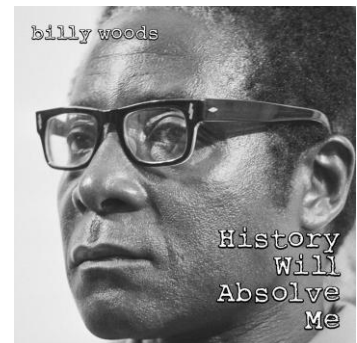


## How does Billy Woods' *History Will Absolve Me* (2012) engage with the historical legacies of revolutionary leaders?

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Billy Woods, *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012)

[Originally written for 'Public History and Popular Culture' at the University of Leeds, Second Year, 2025]



Billy Woods is a critically acclaimed rapper known for his sharp political lyricism and intricate storytelling. In his 2012 album *History Will Absolve Me*, he engages with concepts of radicalism and decolonisation. He does this by looking specifically at revolutionary leaders like Fidel Castro and Robert Mugabe. The album's title borrows from Castro's famous 1953 trial speech and encapsulates the core themes of resistance, anti-colonialism, and the complex legacies of revolutionaries. Woods uses a provocative image of a young Robert Mugabe as the album cover to question Mugabe's historical and revolutionary legacy in his music. Their radical anti-colonialism and defiance against imperialism become pivotal themes throughout the album, with Woods drawing parallels between them and current contemporary struggles against oppression. He uses an element of authenticity in how he imitates their politically charged and controversial nature to narrate the politically dense album. Woods critiques the failures and contradictions of post-colonial leadership while simultaneously paying homage to their revolutionary aspirations.

### ***History Will Absolve Me* and Fidel Castro**

The title of the album refers to the Fidel Castro speech with the same name. He draws on Castro's reputation as a revolutionary and anti-colonialist to reinforce the album's anti-colonial themes. He names the album after this speech to reference Castro's legacy and imitate his aggressive tone.

Woods uses the title as a direct reference to the 1953 speech by Fidel Castro, in which Castro defends himself for the actions committed by his revolution.<sup>1</sup> The speech was delivered during the Moncada trial.<sup>2</sup> Although Castro and his movement knowingly committed multiple crimes, he spoke with audacious certainty, convinced that history would exonerate him.<sup>3</sup> Castro and his followers had resorted to acts of violence due to their disillusionment with Cuba's failed independence after 1902.<sup>4</sup> He closes the iconic speech with a line that would become the title: 'Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.'<sup>5</sup> The speech ended with 'the most memorable phrase he ever uttered,'<sup>6</sup> which became a key phrase used in his propaganda campaign.<sup>7</sup>

In media history, Castro represents a radical, Marxist-Leninist and anti-colonial figure. Woods uses these as themes throughout the album. Woods grew up with a father dedicated to Marxism under the Zimbabwean government.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Woods 'always had a certain appreciation for the Cuban revolution'.<sup>9</sup> For public perception, Castro represents the radical leftism in the Americas that overthrew dictatorships.<sup>10</sup> He claimed that he "shall be a Marxist-Leninist until the last day of [his] life"<sup>11</sup> and is often credited for the spread of Marxist-Leninism in Latin America.<sup>12</sup> While Castro is seldom described as an actual Marxist, Woods uses his reputation and association as a reference to 'anti-colonial, nationalist regeneration' through theories of Marxism.<sup>13</sup>

The way that the speech is written is very significant to Woods' album. Like Castro's speech, Woods speaks with an accusatory tone. He authentically replicates the attitude and tone of it in his

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<sup>1</sup> Bert Hoffmann, 'Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change: Lessons from Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession', *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, 30.3 (2009), pp. 229-248 (p. 234) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25652905>> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

<sup>2</sup> Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History* (University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Latell, *History Will Absolve Me: Fidel Castro* (RosettaBooks, 2016), Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, p. 16, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Fidel Castro, *History Will Absolve Me*, 16 October 1953, *Marxists Internet Archive* <<https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>> [Accessed 22 March 2025].

