

**“The Life and Times of Tupac Shakur:  
A *Griot* of Inner-city America and Commodified African American  
Radicalism”**

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Workshop A  
Hip-hopping America: Dimensions of Mainstreaming Subcultures

## **Introduction**

The fascinating title of this workshop – Hip-hoping America: Dimensions of Mainstreaming Subcultures – reminds me of two incidents in 1999: *Time* magazine on its February 5th cover projected America to be a “Hip-hop Nation”; shortly after, at the Grammy Award ceremony, Lauryn Hill, a hip-hop diva, accepting the five awards, literally shouted to the microphone, “This is crazy. . . because this is hip-hop.” A member of hip-hop community is sure to have shared her surprise, because hip-hop cultures were at times trivialized as a novelty fad and at other times harshly criticized and persecuted for its supposedly vicious influences upon minors.<sup>1</sup>

However, recognition of the artistic values of hip-hop cultures does not mean that criticisms against them are completely subsided. For example, at the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v Board of Education* sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Bill Cosby, a famed African American comedian, said:

Are you not paying attention, people with their hat on backwards, pants down around the crack. Isn't that a sign of something, or are you waiting for Jesus to pull his pants up . . . With name like Shaniqua, Shalingua, Mohammed and all that crap and all of them are in jail.<sup>2</sup>

Although the targets of his harsh criticisms were young African Americans in general, hip-hop cultures were undoubtedly related to the phenomena described in his speech. On the other hand, Todd Boyd, a self-proclaimed member of the hip-hop generation, offers a provocative opinion:

[C]ivil rights shit is heavy and it in no way will work in today's society. . .  
With affirmative action now a thing of the past, with race being almost a

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<sup>1</sup> Hip-hop, despite its worldwide influences, is not a monotonic or identical cultural expression. Japanese hip-hop scene has almost nothing in common with the situation the American hip-hop artists have been placed in. Therefore, this paper, in describing that scene, used a word, “cultures,” in order to express multi-dimensional hybrid nature of hip-hop.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Cosby, “Dr. Bill Cosby Speak at the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, Supreme Court Decision, May 22, 2004,” *Black Scholar* 4 vol. 34 (Winter 2004), p.3. Almost a decade ago, Tupac Shakur said, “We asked ten years ago. We was [sic] asking with the Panthers. We was asking with them the civil rights Movement. We was asking, you know? Now those people who was askin' are all dead or in jail. Now what do you think we're going to do? [pause] Ask?” Tupac Shakur, *Tupac Resurrection: In His Own Words* (DVD), Paramount Pictures, PDA-245 (2004).

taboo subject to bring up, with changing population demographics, the days of civil rights are over . . . One of the biggest problems now facing the Black community is the divide between [the] civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, there is a generation gap between Bill Cosby and Cris Rock. Nevertheless, we cannot be satisfied by just pointing out a gap but have to offer more detailed *analyses of continuity and discontinuity* of these generations. As almost three decades have passed since their birth, to historicize the hip-hop cultures is long overdue. My presentation will be this endeavor.

### **I. Development/Chronology of Hip-Hop Cultures**

Different from prevalent perception of the origin of hip-hop, this category of cultural expression does not have its roots solely in the African American tradition. The distinctive cultures of hip-hop were born in the late 1970s in an extraordinary diverse cultural environment in South Bronx and Queens, where African Americans, Latinos, and Caribbeans had been sharing rapidly deindustrialized urban spaces.

The first generation of hip-hop artists who are currently described as “Old School” includes DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa. Among them, DJ Kool Herc’s career is worth a detailed explanation here.

DJ Kool Herc was born Clive Campbell in Trenchtown, Kingston, Jamaica in 1954. While he was there, he was fascinated with the dance culture of Jamaica. In Jamaica at that time, dance parties were often held in open yards with the mobile sound system — the powerful stereos, delivering the crisp highs and the thumping bases, the sound that would become the cornerstone of hip-hop music. In 1967, he migrated to Bronx, bringing with him there, of course, his knowledge and skills of “Jamaica sound system.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The New H.N.I.C.[Head Niggas in Charge]: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), pp.xix-xx.

