

TRANS- HUMANITIES

Title : Tupac Amaru Shakur: A Communicator from the Margins

Author(s) : Eric DURHAM

Source : *Trans-Humanities*, Vol. 7 No. 1 (2014), pp. 119–137

Published by : Ewha Womans University Press

URL : <http://eiheng.ewha.ac.kr/page.asp?pageid=book10&pagenum=060600>

Online ISSN : 2383-9899

All articles in *Trans-Humanities* are linked to the Homepage of KCI and
Ewha Institute for the Humanities and can be downloaded:

www.kci.go.kr & <http://www.trans-humanities.org/>



이화여자대학교
EWHA WOMANS UNIVERSITY

Tupac Amaru Shakur: A Communicator from the Margins

Eric DURHAM (Hannam University)

Cops patrol projects and the people livin' in 'em,
I was born an inmate, waitin' to escape the prison.
Went to church, but don't understand it!
They underhanded!
God gave me these commandments!
The world is scandalous!
Blast 'til they holy high!
Baptize they evil minds.... rise ...
no longer blinded.
Watch me shine, Trick!
Which one of y'all wanna feel the degrees?
Bitches freeze when they see Black Jesus!
- Tupac Shakur, "Black Jesus"

I. Introduction

These lines were penned by an artist that a multitude of people still view as a modern-day Jesus Christ. In fact, contemporary rap artist, J. Cole says “Long live the idols may they never be your rivals, Tupac was like Jesus – Nas wrote the Bible!” (*Born Sinner*) In the annals of Hip-hop history and culture, his impact was intense; his legend runs deep. Tupac Amaru Shakur was born June 16, 1971 in New York City. His mother, Afeni Shakur, an active member of the New York 21 – a Black Panther Party contingent. In 1970, she was arrested and charged with conspiring to bomb several New York City department stores, police stations, and commuter railways (Dyson). As a point of fact, Afeni was pregnant with Tupac during the period of incarceration she received for being involved in the plot. In an interview with Veronica Chambers, Afeni recalls how she had numerous miscarriages before being pregnant with Tupac.

Despite being jailed and given sparse amounts food every day, Tupac was an embryo that continued to grow and develop despite such harsh conditions (Chambers). Made clear by this history, Tupac Shakur was a product of a revolutionary paradigm in both philosophy and experience.

The significance of this study is grounded in the need to examine the link between Tupac's cultural influences and his subsequent communication. Further still, this study is informed by a need to uncover ways in which political voice is used to call attention to social injustice. This research operates on the assumption that in order to truly understand the rhetoric of Tupac – and other urban artists of his ilk – a solid understanding of certain aspects of the African-American experience is prerequisite.

If anything, rhetorical scholars are certainly aware “there are few communications that are not influenced by culture in some way” (Devito xv). Expounding upon the extreme importance of considering cultural influence in relation to communication, he offers the following observation:

Whereas at one time the United States was largely a country populated by northern Europeans, it's now a country greatly influenced by the enormous number of new citizens from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. And the same is true to an even greater extent on college and university campuses throughout the United States. With these changes have come different customs and the need to understand and adapt to new ways of looking at communication. (38)

In the current climate of increasing globalization, Devito's sentiment can be extended to include countries outside of the United States. As more and more people cross international boundaries for work and play, it becomes more and more important to gain better understandings of various histories and cultures. In that vein, this research is an attempt to better understand ways in which disenfranchised populations of African-American youth manage and cope with physical, psychic, political, social, and economic constraints of life in America. Because he was such an articulate communicator, Tupac is used as a “text” by which a greater understanding of Hip-hop culture can be understood.

Lyrical excerpts [stanzas] from the album *Me Against the World* were examined for their philosophical intent based upon Dixon and Foster's essential elements of the African American referent. Each of the essential

elements, which include (1) the value of empathetic understanding; (2) value of communalism; and (3) the attribute of oppression/paranoia will be the examined and evaluated. Lyrical excerpts from the songs will be analyzed for emergent themes. These emergent themes will be analyzed for convergence with aforementioned rhetorical principles.

