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Karin L. Stanford¹

Abstract

Outside of his most incendiary critics, Tupac Shakur is generally perceived as a socially conscious artist whose political credibility is located in his lyrical critiques of racism and his mother's membership in the Black Panther Party. Popular and academic writers have failed to examine Tupac's distinct political ideas and identifiable activism. This article serves as a prolegomenon to the necessary dialogue on the politics of Tupac Shakur. Drawing from interviews, public statements, and lyrical analyses, the author expands the discourse on Shakur's contribution to the African American fight against racism and injustice.

Keywords

hip hop, rap music, Tupac Shakur, political activism

The worldwide fascination with Tupac Shakur is beyond dispute. Although he was murdered in a drive-by shooting at the early age of 25, the rapper-turned-actor was regarded as one of the most gifted hip hop lyricists. In life, Shakur was also well known for his charisma and warrior-like persona that challenged White supremacy, discrimination, and injustice. Despite criticisms that drew attention to Shakur's misogynistic lyrics, celebration of

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“thug-life,” and association with violence, millions of people mourned his death on September 13, 1996. For the 9 years that he entertained audiences, Tupac Shakur expressed the hopes, aspirations, worries, pain, suspicions, and experiences of young people living in disadvantaged communities. Tupac Shakur’s beloved status was reflected in the popularity of his work in life and death. He is one of the most successful rap stars in history, selling more than 67 million albums, 11 of which were designated platinum status (Evergreen Copyrights, 2009). Tupac was listed as the number one MC by MTV viewers in 2003 and voted the “greatest rapper of all time” in 2004. In addition to producing hit records, Shakur was an actor, starring in seven films for which he received critical acclaim. Tupac Shakur’s significance is further confirmed by the 11 documentaries, released posthumously, that seek to decipher the meaning of his life, music, and death.

Writing Tupac

More than 20 books and hundreds of articles have examined Tupac’s complex life. Using biography, critical analyses, photography, and poetry, two perspectives have emerged. Tupac’s critics emphasize his impetuous and reckless behavior, accentuate his confrontations with the criminal justice system, and condemn his angry lyrics. They also challenge the notion that Shakur’s message can empower the African American community (Crouch, 1999; Steyn, 1996; White, 1997). On the other side are authors who emphasize Tupac’s intellectual gifts, humanitarian impulse, and outspoken critique of racism and injustice. These writers seek to contextualize Tupac’s pejorative behavior by calling attention to his experiences as a son of the Black Power movement and growing up as a disadvantaged young Black male (Bastfield, 2002; Dyson, 2001; Joseph, 2006). One representative from this group, Professor Michael Eric Dyson (2001), author of the national bestseller *Holler If You Hear Me*, aspires to explain the seemingly two sides of the rapper. He asserts that Tupac’s appeal rested on the “divide in his mind and soul between his revolutionary pedigree and thug persona” (p. 14), which aptly explains why individuals and groups, especially those from urban disadvantaged communities, could identify with both sides of the slain rapper. The discourse on Tupac Shakur is also located in scholarly journals. The academic literature endeavors to ascertain the meaning of Tupac’s life to the African American and hip hop communities. Areas of discussion include Tupac’s hypermasculine image, his links and frustrations with the Black Power movement, and interpretations of his rhetoric and lyrics (Brown, 2005; Iwamoto, 2003; Keeling, 1999).

Despite the extensive coverage of Shakur's life, writers overwhelmingly neglect to analyze his political beliefs and activism. The consequences of this neglect are many. First, readers receive a deficient portrait of Tupac's perspective and proclivities. Second, viewed from an apolitical perspective, Tupac Shakur is easily characterized as a social deviate rather than a political activist devoted to social change, who sometimes made mistakes. In addition, neglecting Tupac's political work can encourage the idea that it was only his familial relationships that provided him with political credibility. The final consequence of purging Tupac's politics from explorations of his life is his exclusion from analyses of hip hop activism. For instance, in *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* and *Stand & Deliver*, two of the most important books on hip hop and politics, Bakari Kitwana (2003) and Yvonne Bynoe (2004) investigate the political tendencies and character of the "hip hop generation." Although several activists are discussed in detail, Tupac Shakur's political work is excluded.

This article serves as a prolegomenon to the necessary dialogue on the political beliefs and identifiable activism of Tupac Shakur. Drawing from interviews, public statements, and lyrical analyses, this essay expands the discourse on Shakur's contribution to the enduring and unyielding battle waged by African Americans against racism and injustice. This article is compartmentalized into several sections that include a brief literature review; an analysis of Tupac's political ideology, embedded in Black political theory; and a contextual discussion of how Tupac used culture to support his political activism. The article ends with an interpretive discussion of Shakur's political work.

