
FROM THE FIELD**Tupac's Book Shelf: "All Eyez on Me:
Tupac Shakur and the Search for a
Modern Folk Hero," W.E.B. Du Bois
Institute for Afro-American Research,
Harvard University, April 17, 2003**

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Niggas with knowledge is more dangerous than
niggas with guns
they make the guns easy to get and try to keep niggas dumb
(Talib Kweli "The Proud")

On April 17, 2003, a group of scholars, journalists, and fans gathered at Harvard University to talk about hip-hop. The occasion was the symposium "All Eyez on Me: Tupac Shakur and the Search for a Modern Folk Hero." Jointly sponsored by the Hiphop Archive, located within the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, and the Program for Folklore and Mythology at Harvard, the event examined Tupac's legacy as an intellectual, a political figure, and an urban folk hero. The Hiphop Archive at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, currently under the leadership of Harvard anthropologist Marcyliena Morgan, was launched in January of 2002 and is one of the first scholarly archives devoted solely to hip-hop music and culture. The symposium offered yet more evidence of the current engagement between American academics and the burgeoning culture that had its birth in urban centers throughout the United States 30 years ago.

Scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson, who was the keynote speaker for the event, Tricia Rose, and Todd Boyd have made careers out of being hip-hop pundits. Dozens of courses focused on hip-hop culture are taught at the nation's colleges and universities every semester. The Hiphop Archive has documented the majority of these courses on their Web site. But "Tupac Shakur and the Search for a Modern Hero" struck a particularly strange chord because of its location at the

pre-eminent American university and its auspicious support by arguably the leading African-American intellectual, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute. Despite all of the books written about it, hip-hop culture still bears the burden of having to defend itself as a legitimate site of scholarly inquiry. As one person commented to me shortly before the event, “If Tupac is or could ever be an ‘urban folk hero’ to anyone but a brain-addled white kid from the suburbs, then much of our intellectual capital is already lost.” On the contrary, all of the scholars who congregated for the symposium proved that not only are the scholarly fields of African-American and Afro-Diasporic Studies thriving, but that Tupac Shakur and hip-hop as a whole remain vital guideposts to black culture in the post-Civil Rights era.

The symposium was broken down into three distinct panels. The opening panel, titled “Theoretical T.H.U.G. Battles: Mapping the Intellectual Legacies of Tupac Shakur,” featured Knut Aukrust and Northeastern University Communication Studies professor Murray Forman. In his talk, “Tired of Hearing These Voices in My Head: Bakhtin’s MC Battle,” Aukrust, a professor of Culture Studies at the University of Oslo, described his introduction to Tupac while driving through an Italian city as his sons popped into the car stereo a copy of Tupac’s *Makaveli—The Don Killuminati: The Seven Day Theory*. Aukrust conveyed his surprise that the dead rap artist had been well read in the works of the fifteenth-century Italian writer Machiavelli (especially *The Prince* and *The Art of War*). Forman’s paper, “Tupac Shakur: O.G. (Ostensibly Gone),” discussed Tupac’s afterlife as an Internet icon. The author of the recently published *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002, Wesleyan University Press), and co-editor (with myself) of the forthcoming *That’s the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (Routledge), Forman argued that “having transcended ‘the real,’ in death Tupac merges with the hyperreal—where he is arguably rendered more knowable, more proximate.” A third presentation by myself discussed Tupac’s connection to the tradition of celebrity Gramscians, “organic” intellectuals such as the late Nigerian musician Fela Kuti and Bob Marley.

The following panel, “Me Against the World: Tupac Shakur and the Hunger of Heroism,” placed Tupac’s popularity within the context of the black urban folk hero. UCLA Ethnomusicologist Cheryl L. Keyes, author of the new book *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (2002, University of Illinois Press), asserted in her paper “Redefining the Meaning of Hero in Hip-Hop Culture” that the mainstream “often envisions a

hero as someone who has saved another person.” In contrast, the hero in hip-hop, she argued, “is translated as someone who has stood against the odds and adversaries of life.” Like Keyes, Emmett G. Price III placed Tupac in the tradition of black folk heroes like High John the Conqueror and Stagger Lee. In “From Thug Life to Legend,” Price drew on his own training as a gospel musician and ethnomusicologist to examine Tupac’s spiritual development, suggesting that the late artist had surpassed the legacies of John Coltrane and Mahalia Jackson as spiritual figures within the tradition of black music.

