

2-18-2016

## Tupac's Quest for Black Jesus: God as Deadbeat Dad and Afeni, the Migdala

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### Recommended Citation

Freeman, John (2016) "Tupac's Quest for Black Jesus: God as Deadbeat Dad and Afeni, the Migdala," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol9/iss1/3>

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*And God said he should send his one begotten son  
To lead the wild into the ways of the man  
Follow me; eat my flesh, flesh and my flesh.*

—“Hail Mary”

*Why do God need colored windows to talk to me? Why God can't come  
where I'm at? Where he sent me? If God wanted to talk to me  
in a pretty spot like that, why'd he send me here then?*

---Tupac Shakur (*Vibe* 1996)

Although Tupac Shakur maintained in a late interview that he had gotten past his abandonment by his father, the absence of that father no doubt left him to fend for himself, scarred and confused: “They say I’m wrong and I’m heartless, but all along/I was lookin for a father he was gone.” This sense of abandonment extended to the theological realm. For Shakur, God the Father “can’t come where I’m at.” He is, in a sense, a “deadbeat dad.” Like the absentee father, He has placed him here, abandoned, the product of a broken home and broken world, with few resources by which to find his way.

The early Church struggled with its own “missing Father” problem when it introduced the concept of the Trinity. Indeed, some in the Church resisted this syncretic formulation, viewing it as a step back from monotheism into polytheism. In *What Is an Apparatus?* Giorgio Agamben demonstrates how the Church fathers resolved the seeming split in God’s being and substance brought on by the introduction of the Trinity. They maintained that God retained his unity but in “his *oikonomia*—that is to say the way in which he administers his home, his life, and the world that he created—he is, rather, triple” (Agamben 2009, 10). Agamben maintains this split in God between being and action was handed down to humans: “This division separates the living being from itself and from its immediate relationship with its environment” (Agamben 2009, 14). In Tupac’s search to find his place in the world, neither Church “fathers” nor a familial father was able to supply what he felt was missing in his life. Indeed, Tupac felt the Guidebook left behind by the Church fathers was outdated and not relevant to his own life:

When God wrote the Bible I’m sure it would have been a revised copy by now. You know what I mean? Because a lot of shit has changed and I been lookin’ for this revised

copy and I don't see it. . . I still see that same old copy they had from then and I'm not disrespecting anybody's religion. Please forgive me if it comes off like that. I'm just statin' my opinion. I feel like we get crucified. . . I mean. . . the Bible is telling us all these people did this because they suffered this much. That's what makes them special people . . .

(Vibe 1996)

It may well be that the “revised copy” of the Bible that plays truer to Tupac’s lived experience can be found in the Gnostic Gospels of such figures as Mary Magdalene. These gospels restore a sense of gender balance to descriptions of the formation of the early Church. Historically, women’s roles in the history of that Church have been systematically suppressed by a misogynistic male hierarchy. The fact that the Risen Christ was first witnessed by Mary, Joanna, and the Magdalene, of course, accords them special prominence. More importantly, as Thomas de Wesselow demonstrates, it is the women, particularly Miryam, called the Migdalah, who recognize and immediately accept the phenomenon of Christ’s resurrection (De Wesselow 2012, 21-22.) The steadfastness of Miryam—later vilified as a prostitute in the figure of Mary Magdalene—is prophesied by Christ: “When all have abandoned me, only she shall stand beside me like a tower.” Representing “empowered Femininity,” in Johanna de Quillan’s words, Miryam proved “anathema” to figures such as Peter, jealous of her role in Christ’s ministry and intent upon establishing his own prominence in the early Church (De Quillan 2010, 25).

In many respects, the disrupted *oikonomia* or household management that Shakur experienced in his life through the abandonment of the father was repaired at least in part through the agency of the mother, Afeni Shakur (who, as we shall see, had her own struggle with a male-dominated hierarchy). There are biblical precedents here, although one must look for them in the “revised copies” of the Bible, the excluded accounts provided by the Gnostics. In *The Gospel of the Beloved Companion: The Complete Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, for example, the male disciples’ anxieties over Christ’s imminent departure from them are quelled in the following revelatory exchange:

The disciples said to Yeshua “When will you depart from us? Who is to be our leader? And Yeshua said to them: “I will not leave you orphans. When a father goes away, it is the mother who tends to the children.” (De Quillan 2010, 35:16)

In "Dear Mama," the mother shoulders the household burdens, taking on both parental roles. Like Christ multiplying the scraps of fishes and loaves to feed the multitude, she manages to perform her own "miracles":