The Ghetto's Populist Prince

Central to any interrogation of an individual's political activism is an understanding of his or her political ideology. As a set of interrelated beliefs that seeks to explain how the world operates, and how it should operate, ideologies serve as a guide to action. According to Kenneth and Patricia Dolbeare, an ideology must (a) describe a worldview, which explains how and for whom the political system works and why, (b) set forth what values are central to the ideology and what goals are desirable, and (c) suggest what the vision or process for creating social change is (Dolbeare & Dolbeare, 1973). Overall, an ideology provides adherents with a "picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and in so doing, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable" (Sargent, 1975, p. 3).

Using the components of ideology as a guide for exploration, there is ample evidence to contend that Tupac's activism was framed by his support for Black Nationalism. Maulana Karenga (1980) defines Black Nationalism as "the political belief and practice of African Americans as a distinct people with a distinct historical personality who politically should develop structures to define, defend, and develop the interests of Blacks as a people" (p. 15). Tupac Shakur's public articulations, lyrical expressions, and political work affirm his alliance with Black Nationalist ideas. Watani Tyehimba, a leading member of the New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO) who served as Tupac's mentor and business manager, acknowledged the rapper's nationalist tendencies. During an interview, Tyehimba said that Tupac's decision to join the New Afrikan Panthers, the youth organization of NAPO, is a reflection of his political orientation (W. Tyehimba, personal communication, 2008). Another representation of Tupac's support of Black Nationalism can be found in his poetry. In "How Can We Be Free," Shakur (1999b) writes,

Sometimes I wonder about this race
 Because we must be blind as hell
 2 think we live in equality
 While Nelson Mandela rots in a jail cell
 Where the shores of Howard Beach
 Are full of Afrikan corpses
 And those that do live 2 be 18
 Bumrush 2 join the Armed Forces
 This so called "Home of the Brave"
 Why isn't anybody Backing us up!
 When they c these crooked a— Redneck cops
 Constantly Jacking us up
 Now I bet some punk will say I'm racist
 I can tell by the way you smile at me
 Then I remember George Jackson, Huey Newton
 And Geronimo 2 hell with Lady Liberty (p. 137)

Tupac's prose acknowledges the subordination of African people and the sacrifices of Black political prisoners and rejects patriotic symbols. He also condemns police abuse and the racist violence that occurred in Howard Beach, New York, in 1986 that resulted in the death of a Black youth and the harassment of others.

It is common to subdivide Black Nationalism by methods and goals (Smith, 1992). Revolutionary Nationalists assert that African American subordination is the result of capitalism colored with racism to further justify the

exploitation of labor. In order to defeat the perverse economic system, the working class of all races must work for change. Some Revolutionary Nationalists envision a multiracial movement, while others center their work among African people. This radical class-based perspective has been advanced by the scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party (BPP), and Imari Obadele of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA). Tupac incorporated Revolutionary Nationalism in his lyrics and writings. In “Words of Wisdom” from the *2Pacalypse Now* album, Tupac (Shakur, 1991) raps,

This is for the masses the lower classes
The ones you left out, jobs were givin', better livin'
But we were kept out
Made to feel inferior, but we're the superior
Break the Chains in our brains that made us fear yah
Pledge allegiance to a flag that neglects us
Honor a man that who refuses to respect us
Emancipation, Proclamation, Please!
Ni*ga just said that to save the nation
These are lies and we all accepted . . .
The war on drugs is a war on you and me
And yet they say this is the Home of the Free
But if you ask me its all about hypocrisy
The constitution, yo, it don't apply to me
Lady Liberty still the bi**h lied to me

Tupac's lyrics underscore his refusal to accept economic inequality and inadequate employment opportunities. He also continues his attack on patriotic symbolism. In 1992, Tupac discussed the unfairness of the capitalism on MTV: “Because I feel like there's too much money here. Nobody should be hitting the lotto for 36 million and we got people starving in the streets. That is not idealistic, that's just real. That is just stupid” (Shakur, Toffler, Gale, & Lazin, 2003).

Although Tupac's discourse was not framed in traditional revolutionary nationalist rhetoric, his political associations, use of language, public statements, and lyrical content suggest that he identified with Revolutionary Nationalism as expressed by NAPO, a group that is central to the New Afrikan Independence Movement. New Afrikans believe that Black people in the United States were forged into a new nation from various Afrikan ethnic groups and are linked by a common history and experience of oppression. The New Afrikan Independence Movement argues for land as the primary basis for national liberation. Their goal is to create a revolutionary,

progressive, humane society. New Afrikans pay homage to Malcolm X as their ideological teacher, support political prisoners, advocate self-defense, build institutions to support the Black nation, and openly challenge U.S. foreign policy and neocolonial aggression. New Afrikans use the “k” in Afrika instead of “c” to reflect their identification with the Afrikan language system. Tupac’s vision for society was aligned with that posited by NAPO—to create a progressive, humane society where class and race oppression is eliminated and injustice is not tolerated. Tupac also acknowledged the importance of nationhood, spelled Afrika with a “k” in his writings, and acknowledged political prisoners in his writings and lyrics.

