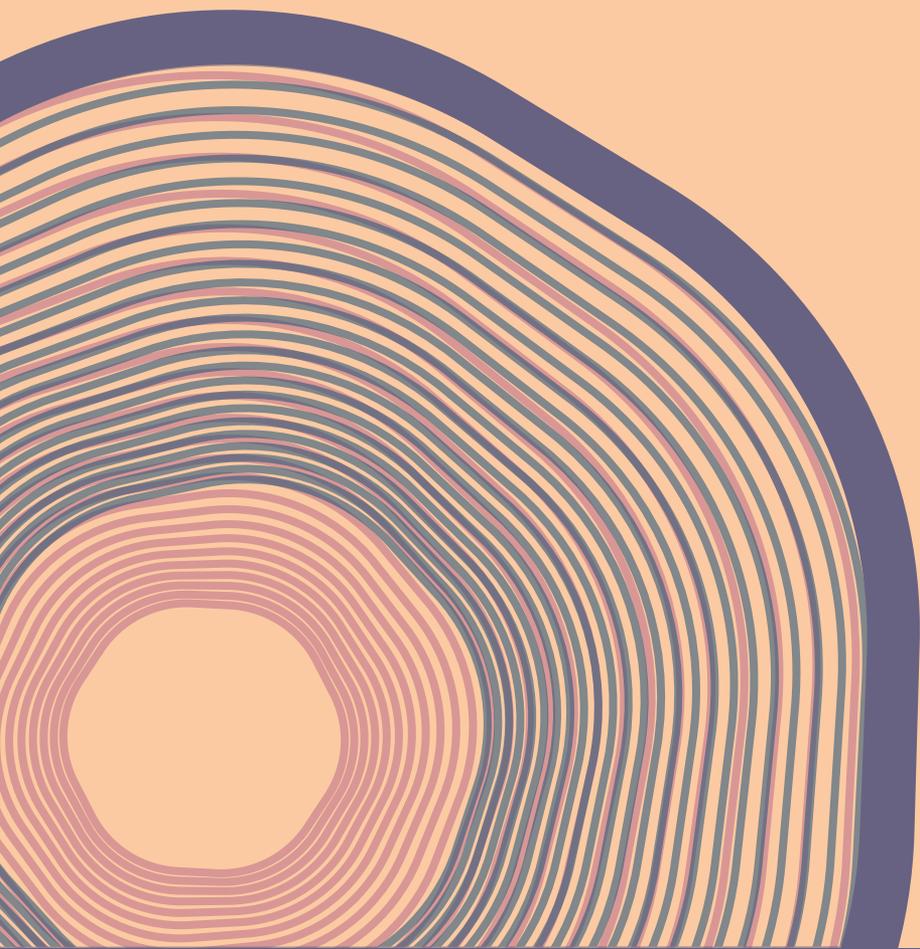


Craft Chaps

Rap & Storytelling Invention:
A Craft Chap

By A.D. Carson



**RAP & STORYTELLINGLY
INVENTION: A CRAFT CHAP**

A.D. CARSON

I do work that incorporates my love of rap music and hip-hop culture. In her book, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick describes the cultural theorist's work, explaining, "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."¹ Her use of the word "genre" to describe "types" or "kinds" of people challenges me to think differently about the genre of work I do and how I might use it to say something meaningful, to resist the systematic excision of the world's most marginalized. She writes later that humans are "*storytellers who now storytelligly invent themselves as being purely biological.*"² This leads me to think about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others, how the stories *I* tell should differ from the stories I was told about me and the people I love, and the *way* I will tell these stories. A story:

I began a Ph.D. program in South Carolina the week Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted.

The following spring a jury would find Jordan Davis's killer guilty on three counts of the attempted murder of Davis's three friends who survived but were in the SUV with him when he was shot to death. The jury was unable to reach an agreement on the charge of first-degree murder of Davis, and a mistrial was declared.

During the summer that followed, Eric Garner was killed by Staten Island police. The weekend before graduate teacher orientation for the coming fall, Michael Brown was killed. Neither his nor the killing of John Crawford III, which happened four days previous, were national news at that point.

Later that semester, Tamir Rice was killed, "no indictment" was announced for the killers of both Brown and Garner; and the semester ended with white students at the university I attended throwing a gang-themed "Crip'Mas" party, at which students dressed up in ways they imagined gang members do.

That spring, Walter Scott and Freddie Gray were killed.

In the summer that followed, Scott's killer was indicted, as were six Baltimore police officers for the death of Gray. Shortly thereafter, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda

1 McKittrick, Katherine, editor. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke UP, 2015., p. 9.

2 Ibid. p. 11.

Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson were killed at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. Later that month, Bree Newsome removed the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house grounds. The next month, South Carolina “officially” removed the flag. That same day, Sandra Bland was pulled over and detained by police in Hempstead, TX. That summer ended with a KKK rally at the South Carolina state capital.

