

Andre Simmons

May 27, 2013

As Poetry Recycles Neurons

My Lyricist: Tupac Shakur

This paper is a part of a month long project I worked on during spring quarter of the class As Poetry Recycles Neurons. The objective was to pursue a passion and then write about that passion through another author or a poet. I decided that I wanted to work through Tupac Shakur because I am an aspiring hip-hop artist and felt that although I knew some of Tupac's work I didn't know all of it as a whole enough to get an idea of how he changed people's lives. In writing this paper, we were given a choice of texts to work with as a guide and I chose Maureen McClane's My Poets. In the chapter I chose, McClane uses multiple voices to guide the reader. My goal in writing my chapter was to engulf my reader in the world of someone that Tupac felt he needed to represent, while also talking about Tupac in my voice and in his own to paint a bigger picture for my audience.

Your table is full, full of everyday items you use for survival. On this table is a bible, a bag of marijuana, a glock .45 pistol, a box of condoms, and a forty ounce of Old English you're currently tossing back because one of your homies just died, but you still have to go on, doing whatever you can, selling drugs, robbing or stealing, just to get this money because it's the only way you know how to survive in this environment and the future just doesn't seem bright enough for anything else. Every day you face death or incarceration. You're trapped.

"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 a bullet that he bought

Nine millimeter kickin' thinking bout what the streets do to me

Cause they never talk peace in the black community

All we know is violence, do the job in silence

Walk the streets like a rat pack of tyrants"

-Trapped, 2Pacalypse Now

2Pacalypse Now was a window into a life many people knew nothing about. The album captured the life of young men and women coming up in urban areas and everyday trials they faced. It lets the listener see through the eyes of a young man just trying to survive in a world set up against him.

Early Tupac is more panther than gangster. He reaches his audience by speaking on their environments; the constant struggle of poverty, gang violence, police brutality, racism, prostitution and trying to survive as a young person living in these areas.

You know these all too well, you see people just like yourself on television labeled criminals, dehumanized and made into the enemy. You can see that what you're doing is described by society as "wrong" but, as you see it, you have no choice.

Tupac writes in his poem "In the Depths of Solitude": "A young heart with an old soul, how can there be peace? How can I be in the depths of solitude when there are two inside of me?"

Duality. A spirit torn into two pieces by the pulling forces it's constantly surrounded by, creating a living contradiction. Happy yet in a constant state of pain, heartless yet empathetic, good kids yet ruthless thugs.

You hope and wish for peace of mind and your own freedom. Every night you wish for a way out, no hopes for college because you have no money, you can barely even get a job, you couldn't leave anyway because your family lives here. Your only choice is to play this game and win, or die. Yet your heart longs still to be free.

“And I still see no changes, can’t a brother get a little peace

It’s war on the streets and a war in the Middle East

Instead of war on poverty

They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me

And I ain’t never did a crime I ain’t have to do

But now I’m back with the facts giving it back to you

Don’t let em jack you up, back you up

Crack you up and pimp smack you up

They get jealous when they see you with your mobile phone

But tell the cops they can’t touch this

I don’t trust this, when they try to rush I bust this

That’s the sound of my tool

You say it ain’t cool my mama ain’t raise no fool

And as long as I stay black, I gotta stay strapped

And I never get to lay back

Cause I always gotta worry bout the payback”

-Changes, Greatest Hits

Professor Michael Eric Dyson said about Tupac's life's relation to his music: "Tupac felt he had to live the life he rapped about". (Tupac Shakur: Thug Angel, 2002)

The art imitating reality then reality imitating art. The constant cycle is a duality of its own. How can the creation not affect the creator in some way? Even without the conscious change of the artist, the creation of the art has to affect them somehow, whether that change be positive, negative or some of both.

Tupac's body of work is the epitome of this principal. 2Pacalypse Now is a young man speaking from the perspective of a hustler, drug dealer, and murderer while still maintaining a side of vulnerability, although, during the time of the album's release, Tupac didn't even have a criminal record. While making his music, Tupac felt he needed to embody the identity of the people he was speaking for in order to reach them from the same level, rather than speaking from above them. So, by All Eyez on Me, Tupac had become completely engulfed in who he saw himself as, not to say the persona was created because of the music, but his art increased its intensity.

"The Feds is watchin', niggas plottin to get me

Will I survive, will I die, come on let's picture the possibility

Givin' me charges, lawyers makin' a grip

I told the judge I was raised wrong, and that's why I blaze shit

Was hyper as a kid, cold as a teenager

On my mobile callin' big shots on the scene major

Packing hundreds in my drawers, fuck the law

Bitches I fuck with a passion, I'm livin' rough and raw

Catching cases at a fast rate ballin' in the fast lane"

All Eyez on Me, All Eyez on Me

You see no way out. First it makes you sad, then you're frustrated, and finally you're just angry. Why does anyone feel the need to stereotype you? Why are you and everyone who looks like you constantly harassed by the police? They abuse their power to hurt you for no reason. If it isn't them, other people in the neighborhood are trying to kill or rob you because they're just as broke as you are. You're constantly at risk of death from the environment, incarceration, and even STDs. You live in a warzone, and the only way to survive in a warzone is to become a warrior. No fear, no pain, no remorse, they don't even care about you anyway, and you can die any second, might as well fight back as much as you can.

These are the people Tupac speaks for, trying to convey the emotions they feel on a regular basis, from a community perspective, from a political perspective, and on a personal level. He felt that because he was in a position where people would listen to him, he needed to speak for those without a voice. He wanted to shake the world and bring America's wars that no one paid any attention to the forefront and he demanded the world's attention.

