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Hughes as Mother, Shakur as Child: A Study in American Racism

The controversies surrounding Tupac Shakur's life and death have often obscured the rapper's abundant social activism. As Karin L. Stanford states, "Tupac's critics emphasize his impetuous and reckless behavior, accentuate his confrontations with the criminal justice system, and condemn his angry lyrics" (4). However, Shakur was a hero in the African American community, not for his "angry lyrics," but for his social activism. Stanford goes on to explain Shakur's activism, stating that

political activism is not obligatory, with no pay received for involvement. This definition can help provide a line of demarcation between Tupac Shakur and others who are considered "gangsta rappers," such as Ice Cube or Ice T who defend their often crude and violent lyrics by insisting that their role is merely to report on the perverse nature of the U.S. political and economic system and the viciousness of ghetto life. Tupac...differs from the others by engaging in authentic activism, attempting to develop solution-oriented ideas and motivating his listeners to also "do politics." (9)

Many have explored Shakur's effect on black culture and hip-hop in this context. However, studies exploring Shakur's literary merit are largely non-existent. Although Shakur certainly occupies a space in pop-culture, the rapper's poetry and lyrics have literary significance, specifically as it relates to his portrayal of African American mothers and the idea of legacy.

For the purposes of this paper, I will juxtapose the work of Tupac Shakur with Langston Hughes in order to reveal Shakur's engagement with African American literary history. Both Hughes and Shakur have recurring maternal relationships in their works. However, both artists incorporate these relationships very differently. Hughes primarily discussed mothers and children in order to show how far African Americans have come in gaining equal rights in their country. His mother-child relationships are ones that hope for continued steps towards equality and a breakdown of the black/white color line. Shakur, however, discusses children and mothers in the context of death, including miscarriage and infanticide. Though some cite Shakur's use of these brutal subjects to accuse him of being a negative influence, I assert that Shakur uses these themes in order to invert the trope of African American motherhood. Shakur does this in order to illustrate the shift of American racism from overt, legal racism to more covert, systematic racism.

It is difficult to prove conclusively whether Hughes directly influenced Shakur. However, it is very likely that Shakur was familiar with Hughes' work. Shakur was well read, having studied everything from Homer to Marquez, from Shakespeare to Aldous Huxley (Dyson 94-97). Shakur was particularly interested in African-American writers, specifically Alice Walker and Maya Angelou (94). His appreciation for the African-American literary legacy is well documented, and it surely included Hughes. It could even be argued that Shakur's early poem, "A River That Flows Forever" is an homage to Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Hughes and Tupac also share similarities in both their philosophies and works. In "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," Hughes explains that "most of [his] poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life [he knew]" (228). He goes on to say that he and his fellow artists "intended to express [their] individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (229). These two

concepts—that poetry comes from real experience and that it takes courage to express real experience—are echoed by Shakur several decades later. Throughout his career the rapper was committed to portraying his lived experience, stating “I am real...there is nothing fake” (*Tupac* 85). In another interview he expresses that all of his music “is based on the pain [he] felt in [his] childhood” (70). These two artists therefore committed to articulate their true experience as a means of bringing a realistic portrayal of their American experience. Although these examples do not necessarily prove that Hughes was a major influence in Tupac’s music, both artists share a similar artistic philosophy, and both were subject to oppression and racism. Studying the Hughes-Shakur relationship provides useful insights into the shift in American racism, particularly when the two artists’ portrayals of motherhood are compared. Such a comparison reveals Shakur’s effective interaction with African American literary history.