These are the stories of my two years of doctoral classwork. None of the aforementioned people made rap music, that I know of, but they are connected to one another, to myself, and to the work in my study, as “a *genre* of the human,” to use McKittrick’s language—those who were systematically excised. During that time period I never attempted the impossible task of separating what was happening in the world from what I was living every day as a student, nor do I make any attempts to do so in my current living and working environments. I documented my time with personal reflections, raps and poems written against the backdrop of studying for a degree while surrounded by death, despair, rage, and resistance.

I would try to demonstrate James Baldwin’s assertion that, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.”³ by using trap music.⁴

I document these stories with my voice and layers of sound, what Ralph Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man* called “the invisible music of my isolation.”⁵ I use this genre of music to try to create space to understand its connection to that idea of genres of the human and the benefits of challenging our ideas about art and scholarship and genre.

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3 Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. “Stranger in the Village.” Toni Morrison, ed. New York: The Library of America, 1998., p. 119.

4 Carson, A.D. Carson, and Blake E. Wallace. *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions*. “Familiar” (by A.D. Carson, produced by Preme) Written by A.D. Carson and Blake E. Wallace), 2017.

<https://aydeethegreat.bandcamp.com/track/familiar-produced-by-preme>

5 Vintage Books, 2nd Edition. p. 13.

Ay, yo, they wrote it on a ledger and alleged I was a nigga when they did it.
Was kind of like a script that I could live in.
Said choose your own adventure, but sure that I would die or be in prison.
Then baited me with shit that they could reel in.

They called it the American Dream. It was a scare of a scene.
And my character was synonymous with terrible things.

Had me thinking that I was doomed to the page that I was written on
and scribbled out
like who's writing these sentences they giving out?

Cause this is hard for me to say, like,
if work is nonstop then when do we see the playwright?

I just wanna talk to the author
and give whoever that is some suggestions I could offer.

Like the shit that you saying is justice,
it don't apply to me and her when they beat and they cuff us,
and it's the least that we can do if we really discuss this,
because it's playing on the stage and it's really disgusting.⁶

What do you do with memories that are not quite memory, but projections or expectations that fit a factual pattern of actual events that have and might continue to occur even if the historical narrative never gets around to documenting them accurately? Not so much difficult memories, but the almost impossible reality built on top of them. How do we find our way to what we don't know we've forgotten or are forgetting? Or what we know to be undergoing a process of active reimagining, *intentional* forgetting, in the

⁶ Fitzgerald, Marcus "Truth" and A.D. Carson. *#shortstories*. "Justice." (by Truth, featuring A.D. Carson, and produced by Truth) Written by Marcus Fitzgerald and A.D. Carson, 2017.

<https://soundcloud.com/oneshadowtruth/06-justice-feat-aydeethegreat>

moment, to attempt to somehow rearticulate terror as triumph with little or no interest in attempting to change in any ways other than how the story gets told?

When people ask me what I do, now, I tell them I rap. I'm a rapper.

Sure, I teach. And I write in other forms. But this distinction may be a matter of philosophy or ontology. There's something different about being a rapper, claiming my work in the way that I craft it and intend it to be engaged, at a moment when we're asking questions about *how* we remember, *what* we remember, and the ways we contend with what we find difficult in the remembering.

There are points at which I'm encouraged by folks who I now call colleagues, who, I assume, sometimes call me the same, that say to me or (others on my behalf) they see no significant difference between what I do and what a poet or any other kind of artist who works with words does. I almost always appreciate the attempt.

But there *is* a significant difference.

I don't want to engage in some kind of academic or artistic sleight-of-hand that makes rappers (and rap music) legible through squeezing artists and our art, whatever our shape, through the square peg hole they call "poetry." And that's not a comment on poetry, but violence done in its name, how it's used to provide cover for what keeps getting omitted from the discussion, for the ways it rearticulates who and what it describes. Not because rap isn't "the poetry of hip-hop," or raps aren't poetic, or because poetry doesn't do important work, but because at least part of the "important work" for me is to ask what we lose – what we are intentionally forgetting – in those rearticulations, for me to be "called one thing and then another while no one really wish[es] to hear what I [call] myself,"⁷ for what makes some of us "Invisible," for what rappers and raps say and do that calling us "poets" and our work "poems" blunts.