II. Tupac: The Rhetor

1. Empathy, Communalism, Oppression/Paranoia

Tupac was taught to succeed in two different worlds: in the ethos of formal schooling in the creative arts are 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. (Edwards 62)

Walter Edwards argues that the ‘double-consciousness’ that was regularly manifested through Tupac’s work was the result of the cohabitation of two distinct, often times opposing, worlds. Dyson lists a number of books in the late rapper’s reading collection that include J.D. Sallinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Teilhard de Chardin’s *Phenomenon of Man* among many others. The odd juxtaposition between ‘educated activism’ and ‘gangsterism’ led to recurring themes of paranoia and oppression; which made Tupac so appealing to many persons in similar social predicaments. Dyson’s summation is that “much of [Tupac’s] appeal rested on the divide in his mind and soul between his revolutionary pedigree and his thug persona” (14). Ultimately, this ability to connect with different segments of society not only made Tupac appealing, but also quite powerful. His ability to draw such diverse audiences makes him more palatable and relevant than any other rapper in relation to Asante’s initial charge for rhetoricians using a “mobilizing language [that] elevates nationalism above religious sects, sex roles, and social class distinctions” (35).

In this study, Tupac is used as lens by which to understand marginalized and disenfranchised African-American youth, specifically – and other groups of disenfranchised youth, generally. Tupac was known for using his voice to

high concerns about his particular racial group and the community-at-large. Throughout his entire body of work, Tupac expounded on arguments including economics, race, politics, philosophy, religion, sex, survival, success, and a host of other issues. In this paper, he is used as a social critic of his generation, and he is also used as a social subject by which his generation may be understood.

A common exigency for executing research on rap music is “the psychological and physical pain and anguish coupled with a sense of injustice and oppression and the need to vent anger and release some of the frustrations” (Cummings and Roy 60). The social-psychological constraints often discussed in Hip-hop culture are major propellers of social science research in this particular arena. This study specifically examines the lyrical component of Tupac Shakur’s *Me Against the World* with certain rhetorical tenets congruent with the work of rhetoricians Vernon Dixon and Badi Foster. These essential elements are as follows: (1) the value of empathetic understanding; (2) the value of communalism; and (3) the attribute of oppression/paranoia (Dixon and Foster). The rhetorical manifestations concern themselves with the preparation and design of the inherent message that is being relayed as opposed to the way in which the messages are syntactically constructed.

Empathetic understanding speaks to the balance between reasoning and feeling. Foster emphasizes the differences between Western epistemological systems and traditional African epistemologies using the term “I feel, therefore I think, therefore I am” to describe African epistemology. Asante illustrates this practice in the following supposition: “The Afrocentric perspective envisions one holistic, organic process. Thus, all political, artistic, economic, ethical, and aesthetic issues are connected to the context of Afrocentric knowledge” (38).

The de-emphasis on the individual is even further pronounced within the value of communalism. Poignantly stated, “self-centeredness and ‘rugged individualism’ should be deemphasized in favor of a consciousness that stresses the individual’s awareness of the relationship and consequences of his actions to the group” (Dixon and Foster 13). Foster provides an example of the differences in which black and white college students handle a campus-wide raid on drug use. In this example, the black student population immediately began to seek out known drug users within their community and urged them to discontinue drug use. The main line of reasoning involved everyone assisting in the larger objective of the black campus community by avoiding negative stigmas. These tactics were successful in curbing drug use within the black community whereas they were equally unsuccessful among the white students. Foster

summarizes the effectiveness of curbing black drug use through communal mechanisms in the following:

Because Blacks are viewed as a caste, because survival in many situations demands unity with the group, and because solving the varied problems that face Black communities requires a willingness of the individual to see his fulfillment in group or communal terms, it is not surprising that the Black students should arrive at the position they did. (15)

The attribute of oppression/paranoia is concerned with contemporary communication behaviors based on a traditional relationship characterized by black subjugation at the hands of white oppression. The attribute of oppression and paranoia is understood as causal-effectual. As a result to baring witness to countless oppressive occurrences, reluctance and paranoia become permanent self-protective mechanisms. An example given to describe this phenomena is “if eight out of ten times Black people have witnessed an unjust and cruel response to their initiatives, then it is not surprising for them to conclude the response will be the same in all future attempts” (Dixon and Foster 16). This learned practice of paranoia can unfortunately lead to missed opportunities. Due to being subject to consistent systematic oppression, a person learns to building coping mechanisms to deal with various forms of institutional and non-institutional racism. Consequently, an unfortunate result of this particular referent is that “oppression incorrectly perceived can lead to resignation and paralysis that eventually become self-destructive” (Dixon and Foster 17). Asante offers a means of remedying this oppression: “It is only a centeredness born of knowledge of our history and consciousness of our predicament that will lead us out of the [oppressive] abyss” (qtd. in Henderson 308).

