

**Carl Upchurch: An American Shaman  
Or  
Niggerization 101**

**Dialogue Sample**

(Buzzer sounds. Carl stands at attention. Sound of Prison door. Sound of prisoners (hooting, whistling) He takes off the non-prison clothing. Professor becomes Prison guard. Buzzer. Prison Door opens and closes. Opens again.)

Guard #1  
Solitary Confinement.

Carl  
But, I just got here.

Guard #1  
But, why did you just get here?

Carl  
That's not fair man.

Guard #1  
Welcome to Lewisburg. (Guard exits)

(Sound of cell door slam)

Carl  
Son of a bitch! (howls and laughter from the other prisoners) Shut up! (ooooh! More howls. ) (Carl looks around—punches the wall. ) Ouuuuuch! Shit! (Carl kicks the bed. Sits and massages his fist). (softly) Damn. (He gets up and walks around the cell. He sits. He lies on his bed. )

(Light change and music to show passage of time.)

(Sounds of prison waking. Buzzer, doors open and close, sound of food trays. Wheeling of carts. Muted voices. Carl gets up to pace. The sound cue of prison clatter should continue with a slow fade. The sound should be faded out when Carl begins to read the whole sonnet)

Chaplin  
Books?

Carl  
Go away.

Chaplin  
You get first choice. Men in solitary get first choice.

Carl  
Fuck off.

Chaplin  
Your choice.

(Carl goes back to bed. Twist and turn. Up and down while voices play)

Mother voice  
You'll never amount to nothin'.

Father voice  
Don't be a pussy, boy.

Mother voice  
I can't accept no weak motherfucker.

Father  
Don't let a nigga' jump ya, boy.

Mother voice  
You'll never amount to nothin.'

(Light change to show passage of time. Sound of prison waking. Carl gets up and paces. Does some push-ups. Guard brings food—shoves it into the cell.)

Guard #2  
Breakfast.

Carl  
Shut up!

Guard #2  
Good morning to you too, Carl.

Carl  
Fuck off.

Guard #2  
Yes, thank you. I am having a nice day. (exits)

(Carl mimes picking up the tray and placing it on a wobbly table)

Carl

Shit! (He rattles the table.) Damn! (He begins to eat and drink. Half way through the meal, he dumps the tray. He gets up and lies down on the bed. He sees a book under one of the table legs. He gets up and goes to the book.) Shakespeare's Sonnets? Oh shit!

(Throws the book across the cell. Lies down on his bed.

Mother Voice

You won't amount to nothin'

Teacher Voice

People like you.

Mother voice

I can't have no weak motherfucker.

(He gets up and picks up the book. He begins to read. Jake enters and observes.)

Carl

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,

Bullshit!

(He throws the book across the room and begins doing pushups.

Mother Voice

You'll never amount to nothin' in your life.

Teacher Voice

People like you.

Mother Voice

You're just like your father.

Father Voice

Kick that motherfucker down before he kick you.

Mother Voice

You won't amount to nothin.

(He lies down and lighting shows passage of time. Picks up the book. Looks at it. Begins to read)

Carl

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,"

What? What the fuck?

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,"

(prison clatter sound cue faded out by here.)

Carl

Hmm.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love rememb' red such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

(Hear sound of library cart)

Carl

Hey! Hey, this Shakespeare—he write anything else?

Chaplain

(laughs) Yeah. What ya got there?

Carl

Sonnets.

Chaplain

I'll get you the plays.

Carl

All right then. And, could you bring me a dictionary?

Chaplain

Sure.

Carl

(To audience.) Bill and I became quite close. It's not just that I read all of Shakespeare. It's that he spoke to me. Once I finished with Shakespeare I moved onto the African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and then to some contemporary black writers such as James Baldwin and Maya Angelou. There was no plan—no rhyme or reason to my reading choices. I devoured Nikki Giovanni and then read Dostoyevsky. I read TS Eliot and then Frederick Douglass. Frederick Douglass and I had quite a discussion.

(Carl goes to cell to read Frederick Douglass. We hear prison clatter)

Carl

“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” That's a good question. Kind of a stupid title, though. (He reads on.)

Carl reads Frederick Douglass

I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.

