From Poetry to Rap: The Lyrics of Tupac Shakur

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Abstract
Growing up in the Bronx and Harlem, Tupac learned and excelled in the verbal dexterity and exuberances that characterize African American working class speech culture. At the same time Tupac also absorbed influences from his mother’s political past. From Afeni, from Afeni’s husband Lumumba Shakur, and from Lumumba’s brother, Muula Shakur, all former Black Panther activists, Tupac learned to believe that racism, economic discrimination and other forms of oppression contributed to the poverty and powerlessness of working class Blacks.

Tupac Shakur’s death on Friday, September 13, 1996, at the early age of 25, brought to an end a complex life marked both by personal controversy and artistic success. His impressive achievements include six solo rap albums, over 30 singles, starring or significant roles in six movies and a body of poems anthologized as The Rose that Grew from Concrete and published posthumously by his mother, Afeni Shakur. Tupac was clearly a performer with multi-dimensional abilities whose contributions to his art deserve to be studied from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints (see Armond White, 1997). This paper is meant to contribute to that effort. It will focus on comparing linguistic and discourse features of Tupac’s poetry with the lyrics of the raps in his debut album 2Pacalypse Now with a view to explaining his success as a rapper compared to his limited impact as a poet. First, I propose that Tupac’s upbringing contributed to his complex personal and artistic behavior and also to the central differences between his raps and his poetry. Then I compare and contrast the poems and raps in terms of topics, style, and content. Finally, I offer some general hypotheses about the reasons for the success of the raps compared to the indifferent reception of the poems.

Tupac was born in 1971 and raised in poor inner-city neighborhoods in New York. His father, Billy Garland, as well as his mother Afeni Shakur, had been significant figures in the Black Panther Movement of the 1960s. Thus, from the beginning Tupac was immersed in the culture of the African American urban working class while simultaneously being influenced by the political views, militant passions, and wider social exposure of his mother and her Black Panther colleagues.

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But there was a countervailing influence that contributed to the uniqueness of Tupac’s education. This was that Tupac’s mother encouraged her son to develop his creative and expressive capabilities within a traditional, conservative, educative ethos. To this end, she enrolled him in a drama school in Harlem, the 127th Street Ensemble, at the age of twelve. Here Tupac learned acting and other performance skills. Thus, from early on Tupac was taught to succeed in two different worlds: in the ethos of formal schooling in the creative arts where standard English, formal education, recitation, declamation and print poetry are the norms; and in the palpably real vernacular world of the urban “hood” with its distinctive oral traditions, its religiosity, and its culture of survival, struggle, and celebration. These often-contradictory elements seem to be represented in Tupac’s raps and poetry and provide explanatory principles for his work.

In 1985, when Tupac was fourteen, his mother moved the family to Baltimore, Maryland, partly to escape the poverty and difficulties of New York. In Baltimore, Afeni enrolled Tupac in the Baltimore School for the Performing Arts, where Tupac continued the performance education he began in Harlem. The school nourished his creativity and histrionic abilities and allowed him to shape his talent for and interest in composing and performing rap lyrics. It was during this period that he wrote his first rap pieces and named himself “MC New York.” Again, we see Tupac spanning the two disparate worlds. He is quoted as saying, “That school was saving me... I was writing poetry and shit and I became known as MC New York because I was rapping and doing the acting thing.”

In June 1988 Afeni Shakur again moved her family, this time to Marin City, California, forcing Tupac, then seventeen, to leave the Baltimore School for the Performing Arts before graduating. It was in California that in 1989 Tupac formed his first rap group, “Strictly Dope,” with Leila Steinberg as his manager and Anton Gregory as his producer. This move to Marin marked the end of Tupac’s formal training in theatre and poetry and, consequently, the end of the period when he moved between the contrasting worlds of dramatic make-believe and the real world of the urban poverty. For the first time, too, he moved away from the immediate influence of his mother and overtly into a life of petty crime. I believe this almost total immersion into the urban vernacular culture accelerated Tupac’s inevitable artistic development into a rapper rather than a traditional poet. I suggest that Tupac’s daily life in the rough battleground of urban poverty, coupled with the social and political ideas learned from his parents and their political associates led him to express his art through rap rather than poetry. It is interesting, however, as a further example of the juxtaposition of his two selves that the poems collected in The Rose that Grew from Concrete were written between 1989 and 1991, precisely when he was developing his rap career. The claim I’m making in this paper is that the poems in The Rose that Grew from Concrete and the lyrics of Tupac’s raps— as represented in 2Pacalypse Now—respectively represent idealizations of the separate, different worlds that Tupac inhabited and mastered: the world of school and the world of the hood. Each body of compositions reveals important aspects of Tupac’s art and gives a different perspective on his talents.