The origins of Tupac’s political ideas are well documented. As asserted by Gwendolyn Pough (2004) in her article, “Seeds and Legacies,” Afeni and Tupac embody the link between the Black Power movement and hip hop culture. The foundation for Tupac’s political beliefs is fundamentally rooted in familial connections. Born to Afeni Shakur, a member of the New York chapter of the BPP who stood trial for conspiracy against the U.S. government, Tupac was birthed 1 month after she was released from prison on June 16, 1971. Although at birth, he was named Lesane Parish Crooks, Afeni eventually changed her son’s name to Tupac Amaru, in honor of an 18th-century Incan revolutionary of Peru killed by Spanish priests (Joseph, 2006).

Tupac’s exposure to political associates of Afeni contributed to the development and evolution of his political ideas. Until the age of 11, Tupac lived with and learned from his stepfather, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, a former member of the Revolutionary Action movement and member of the provisional government of the RNA. After living underground for 4 years, Mutulu was captured and convicted of several crimes, including conspiracy, involvement in a clandestine paramilitary unit that expropriated funds from several banks, and participating in the 1979 prison escape of Black Liberation Army (BLA) member Assata Shakur, who fled to Cuba after she was imprisoned for the murder of a police officer (Umoja, 2006, pp. 243-244). Although Mutulu was sentenced to 60 years, Tupac maintained contact with him while he was underground and during his imprisonment. Tupac was also influenced by his godfather, Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt, a former Green Beret and Vietnam war veteran who eventually became acting minister of defense for the Los Angeles chapter of the BPP. Tupac, Afeni, and his sister Sekyiwa moved into the home of Linda (Ashaki) Pratt, wife of Geronimo. During that time, Pratt was incarcerated for a murder that he did not commit. After serving 27 years in prison, his conviction was vacated (Umoja, 2006). Similar to Mutulu, Tupac and Geronimo sustained their relationship throughout Geronimo’s incarceration. Of all of Tupac’s political mentors, perhaps, Watani Tyehimba was the closest. Tupac

lived with Tyehimba's family in Los Angeles for months at a time in 1986 and 1987. After the Tyehimba family relocated to Atlanta in 1989, Tupac again took up residence in their home. As a guest in Tyehimba's home, Tupac was exposed to the ideas and political work of NAPO.

An Activist-Rapper

Scholars Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady define voluntary political activity as "doing politics" rather than "being attentive to politics" (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 38). The authors further argue that political activism is not obligatory, with no pay received for involvement. This definition can help provide a line of demarcation between Tupac Shakur and others who are considered "gangsta rappers," such as Ice Cube or Ice T who defend their often crude and violent lyrics by insisting that their role is merely to report on the perverse nature of the U.S. political and economic system and the viciousness of ghetto life. Tupac also used crude and coarse language, however, he differs from the others by engaging in authentic activism, attempting to develop solution-oriented ideas and motivating his listeners to also "do politics."

Tupac's political work can be divided into five periods, which correspond to the chronology of his life. Although fluid, segmenting his activism into periods illustrates how changes in his personal circumstances affected his actions. The first period of Tupac's activism began during his formative years at the age of 7 when he spoke and performed at a rally outside of the State Building in New York City. Tupac's presentation was in support of Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt. Another instance of his activism occurred while he was still a pupil in elementary school. In this case, Tupac organized students in support of his teacher, Mr. Lincoln, who was fired because of the school's financial problems; Tupac organized a boycott at the Lower Eastside School to get his teacher's job reinstated. Although Mr. Lincoln was not rehired at the school, he ended up teaching at Tupac's home (Monjauze, Cox, & Robinson, 2008).

In 1986, Tupac relocated to Baltimore with his family. Right away, he noticed the dire circumstances of Black people residing in the city. Tupac said, "As soon as I got there, being the person that I am, I said, 'No, no, I'm changing this.' So I started a Stop the Killing Campaign, a Safe Sex Campaign and AIDS Prevention Campaign and everything" (Jones & Spierer, 2002). As a high school student attending the Baltimore School for the Performing Arts, Tupac wrote and performed socially conscious lyrics, rapped about teen pregnancy, and discouraged gun violence (Bastfield, 2002). Demonstrating

his support of class-based strategies to enhance people's lives, Tupac also affiliated with the Young Communist League.

