scholarly” space, by an academic institution, can be viewed as “a pushing forward” because of the tension created by its thesis and execution. If this performance of scholarship (and others like it) is indeed interpreted as deficient, inferior to “proper” or “properly academic” performances, its evaluation and rejection – its misunderstanding (a miss because of its standing under) – can easily be understood as confirmation of the thesis. Its acceptance doesn’t exactly disprove the argument; however, it can easily be interpreted, because of the necessary pushing back that occurs in the evaluative process, as pushing through, forward, perhaps.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten guide us underground to help articulate this point. They offer perspectives of how one might engage the university and fugitivity. They write, “the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.”

They write that eventually “[s]he disappears into the underground…into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done,

where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.”

Carson’s project – this tension – is Black study, the work of fugitive planning. It is work for and against the university, for and against disciplines, for and against verification and validation. The object of “Owning My Masters” is the aim of “Owning My Masters.” The work is underground. This introduction is a bad document identifying the fugitive as a citizen.

Hortense Spillers is a significant contributor to this creative underground space, particularly her contention that

“Certain idols of narrative have lost their explanatory power for American culture in general and for African American culture, in particular, if its contemporary music tells us anything, so that the key question for the black creative intellectual now is: How does one grasp her membership in, or relatedness to, a culture that defines itself by the very logics of the historical?”

5 Ibid., 26.
Spillers poses this query in a 1994 essay, which is a look back at Harold Cruse’s 1967 work, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, and situates the latter’s import on the moment in which the former is written. She asks, in other words, “What is the work of the black creative intellectual, for all we know now?” Her answer to her own question is that “the black creative intellectual must get busy where he/she is. There is no other work, if he/she has defined an essential aspect of his/her personhood as the commitment to reading, writing, and teaching.” She goes on to encourage the Black creative intellectual to seize the “intellectual object of work in language” by embracing “the black musician and his music as the most desirable model/object.”

She explains:

“While African American music, across long centuries, offers the single form of cultural production that the life-world can “read” through thick and thin, and while so

7 Ibid., 92.
8 Ibid., 92-93.
9 Ibid., 93.
consistent a genius glimmers through the music that it seems ordained by divine authority its very self, the intellectual rightly grasps the figure of the musician for the wrong reasons: not once do we get the impression that the musician performer promotes his own ego over the music, or that he prefers it to the requirements, conventions, and history of practices that converge on the music: if that were not so, then little in this arena of activity would exhibit the staying power that our arts of performance have shown over the long haul. In other words, though ego-consciousness is necessary, it is the performance that counts here, apparently, as we know black musicians and remember them by the instruments of performance, and performance marks exactly the standard of work and evaluation that has not changed...."10

10 Ibid., 93-94.
Spillers calls for “performative excellence,” and states, “this is the page of music from which the black creative intellectual must learn to read.” From there she [parenthetically] conjures the journey of Solomon Northup, referencing a story in his narrative from the 1850s in which bonded persons were made to dance for their masters. This historical connection is salient primarily because she is providing the foundations on which she bases her appeal to Black creative intellectuals to model their work on the Black musician, “music in black culture achieved its superior degree of development, in part, because its ancestral forces were occasioned, allowed. The culture’s relationship to language is the radically different story too familiar to repeat.” The aim of “Owning My Masters” is the object of “Owning My Masters.”

11 Ibid., 94.
12 Ibid., 94.
"Owning My Masters" is a digital archive of original rap music and spoken word poetry. This hip-hop album is a critical-theoretical reflection on personhood vis-à-vis Black bodies and Black lives. Rather than theorizing about hip-hop, the project "does" this work through the genre of hip-hop. This archive argues for attentiveness to historical and contemporary social justice issues, particularly Blackness as it pertains to embodied and disembodied voice and performance, through hip-hop lyrics and spoken-word poetry. Carson contends that "while the study of hip-hop has helped push through boundaries posed by many academic conventions, the performance of some of its cultural products tend to exist on the margins of what is considered "proper" scholarly engagement in the disciplines in which it is studied, which works to reproduce certain forms of – and assumptions about – knowledge production regarding hip-hop."

Invited into his cipher are Gregory Ulmer and Cathy Park Hong to examine what the former calls "the representation of the object of study in a critical text"\(^\text{13}\) and to consider the avant-garde movements whose

history the latter reminds us “to encounter...is to encounter a racist tradition.” Ulmer’s “Object of Post-Criticism” speaks of a transformation in criticism in the way that “literature and the arts were transformed.” As we journey with Ulmer, Hong reminds us that what we’re moving toward “has been an overwhelmingly white enterprise, ignoring major swaths of innovators – namely poets from past African-American literary movements – whose prodigious writings have vitalized the margins, challenged institutions, and introduced radical languages and forms that avant-gardists have usurped without proper acknowledgment.”

And so we beckon to the center Ralph Ellison. He’s speaking “Sonic Afro Modernity” into Alexander Weheliye, who brings with him Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and W.E.B. DuBois among others, to ask “what happens once the black voice becomes disembodied, severed from its source, (re)contextualized, and (re)embodied and appropriated, or even before this point?”