*And I could see you comin home after work late  
You're in the kitchen tryin to fix us a hot plate  
Ya just workin with the scraps you was given  
And mama made miracles every Thanksgivin*

Understanding a father-less Tupac Shakur and his syncretic quest for a Black Jesus begins with recognizing how much his life and character are enframed in his mother's own story. As Jasmine Guy indicates in her biography, *Afeni Shakur, Evolution of a Revolutionary*, "Tupac is definitely Afeni's son" (Guy 2005, 114). We might add here that he is *definitively* her son, his story enframed in her own. The enframing starts when she is in prison and he is in her womb, life nurtured within life imprisoned. It continues with her renaming of her son: how that renaming links him historically (and tragically) to a number of syncretic, revolutionary movements. Indeed, this enframing still plays a role when Tupac's misguided quest for Black Jesus dead ends in the figure of the Godfather.

### *1. A Mother's Bequest and the Body of Evidence*

Like the Magdalene herself, Afeni Shakur was an anomaly as a strong leader in a misogynistic organization (as summed up in Black Panther Stokely Carmichael's assertion, "'The only position for women in SNCC is prone"). Not a typical college student initiate of the Black Panthers, she came from the hard-scrabble streets of South Bronx, a member of the Disciple Debs, "a pack of hard-ass girls" (Guy 2005, 35). She maintains that the Party gave her "home training" and "principles to living," values she passed on to Tupac, who was born just a month after her release from prison. She had been charged with 156 counts of insurrection. Arguing her own case, she obtained her release. When her biographer remarks upon how brilliantly she spoke in her own defense, Afeni reveals just what drove her "brilliant" performance:

I wouldn't have been brilliant if I thought I was going to get out of jail. It was because I thought this was the *last* time I could speak. The last time before they locked me up

forever. I had to make a record there for later, because I would never be able to speak again. . . .I just thought I was writing my own obituary. . . (Guy 2005, 98)

Concerned that her son would be taken away from her, never to be seen again, she penned a letter to the unborn child, insisting that letter be included in the twenty-one testimonials of the other defendants in the case (*Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the NY21*). She strove to explain to her children “all this mess that’s going on now.” She tells them that “change must begin within ourselves” and that African-Americans “still must face the problems of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited” (Guy 2005, 87). She proudly announces “for the first time in my life I feel like a woman—beaten, battered and scarred maybe, but isn’t that what wisdom is truly made of [?]” Quite candidly, she qualifies herself as “a poor example for anyone to follow because I have deviated from the revolutionary principles which I know to be correct” (Guy 2005, 88).

The mother’s desire to leave a legacy for her unborn son is taken up by him a generation later. Tupac may very well have had this letter in mind when he wrote his own version of his mother’s missive: “Letter 2 My Unborn.” Likely referring to the NY21 autobiography, he announces, “Make way for a whirlwind prophesized,” telling the child:

Now ever since my birth, I've been cursed since I'm born too wild  
In case I never get to holla at my unborn child  
Many things learned in prison, blessed and still livin'  
Tryin' to earn every penny that I'm gettin', and reminiscin'  
To the beginnin' of my mission.

He proceeds to describe his school days, rapping career, outlaw life, and the rape charge against him: “Tell the world I feel guilty to bein' anxious/Ain't no way in hell, that I could ever be rapist.” Finding it “so complicated to escape fate,” he hopes one day to meet with the child in “ghetto Heaven” where, apparently, all things will be sorted out. The same sense of fatality that mother wrote out of is at work here.

Describing the sense of fatality underlying many of Tupac’s songs, Sharon Holland argues that he spoke from “the space of the dead,” often alluding to the inevitability of his own death as a Black male in a malevolent culture. (Holland 2000, 391). Guy finds a parallelism between

mother and son, who both lived through their own “concentrated period of time” (1968-1971 for Afeni and 1992-1995 for Tupac) (Guy 2005, 114). She remarks to Afeni: “From nineteen years old to twenty-four you had this accelerated life. . .just like Tupac” (Guy 2005, 113). Afeni confides to Guy the mindset this acceleration caused, no doubt recalling her own situation as an “enemy of the state” during her Black Panther days:

I saw this desperation in my son. Like he knew he was only here for a limited time. That's why it scared me so. I know that place Tupac was in. It's not a nice place to be. It's a place that will save you because you take yourself to the limit. To all the options of all the bad things that can happen. You take yourself there, and you accept them. (Guy 2005, 99)

Afeni passed on to her son this sense of an accelerated, fated, revolutionary life. Although his mother's membership in the Panthers is well known and links Tupac to that movement, she ensured that his revolutionary lineage would extend even farther back in time by renaming Lesane Parish Crooks