The Poems

Of the 72 poems in The Rose that Grew from Concrete, 33—or almost 46 percent—are love poems, grouped in the second section of the anthology, entitled “Nothing can come between us.” These love poems display a sensitivity and vulnerability that contrasts sharply with the harsh “thug” persona that characterizes the Tupac we experience in his rap songs. Some of these poems are quite accomplished. Witness the delicate restraint and lyrical tightness of the poems “The Power of a Smile”:

The power of a gun can kill
And the power of fire can burn
The power of wind can chill
And the power of the mind can learn
The power of anger can rage
Inside until it tears u apart
But the Power of a Smile
Especially yours can heal a frozen Heart

And then, in “Things that make my heart break”:

Things that make hearts break,
Pretty smilie
Deceiving laughs
And people who dream with their eyes open
Lonely children
Unanswered cries
And souls who have given up hoping

The poem “Wife 4 Life” is colloquial, charming, and disarming:

I hope u heard me when I asked
U that night 2 be my wife
Not for this year or next
But mine for all your life
2 accept me when I sin
Not 2 mention standing the rain
Which comes down as hard as hail
I am not the best of men
My faults could scare the night
But my heart is always pure 2 my wife 4 life


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Tupac’s voice in these love poems is self-assured; his poetic vision insightful. The poems convey an optimism and vulnerability, which stands in stark contrast to the realities of Tupac’s daily life. The idealism in these poems is expressed in the recurring naturalistic imagery. In contrast to the bareness of the urban ‘hood,’ these poems are full of references to fresh air, green trees, dawn, nature, rivers and flowers. It’s obvious, also, that the poems were written to be read: their formal structure and ideographic features suggest a visual orientation. Note, too, that the poems are all written in Standard English, are completely devoid of swear words and slang expressions. Absent, too, is the passion and urgency we find in the raps.

A major recurring theme of the poems is the heart as Tupac’s emotional center. Thus, there are numerous references to pain of the heart, heartbreak, love, tears, joy, and other expressions of youthful love or infatuation. This sentimental persona contrasts starkly with the thug roles Tupac embraced artistically and in reality later in his raps. In the love poems in The Rose that Grew from Concrete Tupac’s classical training can be felt through the many references to fairy tales and Greek mythology, especially tales of Cupid. A re-occurring motif in the love poems is a star as the symbol of hope. Together these poems could be seen as an island of artistic escape from the social and economic harshness of what must have been Tupac’s daily experience: a mother battling against drug addiction, a life without his father, and poverty. But I see these poems as externalizing a central part of Tupac’s inner life. He was a complex man and allowed the full range of his complexity to be expressed in his art.

The anthology has three additional sections; namely, “The Rose That Grew from Concrete,” “Just a Breath of Freedom,” and “Liberty Needs Glasses.” The poems in “The rose that grew from concrete,” the first section, are essentially autobiographical. In the title piece, “The rose that grew from concrete,” Tupac celebrates his artistic success despite the odds against him:

Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete
Proving nature’s laws wrong it learned 2 walk without having feet
Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams
it learned 2 breathe fresh air
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else even cared

Notice the restraint in this poem. It is less a boast than a reflection on the possibilities of human strengths. In the poem “In the depths of Solitude” Tupac writes about yearning to be accepted and respected while never compromising himself. Tellingly, he recognizes his own contradictory complexity.

This Duo within me causes
The perfect opportunity
2 learn and live twice as fast
as those who accept simplicity

In “Life Through My Eyes” Tupac gives us a glimpse of the world of his every day experience. He writes:

Life through my bloodshot eyes
would scare a square 2 death
poverty, murder, violence
and never a moment 2 rest.