Darren Bastfield, a friend of Tupac, who reported on his activism in Baltimore, acknowledged that even back then, Tupac's activism was not rooted in the normal channels of student government or the standard after-school clubs. According to Bastfield (2002),

In high school, Tupac began to formalize his politics, and actively participated in several grassroots organizations to which he gave his full energy and creativity. He would speak of the activities of these organizations freely, occasionally sporting related buttons on his clothing and showcasing various leaflets, flyers, and other material. A number of us from the school found ourselves at meetings on more than one occasion. (p. 66)

Also during this period, Tupac became known for his ability to plan events, organize people, and raise their political consciousness. Tupac eventually lent his voice to more conventional politics, as demonstrated by his involvement in Baltimore's mayoral race and performance at a "Jesse Jackson for President" rally during Jackson's historic first run for the White House (Bastfield, 2002).

During these formative years, Tupac's activism illuminated his allegiance to the ideas of his parents and mentors. He also embraced their pragmatism, as highlighted by the BPP's Survival Programs, which included free breakfast programs, free legal clinics, and other free services to their local communities. The willingness of BPP members to assert themselves into the daily struggles of people, without adherence to ideological purity, demonstrated their commitment to uplifting the quality of life for Black people. Similarly, Tupac supported Black nationhood and wealth redistribution as long-term solutions, while at the same time, he worked to address immediate problems.

The second period of Tupac's political work occurred when he was a young adult. During this period, Tupac's activism was not as closely linked to Afeni's, which is evidenced by the independent decisions he made about his political life (Umoja, 2006). It began in 1988, after Tupac, at the age of 17, moved to Marin County, California. Tupac's home life was in turmoil as a result of his mother's drug addiction. However, he received support and guidance from Lelah Steinberg, who eventually became his mentor, confidante, and first manager. Eventually, Tupac and his friend Ray Luv moved into Steinberg's home. Ray Luv and Steinberg both documented Tupac's activist tendencies while living in Northern California. Steinberg noted that Tupac assisted in her after-school art programs and "wanted to ride around the Bay with video cameras to monitor the police"

(Jones & Spierer, 2002). Ray Luv stated that Tupac educated him and other friends about the BPP and the necessity of political activism (Jones & Spierer, 2002).

Periodically, Tupac left Marin County to stay with Watani Tyehimba and his family in Los Angeles. As a guest in the Tyehimba home, Tupac was exposed to NAPO, which operated out of the Center for Black Survival. NAPO held political education classes and fundraisers and engaged in community work. The work of NAPO inspired Tupac to become a supporter of the New Afrikan Independence Movement. Tupac participated in various organizational activities, but his greatest contribution was artistry. He produced plays and skits and gave hip hop performances. Tupac also began training at the Afrikan Institute of Martial Arts in the system known as Kupigani Ngumi, the New Afrikan Combat System. Tupac trained directly under Tyehimba and his son Yakhisizwe Sekou Umoja Tyehimba (W. Tyehimba, personal communication, 2008). Yakhisizwe and Tupac eventually developed a lifelong friendship.

Tupac's political work was also shaped by his personal experiences as a young Black male living in the United States and coming of age during the hip hop era, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the presidential administration of President Ronald Reagan. Adhering to conservative ideology, the Reagan administration cut funding for education, made eligibility requirements for public assistance more difficult, weakened civil rights laws and institutions, increased defense spending, and provided tax cuts to the rich (Walters, 2003). In the midst of these devastating policy changes, the African American community suffered through the Reagan administration's sanction of insults that maligned its character. The national conversation changed from using the welfare system as a tool to support families in need to viewing its recipients as dependent, lazy, and looking for handouts.

Tupac shared the experiences of many young Black men during Ronald Reagan's presidency and the administrations of President George Bush, Sr., and Bill Clinton, elected, respectively, in 1988 and 1992. Through lyrics, he spoke directly to the office of the presidency (Shakur, 1999a):

Uhh . . . dear Mr. President
Whas happening?
.
.
.
Ain't nothin changed
All the promises you made, before you got elected . . .
. . . they ain't came true
. . . Everybody's doped up, ni*ga what you smoking on?
Figure if we high they can't rain us

But then America f**ked up and blamed up
 I guess it's cause we black that we targets
 . . . I know you feel me cause you too near me not to hear me
 So why don't you help a ni*ga out? Saying you cutting welfare
 That got us ni*gaz on the street, thinkin who in the hell care?

As noted, Tupac's ideological perspective and first-person experiences growing up disadvantaged served as a reference point for his political activism. The economic and social decline he witnessed set the political context.