Voice of Prisoner #1

Shut up!

Carl reads Frederick Douglass

The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.

Voice of Prisoner #1

Shut the fuck up!

Voice of Prisoner #2

(to Prisoner #1) You shut up!

Carl reads Frederick Douglass

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

Voices of Prisoner #3

Carl, you sound so purty. (kissing sounds) You and that Shakespeare dude.

Carl

That's not Shakespeare you moron. It's Frederick Douglass.

Voice of Prisoner #2  
Who he?

Carl  
He's a brother, man.

Voices of Prisoner #1  
Shut the fuck up.

Voice of Prisoner #2  
Keep reading Church.

Carl reads Frederick Douglass  
I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave's point of view. Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Voice of Prisoner #2  
You said it brother.

Carl reads Frederick Douglass  
There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man, (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment.

Voice of Prisoner #1  
Hey man, just like today.

Voice of Prisoner #2  
Shut up, man.

Carl reads Frederick Douglass  
The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery. The sin of which it is guilty is one of omission as well as of commission.

Carl (to Frederick Douglass)  
They abolished slavery, Fred, but I still ain't rejoicing.

Frederick Douglass's voice  
Look at yourself, Carl. What are you doing?

Carl  
You think it's easy?

Frederick Douglass's voice

I think there is much to be done, and you are sitting in jail.

Carl  
Shut up.

Frederick Douglass's voice  
You have freedom.

Carl  
Do I look free to you?

Frederick Douglass's voice  
You surrendered your freedom. Shame upon you.

Carl  
Shut up! It's a lot tougher out there than you know.

Frederick Douglass's voice  
So, get out there and do something about it. How dare you sit in here when you could be helping. It's the sin of omission.

(Carl shrugs off his frustration and returns to speak to the audience)

Carl  
Fred and I had some serious talks. Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" also took me to task. It made me think, about what it means to kill, to maim, to destroy things, to be insensitive and uncaring to be a savage—all the things I had been and had been proud to be in my life up to that point. I asked the chaplain to bring me everything he could find by Mark Twain.

Jake  
What did you think of *Huck Finn*?

Carl  
At first I saw Twain's humor which I liked a lot, but as I read and reread the stories I began to understand that he wasn't writing just to be funny; he was using humor for social criticism. Twain had somehow transcended his own origins as a white native of a slave state to understand fully what was happening in the South. I came to view the Civil War through his eyes, amazed that his sharp wit could make me laugh even as he laid bare the ugliness of slavery.

Jake  
Most schools don't teach *Huck Finn* any more, you know?

Carl  
I read enough Mark Twain to be angry when I learned that a university professor from

Michigan was railing against Twain and *Huck Finn* because of the word “nigger.” Without stopping to think that I was just a fourth-grade educated Carl Upchurch and this guy was a college professor, I wrote him thirteen passionate pages in defense of Twain and the book. I couldn’t let that experience be diminished by some guy just because he was black and had the letters “Ph.D.” after his name. I was making progress in my rebirth, but the I had managed to shift my behavior.

(Carl is in the process of stealing some eggs form the prison kitchen when he is interrupted by a fellow prisoner.)

Prisoner

Hey Man, what you doin’?

Carl

What? Shit! (Carl grabs the other prisoner, punches him and throws him to the ground. He kicks him as he tries to get up. The guy falls down unconscious. Carl shakes his fist in pain.) Damn. (He sees the guy on the floor and realizes what he has done. He looks around. Goes to help the guy and then backs away.) Oh God. . . (He addresses audience)

Change occurs slowly. Shakespeare and Twain were a beginning. After this fight—unlike so many fights before—I felt remorse. I felt shame. That is what Shakespeare, Douglass and Twain had done to me. I realized that I didn’t want to live like that any more. It was a very painful realization because I didn’t know how to make the change. Before I had time to create a plan, to figure out how to begin a different way of living, I was paroled.

(Sound of sirens and red lights. Jake moves out of the scene, Carl puts on a watchman’s cap, and begins to look for an escape.

Officer Voice

Put your hands up.

(Carl shadows his eyes and puts his hands up)

Officer Voice

On the ground. On the ground.