<sup>4</sup> Havelock Nelson, “DJ Kool Herc,” *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop*, ed., Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), p.16. DJ Herc’s ethnicity was not exceptional in hip-hop cultures at that time. The protagonist of the first hip-hop movie, *Wild Style* (1982), is a Puerto Rican amateur graffiti writer named “Chico.” Admittedly, we can find only one Caucasian among the main characters of this B movie. But it can hardly be characterized as a “black movie,” because people of color other than African Americans dot the scenes. It was this movie that popularized not only rap music but also other indispensable elements of hip-hop cultures such as break dancing and graffiti. See, *Wild Style* (DVD), *Wild Style*

Regarding this era of hip-hop acts, Nelson George, a superb African American historian of music and music industry, remembers:

Naïve is the key and perhaps unexpected adjective in describing this crew [Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Bambaataa's entourage]. . . By naïve, I mean the spirit of open hearted innocence that created hip-hop culture. The idea of parties in parks and community centers . . . means that money was not a goal. None of the three original DJs . . . expected anything from the music but local fame, respect in the neighborhood, and the modest fees from the parties.<sup>5</sup>

Tricia Rose points out that rap music conveys the "pulse, pleasures, and problem of black urban life."<sup>6</sup> Among these characteristics, the strong emphases were laid upon "pleasures" in hip-hop music at its birth. The first hip-hop record that had entered to the *Billboard's* Top 40 Charts in 1979 was aptly entitled "Rapper's Delight."

Certainly, the first generation rap acts have pieces which express serious political message: The most notable example is Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five's "Jesse" which, with rhythmical scratch noises of records, urged listeners to vote for a presidential candidate, Jesse Jackson. Furthermore, Russell Simmons, African American "hip-hop mogul" who successfully built a business conglomerate, Def Jam, notes the influence of the teachings of the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan.<sup>7</sup> It was these social and political elements that brought about the next generation of rap music in the 1980s, "consciousness rap."

One of the most noteworthy groups of this subgenre is Public Enemy (PE). PE's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* is often referred not only as a *magnum opus* of hip-hop music but also "the touchpaper of a new wave of Black Nationalism." The rising popularity and concomitant notoriety of PE were coincided with those of

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Productions Ltd. Jes Pictures, JES-1001 (1982).

<sup>5</sup> Nelson George, *Hip-Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, Mass.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p.4. Another fascinating academic critique of hip-hop scene, see, Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Russell Simmons, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money + God* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp.38-39.

Louis Farrakhan, and PE was also accused of their anti-Semitic pronouncements.<sup>8</sup> A member of the group, Professor Griff, was indeed a devout follower of the NOI. In addition, imitating the Black Panther Party (BPP) of the 1960s, PE organized a “shadow cabinet” (i.e., Professor Griff as Minister of Information), and the name of the group itself was derived from J. Edgar Hoover’s labeling of the Black Panther, “public enemy #1.”

However, compared with their predecessors, PE’s music was more informed by hardcore punk music. Despite the accusation of anti-Semitism, the producer of their music was a Jewish punk rock DJ, Rick Rubin. Moreover, the bestselling rap act at that time was not an African American but a white group, the Beastie Boys. Therefore, although second generation of hip-hop music was related to Black Nationalism, behind the façade of this attitude, the music had actually become more hybrids.

Significantly, throughout this trajectory of hip-hop, the lines separating facts and images became increasingly ambiguous. The cover of the PE’s *It Takes a Nation* depicted the members behind bars, but the featured members, Chuck D and Flavor Flav, had no criminal record and PE came together in and around Long Island’s Adelphi University. Simmons, whose label PE belonged to, nonchalantly boasts:

My life has largely been about promoting the anger, style, aggression and attitude of urban America to a worldwide audience. I have helped sell the culture of hip-hop by identifying, nurturing and promoting artists. . . and turn them into commercial products that, at their highest level, become objects of art. Instead of becoming a low-level criminal. . . I've taken the entrepreneurial energy I was putting into drugs and created a business that didn't even exist a generation ago. . . With the help of many I built the business of hip-hop from the ground up to a multibillion-dollar industry.<sup>9</sup>

He plainly says that even the anger can be turned into marketable goods. As hip-hop acts transformed themselves to be a projected product of popular culture market, they gained not only ever-increasing popularity but also pecuniary reward. During this

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam: The Radical Rise of Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin* (New York: Omnibus Press, 2002), pp.71-96.

<sup>9</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, p.xiii.

time, approximately 80 % of the consumer of these products became white, although the terms, “keeping it real,” became the catch call of African American rap artists.<sup>10</sup>

What missed here are the defining elements of earlier hip-hop, pleasures and fun, and the music had become increasingly serious. When PE composed “Fight the Power” in 1988, the theme of Spike Lee’s movie, *Do the Right Thing*, they were criticized for glorifying violence.<sup>11</sup> The era of third generation of rap music began exactly the same year with the release of *Straight Outta Compton* by the N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), a typical “gangsta rap.” To “keep it real,” bona fide ex-gangsters entered hip-hop scene.<sup>12</sup> Thus, around 1988, instead of fun, pleasure, rap music began to conjure up urban violence of African American male, in Rose’s words, the “problem of black urban life.”