At the age of 18, Tupac decided to become an active member of the New Afrikan Panthers. This group of 7 to 10 young people, aged 13 to 25 years, engaged in community control, worked against police abuse, educated the public about NAPO, and advocated for the release of political prisoners. According to Akinyele Umoja, a member of NAPO and mentor of Tupac Shakur, "the youth group operated somewhat autonomously from its parent organization. They ran their own campaigns and built their own networks" (A. Umoja, personal communication, 2007). Tupac nominated himself as the chair and won the election. He immediately set out to build the capacity of the organization by acting as a spokesperson, selling organizational newspapers, organizing meetings, and working to reach young people through radio appearances, classroom presentations, and hip hop performances (A. Umoja, personal communication, 2007). During a radio interview with Bomani Bakari on the station WRFG in Atlanta, Tupac was asked about his role as chair of the New Afrikan Panthers. Tupac stated that he wanted to help young people implement the program into their daily lives. He further stated, "I believe that the New Afrikan Panthers are about serious freedom. . . . The Panthers are about providing an alternative, a movement for you to hop into" (From *Tupac Shakur Speaks* [CD], in Joseph, 2006). Tupac criss-crossed the country to attend meetings and events of the Atlanta-based organization. Tupac's formal position with the New Afrikan Panthers ended when he became a roadie and a dancer for the hip hop group Digital Underground, but Tupac remained affiliated with the New Afrikan Independence Movement. For instance, the New Afrikan Panthers attended Digital Underground concerts and Tupac continued to fundraise for the organization.

The third period of Tupac's activism began after he became a professional musician at the age of 19. This period is distinguished by Tupac's use of his professional status and its accretions to support and implement his political ideas. *2Pacalypse Now*, Tupac's first album, was released November 12, 1991. Certified gold, the album was a mixture of social commentary and battle raps, with hits like "Trapped," a diatribe against police harassment; "Brenda's Got a Baby," which details sexual exploitation; and "Words of Wisdom," a song that acknowledges racial discrimination. The album also

featured regressive songs, like “Tha Lunatic,” which promotes promiscuity. *2Pacalypse Now* invited positive and negative attention. Hip hop heads supported the cutting edge lyrics and social commentary. On the other side were critics ranging as high in government as Vice President Dan Quayle, who publicly stated that the production and distribution of *2Pacalypse Now* was “an irresponsible corporate act.” Quayle then concluded that there was “absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published by a respectable record company” (Ayres, 1992).

In spite of the denunciations, Tupac utilized his fame as a political tool. He formed a rap group, Underground Railroad, as an evolving group of young people who would use their talent to make music, instead of engaging in criminal activity. In turn, members would dedicate their lives to supporting their communities. Underground Railroad was named as a tribute to Harriet Tubman’s leadership of escaped slaves. Members of the group came from various parts of the country, including Oakland, New York, Richmond, and Baltimore. During an interview with Davey D in 1991, Tupac said,

The concept behind this is the same concept behind Harriet Tubman, to get my brothers who might be into drug dealing or whatever it is that’s illegal or who are disenfranchised by today’s society—I want to get them back into by turning them onto music. It could be R&B, hip hop or pop, as long as I can get them involved. While I’m doing that, I’m teaching them to find a love for themselves so they can love others and do the same thing we did for them to others.

Underground Railroad eventually turned into the group Thug Life. Members included Trench from Naughty by Nature, Tupac’s stepbrother Mopreme, Big Sykes, and others. Tupac sponsored Thug Life and traveled with them around the country.

Even though he no longer held an official position with NAPO, Tupac was committed to working with New Afrikan professionals. Many of his attorneys were affiliated with the National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL), an organization founded in 1968 as the “legal arm of the Black revolution.” It was NCBL attorneys who had successfully represented Professor Angela Davis in the Marin County Courthouse Raid in 1970 and defended individuals accused of activities associated with the BLA. The chairman of NAPO, Chokwe Lumumba, an attorney and member of NCBL, served as lead counsel and legal adviser to Tupac for several years.

Not only did Tupac utilize the professional services of New Afrikan attorneys, he also hired New Afrikans to lead his management team. Tupac’s manager was Watani Tyehimba, while Yaasmyn Fula, the mother of Outlawz

member Kadifi, was appointed the head of Euphenasia, Tupac's record and film production company (Bruck, 1997). Fula is also the wife of Sekou Odinga, a Black revolutionary who has been imprisoned since October 1981 after a conviction of attempted murder and assisting in Assata Shakur's prison escape (The Talking Drum, 2008). Tupac's retention of New Afrikan advisers and professionals, even after he became a celebrity, proclaimed his continued respect and solidarity.