Hughes exploration of motherhood and maternal figures reveals his concept of legacy. Countless Hughes poems deal with the concept of black heritage, often symbolized by his tomtoms and blood references. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” for example, Hughes looks backward at the long history of Africa, and draws connections to the present. Meanwhile, when Hughes depicts legacy (i.e. looking from the present to the future), he often relies on mother figures. In many of his poems, a maternal figure addresses a child, promising continued progress. His concept of motherhood and legacy is primarily one of progression. In “Mother to Son,” the poem itself is a line graph, which maps the ups and downs of African American progression towards equality. The poem ends higher than it began as the mother pleads ““Don’t you turn back. / Don’t you set down on the steps / ‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard. / don’t you fall now— / For I’se still climbing’, / And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair” (*Collected Poems* 30). In “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” the “dark-faced child” is able to listen to stories of slavery that

happened recently enough to be in his aunt's lifetime, but long enough ago that they are still "stories" (23). The poem ends with the child pondering. As a symbol of potential, the child becomes responsible for the aunt's continued legacy of progression from bad to better. Finally, "A Song to a Negro Wash Woman," reads "I know how you send your children to school, and high- / school, and even college. / I know how you work and help your man when times are / hard. / I know how you build your house up from the wash-tub / and call it home" (41). In this poem, an industrious mother labors for the sake of her children so that they may have greater opportunity than she did. Her legacy, then, is able to enjoy greater freedom and opportunity, namely education, than she was able to have. These three poems illustrate how Hughes uses motherhood to articulate a progressive legacy, one which Hughes predicts will have greater equality.

Shakur also includes mothers in his works. Unlike Hughes', however, mother-child relationships are not indicative of progression. Tupac reverses both Hughes' portrayal of mother's speaking to sons, as well as Hughes' hopeful future. Tupac's music often places both mother and son in a state of stagnation. Instead of children bearing "tomorrow's America," Shakur's children often die, through miscarriage or infanticide. One graphic example is "Brenda's Got a Baby," which describes an impregnated 12-year-old who attempts to abandon her baby after giving birth. In one of Shakur's poems, "Under the Skies Above," the narrator laments a miscarriage. Finally, a deceased son narrates "Thugz Mansion," consoling his mother saying "Tell the homies I'm in heaven and they ain't got hoods." The narrator is only able to find respite from poverty in the afterlife. Distressing works such as these do not portray a hopeful African-American legacy, because this legacy keeps dying out. In effect, whereas Hughes'

mothers reveal a future of gradual progress, Shakur's mothers lose their children, thus halting their legacy of progress.

The question then becomes why these two artists, with so many similarities, would use mothers for such drastically different purposes. The answer lies in the two very different racial climates Shakur and Hughes wrote in. Like many before him, Hughes fought segregation and the white supremacist discourse in Jazz Age America. Hughes poetry attempted to dismantle the tangible racial discrimination created by Jim Crow laws by drawing attention to the black/white color line and the atrocities being committed in the south. His poetic narratives map the progress made in the past and look forward to a more equal future. This is not to say he thinks the black/white line will disappear on its own, as revealed in "Mother to Son." But poems like "I, Too" portray "tomorrow" in hopeful terms: "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / When company comes. / Nobody'll dare / Say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen,' / Then. // Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I, too, am America" (46). The poem progresses from "singing" America, to "being" America, a process that would dismantle the color line by integrating "African Americans" into "Americans." Hughes other poem, "America" follows a similar pattern, describing "today's black mother bearing tomorrow's America" (52). Once again this portrays a future in which African Americans will become "part" of America. Hughes' hopeful future is based on integration, which opposes segregation and Jim Crow. Indeed, Hughes was not blind to the intense racial injustice facing him and his people. But he did see the slow progress being made to fight segregation, and hoped that drawing attention to this gradual change would motivate African-Americans to fight for greater equality. Like slavery, Hughes accurately predicted that segregation would someday be a thing of the past, and that the African-

American legacy would be one of eventual progress. The racism of Hughes' day, then, was more measurable.

In contrast to the Jazz Age, the racism Shakur dealt with took a subtler form: whereas Hughes' had very tangible benchmarks of oppression to overcome (namely segregation and racial violence), Shakur saw only the effects of inequality. Despite the illegalization of discrimination by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Shakur still saw immense racial inequality. As George Lipsitz argues,

Political and cultural struggles over power shape the contours and dimensions of racism in any era. Mass mobilizations against racism during the Civil War and civil rights eras meaningfully curtailed the reach and scope of white supremacy, but in each case reactionary forces then engineered a renewal of racism, albeit in new forms, during successive decades. Racism changes over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in different eras. (371)