III. Methodology

Tupac’s album *Me Against the World* was selected for use in this study due to two reasons. *Me Against the World* was Tupac’s very first solo album to attain a number one position on both the R&B and Pop charts. It was also Tupac’s first solo album to reach certified double platinum status. This album achieved this magnitude in sales in approximately eight months; from February 27, 1995 to December 6, 1995. Due to these factors, though not his

first album, this album could be seen as his introduction to a larger multitude of listeners. Ironically enough, Tupac began a prison sentence 20 days before this album was released and remained in prison until it had reached its double platinum status.

IV. Holla if ya' bear me! – How the 'hood heard' Pac

1. Empathetic Understanding

In the African American rhetorical tradition, empathy and subjectivity are necessary condition[s] for developing and implementing social strategies or agendas (Dixon and Foster). Tupac Shakur makes continual efforts to illustrate the plight of his community by attempting to gain empathy from his listeners. Tupac achieves this value of empathetic understanding through constructing a large percentage of his messages using adolescents and their perspectives as subjects of his narratives.

In order to acquire this level of empathy, Tupac utilizes young people through many of his rhyme schemes. For those who are sincere Tupac fans, this particular lyrical quality may have been his strongest asset. Through sharing stories and perspectives of a troubled upbringing, he was able to connect with many other youths. His ability to do so can be attributed to passages like the following:

Back in junior high ... when we was barely getting by,
when daddy died ... that's when my momma started getting high.
My neighborhood was full of drive-bys; couldn't survive.
All my homies living short lives, I couldn't cry.
Told my momma if I did die, just put a blunt in my casket
let me get my dead homies high.
Come follow me throughout my history,
it's just me against the world stuck in misery; as a young nigga.
(Shakur "Young Niggaz")

In this passage, what Arthur Pressley refers to as the ill effects of economic depravity and its correlation to psycho-theological manifestations of rap music is made evident. The listener has no problem connecting on an empathetic level when Tupac begins a vivid description of the state of familial destitution.

But, Tupac does not relent at the description of the family, by the third line, he is describing the violent turmoil of his friends in the community. This is a perfect example of how Shakur's rhetoric addresses the psychosocial and safety needs lacking in many urban black communities due to lack of economic resources. Examples of staggering death figures that include –“920 suicides, 650 homicides, 20,000 deaths from cardiovascular disease and 500 deaths from cirrhosis of the liver” (Pressley 93) – all contribute to the reality from which Tupac draws catalyst for his conversation.

Notions of nihilism were unquestionably at the heart of Tupac's complete body of work. In fact, it is this intense nihilism that allows for recurring ideas about the value of life and the certainty of death throughout much of his music. Contrary to the lives of middle-class American youth, Tupac concludes this verse by engaging in a conversation about death. Using adolescent rationale in an attempt to merge the secular with the celestial, the child in the narrative asks his mother to place marijuana in his casket so that he is able to bear gifts upon his deceased brethren. This quixotic request, wrapped in subtle naivety, allows outsiders to understand the struggles of the black American underclass. Consequently, listeners are left to cope with the harsh reality of a life littered with drugs, violence, despair, and death. If nothing else, Tupac is adept at providing a vivid illustration of the effects of nihilism on urban youth.

V. Communalism

Themes of communalism are typically structured in the form of lessons, encouragement, and beneficial advice for strenuous situations. Communalism is the relationship of the individual to the group in the larger quest for survival and the ultimate goal of social order (Foster). In many instances, this quest for survival and social order requires critiquing and criticizing the established order. By critiquing the established order, one highlights discrepancies in resource distribution. In the case of Tupac Shakur, this critique of established order is expressed through calling attention for pushback against systematic efforts to keep underclass communities in a state of underdevelopment.