Equally important to Tupac was to engage incarcerated individuals. Tupac visited and performed in prisons to disseminate political ideas and uplift spirits. Talibah Mbonisi, a former chair of the New Afrikan Panthers who eventually became part of Tupac's professional public relations staff, helped to organize some of Tupac's performances. During an interview, Mbonisi pointed out that not all of Tupac's prison engagements went smoothly. On one occasion, he accepted an opportunity to perform at Lompoc Prison in California, where Mutulu Shakur was incarcerated. Tupac performed a song that was critical of the criminal justice system and that had not been previously approved by prison staff. Because Tupac refused to end the song immediately, he was forced to cut his performance short and leave the prison. Mutulu was sent to solitary confinement for a month after the debacle (T. Mbonisi, personal communication, 2009). Tupac also engaged in philanthropy and volunteerism to support political and community organizations. He organized fundraising drives and a concert and even sent out personal fundraising letters for A Place Called Home, an L.A.-based youth program that provided counseling, tutoring, and other important services to at-risk youth (Big Sykes, personal communication, 2008; Jones & Spierer, 2002; Joseph, 2006).

Tupac's views on violence, self-defense, and police abuse began to receive intense scrutiny during this period, as his activism to combat police crimes against Black people led to his arrest. Perhaps, the most infamous incident occurred on October 31, 1993. In that case, Tupac and his cadre were driving in Atlanta, Georgia, when they noticed two intoxicated White men attacking a Black pedestrian. When Tupac and his entourage stopped to intervene, one of the attackers approached the car while brandishing a pistol. Tupac responded by shooting at both men. It was only after he was arrested that it was discovered that the two White men were brothers Mark and Scott Whitwell, off-duty cops drunk after a night of celebration. Tupac was arrested and charged, but the case was dismissed after witnesses reported that the two cops were the aggressors at all times (Bruck, 1997). Even though Tupac was known for advocating on behalf of Black people, some commentators framed the Whitwell incident as an example of his penchant for irrational or violent behavior (Jones, 1993; White, 1997). In their analysis, these commentators

negated the history of police brutality against Black people and Tupac's history of political activism. Situating Tupac within the context of political activism requires one to regard these kinds of entanglements outside of the usual "thug" perspective and opens space to consider alternate explanations for his interactions with law enforcement.

The fourth period of Tupac's activism requires a discussion of the cultural context of his work. Certainly, Shakur was not a practitioner of traditional cultural nationalism as was advocated and practiced during the 1960s by its theoreticians Maulana Karenga and Amiri Baraka. However, Tupac utilized the culture of young people living in urban areas, who had come of age during the 1980s as an organizing tool for community and political activity. African Americans certainly are not strangers to the idea of using culture as a tool for organizing. During slavery, song and dance were used as a source for rebellion, and throughout the civil rights movement, gospel songs motivated activists. During the Black Power era, recordings from artists, including Gil Scott Heron and James Brown, served as an outward expression of the growing political consciousness among African Americans.

Tupac Shakur should be regarded as a cultural worker. During an interview in 1993, he articulated the value of culture in political activism. Tupac said, "I'm not sayin' that I'm gonna rule the world, or I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world and that's our job" (Shakur, Toffler, Gale, & Lazin, 2003). Hip hop culture, the dominant art form of Tupac's generation, was the principal tool in his political arsenal. Tupac understood that he and other activists lacked the support of a social movement to motivate young people; thus, he strategically exaggerated important features of hip hop culture to capture and retain their attention. Oversized baggy jeans and white tees to show solidarity with imprisoned youth was standard attire for Tupac; his 26 tattoos were another indication of his immersion in hip hop culture and deviation from the mores of mainstream society. Tupac was also well known for sticking his middle finger up in the air and spitting—to communicate his lack of respect for law enforcement, segments of the mainstream media, and those who wished to silence his generation. To be sure, Tupac's brazen behavior invited criticism (Dyson, 2001). However, he was able to reach his audience of urban youth, who loved him for his brazen, "tell it like it is" raps. Hip hop journalist dream hampton (1997) posits,

Because we are a generation who has made millions in the billion dollar crack industry, because we are a generation that has buried our boyfriends and girlfriends—bodies riddled with bullets, because we are a generation who calls the devil by his first name, a generation who

created a chaotic musical revolution to serve as the soundtrack for the end of a violent inhumane millennium, the elected few that represent us in the most synonymous sense, must necessarily embody the contradiction, frustration, passion and fire that is us. That was Tupac's destiny, and he fulfilled it. (pp. 62-63)

Tupac also endeavored to generate activism among inner-city youth by developing an ideology that was not foreign to their circumstance and could possibly create a desire for political engagement. The outcome of this development process was called "Thug Ideology." According to Mutulu, Tupac called himself a thug because that is what adults called him and his friends (Potash, 2007). Thug life philosophy was shaped by Tupac's experiences of living in a dysfunctional home, with a drug addicted mother and no support from a father. These experiences led Tupac to seek refuge in the "streets," where his support system included hustlers, pimps, and drug dealers. In his song, "The Streetz R Deathrow," Tupac Shakur (1993) reminisces about his childhood:

Growing up as an inner city brotha
 Where every other had a pops and a motha
 I was tha product of a heated lover
 Nobody knew how deep it screwed me
 And since my pops never knew me
 My family didn't know what ta do with me
 Was I somebody they despised
 Curious look in they eyes
 As if they wonder if I'm dead or alive
 Poor mama can't control me
 Quit tryin' ta save my soul, I wanna roll with my homies

Premised on his experiences of living a "Thug's Life," Tupac developed an acronym to further explain the term. "The Hate U Gave Little Infants F**ks Everybody" was a symbolic expression of the difficult experiences that children growing up in the ghetto confronted (Joseph, 2006, p. 32). It further explained why young rappers and their fans openly rebuked the values and morals of mainstream society. When confronted with a question about the origins of the term, Tupac noted, "I didn't create Thug Life, I diagnosed it" (Shakur, Toffler, Gale, & Lazin, 2003).

Similar to the lumpenproletariat, the group of lower class, unorganized masses with revolutionary potential that the BPP sought to organize, Tupac also believed that "thugs" could be transformed and made ready for political

activism. Insightfully, he understood that Thug Life as a concept was more accessible to his generation than lumpenproletariat, since the term was already accepted in the vernacular of his time. Undoubtedly, Tupac, like the BPP, had a dichotomous view of thugs. They were a class of potential warriors who could fight for their community, but if not organized appropriately, they could also destroy the race. It was for those reasons that Tupac helped to formulate a philosophy for those living the Thug Life. The philosophy was constructed as an educational and organizing tool.

With the advice and support of Mutulu Shakur, Geronimo Pratt, Watani Tyehimba, and gang members, the “Code of Thug Life” was developed and Tupac agreed to become its spokesman (interview with W. Tyehimba, 2008). The Code was premised on the recognition that the social conditions of thugs would not change soon and that Thug Life was predatory. The Code further acknowledged that gang life sometimes encompassed violence, criminal activity, and disputes among members. Appropriately, it called on gang members to protect the most vulnerable people in the Black community. Using the language of the hip hop community, some of the tenets of Thug Life were as follows (Joseph, 2006):

- Slinging to children is against the Code.
- Having children slinging is against the Code.
- No slinging in schools.
- Crew leader and posse should select a diplomat, and should work ways to settle disputes.
- The Boys in Blue don’t run nothing; we do. Control the Hood, and make it safe for squares.
- No slinging to pregnant sisters. That’s baby killing; that’s genocide.
- Civilians are not targets and should be spared.
- Our old folks must not be abused. (p. 37)

The Code of Thug Life was designed to politicize gang members and get them ready for armed rebellion to oppose racist and economic oppression (“Interview w/ Hip-Hop Icons,” 1996). Tupac promoted the Code by traveling to major cities, with his group Thug Life, and meeting with gang leaders to advocate its acceptance. In addition to promoting the Code, Tupac also asked gang members to establish local “Code Foundations,” as a vehicle to raise funds for youth. Tupac often warned his audience of gang members that in order to effectively challenge the system and provide support for young people, a reduction in violence was required.

There is evidence that the Thug Life concept and strategy resulted in the transformation of some gang members. "Monster" Kody Scott, a former leader of the Crips gang of Los Angeles, changed his name to Sanyika Shakur and joined the New Afrikan Independence Movement. After the Los Angeles rebellion in 1992, the Bloods, a rival gang, joined the Crips to sign the Code of Thug Life. They later worked together to develop community improvement plans (S. Shakur, 1994). "In Brooklyn, a summit of gangsters and thugs also agreed to honor the code" (Joseph, 2006, p. 38).

Amid Tupac's Thug Life campaign, the activist-rapper was convicted of sexual assault and sentenced to 1½ to 4 years in prison, with bail set for \$3 million. Tupac began serving his sentence at New York Riker's Island Penitentiary on February 14 but was later transferred to the Clinton Correctional Facility. While incarcerated, Tupac received an offer from Suge Knight, cofounder and CEO of Death Row Records, to join his label, in return for assistance with payment of his bail. Suge Knight was known for his affiliation within the Bloods Street Gang of Los Angeles and unsavory business practices, which included physical threats and altercations with artists to retain a larger share of the profits (Ro, 1999). Tupac's New Afrikan comrades urged him not to sign with Death Row Records, but Tupac accepted the deal. After serving 8 months of his sentence, Tupac was released on bail for \$1.4 million (Joseph, 2006).