Tupac Amaru Shakur (Shining, Serpent, Blessed One). I wanted him to have the name of revolutionary, indigenous people in the world. I wanted him to know he was part of a world culture and not just from a neighborhood... (“Drum”)

Named after Túpac Amaru (1545–1572), the first indigenous ruler of the Incas to rebel against Spanish colonialist rule, Shakur is linked to a succession of revolts against colonial exploitation. After defeating the first Túpac Amaru at Vilcabamba, the Spanish beheaded its ruler and his followers, placing their heads on pikes at the place of execution. A similar gruesome fate awaited the second Túpac. Although their common deaths suggest a gloomy fatality, we also find a sense of regeneration at work here. Indeed, two centuries after the death of the first Túpac a second one was believed to be regenerated, reincarnated from him. As Ward Stavig notes,

the first Túpac Amaru's flesh and blood existence, and royal heritage, made it possible for the second Túpac Amaru to be “reborn” and for the memory to be kept alive. Thus, in many ways, the first Túpac Amaru gave “birth” to the second, and the second, in turn,

became the physical manifestation and then symbol of hope for generations of Andean peoples. (Stavig 2004, 29)

A manifestation of a “third” generation, Tupac Amaru Shakur’s name thus resonates through centuries of colonialist oppression, as we find even present-day Marxist groups such as Peru’s Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement and Uruguay’s Tupamaros honoring this ancestral memory. Moreover, just as Tupac’s name links him to the Incas, his genealogy connects him to another persecuted group: Native Americans. Thus, Afeni traces her genealogy back to a great-grandmother, who married a Croatan Indian. The tribe eventually came to be known as the Lumbee (after a local river). Although many other ethnic influences came into the mix, she notes “they lost their culture and their language, but they stayed separate. They knew they were Indians” (Guy, 2005 11). Naming here also comes into play, as Tupac’s godfather’s *nom de guerre* was “Geronimo” Pratt, a man who spent twenty-seven years in prison as the victim of a CointelPro scheme (the FBI’s counterintelligence unit).

Afeni Shakur’s connection to the Black Panthers constitutes one more link in this “royal” lineage of oppressed cultures. Politically conscious, Tupac deftly sums up the oppression of African-Americans, both the government-sponsored drug war against them as well as its policy of assassinating Black Panther leaders like Huey Newton and Fred Hampton:

*Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares?  
One less hungry mouth on the welfare.  
First ship 'em dope & let 'em deal to brothers.  
Give 'em guns, step back, and watch 'em kill each other.  
"It's time to fight back", that's what Huey said.  
2 shots in the dark now Huey's dead.*

—“Changes”

The systematic repression of African-Americans through the distribution of crack through their neighborhoods as a means of financing the government’s secret Iran-Contra operations in the 1980’s recalls that government’s earlier undermining of Native Americans through the distribution of alcohol. Tupac’s tattooed body functions itself as a testament to similar carnage

wrought upon youths in the African-American community. As the Ben Westhoff of *Urban Ink* notes, his writings “provide a soundtrack and commentary to many of the injustices and inequities of society” and his “outspoken nature was also evident in the ink he wore on his skin” (Westhoff 57, 2012). His body serves not only to memorialize those who “fell victim to the streets” but also to guarantee that they accompany the living in their current exploits:

*Eyes blurred*  
*Sayin' goodbye at the cemetery.*  
*Tho' memories fade*  
*I got your name tatted on my arm*  
*So we both ball till my dyin days. . . (“Life”)*

Raps such as “Life Goes On,” both celebrating and lamenting those who have passed on, display an incantatory quality:

*How many brothas fell victim to tha streetz*  
*Rest in peace young nigga, there's a Heaven for a 'G' [gangster]*  
*Be a lie, If I told ya that I never thought of death*  
*My niggas, we tha last ones left*  
*But life goes on..... (“Life”)*

Ritual acts of remembrance reconnect the living to the dead:

*Pour out some liquor*  
*Have a toast for tha homies*  
*See we both gotta die*  
*But ya chose to go before me*  
*And brothas miss ya while your gone. . . (“Life”)*

The name inscribed upon the flesh allows the fallen person's memory to continue, for the dead person to live vicariously through the survivor. Michael Eric Dyson notes further that



the gesture of examination is also one of self-protection: It secures the place of recent ancestors in the urban cosmology by giving them their just due. In so doing, survivors extend their lives, blessed by the memory of late comrades who intercede with the powers that be on their behalf. (Dyson 2001, 228)