As the son of the Black Panther Party, this revolutionary political perspective was instilled early in his own personal development. Even before his understanding of American racial politics, and the Black Panther Party, his mother, Afeni Shakur renamed him Tupac Amaru, after an eighteenth-century

Incan chief and revolutionary who was killed when Spanish conquistadors tore his body apart with horses (Dyson). These revolutionary beginnings often placed Tupac in peculiar positions of vulnerability at a very young age as well. Due to his familial affiliation with the Black Panther Party, the United States government kept a close eye on him and his family. Connie Bruck reports that F. B. I. agents would approach Tupac at school to ask if he had seen his stepfather, Mutula, who was on the F.B.I.'s 'Ten Most Wanted' list until captured in 1986. Some of these experiences may have led to the construction of raps like the following:

They punish the people that's asking questions.
And those that possess, steal from the ones without possession.
The message I stress: to make it stop study your lessons
Don't settle for less – even the genius asks questions
Be grateful for blessings.
Don't ever change, keep your essence.
The power is in the people and politics we address.
Always do your best, don't let the pressure make you panic
and when you get stranded,
And things don't go the way you planned it,
Dreaming of riches, in a position of making a difference
Politicians are hypocrites, they don't want to listen.
(Shakur "Me Against the World")

In the lines above, Tupac is uncovering what is purposely distorted for mass consumption. The masses, the lower socio-economic classes that compose his audience, won't necessarily understand the term hegemony. But, they will understand what is meant by "they punish the people that's asking questions." The community understands who "they" are. His solution for combating the onslaught of falsehoods and propaganda from monied interests is to assume a healthy attitude toward education. He urges urban youth to stray away from misleading archetypes that suggest intelligent people are those who know everything. By suggesting that even a genius asks questions, he informs his listeners on what it truly means to be erudite. Then by incorporating hints of spirituality and politics, Shakur supplies his young listeners with the confidence to take his advice and apply it to the politics and needs of themselves and their communities. Understanding these things, clearly illustrate his emphasis on

communalism.

Those early childhood experiences of governmental surveillance and harassment may have further shaped his communal tendencies because he also discusses direct confrontation with the agents of community oppression. In most instances, these agents of oppression are the police and Tupac is an advocate of more resistance to the oppressive forces. In the following sequence, Tupac acknowledges the “rags-to-riches via the drug trade” philosophy prevalent in low-income communities; offers his music as emotional and psychological support; and then endorses violence against antagonistic police:

Picture your dreams on a triple-beam, and it seems
don't underestimate the power of a fiend.
To my homies on the block
slanging rocks with your glocks,
put this tape in your box
when you're running from the cops – and never look back
If they could be black, then they would switch
Open fire on them busta-ass bitches!
(Shakur “Lord Knows”)

It must be noted that “economic restructuring resulting in massive unemployment has created criminals out of black youth, which is what gangsta rappers acknowledge” (Perkins 118). As a result, even though Tupac’s criminal behavior warrants pursuits by the police, they remain viewed as agents of the oppressive system that keep the community economically crippled. Due to the fact that many viable options for socio-economic elevation aren’t easily accessed by ghetto youth, Tupac directs his rhetorical energy on giving inspiration to those youths who are dependent on street economics for socio-economic transcendence. Through utilizing the concepts of “triple-beam” and “fiend,” as tools to achieve income, he urges his listeners to utilize his music as a soundtrack for such a precarious lifestyle. Ending the verse in a posture of righteous indignation, Shakur leaves his audience with the spirit of confidence necessary to continue engaging in the illicit drug trade by suggesting violence on any police officer that may interrupt their livelihood. Here, Tupac acts as a communal leader and instructs his constituents to fire at the police when being pursued for participating in one of the only options available for monetary acquisition in these economically depressed areas.

VI. Oppression and Paranoia

The concept of oppression/paranoia is, at its core, a rhetorical exigency characterized by a high degree of sensitivity for situations perceived as being dangerous (Foster). As applied to certain communities, this communicative posture is derivative of oppressive experiences throughout American history. An increased state of paranoia is the result of constant historical oppression. The element of oppression/paranoia is anything but foreign to Tupac Amaru Shakur. Often times, in life and rhyme, Tupac addressed social oppression and the subsequent paranoia developed by persons who are forced to cope with it. His ability to communicate so well within this tenet is perhaps due to his experience within his own family. In speaking of his forebears, Tupac says:

In my family every black male with the last name of Shakur that ever passed the age of fifteen has either been killed or put in jail. There are no Shakurs, black male Shakurs, out right now, free, breathing, without bullet holes in them or cuffs on his hands. None. (Bruck 48)

This statement, similar to many of his lyrics, was given out of response to oppression that he witnessed his family and community experience. Though no specific names of adversaries were given on this particular album, Tupac conveyed the idea that several people desired his demise. Specific reasons for such hatred were never given, but the feeling that his enemies were in cahoots was relayed when he would rap lines such as, “I can’t sleep. Niggaz plotting to kill me while I’m dreaming/wake up sweaty and screaming, ‘cause I can hear them suckers scheming/Probably paranoid ... problem is ... them punks be fantasizing” (Shakur “It Ain’t Easy”).

