



Politics of Protest: Tupac and Thug Life

by Malcolm Tariq

American rapper Tupac Amaru Shakur is often cited as one of the most prolific

and influential artists in his genre, a title that he received more in death than in life. His lyrics are reflective of the “gritty tales of thug life” and meditations on “love and loss, life and death” (Bradley 511). Still, Tupac is often criticized for his violent, misogynistic, and sometimes profane lyrics. A frequent response to this criticism is that Tupac was a much more complex person than the public could imagine. The son of a Black Panther, Tupac definitely embraced the ideas that drove the Black Panther Party and remained conscious of political and social issues surrounding privilege, race, and politics in American society, specifically those concerning African-Americans. To further advocate for the concepts of protest that he spoke about in his music is reflected in the ideologies behind his notion of Thug Life. Although, Tupac’s Thug Life is often criticized as being associated with a gangster agenda, close interpretation of his lyrics and interviews portray the concept as a revolutionary tactic to connect with African-Americans, particularly the younger generation, and empower them to act as a community to overcome struggles penned against them.

In her book, *When Rap Music Had a Conscience: The Artists, Organizations and Historic Events that Inspired and Influenced the Golden Age of Hip-Hop from 1987-1996*, Tayannah Lee McQuillar declares that Tupac’s most conscience material was recorded earlier in his career. Although this claim may be criticized by music historians and scholars who assert that Tupac represented an entire conscious movement throughout and after his life, it is certain that the rapper made a distinct appeal to the music scene with his first studio album, *2Pacalypse Now* (1991). The first single to appear from this album was “Brenda’s Got a Baby.” The song tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl from a neglected home who becomes pregnant with her

cousin’s child. The first part of the verse reads:

I hear Brenda’s got a baby, but Brenda’s barely got a brain
A damn shame, the girl can hardly spell her name
(That’s not our problem, that’s up to Brenda’s family)
Well let me show you how it affects the whole community
Now Brenda really never knew her moms
And her dad was a junkie putting death into his arms,
It’s sad, ‘cause I bet Brenda doesn’t even know
Just ‘cause you’re in the ghetto doesn’t mean you can’t grow

An important feature to note about this song is that Tupac delivers it as one long verse with no interrupting choruses. In this way, the song becomes narrative and more relatable to those listening to his words, the majority of whom is most likely to be young African-Americans who live in similar neighborhoods as Brenda. The song itself is marked by brilliance in its treatment of poverty, specifically positioning Brenda as the main character in such a personal story that consequently becomes something more relatable to listeners. Tupac first introduces Brenda’s primary situation: “I hear Brenda’s got a baby, but Brenda’s barely got a brain.” Not only is Brenda pregnant, but she also does not perform on the educational level that she should. Tupac then addresses those that might say that Brenda’s situation should concern no one outside of her family: “Well, let me tell you how it affects the whole community.” Tupac’s claim here is that grave concerns of the individual are often concerns of an entire group. In this instant, Brenda’s small problem affects her entire community. Still, despite Brenda’s painstaking story, Tupac offers words of encouragement: “Just ‘cause you’re in the ghetto doesn’t mean you can’t grow.” These two themes,

the collective of the community and rising above poverty, are greatly rooted in much of his material.

Like “Breanda,” Tupac’s second single, “Trapped,” addresses concerns related to growing up in the ghetto and the condition of the black community. “Trapped” is different from “Brenda,” however, in that it focuses on the experience of the young, black male:

You know they got me trapped in this
prison of seclusion
Happiness, living on the streets is a
delusion
Even a smooth criminal one day must
get caught
Shot up or shot down with the bullet
that he bought
Nine millimeter kicking thinking about
what the streets do to me
‘Cause they never talk peace in the
black community

This particular segment of the verse is heavily packed by claims made by the artist. First, he mentions the “prison of seclusion,” which is meant to symbolize the ghetto, or the low-income area where he lives. In the second bar, we learn that “living,” or making a living, on the streets in the ghetto is not something desirable, though it seems to be. Moreover, he makes stakes to the claim that “even a smooth criminal one day must get caught,” asserting that this life “on the streets” is a dangerous venture and will not result in anything fruitful.

Despite Tupac’s claim that residents “never talk peace in the black community,” a portion of the remainder of the verse goes on to not encourage this cycle of violence and tolerance of police brutality:

Over the years I done a lot of growing
up
Getting drunk, throwing up, cuffed up
Then I said I had enough
There must be another route, way out
To money and fame, I changed my
name
And played a different game
Tired of being trapped in this vicious
cycle
If one more cop harasses me I just
might go psycho

These lyrics obviously emerge as personal experience from the artist, as he’s “done a lot of growing up.” In this way, he is encouraging other youth to make the changes he made in order to access “money and fame,” or a viable means to success. Tupac’s commitment to uplift his community is what distinguishes him as a revolutionary artist for his time.