When police fired 55 shots at 20-year-old Willie McCoy's car in that Vallejo, California Taco Bell parking lot February 9th, 2019, while he was asleep, everything I read about his death described a "rapper" killed by police. Nothing I read about his death used "poetry" to describe him. The same goes for 38-year-old Eric Reason, killed in the same town on November 10, 2019 by an off-duty police officer in a Valero gas station parking lot. The headline: "Off-duty Richmond officer shoots and kills rapper in Vallejo."

I can't help but suspect the word "rapper" is doing a peculiar kind of work in the descriptions of the deaths of Willie McCoy and Eric Reason and so many other living rappers who will never be described by "poetry" or as

7 Ellison, 573.

“poets,” as people now so generously do on my behalf to justify my life and my art and my work as worthy, as valuable, as mattering as much as others. So maybe there’s something valuable, some incredible importance in interrogating these descriptions, and on whose terms they’re deployed, and how they help us remember . . . or forget.

And I don’t think this is just about genre and embodiment and the power of the descriptors we use when describing ourselves and others. It’s also about the content contained in the forms, the lives lived and lost—forgotten, overlooked, retold in *different* terms. And it’s a challenge to us to maybe listen a bit more intently.

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 on 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 that’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?⁸

8 Carson, A.D., Chenjerai Kumanyika and Blake E. Wallace. *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions*. “Talking to Ghosts” (by A.D. Carson, featuring Bad Dreams, and produced by Preme) Written by A.D. Carson, Chenjerai Kumanyika, and Blake E. Wallace), 2017.
<https://aydeethegreat.bandcamp.com/track/talking-to-ghosts-featuring-bad-dreams-produced-by-preme>

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“Rap is like poetry” is an example of a simile, which is commonly defined as a comparison of two different kinds of things – often using the word “like” or “as” to connect them – to help make the description more impactful. If we accept that rap and poetry are, indeed, two different kinds of things, then the phrase “rap is poetry” is an example of a metaphor, which is a rhetorical engagement in which one thing is said to be another thing that it literally is not. As with similes, metaphors are used for impact. They can provide clarity or highlight a connection between different things or make relationships between ideas more accessible.

The phrase “rap is poetry” is convincing as a true statement because of the truths in the statement. Poets and rappers engage in fairly similar practices. They rely on the development of similar skill sets. In fact, much of the language commonly used to describe what rappers do is borrowed from poetry. We share similar ideas about similes, metaphors, imagery, and puns. We maybe mean different things when we talk about “schemes,” though we use the same word. This is probably the same with “flow,” and “tone,” and “voice.” This common language, even with varying meanings, applications, and executions, helps to move so-called academic conversations along.

While it still does in the minds of many, making the case for teaching rap lyrics shouldn’t require appealing to a legitimacy that rests on its proximity to, or it being legible as, (capital P) Poetry, and only therefore worthy of scholarly attention and academic study. Rap is, and always has been, worthy of said scholarly attention without needing to be bound and dressed up (or down) in poetry clothes. Our understandings can be enriched by properly situating rap in relation to the widely accepted origin story of hip-hop’s birth at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue on August 11, 1973 at the hands, and through the sound system, of DJ Kool Herc, but also the many other histories of Black creative expression—yes, the poetry, but also the talk, the toasts, the boasts, the roasts, the songs, stories, and chants—that led to that moment and the many branches that grew through that foundation and continue to influence us today.

Adam Bradley highlights “that the word *vernacular* comes from the Greek *verna*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as ‘a slave born of his

master's house," which he describes as "no etymological footnote" in his text, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*.⁹ Rap can be an emancipatory vernacular practice distinct from the study of it as poetry. Students certainly benefit from lessons in which teachers offer inclusive, expansive definitions of poetry that afford them the freedom to write or read raps alongside sonnets, sestinas, and prose poems. Rap lyrics appear in poetry anthologies and textbooks. Perhaps, soon there will be more collected volumes comprised solely of rap lyrics for study.

Already, academics across disciplines make the case for the serious study of rap, and many do so without insisting on its relationship to poetry, treating it as its own form, a style of writing that doesn't need to be equated with or subordinated to poetry to legitimize it as worthy academic subject matter or delivery method. This does not necessitate any opposition or aversion to poetry, either. It just doesn't need to be *like poetry* to have merit, nor does it need to be called "urban" or "street poetry." Rap is rap.

By studying rap practices, rather than simply their relationship to poetry, we allow more space to see them as critical and creative rhetorical practices on their own merits. Rather than only examining its poetics and grammars we might use rap as another lens through which to hear, see, think, and deliver historic and contemporary viewpoints or to engage with critical analyses of genres of music, literature, scholarship, and the relationships of those to the ideologies that bring about our desire for categories (and/or genres) and the effect those have on the products and the people who make the products that populate those categories.