Tupac’s use of oppression/paranoia is manifested in his constant quest to free himself from oppressive situations. In the following verse he describes his inability to cope with the stress provided by his enemies. Throughout this verse it is important to note the passion he utilizes to convey a sense of an intense paranoia and stress. In his mastery of rhetoric, he is able to create a scene of a broken man in the throes of a crumbling psychological state. This being the case, Tupac attempts to take listeners a step beyond paranoia into a state of intense depression. His dramatic account of paranoia proceeds as follows:

I smoke a blunt to take the pain out
and if I wasn't high, I'd probably try to blow my brains out.
I'm hopeless. They should have killed me as a baby,
and now they got me trapped in the storm, I'm going crazy!
Forgive me; they want to see me in my casket,
and if I don't blast I'll be the victim of them bastards.
I'm loosing hope, they got me stressing, can the Lord forgive me?
Got the spirit of a thug in me.
Another sip of that drink, this Hennessy got me queasy,
Don't want to hurl, young nigga, take it easy.
(Shakur "Lord Knows")

The initial line of this stanza sets the tone. Tupac opens the verse by referring to his use of marijuana enabling the maintenance of his sanity. It doesn't take him long to introduce his feelings of nihilism. Through the entirety of this verse he describes these feelings with more and more intensity as he continues. In the middle of rapping, he questions if the Lord will forgive him for living in such a depraved state – but, before he can finish the verse, he takes yet another drink of liquor. His return to consuming alcohol so quickly after prayer signifies the cycle of hope and hopelessness too often found in low-income communities.

These rhetorical instances are what connect Tupac so well to his audience. Arthur Pressley suggests that young, poor men from inner-city communities often lack internal problem-solving skills so they rely on rap music. With the loud volume at which it can be played, the rapid speech, and the syncopated beat an auditory bombardment is created. Pressley says that this auditory bombardment is a stimulus-seeking behavior that it used to provide the psychological equilibrium that is so often disrupted by the ill environment. He describes rap music as providing a “psychic energy boost that balances the energy draining demands of day-to-day living” (Pressley 94). A melodic mixture of the bass-filled beat and an ‘angry-sounding’ voice make the perfect antidote for devastating surroundings. Though “gangsta rap” has always maintained a reputation for indiscriminate violence against people, it is very important to note that all the violence in the Tupac verse above are directed toward the rapper himself. Consequently, the only person being terrorized by violence, in this instance and countless others, are those who are producing these messages. Tupac, like his listeners, is using music as a methodology for

coping with oppression/paranoia.

The following verse contains evidence of a similar psychological dilemma, similar roots in paranoia, and a similar concluding conversation with God. However, in this case the paranoia is blatantly more intrapersonal. Though Tupac avoids mention of specific adversaries on this particular album, he speaks in general tones about those who desire his demise. His description is as follows:

Now I'm lost and I'm weary ... so many tears.
I'm suicidal so don't stand near me.
My every move is a calculated step,
to bring me closer to embracing early death.
Now there's nothing left.
There was no mercy on the streets ... I couldn't rest.
I'm barely standing, 'bout to go to pieces, screaming peace.
And though my soul was deleted, I couldn't see it.
I had my mind full of demons trying to break free.
They planted seeds and they hatched, sparking the flame
inside my brain like a match, such a dirty game.
No memories, just a misery.
Painting a picture of my enemies killing me, in my sleep
Will I survive 'til the morning, to see the sun?
Please Lord forgive me for my sins, cause here I come ...
(Shakur "So Many Tears")