A syncretic, “incremental” text in its own right, Tupac’s body integrates past and present. Thus, a tattooed image of Queen Nefertiti, with the inscription “2 Die 4” underneath, takes his lineage further back in time. A reference to “Exodus 1831” serves a dual function, first referring to the Old Testament passage: “Now I know that the Lord is Greater Than All Gods because he delivered the people from the hands of the Egyptians when they dealt with them arrogantly.” In a secondary sense, it marks the year 1831, the date of the Nat Turner Slave Revolt. In a late interview, Tupac spoke about planning to make a film about Turner. Dyson describes “the ways Tupac viewed his body as a text, as the ink of the tattoo artist bled all over his torso” (Dyson 2001, 232). We find there personalized words and symbols expressly designed to ward off evils besetting him and, by extension, those of his own generation. For example, immediately above “THUG LIFE” on Tupac’s abdomen is an AK-47 with “50 N\*\*\*\*\*z” inscribed above it. The most popular interpretation of this tattoo, offered by blogger Bliskley, runs along this line: “50 N\*\*\*\*\*z stands for 1 black from every state of the USA, all them N\*\*\*\*\*z would be stronger than every weapon, if they would be united.” A call to arms, the marked body operates as a protective “garment” of sorts. “Come after me, and you will have to deal with fifty of my comrades-in-arms.” Describing the effects of the “late capitalist economy,” Jill A. Fisher argues, it “has created a structure in which our lives and bodies have been violently commodified.” She portrays the tattoo as a means to “reappropriate the physical body from the socially diseased body” (Fisher 2001, 103). Unfortunately, inscriptions and talismanic markings cannot shield that physical body from the malevolent forces and influences surrounding it.

If Tupac’s tattoos advertise lineage, foment rebellion, and memorialize the fallen, they also serve to ward off evil. Indeed, Tupac’s tattoos recall the talismanic, protective markings and symbols found on the ghost shirts that some Native Americans resorted to wearing at the close of the nineteenth century. James Mooney postulates that they were a syncretic formulation, possibly inspired by the endowment robe of the Mormons, “a seamless garment of white muslin adorned with symbolic figures.” “Each wearer” of the ghost shirt, he tells us, “decorated his or her shirt

with symbols from personal visions or items of power” (Mooney 1894). The Lakota believed they possessed magic power and would protect the wearer of them from the white man’s bullets.

Responding to the ever-increasing genocide practiced against them, ghost dancers engaged in ritual practices to summon forth the dead. In 1890, Mrs. Z. A. Parker described a Ghost Dance she observed on White Clay Creek at the Pine Ridge Reservation, Dakota Territory. She describes

the most fearful, heart-piercing wails I ever heard-crying, moaning, groaning, and shrieking out their grief, and naming over their departed friends and relatives, at the same time taking up handfuls of dust at their feet, washing their hands in it, and throwing it over their heads. (Mooney 1894)

Invoking the “Great Spirit,” they sought to speak with the dead. We find an archetypal pattern to this desire to connect with and memorialize the dead. While the subjects of oppression have changed, the oppressor in these cases remains the same. In “‘The Father Tells Me So!’ Wovoka: The Ghost Dance Prophet,” L. G. Moses explores the syncretic nature of the Ghost Dance drawing as it does on Christian concepts of resurrection. Thus, in a “Messiah Letter,” Wovoka announces “Do not tell the white people about this. Jesus is now upon the earth....The dead are all alive again” (Moses 1985, 341). Wovoka believed that those Indians who had died would return and lands lost to the whites would be restored. Moses asserts that a misunderstanding of the Ghost Dance as threatening “significantly contributed to the Dakota disaster that ended at Wounded Knee, South Dakota” (Moses 1985, 342). He cites Black Elk’s assessment of what was lost in the massacre: “a dream was buried with the slain Sioux” (343). We can detect a similar sense of fatality in Tupac’s own assessment of his work: “My music is spiritual. It’s like Negro spirituals, except for the fact that I’m not saying ‘We Shall Overcome.’ I’m saying that we are overcome” (cited by Holland 2000, 392).

