

Take Me Back: Ghostface's Ghosts

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April 21, 2007

1. I'd like to begin with a track that was supposed to appear on Ghostface Killah's 2006 album *Fishscale*. Advance copies were all over the Internet, but the track was withdrawn at the last moment, I presume because of copyright clearance issues. You'll recognize the sample: it's from the Pointer Sisters' 1973 hit "Yes We Can Can," itself a cover of a song originally written by Allen Toussaint and performed by Lee Dorsey.
2. Ghostface's track is simply called "Can Can," and Ghostface himself is the producer. The backbone of "Can Can" is the opening rhythm track from "Yes We Can Can": first we hear the bass line, and then the drums and the funky rhythm guitar kick in. This is looped over and over again during the rap. In the Pointer Sisters' version of the song, we first hear the rhythm track by itself, making for a long introduction; finally, after about thirty seconds, this leads into Anita Pointer's opening verse: "Now's the time for all good men/ To get together with one another..." In Ghostface's track, this opening verse comes in twice to interrupt the rapping: first in the middle of the track, and then again at the very end. But the sample (and the track as a whole) ends in a weird suspension, with the words "we got to..." In the Pointer Sisters' version, these words lead to the triumphant chorus ("we got to make this land a better land/ Than the world in which we live/ And we got to help each man be a better man/ With the kindness that we give," etc.). But Ghostface withholds this chorus from us, so that his track ends on an unresolved note.

3. I don't know what the story is about Ghostface's failure to get copyright clearance for "Yes I Can Can." Not only has the song itself been covered by numerous artists, it has also been sampled in hip-hop at least thirteen times, by artists ranging from NWA to De La Soul, and from Big Daddy Kane to MC Lyte.¹ I haven't listened to most of these other samplings, but I doubt that "Yes I Can Can" has ever been used quite in the way it is used here, as the backdrop to a knockdown argument between Ghostface's persona and an irate girlfriend. It's a drawn-out lip battle. Ghostface alternates between outrageous threats of violence – "shut up 'fore I break your jaw," and "your girlfriend, I had to have her smacked up, she had it coming" – and expressions of contrition; she curses him out as a "stupid ass punk faggot mark trick," and complains that "all I do is cook, clean, and watch all the children." There's a lot of back-and-forth here, and a tentative movement towards reconciliation; but the narrative, like the vocal sample, ends without any firm resolution.
4. It's significant, I think, that, although Ghostface is in charge of the story, and although the overall import of the song is one of self-justifying masculinity, we do nonetheless get at least some sense of the woman's perspective. She may be greedy and materialistic, with her "bullshit perms" and her "alligator Gucci bag" and "Donatella Versace sweatsuit"; but rhetorically, at least, she gives as good as she gets – and in hip-hop, there is no belittling that. In any case, Ghostface moves in the course of the track from telling her off to begging her forgiveness and asking her to marry him. He seems to be taking to heart the original song's exhortation: "And do respect the women of the world/ Remember you all have mothers." Ghostface comes out managing to have it both ways. He shows that he is able to apologize, and be something of a sensitive man; but he still maintains his patriarchal privilege. It's all well and good for him to recognize that "a real man would never disrespect or hurt his family"; but nobody will mistake this phrase, with its emphasis on what makes a "real man," for a formula of egalitarianism and feminist empowerment.
5. I am not going to go over the words of the song in any greater detail; suffice it to say that nearly every line is packed with incident and with significance. Past relationships are recalled, somebody comes to visit, and so on – all in the course of a track that is less than three minutes long. In any case, others

¹According to the "Artist Samples" website (<http://www.the-breaks.com>).

have written, better than I could, about Ghostface's brilliance as a storyteller, his amazing way with words, how aptly he moves between finely rendered naturalistic details, on the one hand, and bizarre non sequiturs and invented slang, on the other. He's like a great noir novelist one moment, a whacked-out surrealist the next, a postmodern metafictionalist the verse after that. But for all the games he plays with words, I think that Ghostface is ultimately more an expressionist than a formalist, more concerned with projecting emotions than with foregrounding, and calling attention to, his (considerable) skills. As Greg Tate nicely puts it, "you scratch your head every fourth line, but you get the ones about roaches in the cornflakes, the wifey back home boning your boy while you're on tour, and the Shaolin crime narratives where fists and bullets are foreverever flying – all like he's Burroughs, Ellroy, and Bukowski rolled into one garrulous gregarious grungy gruesome ghettofied writer."