## **II The Life of Tupac Shakur: Live Fast, Died Young**

With the advent of N.W.A., the central scene of hip-hop culture moved to Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> There are genuine stylistic and musical differences among the gangsta rappers, but as discussing the subject here is beyond the scope and limit of this presentation, this paper will describe the life of the best selling gangsta rapper, Tupac Shakur, and later discuss his fascination and historical significance.<sup>14</sup>

While PE had deftly used the *image* of Black Panthers, Tupac was a son of a founder of the New York chapter of the BPP, Afeni Shakur: She was a victim of the framed-up charge of attempted bombing of New York subway stations and Bronx Botanical Garden, a cause célèbre known as “Panther 21.”<sup>15</sup> Tupac was born soon

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<sup>10</sup> Bill Youssman, “Blackphilia and Blackphobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13 (November 2003), p.367.

<sup>11</sup> Chuck D with Yusuf Jah, *Fight the Power: Rap, Race and Reality* (New York: Delta, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Their member includes an ex-gang member and a highly acclaimed hip-hop producer and performer Dr. Dre and an actor as well as a rapper, Ice Cube. Dr. Dre has been the executive producer of a white rap artist, Eminem. Ice Cube, as if expressing a putative generation gap between African Americans, recently featured in a controversial movie, *Barbershop*, which ridiculed the civil rights movement.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding Los Angeles hip-hop scene, see, Brian Cross, *It’s not About a Salary: Rap, Race + Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1993); Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Hereafter, this paper refers to Tupac Shakur as Tupac, because, in the hip-hop community and the music industry, he had been usually addressed only by his first name. For Tupac’s biography, see, Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Armond White, *Rebel for the Hell of It: The Life of Tupac Shakur* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> eds., Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI’s Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1996); Earl Anthony, *Spitting in the Wind: The True Story Behind the Violent Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (Malibu, Ca.: Roundtable Publishing, 1990); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books,

after her release from the prison in 1971.

During the time when “radical chic” was considered as a fashionable lifestyle, Afeni Shakur, as a former “political prisoner,” was a very popular guest lecturer of colleges and universities. But as the mood of American society became increasingly conservative, or to be exact, tired of radicalism of the late 1960s, she was forced to depend upon welfare.

When Tupac was child, he was enrolled in the 127th Street Ensemble, a Harlem theater group. In his first performance in 1983 at the Apollo Theater, he played Travis in *A Raisin' in the Sun*. Three years later, he enrolled at the Baltimore School for Arts, where he studied classic ballet, music, and acting. But his mother's crack addiction terminated his studies there and the family moved to Marin City, California. Remembering this turn of the events, he said later, “Leaving that school affected me so much . . . I see that as the point where I got off track.”<sup>16</sup>

Getting off track, he temporarily engaged in drug trafficking but soon became a regular figure of the West Coast hip-hop scene. The first record of his, *2Pacalypse Now*, appeared in November 1991, and, until his death in 1996, all of his records sold over at least a million copies. Among them, *All Eyes on Me* — the rap's first double CD, released in February 1996 — became tremendously popular, selling well over five million copies.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this enormous success, harsh criticisms and even criminal charges came to surround Tupac. In April 11th, 1992, an African American youth shot a Texas trooper, and his attorney claimed *2Pacalypse Now* had incited his client to kill. Shortly after, Tupac was denounced by Vice President Dan Quayle, who said that *2Pacalypse Now* had “no place in our society.” Although these problems were related to his activities in the entertainment world, in his private life, he was also embroiled in violent incidents. Shortly after his CD debut and only eight months after the Rodney King incident, he was arrested and severely beaten by Oakland police for jaywalking. But, in 1993, a 19-year-old woman charged him that she was sodomized and sexually abused by him and his entourage. He was eventually acquitted of sodomy but found guilty of sexual abuse and incarcerated in February 1995 — this was actually his

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1987).

<sup>16</sup> Tupac Shakur, *Tupac Resurrection*.