---

15 Ulmer, p. 83.
16 Hong.
This is one question to which these words, those rhymes, this project responds. And to respond we turn back to Ulmer, the music, the sounds, the words and rhymes, the project, being “the compositional pair collage/montage” he borrows from Derrida. Specifically, “the transfer of materials from one context to another and…the “dissemination” of these borrowings through the new setting.” Thus, we will “shift away from commentary and explanation, which rely on concepts, to work instead by means of examples....approaching the object of study at the level of the examples it uses.”

18 Ulmer, 83.
19 Ibid, 84.
20 Ibid, 90.
“It's not a matter of simply rapping.  
I really happen to have a strategy being enacted.

If you know, you know I ain't afraid of spitting  
what I know is true 'cause I'm south of the Mason-Dixon.

If I know the truth it's my duty to make revisions;  
showing my peoples' beauty and skewing what They envision.

I make my living off the things that I think.  
Therefore, I am.  
I'll give that a minute to sink  
in."

“Dissertation [Part I: The Introduction]”
You don’t see him.
He often doubts if he really exists.
His is not the radio phonograph.
His is capable of five live sounds,
of feeling their vibration,
of being the embodiment of those sounds.

But he’s not five Louis Armstrongs
playing and singing
“What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue,”

yet he’s made poetry out of his being invisible
and it’s probably because he’s unaware that he is invisible.

I understand his invisibility, though, I think.
He has that slightly different sense of time,
and I can, at least, tell when he’s not quite on the beat—
sometimes ahead and sometimes behind.

But nevermind me;
this isn’t about me.

He listens, in that newly discovered
analytical way of listening to music.

I hear each melodic line existing of itself,
standing out clearly from all the rest,
saying its piece,
waiting patiently for the other voices to speak.

He listens in time and space,
entering and descending into its depths
like the invisible men before us,
like Dante,
knowing now that few
really listen to this—
the invisible music of his isolation—
he asks
not what did he do to be so blue,
but “what do we do
with the black?”

Bear with us.
These words are borrowed from the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. He discovers “a new analytical way of listening to music” while “under the spell of...reefer.”\(^{21}\) He’s on dope, “self-critical” as a result of his being what Spillers describes as “discomfitted, unoriented,” which she suggests “the work of the intellectual [should] make her reader/hearer.”\(^{22}\) Ronell might call this a conjuring. She says, “Intoxication names a method of mental labor that is responsible for making phantoms appear. It was a manner of treating the phantom, either by making it emerge—or vanish.”\(^{23}\) This is the work of dope.

---


22 Spillers, 83.

23 Ronell, 5.
“It’s the anti—everything that you believe you stand for. Cancer that a man stores in his hands for laying ‘em on parishioners wishing for some malignance. I’m really just saying what I’m writing is sickening. What I’m writing is vision. What I’m writing is healing. What I’m writing is flashes of lightning across the ceiling. Flames from the floor, flickering, licking your feet to move you, fool you into believing that when you move, it’s the true you.

Voodoo dance from dude whose hands expand reality. Puppeteering, but from what you’re hearing, you do it naturally. And actually I’m to blame for it all— I’m the reason, even your breathing—if you rise or you fall.

They said Hip-Hop’s dead. I said it must be a joke, ’cause if it’s really the truth that means I fuck with the ghost.

And I ain’t—above believing in what people don’t see, but I can’t—believe in it if don’t believe in me, so where are you?”

“Talking to Ghosts”
“[Y]ou’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist.” The narrator continues, “You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back.” He later states: “I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it.”

James Baldwin raps alongside Ellison’s narrator, quoting a hymn for the title of his 1964 book: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time.”

To speak of specific voices, specific bodies, Baldwin tells us in “Stranger in the Village” that “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” The bodies of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael

24 Ellison, 4.
25 Ibid., 4.
26 Ibid., 5.
28 Ibid., 119.
Brown, Walter Scott and Sandra Bland, among the countless others, can tell us quite a bit about this trap if we listen, also, to Sylvia Wynter, who says “the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systematically excise the world’s most marginalized.”29 They are of a genre of human that holds less value, that doesn’t matter as much as those America might view as “canonical.” To assert that those kinds of lives matter is a matter of perspective—an objective fact to some, counter-logical to others, but nonetheless deeply entangled in “physiological and narrative matters.”

Carson offers, in verse:

“It’s probably the most irresponsible, conscious, decision I’ve made to say this. And a lotta people I know prob’ly won’t play this. But fuck it. They say you have the constitutional right. Who gone protect you as you move through the night?

You got media that’s malicious, people starting militias, they holding on to guns like it’s a part of they religion.

Swear we coming to get ’em. They want they country back so they avoid the fact that it was built on our backbones, Revise history like The Man in the High Castle. They want men like me to be cool with being they chattel. But I ain’t on that slave shit. I ain’t with that “Boss is you sick?”