<sup>6</sup> Latell, *History Will Absolve Me*, Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Latell, *History Will Absolve Me*, Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Dean van Nguyen, 'Time Goes By: Interview with Billy Woods', *nerdtorious.com*, 1 September 2013 <<https://nerdtorious.com/2013/01/09/time-goes-by-interview-with-billy-woods/>> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

<sup>9</sup> Van Nguyen, 'Interview with Billy Woods'.

<sup>10</sup> Andrés Suárez, 'The Cuban Revolution: The Road to Power', *Latin American Research Review*, 7.3 (1972), pp. 5-29 (pp. 6-7) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2502783>> [Accessed 25 February 2025].

<sup>11</sup> Patrick J. Gallo, 'Castro and the Cuban Revolution', *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, Vol. 41, 1.161 (1974), pp. 81-98 (p. 81) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42733799>> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

<sup>12</sup> Suarez, 'The Cuban Revolution', p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Balfour, *Castro* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), p. 38.

lyrics.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the speech, Castro describes a ‘grim picture’ of Cuba under an ‘illegitimate government.’<sup>15</sup> He speaks of radical ideas like overturning tanks.<sup>16</sup> Castro was a radical thinker, and his dynamism was inspired by Adolf Hitler.<sup>17</sup> Castro’s accusatory and assertive tone is mirrored in Woods’ lyrics. Particularly in ‘Pompeii’, Woods raps in second person addressing an oppressive slave owner. The lyrics say: ‘You oversaw the torture / You tightened the clamps / You lied to reporters.’<sup>18</sup> These accusations echo the nature of Castro’s speech when he accuses of ‘tyranny’ in Cuba.<sup>19</sup> Castro’s speech intersperses legal and moral arguments ‘with homespun philosophy.’<sup>20</sup> Billy Woods’ lyrics include a lot of aggressive political statements which echo these ideas.

Woods authentically intersperses the political extremist nature of Castro within his writing of his album. By drawing on Castro’s revolutionary rhetoric and connection to Marxism, Woods channels the radical, accusatory tone of the speech to underscore his critiques. Through his sharp writing and harsh beats, Woods not only honours Castro's legacy but also uses it to elevate the album's exploration of political, social, and historical struggles, offering a bold and unflinching commentary on systemic oppression.

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<sup>14</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Any resemblance to persons living or dead’: film and the challenge of authenticity”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8.3 (1988), pp. 269-283 (p. 271)

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/01439688800260381>>

<sup>15</sup> Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Castro, ‘History Will Absolve Me’.

<sup>17</sup> Latell, *History Will Absolve Me*, Chapter 1.

<sup>18</sup> Billy Woods, ‘Pompeii’, from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Castro, ‘History Will Absolve Me’.

<sup>20</sup> Carlos Todd, ‘‘Condemn Me,’ He Shouted, ‘History Will Absolve Me’’, *Human Events*, 2 Jun 1962, p. 1 (p. 1).

## The Cover art and Robert Mugabe

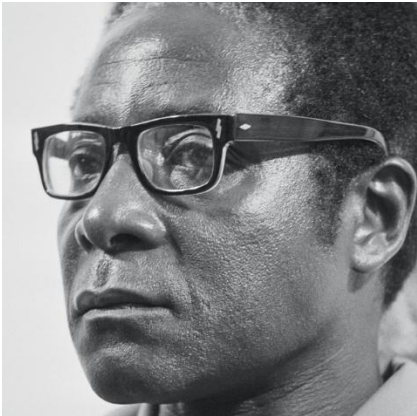


Figure 2: *History Will Absolve Me* album cover (2012)

The album cover, much like the title, uses the striking image of a radical figure symbolising revolution and decolonisation. Woods deliberately selects a photograph of a young Robert Mugabe to reference Zimbabwe's struggle for independence and his conflicting legacy. This image is not only a nod to the larger themes of decolonisation throughout the album but also a personal reflection of Woods' formative years in Zimbabwe under Mugabe's rule.