The section “Just a Breath of Freedom” includes three poems that reveal the strong bond of love between Tupac and his mother, and his anguish for her struggle against poverty and drugs. In “When Ure Hero Falls” he bemoans his mother’s weakened physical or emotional condition:

“When ure Hero falls so do the stars/
And so does the perception of tomorrow.”

In “U R Ripping Us Apart” he blames crack cocaine for defeating his mother and weakening the bond between mother and son;

I know the worst is here
I feel it in my heart
U got into the circle
Now you’re ripping us apart.

In “A River That Flows Forever” he assures his mother that,

As long as u R with me
We’ll ride the River Together.

In the section, “Just a Breath of Freedom,” we begin to see the militant side of Tupac. In the title poem he celebrates the release of Nelson Mandela from prison.

Held captive 4 your politics
They wanted to break your soul
They ordered the extermination
Of all minds they couldn’t control.

In “For Mrs. Hawkins” Tupac addresses the mother of his friend Yusef who was killed by a white man. He promises ominously,

But Mrs. Hawkins as sure as I’m a Panther
With the blood of Malcolm in my veins
America will never rest
If Yusef dies in vain!

In Fallen Star he eulogizes Huey P. Newton, one of the central figures in the Black Panther movement:
They could never understand
What a set out 2 do
Instead they chose 2
Ridicule u
When you got weak
They loved the sight
Of your dimming
And flickering starlight.

In the final section of the collection, entitled “Liberty Needs Glasses” we glimpse the Tupac who emerged in most of his rap songs. In four of the nine poems in this section, Tupac inveighs against social injustice, oppression and hopelessness. In the title poem he asserts:

Excuse me but Lady Liberty needs glasses
And so does Mr Justice by her side.
Justice stubbed her big toe on Mandela
And liberty was misquoted by the Indians
Slavery was a learning phase
Forgotten without a verdict
While Justice is on a rampage
4 endangered surviving Black males.

Note the catholicity of the focus. In this poem, and in others, Tupac pleads for justice worldwide, whereas in his raps he essentially focuses on the specific injustices in the Black community. The poems “How can we be free,” and “The promise” repeat the theme of “Liberty needs glasses,” presenting a society that fails to provide real liberty and economic opportunity for minorities. However, in the most moving of the pieces in this section, “And 2morrow”, we see a hopeful persona who overcomes his anger and looks to a promising future.

Today is filled with anger
Fueled with hidden hate
Scared of being outcast
Afraid of common fate
Today is built on tragedies
Which no one wants 2 face
Nightmares 2 humanities
And morally disgraced....
But 2morrow I c change
A chance 2 build anew
Built on spirit, intent of heart
Ideals based on truth
And 2morrow I wake with a second wind
And strong because of pride
2 know I fought with all my heart 2 keep my dream alive.

In this final section of the anthology, too, Tupac is absorbed with his own personal destiny. In “No-Win” he sees himself backed into a corner with his manhood at stake. He declares himself to be able to kill to survive if he must.

The final poem in the section and in the book “In the event of my demise” is a hauntingly sad piece that foreshadowed Tupac’s early, tragic death:

I hope I die for a principle
Or a belief that I had lived 4
I will die before my time
Because I feel the shadow’s depth
So much I wanted to accomplish
Before I reached my death
I have come 2 grips with the possibility
And wiped the last tear from my eyes
I loved all who were positive
In the event of my demise.

The poems in the anthology reveal that at age 19, Tupac was a young man of unusual social intelligence who possessed a gift for communicating his ideas in verse. My sense is that Tupac was on his way to finding his voice as a lyrical poet but chose to interrupt that development in favor of his career as a rap artist. This choice seems inevitable since his personal history up to 1989 had prepared Tupac more viscerally to be a rapper than a formal poet. He had lived the life of a poor young Black male in inner cities on the East and West coasts; he understood the struggles, temptations, triumphs and strength of the urban poor; and he knew the sense of oppression that racial and economic discrimination engenders in most members of these communities. By this time Tupac had gained first-hand knowledge of central behaviors in the urban “hood”, including its rich vernacular language, its thug subculture and the crime, violence and nihilism which result from poverty and social neglect. He had internalized and begun to practice the philosophy of revolutionary militancy to which his mother and step father had introduced him. To that end he had joined and in 1989 became chairman of The New African Panthers, “an organization of black youth determined to honor the goals of the original Panthers without duplicating their mistakes” (White 1997: 213). Tupac must have seen rap as the natural vehicle for both displaying his poetic talents and voicing his social commentary.