<sup>17</sup> ed. Alan Light, *Tupac Amaru Shakur, 1971-1996* (New York: Three River Press, 1997), p.156.

second incarceration — and paroled eight months later.<sup>18</sup>

Although Tupac had never been a member of gang, Death Row Records, the record label he signed with, was notorious for its relationship with the violent gang named Bloods. In June 1996, Death Row Records released his song entitled “Hit ‘Em Up,” a brutal diatribe against rival gangsta rappers, Notorious B.I.G. [also known as Biggie Smalls, born Christopher Wallace] and Puff Daddy who, on their own part, had a relationship with Blood’s rival, Crips.<sup>19</sup> Three months after the CD’s release, he was murdered in a drive-by shooting in the downtown of Las Vegas, and in March 1997, Notorious B.I.G was also gunned down in Los Angeles. At this moment, no arrest is made for these shockingly sensational murders.<sup>20</sup>

### **III. Gangsta rap as a social critique**

One may argue that it is quite natural for a person like Tupac to be violently killed because he was very eager to represent the image of, in his own word, a thug, “Thug Life” being the most noticeable tattoo on his body. But the thug image was not disadvantageous to him. As a gangsta rapper living in the world that encouraged the artist to “keep it real,” even the contract with Death Row Records gave him a semblance of a “real thug.”

The BPP of the civil rights era was also accused of gangsterism and thuggery both in academic studies and popular literatures.<sup>21</sup> It is almost impossible for popular movements to have a certain flaw, but, ironically, the gangsta rap in general and Tupac in particular had imitated as well as inherited the most negative trait of the radical African American formation of the 1960s.

However, there are at the same time critical differences between the two. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.154-155.

<sup>19</sup> For the gang-related conflicts after the late 1960s, see, Tom Hayden, *Street Wars: Gangs and the Future of Violence* (New York: New York Press, 2004); Sanyika Shakur [no relation with Tupac], *Monster: The Autobiography of An L.A. Gang Member* (New York: Grove Press, 1993); Yusuf Jah and Sister Shah'Keyah, *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Thell the Story of America's Youth in the Crossfire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Léon Bing, *Do or Die* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992); Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (New York: Random, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Randall Sullivan, *LAabyrinth* (New York: Grove Press, 2002); Frank Alexander with Heidi Sigmund Cuda, *Got Your Back: Protecting Tupac in the World of Gangsta Rap* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); Ronin Ro, *Bad Boy: The Influence of Sean "Puffy" Combs on the Music Industry* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001); Cathy Scott, *The Killing of Tupac Shakur* revised and expanded ed., (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 2002); Cathy Scott, *The Murder of Biggie Smalls* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994); David Horowitz and Peter Collier, *Destructive Generation: Second Thought about the '60s* (New York: Free Press, 1989); eds., Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panther and Their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

BPP was first and foremost a political organization and had competed with their rivals in politics. On the other hand, it is in the entertainment world that gangsta rappers' activities have been unfolded. In this sense, gangsta rap acts have been manufacturing hardcore authenticity from the images of the BPP as well as of Bloods and Crips.

However, glamorization of thuggery and gangsterism was not all that the gangsta rappers were talking about. While conservative politicians and activist such as C. Dolores Tucker and William Bennett (the commander of President George Bush's War on Drugs) launched an organized activity to impose a ban on gangsta rap, Tupac, on his part, offered insightful reposts to their accusations.

One of the secrets of series of electoral successes of Republican conservatism of the 1980s, which completely clashed liberal consensus, was racially coded words and images.<sup>22</sup> For example, when attacking the AFDC program, Ronald Regan concocted the word, a "Welfare Queen living in Southside Chicago." There was no mention of race *per se*, but anyone who had a little knowledge of American political geography could easily recognize that the "Welfare Queen" was black. To this coded word, Tupac, with an explicit lyric, sent a tribute to his mother — a crack-addicted mother depending on welfare — in his signature song "Dear Mama." He raps for his "Black Queen":

When I was young, me and my mama had beef  
 Seventeen years old kicked out on the streets  
 Though back at the time, I never thought I'd see her face  
 Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place  
 Suspended from school; and scared to go home, I was a fool  
 with the big boys, breakin' all the rules  
 I shed tears with my baby sister  
 Over the years we was poorer than the other little kids  
 And even though we had different daddy's, the same drama  
 When things went wrong we'd blame mama  
 I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

Huggin' on my mama from a jail cell  
 And who'd think in elementary?  
 Hey! I see the penitentiary, one day  
 And runnin' from the police, that's right  
 Mama catch me, put a whoopin' to my backside  
 And even as a crack fiend, mama  
 You always was a black queen, mama  
 I finally understand  
 for a woman it ain't easy tryin' to raise a man  
 You always was committed  
 A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it  
 There's no way I can pay you back  
 But the plan is to show you that I understand  
 You are appreciated

*[Chorus]*

Lady... Don't cha know we love ya? Sweet lady  
 Dear mama  
 Place no one above ya, sweet lady<sup>23</sup>