One of the key reasons Billy Woods references Robert Mugabe is rooted in Woods' formative years spent under Mugabe's leadership. Growing up in Zimbabwe, Woods experienced firsthand the impact of Mugabe's political regime, making the figure a powerful symbol and influence in his work. As previously mentioned, Billy Woods' father was Zimbabwean and a committed Marxist, actively involved in the country's liberation movement under Robert Mugabe. Woods spent his early years in Zimbabwe before moving back to the United States.<sup>21</sup> The album was released in 2012, five years before the Zimbabwean military ultimately forced Mugabe to resign from power.<sup>22</sup> Woods was likely inspired by Mugabe's revolution but also aware of his controversial nature in the country.

The heavily divided opinion in historical media can be split into those who regard Mugabe as a Pan-Africanist and those who perceive him as a 'rabid black fascist' and a dictator.<sup>23</sup> Woods utilises both perspectives to emphasise the themes of radical anti-colonialism in the album. The cover uses this

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<sup>21</sup> Van Nguyen, 'Interview with Billy Woods'.

<sup>22</sup> Onslow, *Robert Mugabe*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Marongwe and Mawere, 'Robert Mugabe's Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?', p. 2.

controversial image to indicate the harshness and controversial nature of the album.<sup>24</sup> It plays very much into Mugabe's legacy as a radical leader who revolutionised Zimbabwe but also taps into how disliked he is. This emphasises the intentional revolutionary rhetoric used throughout Woods' writing. Woods also makes several other references to Zimbabwe, such as alluding to 'President Banana' of Zimbabwe in his song 'Crocodile Tears'.<sup>25</sup>

The idealised perspective is evident in the specific use of an early photo from Mugabe's life, from a time when he was still loved and the most active as a revolutionary. Historians credit Mugabe as being 'intricately linked to the outcome of the original struggle for independence' in 1980.<sup>26</sup> During his time as a revolutionary, he was viewed 'as a God-given gift to Zimbabwe'.<sup>27</sup> People in his country had this idealistic view of Mugabe as a strong soldier who could release them.<sup>28</sup> They saw his ideas as liberating.

However, Mugabe's image evolved over time as his early reputation clashed with his leadership policies. Hence, the negative perspective of Mugabe emerged as the people of Zimbabwe began to become disillusioned of Mugabe's rule. Things like poor management of the economy, corruption and nepotism brought discontent.<sup>29</sup> Woods alludes to the fall of the Zimbabwean economy throughout the album. When he tells the listener to 'fill full the mouth of famine and bid the sickness cease' he questions Mugabe's legacy as a leader.<sup>30</sup> After independence, Zimbabweans began to question 'why Mugabe was the centre of all of [their] problems.'<sup>31</sup> The 'political shrewdness' that originally kept Mugabe in power became the same thing that found him enemies in the state.<sup>32</sup> Woods discusses these ideas when he speaks about 'Black on Black' conflict in his song 'Freedman's Bureau'.<sup>33</sup> Woods uses Mugabe as a controversial image because of his awareness that people had a 'hate for him'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cis van Beers, 'Underground Hip Hop Check: Billy Woods', *HHGA*, 23 Jan 2020 <<https://hiphopgoldenage.com/list/underground-hip-hop-check-billy-woods/>> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

<sup>25</sup> Billy Woods, 'Crocodile Tears', from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Sue Onslow and Martin Plaut, *Robert Mugabe*. (Ohio University Press, 2018), p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ngonidzashe Marongwe and Munyaradzi Mawere, 'Robert Mugabe's Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?' in *The End of an Era? Robert Mugabe and a Conflicting Legacy*, ed. by Mawere Munyaradzi and Ngonidzashe Marongwe (Langaa RPCIG, 2018), pp. 1-28 (p. 3).

<sup>28</sup> Tendai Rinos Mwanaka, *Zimbabwe: Beyond Robert Mugabe* (Mwanaka Media and Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2022), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Marongwe and Mawere, 'Robert Mugabe's Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?', p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Billy Woods, 'The Man Who Would Be King, from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Mwanaka, *Zimbabwe*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Marongwe and Mawere, 'Robert Mugabe's Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?', p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Billy Woods, 'Freedman's Bureau', from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Mwanaka, *Zimbabwe*, p. 9.