Like Tupac’s own tattooed and mutilated body, the relics of ghost shirts have their own grisly story to tell. A ghost shirt, thought to have been taken from one of the 146 victims of the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, was discovered in Glasgow, apparently sold by George C. Crager, a member of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. We are told: “It is pierced in several places

with bullet holes, and slight brown stains still mar the torn cloth.... The Raven, Owl and Eagle feathers hanging from the neck of the off-white tunic are tattered and ragged” (Mooney 1894).<sup>1</sup>

Interesting enough, Dyson, Tupac’s most eloquent eulogizer, speaks of his premonition of death as a “cloak” that, in the end, not only failed to protect him but also hastened his end:

His beautiful body was riddled with bullets, mangled and twisted with hot lead piercing his flesh, unprotected by guards or forewarning. But he wore his premonition as a cloak, which in truth, had the opposite effect of the bullet-proof vest meant to shield him from harm: It invited the fury of his demons and that of his enemies to conspire against him, to rebuke his body and to crush it with terrifying finality. (Dyson 2001, 226)

Here, Afeni’s own “eulogy” about the Black Panthers has a familiar ring to it: “We drew violence to ourselves. We drew bitterness to ourselves” (Guy 2005, 68). She describes a movement that had lost its way:

We dropped the ball. We didn’t know what we were dealing with.  
We were in over our heads. And, worst of all, we were not listening.  
We were not listening to old people. We had removed any semblance of spirituality from our movement. So, when the danger came, what did we have?” (Guy 2005, 67)

The Panthers’ turn from community organizing to armed resistance no doubt caused the government to redouble its efforts to suppress them. Native Americans’ own resistance to government oppression had the same effect. The Ghost Dance, Mooney informs us, took on the dimension of a new religion, causing alarm among those charged with controlling them, in one case sparking a massacre. Although the prophet Wovoka had emphasized this religion’s anti-violent nature, others, such as Short Bull, interpreted it as foreshadowing “the eventual elimination of the white people” (Mooney 1894). A half-century later, the same debate would occur between Martin Luther King’s adherents of non-violence and Malcolm X’s proponents of armed resistance.

## 2. *Resurrection Myths: Searching for the Indian Christ and the Black Jesus*

After the second, successful attempt on Tupac's life, fans still hold on to the belief that Tupac is somehow still alive. After all, the Makaveli album's namesake, Nicolō Machiavelli, spoke about faking one's death to elude the vengeance of one's enemies.<sup>2</sup> Afeni notes that invariably when she talks to audiences that issue comes up, one young girl querying, "if they have Elvis, why can't we have Tupac?" Reflecting later on her response, she tells her interviewer, "And you know what, I had no answer for her" (Davey D). Dyson's interview with actor Larenz Tate demonstrates how strong the nostalgic impulse is to include Tupac in the pantheon of cherished individuals who died before their time:

"I think he is the hip-hop version of Elvis Presley," Tate declared. "People are claiming Tupac sightings everywhere." I couldn't help but think to myself, as he spoke of Tupac and Elvis, that it's about time. White folk are always spotting Elvis or JFK or Marilyn Monroe, which is a great thing if your icons and heroes were only apparently gone but in truth were hanging out on a deserted island, living beyond their legend in the solitude of old age. (Dyson 2001, 143)

Dyson attributes Tupac's "ascent to ghetto sainthood" to the sad state of affairs in which Blacks find themselves. He lays out the bleak reality in which this ascent occurred as "both a reflection of the desperation of the youth who proclaim him and a society that has had too few saints that could speak to the hopeless in our communities" (Dyson 2001, 270). Carey Walsh compares Tupac's status to the veneration accorded to Catholic saints. Somehow Tupac lives on much like Catholicism's veneration of the saints (Walsh 2013, 243).

Reminiscent of Native Americans' own situation, resurrection myths cut across the cultures considered here. Followers of Tupac Amaru believed his body would regenerate from the grave. Native Americans, Mooney informs us, "are looking for the coming of the Indian Christ, the resurrection of the dead Indians, and the consequent supremacy of the Indian race" (Mooney 1894). Several "claimants" stepped forward to answer the call. As the prophecy spread, Mooney records one instance in which

One Indian went so far as to declare himself to be Christ again come to earth, and rode through the streets of Olympia at the head of several scores of his followers with his hands outstretched as Christ was when he was crucified. (Mooney 1894)

Mooney mentions another “resurrected” individual, Porcupine, who claimed “to be the returned Christ and bore on his body the scars of the crucifixion” (Mooney 1894). As one might imagine, pretenders to the Holy Succession were quickly silenced, murdered by the authorities.