The association with Suge Knight proved to be detrimental. After Tupac was discharged, he became engaged in endless public confrontations and altercations. He released a song, "Hit Em Up," in which he spits vengeful and mean-spirited lyrics about an alleged affair with the wife of Notorious B.I.G. and advocates violence against his East Coast rivals, specifically Puffy Combs and Notorious B.I.G., both of whom he believed were responsible for an attack on his life. On September 4, 1996, Tupac was also involved in an altercation in New York at an MTV Music Awards show. A few days later, the night of his own shooting that eventually led to his death, Tupac initiated a fight with Crips gang member Orlando Patterson.

Even still, while engaging in destructive behavior, Tupac continued his political work. Rooted in the activism of his past, Tupac joined entertainment with politics during this fifth and final period. He also worked to mend some of his broken relationships and end the bicoastal feud with East Coast rap entertainers, as he grew to understand the destructive nature of the conflict to the hip hop community and urban youth.

In 1995, Tupac founded the Outlawz, a rap group, with a purpose similar to Thug Life. The term *Outlawz* stood for Operating Under Thug Laws as Warriors. Big Sykes, a member of the group, commented on how Tupac's influence motivated him to become more educated, stating, "I feel what Pac gave to me and gave to a lot of these cats is that you can be street but you can

be smart too. . . . That's what made me start reading books. I wasn't reading no books, but the more I started dissecting him, the more I started seeing what all his game was coming from" (Dyson, 2001, p. 100). Tupac's ability to persuade spread beyond members of his new group. Rapper Snoop Dogg joined Tupac in Los Angeles at a rally sponsored by the Brotherhood Crusade to urge hip hop fans to vote and to fight against an anti-affirmative action initiative. During the rally, Tupac said, "My record sales, we've got 6 million, Snoop's got 4 million. . . . If we could represent that many votes, we've got to let these politicians be scared of us" ("Tupac Shakur Urges," 1996). He also embarked on the "One Nation" project, designed to become a unified front of artists from various genres of music. Shakur had begun to organize an album that would include East Coast and West Coast groups, but he died before the project was completed (Joseph, 2006). Tupac also made other efforts to weaken the bicoastal hostility. Concerning his conflict with Biggie, Tupac told Kevin Powell (1998), "Regardless of all this stuff—no matter what he say, what I say—Biggie's still my brother. He's Black. He's my brother. We just have a conflict of interest. We have a difference of opinion" (p. 80). Then, after being asked if the disagreement between him and East Coast rappers could lead to violence, Tupac stated,

I don't want it to be about violence. I want it to be about money. I told Suge my idea: Bad Boy make a record with all the East Coast ni*gas. Death Row make a record with all the West Coast ni*gas. We drop the records on the same day. Whoever sell the most records, that's who the bombast. And then we stop battling. We could do pay for views for charity, for the community. (p. 80)

Tupac also reached out to rap artist Nas, considered another rival. At the 1996 MTV Awards after-party, Tupac told Nas that they needed to end their "beef," which stemmed from Tupac's erroneous belief that Nas had attacked him on record. Soon thereafter, both rappers began to attack each other publicly. However, that evening, Tupac broke the standoff by saying to Nas, "Me and you, we brothers. Me and you, we aren't supposed to ever go at it" (Monjauze et al., 2008, p. 121). Then, Tupac said he would remove the criticisms about Nas from his *Makaveli* album and work to bring them together. According to Nas, "He talked about maybe meeting in Vegas the weekend of the Tyson fight so we could keep talking cause he believed that we were the two to bring it all together" (p. 121). Nas described Tupac as a community person and said, "If he were still here, he'd have inspired me to become more active" (p. 121). In Las Vegas, on September 7, 1996, Tupac was shot several times as he rode in a car with Suge Knight. After a 6-day fight for his life, Tupac died on September 13, 1996.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the political activism of Tupac Shakur. By unpacking his political ideas and authentic activism from the records of his life, this analysis complicates previous characterizations of Tupac as simply a gangster rapper. Tupac Shakur was important to the hip hop community and urban youth, not only because of his lyrical style or musical contributions. Tupac became their political advocate, educator, and motivator. One might argue that his greatest contribution was to educate and motivate his peers to become activists in defense of themselves. Certainly, Tupac's real-life issues, including drug and alcohol abuse (Jones & Spirer, 2002), interfered with his endeavor to become a consistent activist. It is also possible that the instability of his childhood presented additional obstacles. Nevertheless, Tupac's life and political advocacy prove that hip hop music and activism are not mutually exclusive. Unlike the example set by many "conscious" and gangster-oriented rappers, Tupac's political work reveals his aspiration for social change. Tupac undoubtedly understood that society would not address the concerns of the poor, impoverished, and dispossessed because a conscious rap song was produced. Certainly, many critiques of Tupac have merit. Some of his lyrics were offensive and many of his actions questionable. Notwithstanding his flaws, it is important that the discourse on Tupac Shakur include his full body of work and experiences.

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Bio

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