6. By calling Ghostface an expressionist, I am trying to get away from all those debates about authenticity and "realness" in hip-hop, which are pretty old and tired at this point. If talking about roaches in the cornflakes, or for that matter brand-name bags and sweatsuits, is "real," then talking about epic gunfights, and adopting aliases from kung fu movies and Marvel comics, very clearly is not. Ghostface's lyrics, as the RZA says in *The Wu-Tang Manual*, "are colorful and abstract, their sound and shape as important as their meaning." What I am calling "expressionism" includes all of this, cutting across the opposition between reality and fantasy. The opposite of expressionism is rather formalism, by which I mean that stage in every genre when the practitioners become more interested in reflecting on the genre itself, and on making minor refinements and innovations therein, than on projecting an emotional content. The Wu-Tang Clan has its formalist moments, but I don't think this is the center of what Ghostface is doing in his solo work.
7. Why does this matter? Well, one common response to charges of misogyny and violence in rap lyrics is to say that the artists are just telling it like it is, describing the world that poor black people are forced to live in. While this is true enough in its way, it doesn't get at the full measure of what somebody like Ghostface is actually doing with his rhymes. Ghostface is dramatizing, or projecting, a way of life; but his *manner of speaking* – his incessant fabulation, his invention of a language – is itself a crucial part of

this way of life. I won't attempt to work through the whole history of rapping in African American culture, from the dozens and the signifyin' monkey to the ways in which success in "the rap game" today reflects the importance of "gettin' paid." But Ghostface's masculine posturing, his complex position in the gender wars, must itself be seen in the light of this complex process of fabulation and invention.

8. Let me try to put this in another way, one that acknowledges race and class as well as gender. There is certainly what can be called a "realist" side to Ghostface's raps. You can see it in all his tales of ghetto life. These are songs and stories about contemporary African American experience. More precisely, they are situated within the northern, urban, working-class (or unemployed, sub-working-class) male heterosexual African American experience of the last twenty years or so, and they convey this experience with an intense, and carefully crafted, verisimilitude. Beyond this, there is the way that Ghostface evokes a general attitude, or a form of life: what Greg Tate, again, calls "that je ne sais quoi we know as unrepentant, unreconstructed, around-the-way negritude."
9. I am strategically quoting Tate here, because this is something that is problematic for any white person to talk about – even one who, like myself, is married into an African American family. It's all too easy for white folks (and for some black folks as well) to romanticize crack dealing, or pimping, or what have you, as the "essence" of the African American condition. This is a tendency that already existed full-blown in Norman Mailer's notorious "white Negro" essay of half a century ago; of course, its roots go back a lot further than that. I said "romanticize," but I could just as easily have said "vilify" or "pathologize" – as these are just two sides of the same coin. Norman Mailer in the 1950s, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the 1960s, were pretty much saying the same thing about black people. And their attitudes still persist today, in what we would like to think of as our more enlightened, "post-Civil-Rights" era. (This is something, incidentally, that Spike Lee has a lot to say about, in his 2000 film *Bamboozled*). Now, I am not accusing Ghostface of a commercially calculated pandering to this sort of mentality: which could be called blackface minstrelsy, even if a black person is doing it. Most likely, Ghostface just doesn't give a fuck. But I think that we do need to take the reality of white people's vicarious enjoyment of what they see as black culture into account: when we consider, for instance,

how Ghostface moved from the broader emotional range of his underrated *Pretty Toney Album* (2004), which didn't sell very well, to the narrower focus on that old standby, crack dealing, that marks his universally acclaimed *Fishscale*.