The “eruption” of so many ardent “resurrectionists” was itself a sign of the times, as Mark Hagopian asserts in *The Phenomenon of Revolution*:

The convulsion of the millennial movement itself evidences the imminence of utopia, which, though experienced on earth, is brought about with divine intervention. Thus, with the help of a charismatic leader, the chiliasts seek to create a “simultaneously sacred and profane paradise.” (Hagopian 1974, 25)

As Ralph Linton notes, while participants in such movements seek to revive many aspects of their own culture, they invariably incorporate elements of the alien culture into their vision of the future. Native American millennial eschatology, the fervid belief that a new era would soon arrive, with the restoration of deceased ancestors and the return of the buffalo, combined with Christian eschatology in a refashioned syncretic belief system. A similar phenomenon can be witnessed among the Incas, Nichols A. Robins observing that

Christian-based prophecies complemented and reinforced Indian eschatological beliefs. According to Saint Rose, Lima would be destroyed by tidal waves that would spare the Indian areas and herald a new, Catholic, era of native rule. “Messianic woes” such as famine, chaos, and plague would characterize the transition to the new society. (Robins 2002, 139)

Tupac’s own spiritual quest, not often acknowledged in the popular media, takes on a syncretism similar to that found in the Incan and Native American experience. In the latter case, the disciples of the mystic known only as the Delaware prophet sought “to purify themselves from sin” and “to live entirely in the original state that they were in before the white people

found out their country.” In “Changes,” Shakur advocates a similar process of purification as a prelude to the coming Redemption:

*We gotta make a change...  
It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes.  
Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live  
and let's change the way we treat each other.  
You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do  
what we gotta do, to survive.*

In addition to advocating changes, Tupac also worked hard to give encouragement to his beleaguered people, particularly its females. In this vein, his most insightful critic, Dyson, labels “Keep Ya Head Up” a “pastoral letter” (Dyson 2001, 107). Here, Tupac gives “a holler to my sisters on welfare,” offering pastoral counsel:

*To all the ladies havin babies on they own.  
I know it's kinda rough and you're feelin all alone  
Daddy's long gone and he left you by ya lonesome  
Thank the Lord for my kids, even if nobody else want em  
Cause I think we can make it, in fact, I'm sure  
And if you fall, stand tall and come back for more  
Cause ain't nuttin worse than when your son  
**wants to kno why his daddy don't love him no mo'.***

Mooney's notion of the “Indian redeemer” surfaces in Shakur's world view, once again in a new syncretic formulation: the figure of Black Jesus. Shakur expresses this idea with a combination of bravura and modesty worthy of hip-hop's own nature as, in Dyson's words, “endlessly recombinant”:

The reason I sell six million records, the reason I can go to jail and come out without a scratch, the reason I can walk around, the reason I am who I am today is because I can look directly into my face and find my soul. There. . .It's not sold. I didn't sell it. My heart is still connected to my body so any character . . .I'm gonna bring that intensity that truth that honesty to it because I have to repay for that blessing from Black Jesus, from

God. I have to pay for that by shining. If he give you the voltage and you waste it, that's the curse. If he gave me the voltage, I'm gonna shine. It's not mine. It's from God.

[Vibe]

Such syncretism leads those who would formulate it onto a difficult path, with few familiar signposts to guide them. The effort to synthesize from one's own and others' traditions never quite succeeds, as those who would do so seek a more originary starting point. Mooney describes one Native American group's practices:

. . .their services being a combination of Protestant and Catholic services, though at first they almost totally rejected the Bible, for they said they had direct revelations from Christ, and were more fortunate than the whites, who had an old, antiquated book. (Mooney 1894)

This is the same "old, antiquated book" that Tupac argued was in need of a revision. For Shakur, lived experience trumps traditional claims made about that Beyond. Speaking from first-hand experience, he scoffs at the supposed torments of Hell: "You don't burn [in Hell]. Because, if that's the case, it's hell on earth because bullets burn." Interesting enough, the five gunshot wounds he suffered when he was caught in the middle of a botched robbery attempt are associated with the five wounds inflicted upon Christ's crucified body.

I got shot five times [pointing at different parts of his body] . . . one. . . two. . . three. . . four. . . five. . . You know what I mean? And I got crucified to the media and I walked through with the thorns on and I had the shit thrown on me and I had this thief at the top and I told that nigger I be back for you. You know what I mean? Trust me. This is not supposed to be going down. I'll be back. I'm not saying I'm Jesus, but we go through that thing every day. ("*Lost*")

The focus on lived experience results in a new syncretic formulation of Jesus as Black Jesus. Existential, it refuses to bypass "this earthly hell" and proceed directly to some promised heavenly bliss. In "Black Jesus," Tupac describes himself "on the edge lookin down at this volatile pit/Will it matter if I cease to exist?" At war, he is looking for "somebody raw [to] rally the troops." Life is described as a losing proposition: "I was born an inmate, waitin to escape the

prison/Went to church but don't understand it, they underhanded.” Penned as a prayer for understanding and help, the song sketches not a Sunday School figure but one much more down-to-earth and accessible:

So we searchins for Black Jesus  
It's like a Saint, that we pray to in the ghetto, to get us through  
Somebody that understand our pain  
You know maybe not too perfect, you know  
Somebody that hurt like we hurt  
Somebody that smoke like we smoke  
Drink like we drink  
That understand where we coming from  
That's who we pray to  
We need help y'all

3. *Turning words into money....*

*...the use of coin was there [among the Incas] utterly unknown, and that consequently their gold was found all hoarded together, being of no other use but for ornament and show....whereas our gold is always in motion and traffic; we cut it into a thousand small pieces, and cast it into a thousand forms, and scatter and disperse it in a thousand ways. [65]*

—Montaigne (“Of Coaches”)

*How in the hell do I pop this fuckin' gate and get me free?*

---Tupac

The Spanish enterprise, summed up in the motto “For God and for Gold,” will stand forever as a testament to how the latter can corrupt the former. As a “second-generation revolutionary,” Shakur had to struggle with a similar dual consciousness. Dyson cites Al Sharpton in this regard, who noted that Tupac “wanted to be honest to his radical past, but “at the same time, he wanted to be commercially successful” (Dyson 2001, 62). “Panther purists,” Dyson maintains, found



that “Tupac’s thug fantasies fulfilled the submerged logic of Panther gangsterism, what with its sexual abuse of women, financial malfeasance, and brutal factualism” (e.g. East Side vs. West Side) (Dyson 2001, 48). Dyson finds in Tupac “two warring ideals. . . (w)rapped in one dark body. The question to ask now is: Could Tupac’s dogged strength alone have kept him from being torn asunder?” (Dyson 2001, 48)

No doubt Shakur performed in an industry tailor-made to tear artists asunder. The cracks were already starting to appear: a rape conviction in 1993 and, prophetically, his engagement in the increasingly vitriolic East Side/West Side war. As Dyson observes, the industry constituted two masters perfectly situated to pull one apart: “It is both a highly commercialized, corporate-sponsored venture as well as an indigenous art form that reflects (on) the brutal realities of black youth existence” (Dyson 2001, 49). Unlike other commercially successful rappers, however, Shakur resisted changing himself: “I’m not fittin’ to act white just cause y’all want me to act white. Just cause all them other mothafuckers act white when they get they papers.” Unfortunately, this bravado meant that his increasing focus on the gangster persona as a form of social protest, an artistic statement, infiltrated his own life out in the real world. As Dyson sums up, “Tupac tried to live the life he rapped about, which had spectacular results in the studio but disastrous results in the world” (254).

Guy remarks upon the historical parallelism between Tupac and Afeni’s experiences, citing “The rivalry between East Coast and West Coast rappers in Tupac’s life and the rivalry between East Coast and West Coast Panthers in Afeni’s” (Guy 2005, 114). Referring to her crack addiction, Afeni connects her own experiences with her son’s, confessing to her biographer: “I faltered. And that is Tupac’s story. His mother faltered, and that was devastating for him. I can’t deny him *his* story. My addiction is part of *his* story. . .” (Guy 2005, 120). Increasingly a revolutionary without a cause (or lost from the cause), Tupac’s own faltering reflected both cultural and personal causes. As Michael Develle Win observes, “His mother prepared him for a different time. The commercialization of our society doesn’t allow for revolutionaries who can’t back a product” (Strauss 2001). He became a victim of his own commercial success, encouraged by that success to fashion himself into a product. The same industry that rewarded rappers for their work seemed programmed at the same moment to pit them against each other, sporting their

affiliations with rival record companies like those from the households of the Montagues and Capulets—with equally disastrous results.

To his dismay at times, Tupac came to realize that the product of his dual consciousness could spin out of his control and have unforeseen consequences. The concept of “Thug Life,” standing for “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone,” was twisted around by those who did not understand it. The rapper was horrified at a concert to find the very gang members whose actions had killed a young boy now engaged in chanting the slogan. Selling the image is one thing; buying into it quite another. Dyson, in this regard, describes the process by which the rapper fell “prey to the temptation to be a gangster.” More ominously still, “In fleeing from art to the actual, from appearance to reality, from the studio to the streets, Tupac lost his life” (Dyson 2001, 68).