Woods engages with Mugabe's conflicting legacy. According to Mhango, 'Mugabe's legacy will always be controversial,' highlighting the ongoing debate about his transformation from liberator to dictator.<sup>35</sup> Aware of Mugabe's status as an anti-colonial icon, Woods also embraces his controversy.<sup>36</sup> For Woods, this ambivalence captures the essence of his formative years in Zimbabwe, where the leader's rise to power and eventual authoritarian rule shaped his understanding of revolution, identity, and power.<sup>37</sup>

### Comparing the Title to the Album Cover

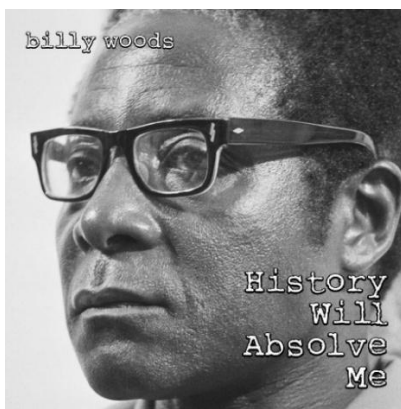


Figure 3: Alternative *History Will Absolve Me* (2012) album cover with the title written on it

Comparing the title of the album to its cover, there are a lot of connections. Woods uses both of these uncompromising activists to provoke a harsh reaction, but also to be a device for storytelling. He uses their narratives of revolution to discuss concepts of anticolonialism and extremism.

Woods uses provocative characters because he 'had the intention of making something uncompromising'.<sup>38</sup> He wanted to examine radical motives in how 'the savage wars of peace' are required in a revolution.<sup>39</sup> He references other controversial revolutionaries throughout the, such as Ho

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<sup>35</sup> Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango, 'Mugabe the Hero Who Became a Villain: The Tragicomedy of the Legacy of Mugabe' in *The End of an Era? Robert Mugabe and a Conflicting Legacy*, ed. by Mawere Munyaradzi and Ngonidzashe Marongwe (Langaa RPCIG, 2018), pp. 353-384 (p. 374).

<sup>36</sup> Mhango, 'Mugabe the Hero Who Became a Villain', p. 370.

<sup>37</sup> Mhango, 'Mugabe the Hero Who Became a Villain', p. 356.

<sup>38</sup> Van Nguyen, 'Interview with Billy Woods'.

<sup>39</sup> Woods, 'The Man Who Would Be King'.

Chi Minh in the Second Indochina War.<sup>40</sup> He includes specific references to Nelson Mandela saying ‘Apartheid rhymes / no Mandela with de Klerk’.<sup>41</sup> Mugabe parallels Mandela’s rise, and Woods continues themes of racial injustice in his music to reference this.<sup>42</sup>

Comparing Castro and Mugabe, they are both viewed as Marxists and revolutionaries. In 1961 Fidel Castro called himself a Marxist,<sup>43</sup> and many scholars would describe Mugabe similarly.<sup>44</sup> They also fought strongly against colonialism. Fidel Castro stood firm against colonialism and U.S. imperialism. Woods echoes this revolutionary spirit of resilience and defiance, drawing a line to Castro’s uncompromising stand against foreign powers.<sup>45</sup> Scholars note the ‘charismatic leadership’ Castro embodied, blending charisma with revolutionary ideals.<sup>46</sup>

Woods' draws parallels between their ideologies and contemporary black identity struggles. Mugabe praised Castro for his resilience against colonialism and US intervention.<sup>47</sup> Through his lyricism, Woods embodies their revolutionary spirit. Despite their controversial legacies, both figures both represent radicalism and anti-colonial sentiment, which Woods channels to critique systemic oppression. Woods uses intentionally offensive anti-imperialist rhetoric, lyrics such as ‘Shoot the Boer / Kill the Farmer’ in ‘Body of Work’ echo Mugabe’s sentiments.<sup>48</sup>