The terms, gangsta rap, implies that the sounds of this genre are coarse, rough and loud, but the case is just the opposite. Compared with the earlier generation of rap music, gangsta rap has sonic sophistication. Tupac's talents both as a musician and a social critique are most revealed in the song entitled "Changes." In this song, Tupac used an unexpected source, a song written by Bruce Hornsby, a white mainstream AOR singer, "The Way It Is," as a hook of his song, and, as a son of black revolutionaries, raps about the gritty social and political situations and also about existential agonies of being a black male in America:

C'mon, c'mon  
 I see no changes wake up in the morning and I ask myself

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<sup>23</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Dear Mama," *Me Against the World*, Interscope, B000005Z0K (1995). This single song sold over two million copies.

is life worth living should I blast myself?  
 I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black  
 my stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch  
 Cops give a damn about a Negro  
 pull the trigger kill a nigga he's a hero  
 Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares  
 one less hungry mouth on the welfare  
 First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers  
 give 'em guns step back watch 'em kill each other  
 It's time to fight back that's what Huey<sup>24</sup> said  
 2 shots in the dark now Huey's dead  
 I got love for my brother but we can never go nowhere  
 unless we share with each other  
 We gotta start makin' changes  
 learn to see me as a brother instead of 2 distant strangers  
 and that's how it's supposed to be  
 How can the Devil take a brother if he's close to me?  
 I'd love to go back to when we played as kids  
 but things changed, and that's the way it is<sup>25</sup>  
  
 That's just the way it is  
 Things'll never be the same  
 That's just the way it is. . .

This piece is a deftly crafted pastiche in postmodern America. Contrary to Paul Gilroy's rather myopic claim that hip-hop music has been "doggedly monoculture, national, and ethnocentric," if taking the musical elements into consideration, the sounds of gangsta raps are actually hybrid.

Even in this song, we certainly find the gap between the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation. However, the hip-hop generation is not completely oblivious to the struggles of earlier generations. Tupac's songs have deep historical

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<sup>24</sup> "Huey" is Huey P. Newton, a founder and the charismatic leader of the Black Panther Party.

<sup>25</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Changes," *Greatest Hits*, Death Row Records, ZJCI-10020-1 (1996).

roots and resonances. In this sense, he was a *griot*, or storyteller, of urban America.

#### **IV. Rappers' Reality**

More appropriate terms for hip-hop are not subculture but marginal culture. For, the cultures called hip-hop have been created at least in America by economically, socially and politically marginalized people. Marginal sites — that is, inner-city areas — are out of sight of the people in suburbia, but, conceptually, a margin cannot exist without a center, *vice versa*. It is these communication and negotiation between the marginal and central cultures that put hip-hop oftentimes into American mainstream, the fact that necessitates explorations of the reality in the margin.

Deindustrialization and concomitant urban blight are amply demonstrated elsewhere. So I would like to point out another phenomenon, the alarming rise of prison population, because a lot of famous gangsta rappers (i.e., Snoop Doggy Dogg, Jay-Z, Warren G) have first hand knowledge of a life in prison and because Cosby and PE in their own ways referred to this institution.

As Figure 1 reveals prison population was sextupled in Tupac's lifetime. This rise of prison population is not the result of rising number of crime. Violent crime rates have been relatively constant or even declining over the past two decades. According to Human Rights Watch's report, "the single greatest force behind the growth of prison population has been the national 'war on drugs.'" <sup>26</sup> Whereas the exploding prison population has also been propelled by public policy changes that have increased the use of prison sentences through mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes" laws, the war on drugs has been unfairly punishing African Americans.<sup>27</sup> Distribution of five grams or more of crack is a five-year mandatory terms in prison. In contrast, it takes 500 gram of powder cocaine to receive the same sentence. In some urban areas, over 90 percent of those arrested for crack possession are black, while over 80 percent of those possessed for powder cocaine are white.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the population demographics are very racially skewed. Although African American account for only 12 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, 44 percent of all

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<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Incarcerated America," *Human Rights Watch Backgrounder*, April 2003, p.1. More recent report confirms that the racially biased trend has not yet changed, see, Dan Eggen, "Marijuana Becomes Focus of Drug War: Less Emphasis on Heroin and Cocaine," *Washington Post*, May4, 2005, p.A1.