The most you’ll get from me is a hock of this spit. And that’s it.

I’m saying, ain’t no crime in standing my ground. I ain’t gone wait for people standing around, hope they recording it. Nope.

If I’m danger and it’s from the police, I’m supposed to call another police?”

“Shoot Back [Second Amendment]”
What, then, do we do with Trayvon’s voice on the 911 call after his body has had its life taken from it? Or with Eric’s “I can’t breathe.” after it’s no longer a possibility? Or with Sandra’s saying, “but I’m still here” forcing us to question its truth? “[W]hat happens once the black voice becomes disembodied, severed from its source, (re)contextualized, and (re)embodied and appropriated, or even before this point?” Is there any use for those bodies? Those voices? Frantz Fanon might describe them as “object[s] in the midst of other objects,” despite our shouts that they be considered people among people. Technological bodies, embodied technology in the service of reification of that master genre of the human, here, is the argument. Martin, Garner, Brown, Scott, Bland—all malfunctioning, our cries for justice futile because bad technology—things like these—are destroyed, dismissed with no mortification, often with impunity, because no one should face recrimination for doing what must be done to maintain the order of things. Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depaynne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders,

30 Weheliye, 37.
Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson – The Emanuel Nine – their bodies were instruments used to turn the page on an ugly chapter of American History. They should be commended for their sacrifice in helping us remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house grounds. Michael Brown and Eric Garner, however, were already broken, disobeying orders, and therefore undeserving of the respect or dignity afforded proper people by authorities. Their bodies laying on a sidewalk in Staten Island and the street in Ferguson are no different than broken televisions or stereo equipment put out on the curb for eventual disposal. You don’t see them. They often doubt if they really exist.
“As sure as property costs and I gotta turn what I know into real estate, when the realest state of reality bites and the dealer takes from the pot before the card’s even dealt, there’s other things on my mind that I’m more concerned with.

Not what Momma taught—The Golden Rule—
“Do unto who…what was done to you.” This shit’ll be burning now.

But the schools want me to think that I’m doomed—but I ain’t going.
I’m living and trying to get it. I’m s’posed to be learning how.

And they just teaching me to hate myself, ‘bout chains that I’m s’posed to break myself, that ‘justice’ means “wait for help” that ‘good life’ means “take for self.”
I’m busy redefining ‘great’ for self.

So when you hear me say “word to words.”
just know the purpose behind it.
You see my work is defining me for myself.

I still stand where the terror lives and they keep telling me to take but instead I give…
my word.”

“Message”
Wynter says,

“Our mythoi, our origin satires, are therefore always formulaically patterned so as to co-function with the endogenous neurochemical behavior regulatory system of our human brain. Humans are, then, a biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological. With this, particular (presently biocentric) macro-origin stories are overrepresented as the singular narrative through which the stakes of human freedom are articulated and marked.”32

The history in which we are trapped is a genre of storytelling that perpetuates the genres of the human and our values thereof. We keep telling ourselves who we are with these stories, and we keep being

32 McKittrick, 11.
what we’ve said we were. What we are now are products of our storytelling, trapped in the trap we’ve written. Currently, objects don’t write their own histories. And since A.D. Carson, too, is an object in the midst of other objects, perhaps this genre of writing – the genre that speaks through Trap Music to remind us, “Boy, it’s familiar” – is something that can be done with the disembodied voice, severed from its source, (re)contextualized, and (re)embodied and appropriated. It raps:

“Boy, it’s familiar,
mess with them boys, and they kill you,
then get a lawyer to deal with
annoying appeals to
the public to show ‘em they did ‘em
a favor destroying a villain.

No you ain’t living
If you know you ain’t living
but seconds away from a sentence,
making a way for a system.
You die or they take you to prison.
Take what they know you ain’t giving.”

“This Familiar”

Perhaps this can be the kind of dope that makes the phantom emerge or vanish, that provides a new,

self-critical, analytical way of listening.
So there you have it.
His invisibility placed us here.

In fact, it showed us and helped us accept where we are,
studying this lesson
through his life.

He tried to do it in everyone's way but his own.
That was his problem.

That and being called one thing,
then another,
while no one really wished to hear what he called himself.

Rebellion was inevitable;
invisible, a return.

The end was in the beginning,
beneath the surface,
under ground,
under thought,
but understood.

Under common circumstances
we would say this was about history—about H.E.R.—
but this is more undercommons
than even Common Sense might say:
black and fugitive, study and planning,
an act, too.

This is about us,
about being without
sub-stance,
a disembodied voice
with no choice but to tell you
what you've been looking through—
him, on the lower frequencies,
speaking for you.


A.D. Carson's Work By Term

Owning My Masters
The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions
A Dissertation for the Graduate School at Cleveland University [OTR]

Term One: A Mixtape

Term Two: A Mixtape

Summer Session: A Mixtape

Term Three: A Mixtape

Term Four: A Mixtape

Term Five: A Mixtape

Term Six: A Mixtape

CLICK TO LISTEN