Robert Mugabe's legacy is marked by controversy. His rise as a revolutionary leader fighting colonial oppression is mirrored in Woods' depiction of an uncompromising aggression.<sup>49</sup> Mugabe clung to power for four decades despite flaws in governance.<sup>50</sup> Woods addresses this paradox in his music, referencing the ongoing debate surrounding Mugabe’s legacy. In one lyric, Woods writes, ‘Woe unto he who believe a / Word these Boers speak’, reflecting the ongoing tensions in post-colonial societies and their battle with neo-colonialism.<sup>51</sup> Mugabe’s controversial leadership is mirrored in Woods’ portrayal, acknowledging the complexity of revolution and its aftermath.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Billy Woods, ‘The Foreigner’, from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Woods, ‘Famous Last Words’.

<sup>42</sup> Onslow, *Robert Mugabe*, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Gallo, ‘Castro and the Cuban Revolution’, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Onslow, *Robert Mugabe*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Hoffman, ‘Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change’, p. 234.

<sup>47</sup> Elsa Buchanan, ‘Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe mourns fellow revolutionary Cuban leader Fidel Castro’, *International Business Times*, 30 November 2016  
<<https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/zimbabwes-president-robert-mugabe-mourns-fellow-revolutionary-cuban-leader-fidel-castro-1594182>> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

<sup>48</sup> Billy Woods, ‘Body of Work’, from *History Will Absolve Me* (Backwoodz Studioz, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Munyaradzi and Marongwe, ‘Robert Mugabe’s Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?’, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Marongwe and Mawere, ‘Robert Mugabe’s Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?’, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Woods, ‘The Foreigner’.

<sup>52</sup> Marongwe and Mawere, ‘Robert Mugabe’s Conflicted Legacy and the End of an Era?’, p. 1.

Woods draws from Mugabe's and Castro's legacies to critique contemporary issues of black identity and systemic racism. Mugabe's call to expunge the 'colonial personality' resonates in Woods' work, critiquing both liberation from colonial influence and the failures of revolutionary movements.<sup>53</sup> Castro has been viewed as the "apostle" of decolonial movements in the Global South.<sup>54</sup> Woods incorporates this impression in his anti-colonial lyrics, delivering a 'staccato flow' on subjects such as 'politics, race, sex, and class.'<sup>55</sup> His harsh and intense writing, coupled with loud industrial beats is evident in songs like 'The Man Who Would Be King' - aptly sharing a name with the colonial novel by Rudyard Kipling - which explores colonialism, imperialism, and Western exploitation of Africa.<sup>56</sup> This is evident as the song opens with an audio clip referring to an 'unforgettable adventure in untamed Africa'.<sup>57</sup> By weaving these historical figures into his music, Woods highlights how their struggles are not confined to the past but continue to shape contemporary debates on race, identity, and power.

Both leaders, and others throughout the record, symbolise the cyclical nature of liberation and the persistence of struggles even after apparent victories. Woods connects past struggles to the present, highlighting the ongoing fight against oppression and systemic racism.

Billy Woods' *History Will Absolve Me* serves as a commentary on the enduring legacies of anti-colonial revolutionaries like Fidel Castro and Robert Mugabe. Through the provocative use of their image and ideologies, Woods critiques and channels their radicalism. The title helps explore the complexities and reasoning for revolution, while the album cover symbolizes the tension between revolution and post-colonial governance. Woods' lyrics, marked by their confrontational tone, replicate the audacious certainty of these leaders, using their legacies to question modern-day. In doing so, *History Will Absolve Me* not only reinforces the legacies of Castro and Mugabe but also highlights the cyclical nature of resistance, urging listeners to confront the ongoing fight for justice. Therefore, Woods challenges both the ideals and the flaws of revolutionary movements, making a bold statement on the complexities of liberation and power.

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<sup>53</sup> Onslow, *Robert Mugabe*, p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Rafael Pedemonte, 'Castro, Fidel (1926–2016)', in *Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (The Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 284.

<sup>55</sup> Van Beers, 'Underground Hip Hop Check: Billy Woods'.

<sup>56</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'The Man Who Would Be King', in *The Phantom 'Rickshaw and Other Tales* (A. H. Wheeler & Co, 1888), pp. 66-104.

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