The Raps

By the time Tupac turned his artistic attention principally to rap, the genre was already accepted as a form of “folk-poetry.” As Brent Wood (1999:130) points out, “Rap meets most of the criteria normally associated with folk-poetry in English: no formal music or literary training is required, there is a relatively free borrowing of music and words between practitioners. it is often locally-oriented, it does not assume literacy and there is a union rather than separation of music, dance and lyric.” Some of rap’s precursors provided Tupac with a model for poetically expressed social commentary that was meant to be heard rather than read. The Los Angeles-based Watts Prophets, for instance, had re-
corded the album *Rappin Black in a White World* in 1971 in which political commentary was delivered on stage in poetic form; and the group the Last Poets recorded in the 1970s such politically charged poems as “Niggers are scared of revolution,” “When revolution comes,” and “Run nigger” to the tune of drumbeats. According to Rose (1994:2), rap had emerged in the mid-1970s, “as a Black cultural expression that prioritizes Black voices from the margins of urban America.” Rose points out that “rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator.”

The content and delivery of Tupac’s raps locate his material in the category of gangsta rap defined by Morrison (forthcoming) as “a music of rebellion and anger that developed in response to a racist and nihilistic society.” More specifically, Tupac specialized in narratives that involved what Boyd (1997:69) refers to as “G culture” and describes as a cultural movement “geographically specific to the West Coast, especially Los Angeles… composed of fictional as well as real-life occurrences, mediated as well as non-mediated events” (quote taken from Morrison, forthcoming). By 1971, Gangsta rappers such as Public Enemy, Ice-T and Ice Cube had begun to rap about the bleak economic conditions in Black inner-city neighborhoods, and to use the rap medium to draw attention to racism, police brutality and other oppressive behaviors practiced against working-class African Americans. These gangsta rappers introduced and conventionalized the use of the street vernacular to convey informality and linguistic authenticity, and graphic, obscene language partly as means of communicating anger, outrage and “realness” to audiences of young, urban Blacks. Such groups as NWA and 2Live Crew had also demonstrated, unhappily, that obscenity, misogyny and homophobia in rap lyrics increased record sales. It is into this burgeoning rap culture that Tupac Shakur, an unpublished, unproven amateur poet, actor and budding rapper came to try to make his name in 1990. His success was almost immediate. His first solo album, *2Pacalypse Now*, went gold and the cut *Brenda’s Got a Baby* became a major hit and established Tupac as a preeminent rap star. What explains this success?

Although there are clear similarities between the body of poetry Tupac had already produced and the lyrics of his raps, we see in the latter a radical shift of focus, themes, language and rhetoric; and a new, fierce identification with the inner-city and the issues and behaviors that define it. We also see more clearly in his raps the contours of the psychic complexity we had noted in his poetry. This complexity has become a defining property of the perceptions of Tupac.

White (1997:56) points out that *2Pacalypse Now* “revealed cultural indebtedness with almost disarming naiveté… writing and recording this album was [Tupac’s] artistic answer to the political principles taught by Afeni and Mutula, Rev. Daughtery and Public Enemy.” The raps on this album focus fiercely and relentlessly on the experiences, characters, issues, social philosophy and drama of the Black neighborhoods Tupac had grown up in and knew intimately. Thus, his work achieved an immediacy and connectivity with his audience that his poetry lacked. Informal discourse analyses of some of the cuts on the album tell the story. The first cut, “Young Black Male,” announces the dramatic difference between Tupac’s poetic and rap personas. The first line is “hard like an erection” delivered with high energy and defiance. The rap presents the protagonist as a DJ living the thug life. He is hard, dangerous and armed. He is misogynous and mercenary; thus he is getting paid, getting laid, and getting drunk. The rap is wicked and wild, full of the verbal exuberance that was absent from the poems.