My approach to rap is transdisciplinary, a means of writing and speaking to and about many different areas of life. Whether it's telling stories using similes and metaphors, or utilizing rhythm, rhyme and wordplay to describe a set of scientific concepts, contemporary events, or historical figures – well-known or not – rap opens up a multitude of possibilities for sonic, critical, poetic, grammatical, and historical rhetorical engagement. Teachers across disciplines can use rap as a more expansive pedagogical practice that spans multiple topics and subjects rather than a superficial tool closely related to another well-established, necessary, subject.

Teachers of rap focus on a range of things, including language and lyrics, musical composition—including sampling, fair use, copyrights, and access, as well as other kinds of instrumentation and musical practice; music history and historical context; and the potential (intertextual) overlap of any of these with other songs, subjects, and events. They might also challenge

⁹ Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009. P. 125.

students to think about rap as a genre, about the stories rappers tell, and about the stories we all tell ourselves about ourselves and others.

This is not to insinuate that rappers are necessarily extra-poetic, but to note the differences in the process of rap writing without relying on someone like William Shakespeare as a model of poetic genius when there exist plenty of genius models of rap already within that particular expressive mode. Shakespeare is not only an unnecessary part of the conversation, he never created, nor intended to create, the ideal work or type of work upon which most rappers model their writings. Certainly, the writings credited to him, and the impact of those writings are important. They just need not be foundational to our understanding of rap and its impact and importance as a form. In many ways, Shakespeare is like a rapper. After all, poetry *is* like rap. This doesn't mean that we should think rap *is not* poetry. But how might we benefit from thinking of the phrase "rap is poetry" as more metaphor than literal?

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WRITING EXERCISE

STEP 1: Make note of the following elements as they are applied in rap compositions and how those applications might be similar to, and distinct from, poetry. Many of these terms appear in Bradley's *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*.

alliteration	metaphor
anaphora	metonymy
antanaclasis	mosaic rhyme
apocopation	onomatopoeia
aposiopesis	personification
appropriation	picaresque
assonance	polysyndeton
asyndeton	prosopopeia
braggadocio	pun
caesura	repetitio
chain rhyme	rhyme
conceit	rhyme scheme
consonance	rhythm
decorum	sampling
end rhyme	signifying
enjambment	simile
epanodos	slant rhyme
epistrophe	sprezzatura
epithet	storytelling
eponym	stress
flow	style
homonym	tenor
homophone	tone
internal rhyme	vehicle
kenning	wordplay

STEP 2: Write a 16 bar rap.

One bar is one musical measure in 4/4 time, which would, therefore, be comprised of four quarter-note beats.

Each of the verses presented in this text are written with breaks that approximate one poetic line to one bar. The above terms may assist your

thinking through this creative process. I would also suggest starting by imitation, which isn't to insinuate that borrowing is somehow a rudimentary process. In fact, borrowing words, beats, forms, flows, enunciations, slang, etc., is a foundational hip-hop composing practice and, by extension, a practice of many artists, myself included. I borrow the opening line and phrasing from "Hold Ya Head" by Makaveli (Tupac Shakur) for my final "Talking to Ghosts" verse:

God bless the child that can hold it in.
Believe. Enemies bleed when I hold my pen.
Let these words be the first to my unborn seeds,
so they hear the voice of God clear. Blast for me.
Blast for you – and those who come after you.
Keep your peace until they make you have to use it,
have to lose it. Clear choice. After music
comes the fall, so really what I'm doing's for y'all.

The opening eight bars of the Makaveli verse:

God bless the child that can hold his own.
Indeed, enemies bleed when I hold my chrome.
Let these words be the last to my unborn seeds.
Hope to raise my young nation in this world of greed.
Currency means nothing if you still ain't free.
Money breeds jealousy. Take the game from me.
I hope for better days. Trouble comes naturally.
Running from authorities 'til they capture me.¹⁰

10 Makaveli (Tupac Shakur). *Makaveli: The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*. Death Row Records, 1996.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. A.D. Carson is an award-winning performance artist and educator from Decatur, Illinois. He received a Ph.D. from Clemson University in Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design. A 2016 recipient of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Award for Excellence in Service at Clemson, Carson worked with students, staff, faculty, and community members to raise awareness of historic, entrenched racism at the university through his See the Stripes campaign, which takes its name from his 2014 poem. His dissertation, "Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions," was recognized by the Graduate Student Government as the 2017 Outstanding Dissertation. His music is available to stream or download free at <http://aydeethegreat.com>. His new album, *I Used to Love to Dream*, is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.

Carson is currently assistant professor of Hip-Hop and the Global South in the Department of Music at the University of Virginia. Follow Dr. Carson on Twitter & Instagram @aydeethegreat.

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