Tupac's dual consciousness marked him as a complex, paradoxical, and ultimately tragic figure. When interviewer Chuck Philips asked him about the influences on his writing, he cited Shakespeare. His curiosity piqued, Philips observed: “Not many people would associate you with Shakespeare.” Tupac replied: “Cause they stupid.” He proceeds to portray Romeo and Juliet in a decidedly “street-level” way:

... I love Shakespeare. He wrote some of the rawest stories, man. I mean look at *Romeo and Juliet*. That's some serious ghetto shit. You got this guy Romeo from the Bloods who falls for Juliet, a female from the Crips, and everybody in both gangs are against them. So they have to sneak out and they end up dead for nothing. Real tragic stuff. (Philips 1995)

Commenting on “how Shakespeare busts it up with Macbeth,” he likens this tale of murder, power-grabbing, and delusion to “a Scarface song” (Philips 1995). Abuses suffered in prison no doubt fueled the anger and paranoid bravado that culminates in the mob mentality of his last album, published posthumously as *Makaveli The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*. Here, Shakur commandeers Machiavelli's state-sponsored gangsterism and turns it into a media-sponsored phenomenon. Examining the album cover, with its portrayal of a black crucified Christ, we find here “two warring ideals” of martyrdom and gangsterism “(w)rapped in one dark body.”

Caught up in the cash nexus of the hustle and flow of the recording industry, Tupac sometimes mixed his metaphors—sacred and profane—in bragging about the miraculous transformations that occurred there:

We don't part the Red Sea, but we walk through the 'hood without being shot. You know what I mean? We don't turn water to wine, but we turn muthafuckin' dope fiends and dope heads into profitable [*searches for the right word*] productive citizens into society. You know what I mean? We turn money...we turn words into money. You know what I mean? What greater gift can there be? So I believe God blesses us. I believe God blesses those that hustle. Those that use they mind and over all are righteous. [*Vibe*]

Tupac's quest to find and pay homage to Black Jesus vacillated between two poles: the hypermasculine, patriarchal one expressed in *Makaveli the Don* militates against the matriarchal one expressed as a Cult of Mary in such songs as "Dear Mama." The idealization of the mother in "Dear Mama" is complemented by complaints about the absent father and the subsequent scarring and confusion this absence had on the speaker. As Dyson points out, although Afeni offered "a model of valiant motherhood," Tupac never quite forgave her fall into drug addiction (Guy 2005, 165). In "When Ure Hero Falls," Tupac writes about his mother's fall from grace, a fall in which "all fairy tales R uncovered/myths exposed and pain magnified" (Guy 2005, 174). He expresses a familiar sense of abandonment: "without my Hero there is only/me alone 2 deal with my sorrow" (Guy 2005, 179).

The lack of a father figure and the mother's own failure add up here to a macho swagger and a "femiphobia" on the part of the speaker. In "Hail Mary," what begins as a seeming invitation to go to Christ's burial vault to witness his resurrection—"Come with me, Hail Mary,/Run quick see, what do we have here"—turns out to be the opening of a gangster rap paean to violence and revenge, fanning the flames of East/West gangster factionalism. We witness both poles of Tupac's psyche at work here: "I ain't a killer, but don't push me/Revenge is like the sweetest joy next to getting pussy." The writer of pastoral letters of guidance to his beleaguered sisters seems lost himself here. The tomb is empty, and the quester at a loss.

Late in his life, Tupac's search for God the Father in the form of Black Jesus deviated into a fixation on the Godfather. Stanley Crouch argues that two influences on black youth have led to

“the dangerous moment summed up in Tupac’s confused revolutionary gangsterism: the Panthers and the book and film *The Godfather*. Crouch argues that thug rap embraces *The Godfather* as its bible” (48). As it turns out, Huey P. Newton was also a fan of the same text, encouraging his Black Panther protégés to read it. In searching for God the Father, Tupac found only the figure of the Godfather. It would prove to be a dangerous turning point for him, particularly as the person who took on this role of Godfather, Suge Knight, was the chief person of interest in the inconclusive investigation of Tupac’s death. “May God bless his divided soul,” Nelson George might very well intone here (George 1996, 28-29).

That divided soul, like that of his mother, might have found its way eventually had Tupac’s life not ended so long before its time. Perhaps after all he has come to know the wisdom Afeni’s experiences have taught her: “We flow through these winds of danger, distress, and confusion to be able to be sure-footed on the other side” (Guy 2005, 203). It is fitting and proper that Afeni, like a Black Pietà, should be left holding “the body of his works,” eventually releasing them for public airing and posthumous “collaborations.” Although both may have faltered and strayed from their original vision, the legacy each leaves behind is, in the final analysis, a worthy one. Her story is, in the end, his story as well:

I always felt that Tupac was living witness to who we are and who we were.

I think that his life spoke to every part of our development and  
the development of the Party, and the development in this country that

I don't think will die. (Davey D)

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<sup>1</sup> An image of a ghost shirt can be found at the following site: "The Glasgow Ghost Shirt." <http://www.ghostdance.us/images/images-glasgowghostshirt.html>

<sup>2</sup> An image of the album cover can be found at the following site:

<http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org>