The language is the AAVE vernacular, generously laced with street slang and dripping with attitude. In this very first rap Tupac uses the “F word” four times compared to zero in the complete book of poems, and he starkly paints a picture of the thug that is unflattering but real both in terms of the verbal sketches and the dialogue. This rap is clearly addressed to the audience described by Warner (1999) as Poor Inner-City Youth (PYT).

The second cut, “Trapped,” is addressed to the members of the G culture, since it discusses both real-as-life and fictional gang events. It communicates Tupac’s understanding of and visceral connection to the mind set of a typical young black male in the hood: a feeling of being trapped and oppressed:

*You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion*  
*Happiness, living on the streets is a delusion.*

Tupac describes the oppressive life of a thug: the continuous dehumanizing harassment by police often leading to fatal confrontations; the constant pressure to assert his manhood by fighting or shooting individuals who disrespect him; the fugitive existence; the sense of hopelessness; the inevitable incarceration; and the frequent contemplation of suicide as the manly response to humiliation of prison life:

*What do I do?*  
*Live my life in a prison cell*  
*I’d rather die than be trapped in living hell.*
These lines encode a chronic fatalism, yet the rap’s chorus asserts repeatedly, “They can’t keep the black man down.” Thus we are impelled to ask ourselves: Is the chorus a mocking reminder that the rhetoric of resistance is empty in the face of the destiny that awaits the Black male? Or is the chorus a rallying cry for the revolution? “Trapped” fuses social observation, social critique and poignant, dramatic description:

Even a smooth criminal one day must be caught
Shot up or down with the bullets that he bought
Nine millimeter kicking, thinking about what the streets do to me
Cause they never talk peace in the Black community
All they know is violence, do the job in silence
Walk the city streets like a rat pack of tenants
Too many brothers heading for the big pen
Niggas coming out worse than they went in.

Freed from the metrical restrictions of formal print poetry and writing within the freer boundaries of folk poetry, Tupac is able to communicate the complex worldview of the thug with passion and realness. The thug’s emotional experiences are complex; they include loneliness and hopelessness but also defiance: “If one more cop harasses me I might go psycho.”

“Trapped” displays the special talent Tupac had acquired for painting verbal pictures that capture the essence of life in the ‘hood and converts into drama the lived experiences of its young male inhabitants. The lines,

Now I’m trapped and want to find a getaway
All I need is a G and somewhere safe to stay
Can’t use the phone
Cause I’m sure someone’s tappin in
did it before
Ain’t scared to use my gat again

capture the desperation of a Bigger Thomas-like figure fleeing justice but prepared to die fighting if confronted. It is this ability to “make it real” that distinguishes Tupac from other rappers. The notion of reality has to do, also, with the fact that Tupac, in embracing the rap medium, began to locate his lyrics within the communication traditions of the African American community where adventure narratives, tall-tales, boasts, “running it down,” sounding and signify are styles of talking (Kochman, 1971). “Trapped” includes boasts and “running it down” sequences.

The cut “Soulija’s Story” is another version of the thug life exposition. The title itself taps into the political semantics of the ‘hood by describing young Black males as soldiers in battle against the system (remember Sista Soulija?). The rap features a “soulija” whose mother is on drugs, whose father has abandoned the family, who is constantly “sweated” by cops who suspect him of dealing drugs, and who eventually kills a member of the drug task force, is caught and jailed. This “Soulija’s” younger brother, who also aspires to be a “soulija,” mounts a daring attack on the prison in an effort to free his brother and gets fatally shot in the head, and his older brother gets shot too. Here again Tupac captures poignantly in his lyrics the harried life of a young Black male but complicates our reception of this picture by showing us the bleak destiny that awaits the soulja if he succumbs to the life of a thug. The piece ends thus:

I caught a bullet in the head, the scream never left my mouth
my brother caught a bullet too
I think he gon pull through, he deserve to
The fast life ain’t everthing they told ya
Never get much older, following the tracks of a soulja.