<sup>27</sup> "Mass Incarceration and Rape: The Savaging of Black America," *Black Commentator* 95 (June 17, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dream: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p.45.

prisoners in the United States are people of African descent. (Figure 2) and 12 percent of African American male ages 20 to 32, the cohort Tupac belonged to, are in jail or prison.<sup>29</sup> In addition, as Figure 3 reveals, the percentage of black male among the victim of homicide is inordinately high. Therefore, it could be argued that, unless stepping out of African American community, in geography as well as in spirit, it is almost impossible for African American youth not to be affected by the life in prison and the violent crimes. It is this situation that gangsta rappers are talking about.

Tupac was certainly not a typical African American, much less a “role model.” Nor was he a genuine gang member. Troubled as he certainly was, the trajectories he had taken were also those of inner-city America after the 1970s. He had been staying in the place that is *neither too close nor too distant* from a life in a ghetto. There have always been fiercely conflicting tendencies among the hybrid cultures called hip-hop, and, in gangsta rap, by placing facts and images in close proximity, authenticity has been manufactured as marketable commodities.<sup>30</sup>

### **Hope and Hip-Hop Community: Commercialism v. Politics**

The notorious associations with gang violence have not yet disappeared from the hip-hop scene. This spring, an entourage of 50 Cent, one of the most popular gangsta rapper and a former member of Bloods gang, was shot in the gate of the hip-hop radio station in New York. This incident was prompted by 50 Cent’s “dissing” of his own protégé called the Game, a former Crips.<sup>31</sup>

To make matters more complicated, the publicities and the voyeuristic interests that the violent incident brought about contributed to the CD’s sale.<sup>32</sup> 50 Cent’s new album *The Massacre* had sold over one million copies in just four days, the feat that had

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<sup>29</sup> Department of Justice, “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin*, April 6, 2003, p.11.

<sup>30</sup> John Sides also points out the cleavage of the real Compton and the reality that gangsta rappers are singing about and this cleavage brought about the conflict with the interest of the residents. See, John Sides, “Straight into Compton: American Dreams Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb,” *American Quarterly* 56 (September 2004): 583-605.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Wilson and William K. Rashbaum, “Rapper’s Potshots on the Air, and Gunshots at a Radio Studio,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2005; Claudia Parsons, “New York Shootout Raises Fear of Another Gangsta Rap War,” *Reuters*, March 3, 2005.

“dissing” is one of the most important gangsta rap vocabulary, meaning “disrespecting” or “humiliating.” For the hip-hop vocabulary, see, Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.(Head Niggas in Charge): The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Kelefa Sanneh, “A Rapper’s Prison Time as a Résumé Booster,” *New York Times* March 24, 2005. For recent incident that related to rappers and violence, see, Ruben Castaneda, “Rappers Set for Pr. George’s Court Appearance,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2005, p.B4

not been repeated since the Beatles in 1964.<sup>33</sup>

One may argue that gangsta rappers is the cause that results in the rise of young African American population in prison. But the gang war between Bloods and Crips was preceded the rise of gangsta rap. Accused that his songs were glorifying violence, Tupac answered, "I have not brought violence to you or thug life to America, why am I being persecuted?"<sup>34</sup>

If black people in the street, or in the "hood," speak up, they are labeled whining victims or accused as symptomatic manifestations of "social pathology." If they remain quiet, they give tacit approval to their status in particular, to status quo in general, thus reinforcing their suffering and images, vicious catch 22. This predicament reminds me of W. E. B. Du Bois. In a letter to the Board of Directors of the NAACP, he said:

I have. . . tried to work inside the organization for its realignment and readjustment to new duties. I have been almost absolutely unsuccessful. . . So long as I sit by quietly consenting, I share responsibility. If I criticize openly, I seem to be washing dirty linen in public. There is but one recourse, complete and final withdrawal [from the NAACP], not because all is hopeless. . . but because evidently I personally can do nothing more.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that "hopes" are almost disappeared in contemporary inner-city black America. Around the year Tupac's first album was released, Cornel West pointed out that "the most basic issue now facing black America" was "*the nihilistic threat to its very existence* [italics in original]" and one of the most repeated word in the gangsta rap is "hopeless."<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Russell Simmons has still had hopes for the better future. In 2001, the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs held a hearing about the putatively vicious influence of rap music. After participating in the hearing, he wrote

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<sup>33</sup> Dondiego, "50 Cent to Smash Beatles Sales Records," Nobodysmiling.com, March 14, 2005 <<http://www.nobodysmiling.com/hiphop/news/81370.php>>

<sup>34</sup> eds. Jacob Hoya and Karolyn Ali, *Tupac: Resurrection, 1971-1996* (New York: Atria Books, 2003), p.130.