Not only do the words scream fatigue and hopelessness, but Tupac's raps these words in a deep, hoarse cadence. This delivery reinforces the despair and hopelessness which is evident in the actual content of the rap. The verse above is the perfect picture of a broken person. Nihilism is not only defined, but illustrated, in these lines. Those who live in American ghettos today can still access the feelings and experiences that Tupac outlines above. It is evident the oppression Tupac faces is very intense and leaves him emotionally distraught. An unfortunate consequence of oppression is extreme resignation and paralysis that can eventually become self-destructive. If nothing else, Tupac shared this pathology and paralysis in such a way, that many gathered inspiration and community from it and others were made aware of the exact ways in which people were affected by ghetto life in the United States. If there is a silver

lining to the dark clouds in Tupac's life, it has to be based on the way in which he dealt with his personal turmoil. In an interview, Tupac explains how he dealt with this turmoil: "Because I had that fucked-up childhood, [that's] the reason why I could get into acting ... it takes nothin' to get out of who I am to get into somebody else" (Light 25). Tupac's longing to 'get into character' is what eventually introduced Tupac to the world. Tupac found escape from poverty, familial drug use, and peer ostracism through artistic expression. Being both the product of the inner city and having direct familial relations with one of the most aggressive black power institutions in American history, Tupac already possessed large amounts of revolutionary mental material. The desolate, disruptive, destructive ghettos of the Bronx, Harlem, Baltimore, and California gave him a sense of the streets while his mother supplied him with utilities for ascendance through black power rhetoric and formal education and training (Edwards). The combinations of lessons learned in the street and lessons learned in the classroom are what many argue provided Tupac with the knowledge and skills to effectively communicate this trauma with such effectiveness. Consequently, though the instability of his home may have been a negative force, it was balanced by the cerebral and verbal versatility he gained from his formal education. Lovers of rap music and Hip-hop culture are still in love with the paradoxical nature of his experiences and writings.

VII. Conclusion

It is important to note that economically-depressed populations are sincerely and keenly interested solving the hosts of issues that plague the community; these include drugs, crime, poverty, and the social fallout that these elements create. Tupac Amaru Shakur is a product of these depressed communities. Yet, he is not the only one. Tupac symbolizes millions of youth that understand the world in similar ways. We must be honest and give rap music, and Hip-hop culture, credit for providing voice to the voiceless. Tupac Shakur, being a shining example of an authentic rhetorical figure, explicitly addressed these social ills as should be duly noted. In fact, scholars have found "striking similarities between themes in rap music and those of Malcolm X; and [the] resurgence of themes, such as the advocacy of self-help focusing on reclaiming values of the African-American community" (Aldridge and Carlin 105).

Rap operates from a social transformative position by suggesting “despite its immaturity, the primary message of Black rap music parallels many of the values traditionally articulated by the Black church” (Pressley 96). Rap music addresses the nature of intimate relationships, the nature of suffering, and essentially what it means to African American. Tupac completed these tasks with superb articulation and sincere compassion. His closing argument is that “it is important to understand the social and psychological needs addressed by Black rap music, and [its] degree of consistency with the ethos of threat and violence of the wider community” (Pressley 97).

Rap music, principally created for, and directed by, the passions of young people, acts as an appropriate avenue for Tupac to connect with his young constituents. But, it should be noted that he was also able to relay the concerns of the inner-city youths to other demographic groups less familiar with inner-city atrocities first-hand. Surprisingly enough, Tupac was known for possessing the ability to negate the generational and racial gaps that stereotypically separate rap fans. Mary Tasker, a middle-aged Caucasian social worker, acknowledges this when she explains:

Many people believe that these lyrics condone, glorify, and perhaps even promote violence, and that therefore this music contributes to the moral decline of teenagers today. The teens I work with, however, have very different feelings that I am learning more about each day. (217)

The social worker offers this opinion as she transitions from a stance of ignorance to one of enlightenment on the subject of rap music. Through her experiences with inner-city youth, she finds herself in a position to understand and appreciate the essence of the music and the culture from which it’s produced. Upon one of her students learning of Tupac’s violent death, she asked, “Why Mary, why I feel this bad like it was my own flesh and blood?” (Tasker 217). Not only does a moment like this provide Mary with an understanding of Tupac’s influence, but it illustrates the acute affinity and respect that the youth had in regards to Tupac’s message.

The most important lesson Tupac teaches us is that voices from the margins do exist. Often they are marginalized and muted, but every so often, someone from the margins is able to speak to all of us through using charismatic and compassionate rhetorical strategies. Tupac was able to highlight the drama, trauma, and perspectives of his marginalized community. Through first

speaking with his constituents, and then gaining the ears of those outside his community, Tupac was able to make a lasting impact and the world as well as rhetorical theory.