The cut “Word of Wisdom” does not resonate with the ambiguity of the two raps discussed above. It is a straight indictment of America for killing off young black males in the ‘hoods. “One by one,” and a call to action for these young black males to fight back. The battle against this genocide, claims Tupac, is carried by such rappers as himself, Ice Cube, The Lynch Mob, Above the Law, Public Enemy, and by militants such as Mutula Shakur, Geronimo Pratt, and Assada Shakur. Though less complex, this rap fits into the ethnography of speaking, as a piece of “running it down” and clarifies the meaning of the word “Nigga,” an important aspect of Tupac’s political vocabulary. For him the word is an acronym for Never Ignorant; Getting Goals Accomplished.

The word “Nigga” shows up often in the raps on this album and in the work of rappers in general. “Crooked Ass Nigga” is a cut on this album on which Tupac, Stretch, Easy-E, and Ice Cube collaborate. The rappers scatologically present various scenarios with Crooked Niggas. Tupac declares:

| Crooked ass niggas come in all shapes and size |
| They wear disguises |
| Backstabin’’s what they specialize in |
| They’ll try to getcha, they’ll sweeten up to get in the picture |

But Tupac’s rap is made real by scenarios in which Tupac and Stretch each are involved in dramas in which they foil the attempts of various “Crooked ass Niggas” to rob them. This rap, along with “Lunatic,” “Violent,” “Rebel of the Underground” and “I don’t give a F-uck,” displays another side of Tupac’s artistic personality. In these latter raps he shows his mastery of “wooing” and boasting and dissing, all central parts of the African American speech system in which obscenity and aggressive language are required. They also show the...
dark side of Tupac’s personality: that he is capable of lurid thoughts and vengeful, cruel behavior.

These raps also have the political intent of giving vent to Tupac’s sense of outrage about the prejudices against young Blacks perpetrated by various establishment institutions including the CIA, FBI, Marin County Sheriff Department, the San Francisco Police Department and America in general. The sins Tupac inveighs against over and over again include the constant sweating of young Blacks by the police. The piece “Violent,” like “Trapped,” contains a dramatic confrontation between a defiant protagonist who refuses to submit to the police, although the odds are stacked against him and his “homies” are being shot to death. The point of this rap is to claim that the label “Violent” is typically attached to young Blacks who speak out against injustice. The drama is told in terse, fluid verse and communicates the fierce courage of the protagonist and his intention to keep fighting to the end. Unlike in “Trapped,” the protagonist is standing at the end, although he is clearly doomed. Thus, Tupac again sends us a complex message in “Violent.” The protagonist is doomed, either by virtue of the relentless and ineluctable push toward violence and crime that the society exerts on him, or by the dehumanizing culture that poverty promotes; or by the resistance he offers if he is a real nigga in the sense of Never Ignorant; Getting Goals Accomplished.

The 2Pacalypse Now album contains two cuts, “Part Time Mutha” and “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” which display Tupac’s complex responses to women. On the one hand, I think that Lucy Morrison’s (2000:1) comments are fair when she asserts that “Tupac’s lyrics are deeply ingrained with the misogyny and thug life so typical of gangsta rap...[and] Tupac’s music also reveals the white stereotypes that African American women have to fight to escape, revealing his own struggle and, perhaps, failure to defeat the African American male stereotype imposed upon him.” Certainly, Tupac has nasty things to say about women in “Young Black Male” and other cuts on this album.

However, also like Morrison, I’d like to propose that Tupac was also sensitive to the plight of poor African American women both as a group and as individuals. In “Part-time Mutha” he clearly sympathizes with the girl whose young dope-fiend mother was too preoccupied with her drug habit to take proper care of her daughter. The result is that her daughter was raped and made pregnant by her stepfather and lived in fear of discovery. Eventually the daughter had to tell her mother of the abuse only to be accused by her mother of seducing her rapist. Tupac’s narrative is terse, clear and poetic. Here’s the victim speaking:

I grew up in a home where no one liked me
Moms would hit the pipe, every night she would fight me
Poppa was a nasty old man, like the rest
He’s feeling on my chest, with his hand in my dress
Just another pest, and yes I was nervous
Blood sensor tests, I just don’t deserve this
I wanna tell mom, but would she listen
She’s bound to be bitchin if she hasn’t got a fix in
So... now I lay me down to sleep
Lord don’t let him rape me
If he does my soul to keep
Don’t let the devil take me
Gotta believe in him, and dissin her own daughter

Clearly there is empathy and sympathy in this characterization of the daughter’s fate.