Shakur's mother-child relationships are informed by his understanding of societal racism in the 1990s. What results from this understanding is a far less hopeful view of the future, one in which Shakur "ain't meant to survive 'coz it's a setup" ("Head Up"). Shakur attacks many of the more tangible effects of this societal racism, such as an education system where "more kids are being handed crack than they're being handed diplomas" (*Tupac* 54). But his most pointed criticisms racialize welfare spending, such as in "Keep Ya Head Up" which begins with "I give a holler to my sisters on welfare / Tupac cares and don't nobody else care." The changing policies regarding welfare during the Reagan administration have recently come under attack for being partially informed by racism, as the administration

cut funding for education, made eligibility requirements for public assistance more difficult, weakened civil rights laws and institutions, increased defense

spending, and provided tax cuts to the rich...The national conversation changed from using the welfare system as a tool to support families in need to viewing its recipients as dependent, lazy, and looking for handouts. (Standford 11)

Lipsitz argues that such policy changes contribute to white supremacy, because “attacks on government spending for public housing, health, education, and transportation have deprived African Americans of needed services and opportunities for jobs in the public sector” (380).

Shakur perceived the racism latent in these changing policies, and how the changing political discourse further disadvantaged those on welfare, accurately pointing out that “[the government] got money for wars but they can’t feed the poor” (“Head up”). Welfare reform is a more tangible example of the ways in which African Americans were oppressed during Shakur’s lifetime.

However, American politics continued to discriminate in more covert, subconscious ways. In contrast to Langston Hughes’ “Mother to Son,” Shakur’s racism could not be measured on a line graph. Though certainly a difficult law to enforce, the Civil Rights Acts were clear, legal changes made in order to affect legal discrimination. In Shakur’s day, however, racism had taken a more subtle form, one that was hard to identify and even harder to change.

Shakur’s dying children therefore represent the failure of the legacy Hughes hoped for. Shakur’s children inhabit Hughes’ “tomorrow”: by the time Shakur was born, both slavery and segregation had “officially” become part of the past. The foreseeable racial barriers that limited African Americans during Hughes’ time had been breached, and African Americans were legally equal to white Americans. However, it is clear through both Shakur’s own life experience as well as the previous discussion of racism that there was (and still is) continued discrimination against African Americans in American culture and politics. Rather than living to enjoy achieved equality, Shakur’s children die. Mother-child relationships therefore have no optimistic legacy of progression, and African Americans are left in stagnation and poverty, with no clear direction to

take. As George Lipsitz states, “the problem with whiteness is that it “never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (369). To counter this, Shakur stated that he was “gonna show the most graphic details of what [he] saw in [his] community and hopefully they’ll stop it quick” (*Tupac* 70). Indeed, Shakur’s most effective tactic in combating this subtle racism may have been simply calling attention to it, as the subtleties of American racism in the end of the twentieth made it difficult to diagnose. His inversion of the mother-son relationship previously seen in Hughes’ poetry effectively reveals and attacks this drastic shift in American racism towards one that is harder to see, but equally disenfranchising.

This paper has outlined the ways in which Shakur’s mother-child relationships reveal how American racism had evolved into a more latent force than it had previously been, and likewise that Shakur’s sophisticated inversion of the trope of African American motherhood should not be dismissed as mindless gangsta rap. However, it should be noted that Shakur’s dying children did not symbolize an end to progress, but rather the absence of progress in Shakur’s time. He, like Hughes, hoped for continued progress in the African American community. This is seen most clearly in “Keep Ya Head Up.” Addressed to his “godson” and “a little girl named Corinne,” this song effectively explains the issues facing these children, but ultimately promises “I think we can make it, in fact, I’m sure // And if you fall, stand tall and comeback for more” then pleads “And it’s crazy, it seems it’ll never let up // but please, you got to keep ya head up.” In a manner very similar to Hughes in “Mother to Son,” Shakur promises that continued fighting will secure equality for African Americans. As America continues to work toward equality, perhaps the most important thing to fight inequality is simply the

realization that systematic racial inequality, though different than the racism of the past, is still an issue.

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