The findings from this analysis suggest future research agendas should include more aggressive research along the line of musicology in relation to culture. In performing the research necessary to complete this study it is noted that music is strongly related to culture in the African American culture. Therefore, new areas of research that would prove beneficial include an aggressive agenda linking music to black speech. As in the sermonic tradition, talking and music often form a harmonious combination when a preacher is engaged in delivering a sermon. This talk-singing, as it has been labeled, is congruent to rap music in its construction and delivery. These inherent similarities between the gospel tradition and rap music tradition imply that there may be other connections that allow for a better understanding of communication. In order to execute research in this particular vein, researchers could conduct ethnographic focus groups to examine how audiences interpret the meanings and messages within rap lyrics. This information would aid in discovering the kinds of affects that rap music has on audience socialization and behavior.

Works Cited

- Aldridge, H. and Carlin, D. "The Rap on Violence: A Rhetorical Analysis of Rapper KRS-One." *Communication Studies* 44 (1993): 102–15. Print.
- Allen, Ernest. "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap." *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. W. E. Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 159–91. Print.
- Asante, M. K. *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press, 1988. Print.
- Bruck, Connie. "The Takedown of Tupac." *The New Yorker* 7 July 1997: 46–63. Print.
- Chambers, Veronica. "Conversations with Tupac." *Esquire* December 1996: 83–86. Print.
- Cummings, Melbourne and Roy, Abhik. "Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music." *The Howard Journal of Communications* 13 (2002): 59–76. Print.
- Devito, Joseph. *Human Communication: The Basic Course*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003. Print.
- Dixon, Vernon and Foster, Badi. *Beyond Black or White*. Boston: Little Brown Press, 1971. Print.
- Dyson, Michael E. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.
- _____. *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Print.
- _____. "Performance, Protest, and Prophecy in the Culture of Hip-hop." *Black Sacred Music* 5.1 (1991): 12–40. Print.
- Edwards, W. "From Poetry to Rap: The Lyrics of Tupac Shakur." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 26 (2002): 61–70. Print.
- Henderson, Errol A. "Black Nationalism and Rap Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 26.3 (1996): 308–40. Print.
- J. Cole. "Let Nas down." *Born Sinner*. Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Jan. 2013. Web.
- Jackson, Ronald L. "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology for the Critical Assessment of Rhetoric." *African American Rhetoric*. Ed. L. Niles, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1995. 148–56. Print.
- Light, A. *Tupac Shakur*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. Print.
-

- Perkins, W. E. *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-hop Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Print.
- Pressley, A. "Rap Music by Black Male Artists: A Psychotheological Interpretation." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 16 (1992): 92–97. Print.
- Shakur, T. *Me Against the World*. Out Da Gutta/Interscope/Amaru, 1995. CD.
- Shakur, T and Outlawz. "Black Jesus." *Still I Rise*. Amaru/ Death Row/ Interscope, 1999. CD.
- Tasker, Mary. "You like Tupac, Mary?" *Families in Society* 80.3 (1999): 216–18. Print.

Abstract

This essay is a rhetorical analysis of the lyrics of, arguably, one of the greatest minds in music – Tupac Shakur. In general terms, this piece evaluates the ways in which oppressed communities manifest resistance toward the established power; issues of race, class, and power are taken into consideration. Through an examination of the lyrical component of Tupac Shakur’s *Me Against the World*, there is an attempt to uncover critical knowledge regarding the ways in which communication and culture are managed among the young American underclass. The essential elements are as follows: (1) the value of empathetic understanding; (2) the value of communalism; and (3) the attribute of oppression/paranoia. These rhetorical tenets are essential in the preparation and design of messages being constructed for members of the underclass and members of outside the community. Tupac is used a symbol for the disenfranchised urban voice. Through greater understanding of both the contemporary challenges urban youth face and the philosophical principles that guide their rhetoric, the academic conversation regarding communication and culture among marginalized communities is further advanced.

Keywords: Tupac, rap, Hip-hop, culture, race, oppression

Eric DURHAM is Professor at Hannam University’s *Linton Global College* in Daejeon, South Korea. Graduate of the Howard University Department of Communication & Culture; where he obtained his Master’s and Doctoral degrees in Rhetoric & Intercultural Communication. Dr. Durham has lived in South Korea for nearly five years. His research interests include Hip-hop, race, culture, and power. Feel free to read his article “Bridging the Gap: African and African American Communication at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.”
durhameric@yahoo.com

Received: 10 January 2014
Reviewed: 28 January 2014
Accepted: 10 February 2014