This is true also of Tupac’s treatment of the central character of “Brenda Got a Baby”. The rap is the tale of a twelve-year-old girl whose parents were junkies and neglected her education. They didn’t pay her enough attention to prevent her from getting sexually involved with her cousin who made her pregnant. Brenda ended up having the baby without any support since her lover abandoned her. She threw the baby down an incinerator to get rid of it. Her life after that is the typical horror story for poor young Black girls with uncaring, drug dependent parents. She ends up in prostitution, after failing as a drug dealer. Tupac’s treatment of Brenda’s tale is insightful and sympathetic. Once again he captures in terse poetry the essence of the lived experience and thus connected viscerally with the life experiences of the inner city Black community. Tupac’s rendering of her final descent is starkly real, and sharply etched:

Now Brenda’s gotta make her own way
Can’t go to her family
They won’t let her stay
No money, no babysitter, she couldn’t keep a job
She tried to sell crack, but ended up getting robbed
So now what’s next, there ain’t nothing left to sell
So she sees sex as a way of earning bell
It’s paying the rent, so she really can’t complain
Prostitute, fair slang, and Brenda’s her name
She’s got a baby.

Thus, in the 2Pacalypse Now album we see the outlines of the uniqueness of Tupac’s talents and can infer the reasons for his success as a rapper. These reasons are both linguistic and perceptual:

a) The ability to articulate the experience of economic, social and racial oppression experienced in the inner city Black community with passion using the rhetoric he inherited from his education as the son and step son of former Black Panther militants.

b) His talent for coupling political and revolutionary rhetoric with dramatic scenarios that con-
nect with the actual and vicarious experiences of members of the hood. The effect was to communicate a sense of "realness."

c) His use of the typical speech styles of the African American community—boasting, woofing, running it down, and tall tales.

d) His ability to use AAVE grammar, rhythm, intonation and vocabulary to delivery his messages, making them sound real to urban Black youth. In this regard Tupac’s lyrics exhibited vernacular "lyrical fitness," a concept used by Morgan (2002) to explain the intrinsic standards of linguistic appropriateness recognized by in-group AAVE speakers and knowledgeable consumers of hip hop poetry.

e) The perception that he was an authentic member of the Black underclass that he rapped about. His personal confrontations with the establishment certified his "realness." Thus, many of his fans saw him as a victim of "player haters" in the sense of that expression defined in Smitherman (1994), i.e. "envious people who criticize others’ success" (Morgan 2001: 198).

f) The complexity of his responses to the realities of life in the "hood. I propose that this made Tupac seem palpably real to his audience.

I’d like to propose that (e) and (f), though non-linguistic, are as important, if not more important, than the others in explaining Tupac’s popularity as a rapper. In his raps, as in his personal life, Tupac moved agonizingly and contradictorily between embracing the values and behaviors of the thug life, and warning other young men to eschew this path. He also vacillated between nihilism and hope; between misogyny and reverence for women as expressed in raps like "Brenda’s Got a Baby” Keep ya Head up" and the phenomenally successful “Dear Mama”; between spitting out obscenities and lewd posturing in a cut like “Hit em up” and thoughtful expositions like “Words of Wisdom.” Through these public airing of his angst he came across as being truly honest, i.e., “real” to the audiences he addressed.

This quality of realness in Tupac’s work has not gone unnoticed by his fellow rappers. In an interview I recently had with him, the Detroit–based rapper “Eshan” said, “Tupac was real, man. He made you feel that you were there. He brought it home with sincerity” (personal communication, September 2001). In an article in Rolling Stone published on October 11, 1996, Kevin Powell concludes, “We may never find out who killed Tupac Shakur, or why he did the things he did and said what he said. All we have left are his music, his films, and his interviews. Shakur lived fast and hard and has died fast and hard. And in his own way, he kept it real for a lot of folks who didn’t believe that anyone like him (or like themselves) could do anything with his life” (my emphasis).