10. This brings me back to Tate's comments on "negritude." Ghostface's expression of "blackness" is more a matter of style and attitude than it is one of content. It is something that comes from the singer, not the song. It has more to do with the specificities of *how* Ghostface expresses himself, than it does with the actual – often violent – content of the stories he tells, or the particular – often weird and crazy and hyperbolic – things he says. It's not just a question, therefore, of Ghostface's words, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, of just *how* these words are presented to us. This means that we need to consider, on the one hand, Ghostface's speaking and singing voice, and on the other hand, his use of samples. These can be thought of as, respectively, the inner and outer dimensions of a rapper's mode of expression. The voice, with its tones and inflections, expresses the inside, or the underlying character, of the person speaking – or better, of the persona (since it may well be a consciously crafted fiction). The sample, on the other hand, is the outside. It is something like the voice's context, the otherness that it must confront, the field of forces in which it must be located, and the memory traces that it reactivates, and to which it responds.
11. Ghostface's rapping voice is unique. It doesn't sound like anyone else's in hip-hop – or in any other musical genre, for that matter. Many masculine voices in hip-hop are tough-guy voices: they can be characterized by their sheer bravado; or they have an air of authority that comes, at least in part, from a certain undercurrent of menace. A tough-guy voice may be boasting, but it can just as well be quietly matter-of-fact. Other rap voices are more open and relaxed, even ebullient (think of Lil' Wayne, for instance).² Still others are sexy, even seductive – though in this case, we are already starting to cross over from speaking voices to singing ones, from rapping voices to male r&b loverman voices. And then there are those rap voices that are delirious or crazy, that seem to be out of control (think of Ghostface's Wu-Tang bandmate, the late Ol' Dirty Bastard). And this typology could be extended, to encompass styles like those of Southern rap (Ludacris,

²It may well be that this vocal quality has helped to trigger the accusations – as they may be called in the homophobic atmosphere of mainstream hip-hop culture – that Lil' Wayne is gay.

perhaps), alternative rap (MadLib), white working-class rap (the unique vocal stylings of Eminem, of course, but also the voice of someone like Bubba Sparxxx), and so on.

12. But Ghostface's voice doesn't really fit into any of these categories. It's wary and tough, rather than relaxed or open; but it also has a certain twang, or a slight shaking – or perhaps I should even say a whine. You have to take it seriously, and give it a certain authority; it never crosses over into ODB-style buffoonery. But at the same time, it always seems to be derailing itself slightly. You can hear this, for instance, if you compare Ghostface's voice to Raekwon's, on the albums in which they appear together: like the latter's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* (1995), or Ghostface's earlier solo efforts (e.g. *Ironman*, 1996).
13. You can't help sensing a true degree of charm in Ghostface's voice – and thereby, a certain distance, a certain sense of this-is-not-quite-to-be-taken-seriously – even when he is threatening to break his girlfriend's jaw. The twang is what allows him to get away with it. It makes him sound a little more self-conscious and reflective. Yet at the same time,x it gives his voice an added dimension of emotionality, which allows it to slide from self-assertion into romantic pleading – as when he begs his woman to come back to him, and give him another chance. This twang or whine even fuels the metamorphosis into what Ghostface calls his “crying voice”: the tonality of remembered woe, which he drifts into when he is recalling roaches in the cornflakes, or “babies with flies on the cheeks” (in “I Can't Go To Sleep,” from the Wu-Tang Clan's *W*, 2000) or being whipped by his Mama when he was a child (in “Whip You With A Strap,” from *Fishscale*). In short, Ghostface's voice is unique in the way it is able to continually *modulate* its affective tone: from tough-guy fatalism to wacky humor to begging to almost-crying, and back again.
14. This flexibility can be disconcerting. Even Robert Christgau – who rates most of Ghostface's solo albums quite highly in his “Consumer Guide” – dismissed *The Pretty Toney Album* (2004) with the rather snarky one-liner: “Don't worry, Ghost – no matter how much you cry we'll never call you 'faggot.’” The truth behind Christgau's comment is that there is indeed only a thin line between mastery and victimization; or between masculine assertiveness and control, and the kind of enforced submission that is coded

as ‘feminization’ in our patriarchal (misogynistic and homophobic) culture.³ It’s as if Ghostface were continually performing a high-wire act; his voice is always teetering on the edge between self-congratulatory sneering and maudlin self-pity, or between asserting that he’s a top, and confessing that he’s a bottom – but without ever quite falling into either side.