"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 to face

Nightmares to humanities

And morally disgraced

Tonight is filled with rage

Violence in the air

Children bred with ruthlessness

Because no one at home cares

Tonight I lay my head down

But the pressure never stops

Gnawing at my sanity

Content when I am dropped

But tomorrow I see change

A chance to build anew

Build on spirit, intent of heart

And ideals based in truth

And tomorrow I wake with second wind

And strong because of pride

To know I fought with all my heart

To keep my dream alive"

And 2morrow, The Rose That Grew From Concrete

This is the duality of being a thug poet and a black activist. It is not uncommon for human beings to feel like there's more than just one part to themselves. Not any one of us is simply put into one category, as we shouldn't be. There is at times a pulling of the two parts, because of the contradictions that sometimes arise, and from this, we make the most difficult of decisions.

When you find yourself in the deepest confines of your mind, right before you fall asleep, arguing with a figure who is not present in front of you, who you cannot touch with your hands or hear with your ears, that is your own personal duality being active. That activity allows us to critique ourselves and look at ourselves from a distance, which can either be helpful and constructive or hellish and destructive.

Tupac was a soul afflicted with just being too human. He made mistakes, he had a lot of imperfections, at some points in life he even contradicted himself, but he was okay with just being human. He was willing to share his inner most thoughts and feelings with the people he cared most about, his fans, through different forms of poetry. That is how he reached so deeply into the souls of the people. He shared all of his hardships in the same way he approached any challenge, with no fear.

"Sometimes when I'm alone

I cry because I'm on my own

The tears I cry are bitter and warm

They flow with life but take no form

I cry because my heart is torn

And I find it difficult to carry on

If I had an ear to confide in

I would cry among my treasured friends

But who do you know that stops that long

To help another carry on

The world moves fast and it would rather pass you by

Than to stop and see what makes you cry

It's painful and sad and sometimes I cry

And no one cares about why"

Sometimes I Cry, The Rose That Grew From Concrete

"Pistol whipping these sims, for being petrified and lame

Disrespecting the game, praying for punishment and pain

Going insane, never die, I live eternal, who shall I fear

Don't shed a tear for me nigga I ain't happy here

I hope they bury me and send me to my rest

Headlines readin' MURDERED TO DEATH, my last breath

Take a look picture a crook on his last stand

Motherfuckers don't understand, if I die tonight"

If I Die 2nite, Me Against The World

Tupac eventually reached a point where he wasn't concerned with his death. He spoke about the aftermath of his death so often on songs that it worried his friends and family that he wanted to die. It seems that the constant pressures of fame and the street life had gotten to him. There had been attempts on his life before, he was sent to jail for a crime that many of those close to him, say he wasn't capable of committing, he was constantly under scrutiny of the media and even politicians for his lyrics and it seemed as if Tupac made enemies just as easily as he made friends. So, it seemed fitting to him that he would die young, maybe in death finding peace finally, and since his enemies were relentless and he wasn't willing to change for other people to be comfortable, he may have saw it as inevitable.

"In the event of my demise

When my heart can beat no more

I hope I die for a principle

Or a belief that I had lived for

I will die before my time

Because I feel the shadows depth

So much I wanted to accomplish

Before I reached my death

I have come to grips with the possibility

And wiped the last tear from my eyes

I loved all who were positive

In the event of my demise!"

In The Event of My Demise, The Rose That Grew From Concrete

You sit staring at the glock .45 and the forty ounce of Old English. Still frustrated, still angry, still feeling cornered by the world. Why don't you go out and start firing on every person with the face of your oppressor? Who's going to stop you? You don't care if you die anyway, so if the police come to kill you it would be more of a gift than anything else. You continue to contemplate, your eyes divert from the gun a little farther down the table to a book you forgot you had, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*. You love Tupac because he knows your struggle; he feels your same pain, you open the book of poetry to search for words of wisdom. You open the book to this poem:

"Backed into a corner

Alone and very confused

Tired of running away

My manhood has been abused

Not my choice to be so blunt

But you must fight fire with flame

I allowed myself to run once

And was haunted by the shame

If I must kill I will and if I must do it again

I would but the situation is a no-win"

No-Win, The Rose That Grew From Concrete

You realize what you've been thinking about for the last couple hours, and how in the larger scheme of things it wouldn't help anything. You would just be another wasted urban youth. You put the gun away and grab out a pen and paper, writing your frustrations in rhyme form, creating a picture of what you thought about doing but chose not to. You write your first rap, and you feel better. A dead man's words save countless lives, sparking the minds of many young people to create a change in the world.

"If there be pain

All you need to do

Is call on me to be with you

And before you hang up the phone

You will no longer be alone

Together we can never fall

Because our love will conquer all

If there be pain

Reach out for a helping hand

And I shall hold you wherever I am

Every breath I breathe will be into you

For without you here my joy is through

My life was lived through falling rain

So call on me if there be pain”

If There Be Pain, The Rose That Grew From Concrete

Bibliography

Shakur, Tupac. "All Eyez on Me." All Eyez on Me. Koch Records, 2004. CD.

Shakur, Tupac, and Richie Rich. "If I Die 2nite." Me Against The World. Amaru Records/Jive, 1995. CD.

Shakur, Tupac. "Changes." Greatest Hits. Death Row Records/Interscope Records, 1998. CD.

Shakur, Tupac. The Rose That Grew From Concrete. New York: Pocket, 1999. Print.

Shakur, Tupac. "Trapped." 2pacalypse Now. Amaru Records/Jive, 1991. CD.

Tupac Shakur:Thug Angel. Dir. Peter Spirer. QD3 Entertainment, 2002. DVD.