Tupac himself considered being real to be a very positive personal characteristic. In several raps in the 2Pacology album he refers to this quality, as he did in raps on other albums. For example, in the rap “Dear Mama” he praised his mother for “staying real.” In the song “Changes” on his Greatest Hits album he says, “it takes skill to be real.” Morgan (2001: 187) commented on the importance of “Realness” to the working-class African American culture in a recent article. She pointed out that “the music, sounds, and lyrics from some of Hip Hop’s most talented writers and performers has resulted in what has undeniably become the one cultural institution that urban youth rely on for representation, honesty—keeping it real—and leadership” (emphasis hers).

Note, however, the chilling deconstruction of the notion of realness that Quincy Jones offers in his Foreword to Vibe magazine’s anthology Tupac Shakur (1998). After praising Tupac for being “a fighter, a young man who constantly fought out demons and battled them—to his death.” Jones observes that “real is being shot four times with real bullets. Real is having to induce paralysis to stop you from ripping your guts out. Real is having a promising life cut short at 25 years of age by someone you might call ‘brother.’” I think Tupac would have agreed.

That Tupac’s contradictions are viewed positively by his fans is exemplified by this quote from the website www.makaveli.com that my assistant Boatama Nitiri found on August 24, 2001:

"2Pac had two sides to his music. Everyone knows he contradicted himself in his songs but this was the flavor that made Tupac who he was. Pac could sing songs of struggling to survive, and showing love to the people, his moma and kids, and then he’d turn around and become the heartless thug that could fuel songs like “Hit Em Up” and “When We Ride On Our Enemies.” This was what really made Tupac shine and sell... This was the power that most rappers just cannot hit today. He could take you from the cold bloody streets up to the mansion of gold. That was power. That is where it became complicated” (Strange, 1996: 84).

Strange (1996:84) also referred to Tupac’s contradictory impulses: “Many different people see Tupac as many different things: hustler, actor, thug, realist, lover, hater, opportunist. But in reality he is all of these. And while this observation may appear to make him unique,
it actually simplifies him into the universal symbol of young Black manhood that he is.”

Tupac acknowledged this dualism in himself. In an interview for Vibe (February, 1996) he admitted “Everybody’s at war with different things...I’m at war with my own heart sometimes.”

Among the apparent contradictions one finds in an analysis of the discourse in Tupac’s lyrics are the following:

- He displays a strong commitment for social change in his communities despite the paranoia and nihilism created within its borders.
- For all his fatalism, he still raps about improving the conditions of the lives of the young thugs coming after him.
- He recognizes that the vicious cycle of thug life will continue, but continues to offer encouragement that change is possible. Thus he:
  - challenges young g’s to break away from the gangsta lifestyle
  - challenges young Blacks to go out and do something positive with their lives
  - challenges his audience to “study your lessons,” ask questions, strive to do your best, keep your essence, stay calm under pressure (big themes in the poems)
  - repeatedly acknowledges his inability to sustain a long term relationship, yet expresses continued desire for one
  - recognizes his anger, but is quick to say that he doesn’t want to make excuses for it
  - identifies himself as psychotic and begs for help, but recognizes his inability to receive it

Whether or not his introspection and acknowledgment of personal responsibility are sincere, they are perceived as such by a large segment of urban youth as being real.

I conclude with the claim that Tupac Shakur’s literary talents, expressed in his book of poems, The Rose that Grew for Concrete, though considerable, were not fully developed at the time he wrote poetry. However, his verbal virtuosity, social intelligence along with his ambivalence, passion for reform, and artistic honesty found an appropriate outlet in gangsta rap. The raps in 2Pacalypse Now presaged the raps in the other albums by displaying the same mix of ideas as represented in the later work. It seems to me that Tupac was courageous enough to put all of himself out there. To lay it all on the line, so to speak. I suggest that this artistic integrity allowed the world to experience his brief brilliance.

References


**Discography**


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