<sup>35</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Dr. Du Bois Resigns: The Full Text of His Letter and the Resolution of the N.A.A.C.P. Board Accepting His Resignation," *Crisis*, 41 (August, 1934), p.245.

<sup>36</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p.19.

for the *New York Times*:

There are many cultural and economic facts of life that drive hip-hop and its themes, lyrics and language. The senators have to make an effort if they are to appreciate why this music exerts such a hold on American culture, how it unites and educates our youth, and why its popularity spans divides of race and class.<sup>37</sup>

For him, the tradition of hip-hop was “being a little bit rude for the sake of speaking truth.”<sup>38</sup> The explicitness and candor that Du Bois had always preferred are surely handed down to next generations of African Americans, even though they are not a “talented tenth.”

Simmons had recently begun to commit himself to the overtly political activities (i.e., demonstration against the unfair drug laws, voter registration drives for liberal candidates).<sup>39</sup> Even such a civil rights stalwart as Andrew Young publicly praised his efforts.<sup>40</sup> Tupac’s works as a griot indisputably passed on the legacies of militant and radical African American voices and resistances to the next generation, but, for now, radical heritages are commodities in the ever-expanding entertainment industry and its market. And, to this day, Simmons’s activities do not bring about concrete and tangible results.

Granted that, it is hip-hop cultures, cultures of marginalized people, by expanding the circumferences of their existence and transgressing previously bounded elements of genre, language, and style as they have done, that will change the contours of the mainstream culture.

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<sup>37</sup> Russell Simmons, “Rapping at the Senate’s Door,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Simmons, *Life and Def*, p.112.

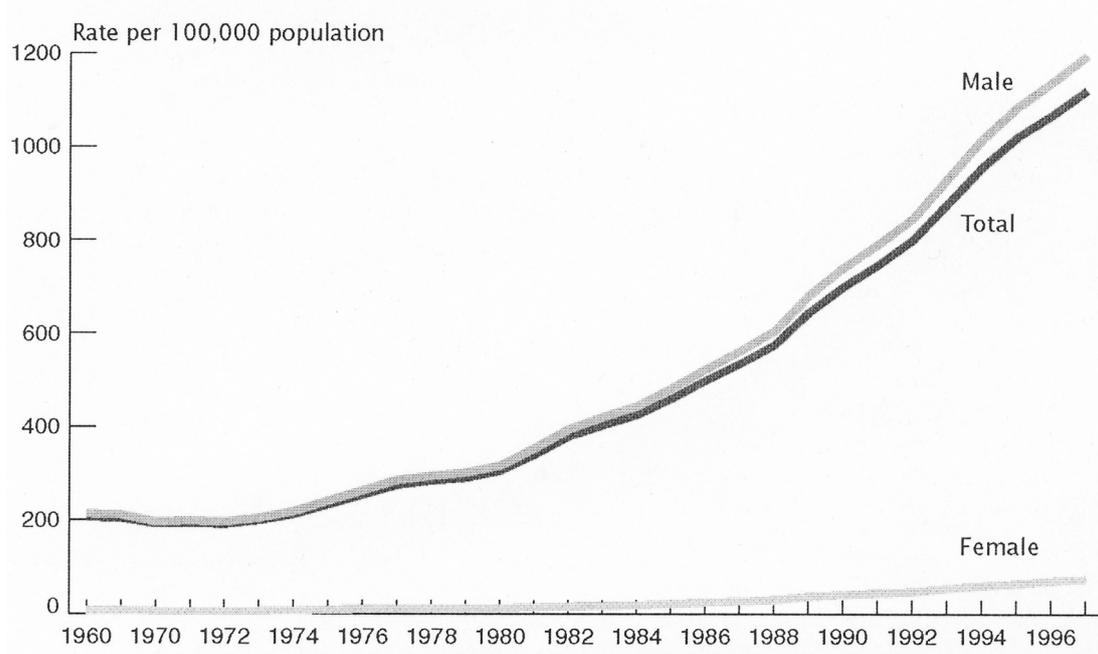
<sup>39</sup> Felicia R. Lee, “Hip-Hop Is Enlisted in Social Causes,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2002; Al Baker, “Hip-Hop Player Learns Albany’s Game,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2003; “Drug Law Foes March on Capitol,” *New York Daily News*, March 28, 2001. Puff Daddy, on his part, organized a similar PAC, Citizen Change, launched political campaign to support liberal candidates. < <http://www.citizenchange.com/site/pp.asp?c=kkJ2JeO0F&b=140822>>

