

Excerpts from *Keepin' It Real in Hip Hop Politics: A Political Perspective on Tupac Shakur* by Karin L. Stanford

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In 1986, Tupac relocated to Baltimore with his family. Right away, he noticed the dire circumstances of Black people residing in the city. Tupac said, "As soon as I got there, being the person that I am, I said, 'No, no, I'm changing this.' So I started a Stop the Killing Campaign, a Safe Sex Campaign and AIDS Prevention Campaign and everything" (Jones & Spierer, 2002). As a high school student attending the Baltimore School for the Performing Arts, Tupac wrote and performed socially conscious lyrics, rapped about teen pregnancy, and discouraged gun violence (Bastfield, 2002). Demonstrating his support of class-based strategies to enhance people's lives, Tupac also affiliated with the Young Communist League. Darren Bastfield, a friend of Tupac, who reported on his activism in Baltimore, acknowledged that even back then, Tupac's activism was not rooted in the normal channels of student government or the standard afterschool clubs. According to Bastfield (2002),

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

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

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At the age of 18, Tupac decided to become an active member of the New Afrikan Panthers. This group of 7 to 10 young people, aged 13 to 25 years, engaged in community control, worked against police abuse, educated the public about NAPO, and advocated for the release of political prisoners. According to Akinyele Umoja, a member of NAPO and mentor of Tupac Shakur, "the youth group operated somewhat autonomously from its parent organization. They ran their own campaigns and built their own networks" (A. Umoja, personal communication, 2007). Tupac nominated himself as the chair and won the election. He immediately set out to build the capacity of the organization by acting as a spokesperson, selling organizational newspapers, organizing meetings, and working to reach young people through radio appearances, classroom presentations, and hip hop performances (A. Umoja, personal communication, 2007). During a radio interview with Bomani Bakari on the station WRFG in Atlanta, Tupac was asked about his role as chair of the New Afrikan Panthers. Tupac stated that he wanted to help young people implement the program into their daily lives. He further stated, "I believe that the New Afrikan Panthers are about serious freedom. . . . The Panthers are about providing an alternative, a movement for you to

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hop into" (From *Tupac Shakur Speaks* [CD], in Joseph, 2006). Tupac criss-crossed the country to attend meetings and events of the Atlanta-based organization. Tupac's formal position with the New Afrikan Panthers ended when he became a roadie and a dancer for the hip hop group Digital Underground, but Tupac remained affiliated with the New Afrikan Independence Movement. For instance, the New Afrikan Panthers attended Digital Underground concerts and Tupac continued to fundraise for the organization.

Another of Tupac's activism began after he became a professional musician at the age of 19. This period is distinguished by Tupac's use of his professional status and its accretions to support and implement his political ideas. *2Pacalypse Now*, Tupac's first album, was released November 12, 1991. Certified gold, the album was a mixture of social commentary and battle raps, with hits like "Trapped," a diatribe against police harassment; "Brenda's Got a Baby," which details sexual exploitation; and "Words of Wisdom," a song that acknowledges racial discrimination. The album also featured regressive songs, like "Tha Lunatic," which promotes promiscuity. *2Pacalypse Now* invited positive and negative attention. Hip hop heads supported the cutting edge lyrics and social commentary. On the other side were critics ranging as high in government as Vice President Dan Quayle, who publicly stated that the production and distribution of *2Pacalypse Now* was "an irresponsible corporate act." Quayle then concluded that there was "absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published by a respectable record company" (Ayres, 1992).

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

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

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where his support system included hustlers, pimps, and drug dealers. In his song, "The Streetz R Deathrow," Tupac Shakur (1993) reminisces about his childhood:

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

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

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

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