2pacalypse definitely marked Tupac as a revolutionary for his incorporation of relevant issues in his art. The album also saw the rise of more protest manifestations from the rapper. During the production of his next studio album, Tupac began to embrace Thug Life, a theme that would stay connected to him for years. In the wake of Tupac’s next album, he began to outspokenly become the poster child for Thug Life. As described by

Kevin Powell in a Vibe story, Thug Life was Tupac’s “mission for the black community.” According to the rapper, it represented several things: “a support group, a rap act, and a philosophy” (Reeves 162) Marcus Reeves says that “[the] philosophy was that black folks were the thugs of society—“thugs” meaning social underdogs as opposed to criminals. And as thugs, they would rise up to gain power over their lives and their communities” (162-163).

When asked in a 1994 interview by Abbie Kearshe how he thought hip-hop evolved from the earlier messages presented by Grand Master Flash to where rappers were in the present, Tupac responded:

“We asked ten years ago. We was asking with the Panthers. We was asking with them, you know, the Civil Rights Movement. We was asking. Now those people that were asking, they’re all dead and in jail so what do you think we’re going to do?”

Tupac became devoted to the ideology that he and his comrades should become actual thugs if society wanted to perceive young people from the ghetto as such. The mechanism behind the reframing of the word is definitely one of protest. As stated in his quote above, Tupac saw Thug Life as a sort of continuation of the Civil Rights Movement and the ideas of the Black Panther Party. In this way, the concept could have even possibly been powered with intentions to function as a movement itself.

As creator of the concept, Tupac assumed the position as its spokesperson, and had the phrase T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E tattooed across his abdomen. According to Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois the acronym stood for “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody” (512). This acronym reflects sentiments of those found in “Brenda’s Got a Baby” when Tupac says that Brenda’s situation affected the whole community. Tupac’s idea in the meaning behind the words that made up T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. was that society’s perception and treatment of children who live in the ghetto has negative implications for everyone living there because those children eventually grow up to be adults. Thus, “The Hate U Give Little Infants” contributes to a cycle of perpetual drug abuse, unemployment, and violence in marginalized communities.

But Tupac also envisioned another agency for Thug Life. In the interview with Abbie Kearshe, he said:

“[When] I say ‘I live a thug life. Baby, I’m hopeless’, one person might hear that and just like the way it sound. [...] I’m doing it for the kid that really lives a thug life and feels like it’s hopeless. So when I say hopeless, when I say it like that, it’s like I’m reaching. [...] [For] the person that I was trying to reach, he’ll pick it up and I’ll be able to talk to the kid.”

The other side of Tupac’s intention for Thug Life was that it would serve as something that young people who lived as he did as a teenager had something or someone to relate to. Like he did with much of his protest work, Tupac was concerned with connecting with the people who listened to his music, especially those that lived in the ghetto. He wanted to empower them to grow beyond where they came

from. Both of these intentions of Thug Life immersed in his next studio album.

Consistent with his protest agenda, Tupac presented a new initiative in his second studio album. In *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z* (1993), he introduced the name that he mentioned in "Trapped" ("To money and fame, I changed my name/And played a different game"). Derived from "nigger," the derogatory term used to describe African-Americans, Tupac endorsed the use of "nigga." He saw the word as a term to refer to other African-American, particularly those in the ghetto. Tupac's aim for the word definitely became clear on his sixth posthumous studio album, *Loyal to the Game* (2004). Included on the album is a song with rapper Jadakiss titled, "N.I.G.G.A (Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished)." In *Strictly's* title track, "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z," Tupac says:

I was framed, so don't make the same mistake, nigga
You gotta learn how to shake the snakes, nigga
Cause the police love to break a nigga
Send em upstate cause they straight-up hate the niggaz
So what I do is get a crew of zoo niggaz
Straight fools into rules and do niggaz

Again, Tupac speaks the words in this song as if he was personally having a conversation with the listener. In this song specifically, he is addressing the listener as "nigga," a term of familiarity to him, because most of his listeners are from the ghetto as is he. Moreover, this song is reflective of "Trapped" in that it talks about the police trying to "break a nigga," or mistreat young black men like the artist. In the Abbie Kearsse interview, Tupac profoundly said that he didn't know how to change the world, but that he knew that if he truthfully talked about the conditions of his community that someone listening to him would be inspired to make the necessary changes. Tupac's music was the contribution that he was making to see that change. Marcus Reeves said:

"But what distinguished Tupac from his radically hardcore colleagues was his mindful expression of pain from living in the inner city. He didn't just rap about the problems of the ghetto or decry the conditions; he took listeners into the lives and souls of people affected by the environment." (160)

Tupac's Thug Life persona was a method to relate to listeners in his community. But, as Reeves indicates, it was also a technique to take unknowledgeable listeners into his community, or to broadcast the condition of the ghetto to people who were ignorant toward them. The ideas behind his ideology are radical and agents of social change. Thug Life was a sentiment of a protest tradition of reframing weapons used against a person or group into something by which could bring about positive revolutionary change for that individual or group. It is in this progressive heritage that Tupac should be recognized for not only his

contribution to the protest tradition, but in his passion to bring unity to his community in the process.

*This feature is representative of a larger work that is still in progress.

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