

“Reading and Analysis of Protest Songs” by Michael Burns
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“Soundwriting and Resistance: Toward a Pedagogy for Liberation”

African American Rhetorics
Reading and Analysis of Protest Songs
1000-1500 words or equivalent

Karenga¹ offers that there are at least four themes evident in African rhetorical practice: 1) “As an expression and constitutive process of community, African rhetoric is first of all a *rhetoric of community*” (5); 2) “In the context of historical and current oppression, African rhetoric is also a *rhetoric of resistance*” (6) in response to enslavement and systematic oppression; 3) it is a “*rhetoric of reaffirmation*” of dignity, fundamental rights, a meaningful life, the right/responsibility to speak the truth; 4) and as *rhetoric of possibility* “It seeks not only to persuade, but to share, to inform, to question, and to search for and explore possibilities in the social and human condition.” Where Karenga’s focus is on a theory of rhetorical practices, Smitherman² defines Black American dialect as “an Africanized form of English reflecting Black Americans’ linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture” (2).

Your task for this assignment is to apply the above themes of African rhetorical theory and Black language forms in a close reading and analysis of a song. You can choose a piece from this YouTube playlist of [protest songs](#) or work with a song you select independently (check it with me). Any song that evidences the themes of community, resistance, reaffirmation, and possibility will work, but music that relates directly to past or current struggles for black Americans will work best.

Your work—in essay or podcast form—should 1) summarize the song’s lyrics and compositional choices and identify the overall argument the work makes; 2) identify and analyze examples of at least two of the four themes Karenga suggests in the work; 3) and reflect on how a recognition of these themes informs your understanding of Black American language, rhetorical practices, and musical experiences.

¹ Karenga, Maulana. (2003). Nommo, kawaida, and communicative practice: Bringing good into the world. In Ronald L. Jackson II & Elaine Richardson (Eds.), *Understanding African American rhetoric: Classical origins to contemporary innovations* (pp. 3–22). New York, NY: Routledge.

² Smitherman, Geneva. (1977). From Africa to the new world and into the space age. *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*. (pp. 1–15). Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.