15. And this is where I would like to turn from Ghostface’s own voice to that other dimension of his sound, the one that comes from without rather than within: the way that he uses soul music samples. Ghostface’s willingness to compromise his hardcore gangsta stance with unabashed appeals to sentiment – his genre switch, you might say, from nihilistic crime narrative to melodrama or even romantic comedy – goes together with his taste for soul music of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ghostface (who was born in 1970) never tires of saying that soul is the music that he likes the best; and that he likes it because it is the music his parents would listen to when they were fucking. It’s the music to which he was conceived. Such a return to his own sonic organs, if I can call it that, is sufficiently weird and outrageous that it *has* to be taken seriously.
16. Soul samples in hip-hop are not exactly a novelty at this point. Nate Patrin has just told us about how The RZA revolutionized hip-hop when he used such samples on the Wu-Tang Clan’s first album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, back in 1993. And more recently, retro soul samples have been well-nigh ubiquitous in hip-hop (and r&b): think of Kanye West, or of producers like Rich Harrison. But I want to suggest that Ghostface’s use of these samples is unique, precisely because of the way that they call up his scene of origins. Of course, nobody can really go back to the moment of his or her own conception. My scene of origins is necessarily beyond my grasp. It’s an experience, or a life-world, that absolutely, materially concerns me – but also one that I can never grasp directly. It is lost; and it can only be imagined, retrospectively, as already having been lost. Ghostface’s sampling practice is a sort of time travel: but it is one that can only access the past in a distant, wavering, spectral form.

³Let there be no mistake: I’m referring here to United States/American culture *in toto*, and not specifically to working class American culture, or African American culture, or prison culture, or hip-hop culture. If we are to find a particular “negritude” in Ghostface’s voice, it has to do, not with this globally oppressive situation, but with the culturally specific resources that he uses to negotiate it.

17. I don't mean this only in personal, autobiographical terms – after all, I know nothing about the life of Dennis Coles (to call him by the name his parents gave him), aside from what he has chosen to reveal (or perhaps remix and fabulate) in his lyrics. What I am calling Ghostface's scene of origins has a crucial social and historical dimension. For the time of Ghostface's birth, or of his parents' generation, is a unique moment in African American history. It's the moment of Black Pride, after the victories of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement – and before the economic crisis of the 1970s, and then the crack epidemic of the 1980s, utterly ravaged urban African American communities like the one in which Ghostface grew up. Indeed, it's the time of blaxploitation cinema, one of the sources of hip-hop's gangsta mythology. But even those were exhilarating, in a way that their echo in hip-hop of the 1990s and later is not. The soul era was a time of hope rather than despair. And, though it wasn't exactly a utopia of gender equality, it was also a time that was still largely free of what Greg Tate calls “the self-inflected misogyny of the modern [hip-hop] era.”
18. In short, the soul music that Ghostface loves belongs to a moment that – excuse the hyperbole – might almost be thought of as a second Emancipation. You can hear it directly in the music: just listen to a compilation like *Black Power: Music Of A Revolution* (released by Shout! Factory in 2004). There's an amazing degree of political engagement and radical passion there, even in the most mainstream soul and r&b acts. You can hear that passion in the positivity of a song like “Yes We Can Can”: a positivity that is scarcely imaginable today, when such sentiments must either be expressed with a protective irony, or shoehorned into the severe and joyless embrace of so-called “political correctness.”
19. Of course, we now know how limited that moment of Black Pride and Soul Power (as Robert Fink talked about yesterday) was: how partial its victories were, how quickly its gains were eroded away. The legacy of that era is an oddly contradictory one. *De jure* segregation is gone, so that (as Bakari Kitwana points out) the “hip-hop generation” has a radically different experience of the world than that of its elders. But of course, *de facto* racism continues in America today, made all the more bitter and insidious by the fact that so much in the contemporary mediasphere encourages us to imagine that we live in a world that is finally “beyond race.” I could rant at length on this subject, but I'll desist.

20. For now, I just want to emphasize how shocking and disjunctive and crazy the irruption of “Yes We Can Can” into Ghostface’s domestic dispute really is. There’s just too much of a gap between the personal, private register of the track’s slice of life narrative, and the public call-out to “all good men” of the original song. There’s too much of a distance between the rap’s litany of complaints and curses, and the anthemic exuberance of the Pointer Sisters. When Ghostface calls upon soul sounds in this way, he is not acting out of anything so simple as nostalgia: since he is evoking a past that he cannot recover or even remember, but only experience in the form of a trace, a mark of absence. Nor is he using the soul sounds in order to give his own track an authority that it would otherwise lack. Rather, his call to the past works to register difference and distance, to create and express disjunction. His rapping both echoes and cuts against the music to which it is set. His voice adapts itself to the rhythm and flow of the samples, while at the same time his tone – sometimes desperate, more often dry and deadpan, at times comedically mock-hysterical – cuts against it. Ghostface reverts to the moment of his conception in order to tear a hole in the heart of the present, of the ghetto world that he describes with such economy and precision.