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Young, “I applaud hip-hop’s leap into civil rights,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 10, 2004. Furthermore, the mothers of two victims of the first “gangsta rap war,” Afeni Shakur and Valetta Wallace, utilizing the legacies of their sons, had launched educational activities: Shakur has just launched “Keep Kids Alive” campaign, a campaign against gang violence, and established Tupac Amaru Shakur Foundation, a fund for minority and Tupac Amaru Shakur Center for the Arts < <http://www.tasf.org/>>; Wallace, Notorious B.I.G.’s mother, established the Christopher Wallace Memorial Foundation and participating in the gun sales restriction campaign, under to slogan, “B.I.G stand for Books Instead of Guns.” < <http://www.cwmfonline.org/>>. For, an earlier their joint political effort, see, Quibian ‘Q’ Salazar-Moreno, “Rappers’ Mothers Honored at B.I.G. Night Out,” *Daily Hip-Hop News*, March 4, 2003.



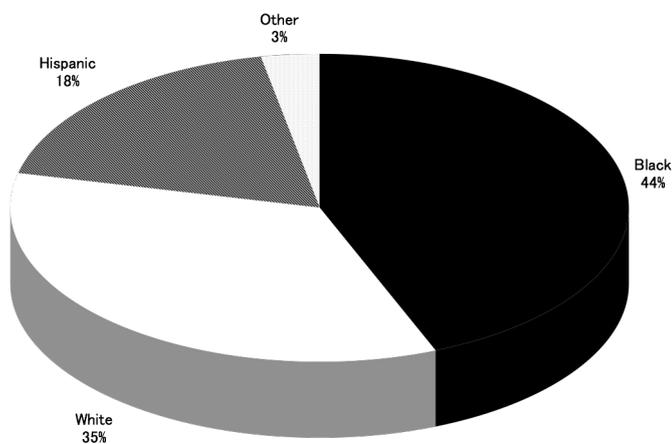
**Appendix**

**Figure 1: Prison Population**



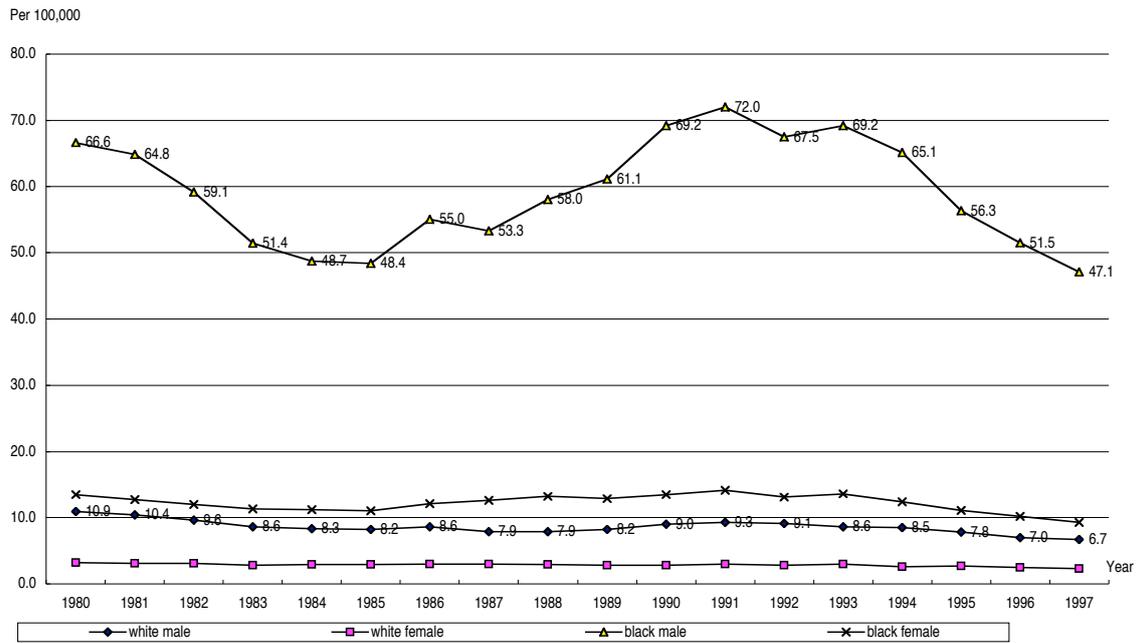
U.S Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2000*  
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000), p.202

**Figure 2: States and Federal Inmates By Race**



Source: Department of Justice, "Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002,"  
*Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin*, April 6, 2003, p.11

**Figure 3: Victims of Homicide by Race and Gender, 2000**



Source: Percentage calculation from data in U.S Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2000* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000), p.202