In the third presentation, Greg Dimitriadis, who wrote the groundbreaking ethnographic study of hip-hop and youth culture *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip-Hop Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (2001, Peter Lang), specifically drew from the comments of many of the youth he interviewed for his research about their own connections to Tupac as documented shortly after the artist’s death. Dimitriadis revisits much of that study in his *Friendship, Cliques, and Gangs: Young Black Men Coming of Age in Urban America* (2003, Teachers College Press).

The final panel, “‘Keep Your Head Up’: Power, Passion, and the Political Potential of Tupac Shakur,” brought together noted Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo, UCLA scholar Dionne Bennett, and journalist Bakari Kitwana, author of the critically acclaimed book *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (2002, Basic Civitas Books). Whereas Bobo locates Tupac as a voice of critique around the burgeoning Prison Industrial Complex or what Loic Waquant calls the “carceral state,” Kitwana sees Tupac as the logical link to the Black Power politics of the late 1960s and 1970s. But in the most provocative talk of the day, Bennett examined Tupac’s role as a feminist agent. Bennett, who is the editor of *Sepia Dreams: A Celebration of Black Achievement Through Words and Image* (2001, St. Martin’s Press), was careful not to describe Tupac as a feminist in the strict sense of the term but rather as someone who engaged in feminist labor. As she asserts, “Just as [Tupac’s] misogynistic lyrics informed a dehumanizing gender discourse, the lyrics in which he demonstrates a passionate identification with women present a model for a politics of empathy that both imbues and extends beyond culture.” Bennett cited the example of Tupac’s “Baby Don’t Cry (Keep Ya Head Up II),” a track featuring the Outlawz, as not only an example of the power of Tupac’s empathy toward working class and disenfranchised black women, but also of his ability to reproduce that empathy among other male hip-hop artists. Bennett’s paper, thus,

powerfully tapped into the mythology that has been erected around the figure of Tupac.

The Harvard symposium was very much about various contemporary thinkers imagining how a mature Tupac Shakur—as organic intellectual, urban hero, political organizer, and feminist—would have impacted American life had he lived. Despite his brilliance as an actor and lyrical provocateur, it was clear that by the time of his death at 25, Tupac Shakur was still a work in progress. It was roughly the similarities between Tupac and a 25-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr. that led Michael Eric Dyson to suggest in his keynote address that the two had a more common spirit than most are willing to accept. Of course, King has been the most celebrated black icon of high moral fortitude, while Tupac was easily the most demonized black male of his generation. The mythologies that have abounded around Tupac's legacy may simply be part of the process of many people attempting to recover his moral, spiritual, and intellectual value to the black community. As Dyson notes in his biography *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur* (2001, Basic Civitas Books), “Anonymous, ordinary individuals project their lives onto the legendary figure, merging with it where they can, fostering an even more intense identification with that figure. By contributing to the creation of a legend...ordinary people are in fact creating themselves” (262).

And what exactly are black intellectuals and others creating when we fashion our own mythologies of Tupac? Clearly many of us see Tupac as a politically engaged intellectual. As Marcyliena Morgan noted during the symposium, many of us take comfort in the idea that Tupac Shakur read some of the same books that we do. Tupac's book collection became one of the recurring themes at the Harvard symposium. Tupac's relationship with Leila Steinberg, who befriended Tupac in the late 1980s and became his mentor, was crucial to his development as a reader. According to Dyson, “the most important role Steinberg played in Tupac's life was that of a literary soul mate...it was as reading partners that Steinberg and Tupac most profoundly shaped each other's lives” (92). The pair spent hours in the Bohdi Tree Bookstore in Los Angeles. On a bookshelf in Steinberg's apartment, she keeps copies of the books that Tupac read (Tupac lived with her for a while). Included in that collection are books such as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River*, Herman Melville's classic *Moby Dick*, Eileen Southern's *Music of Black Americans*, and the feminist writings of Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*) and Robin Morgan (the now

classic *Sisterhood is Powerful: Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*).

Many of the texts cited above were read before Tupac reached the age of 20. Tupac's bookshelf was indeed the bookshelf of a young man who, at his age, was extraordinarily well read and well-rounded intellectually—likely more so than the average student entering in the first year class of most Ivy League institutions. Dyson argues that “Tupac's profound literacy rebutted the belief that hip-hop is an intellectual wasteland...Tupac helped to combat the anti-intellectualism in rap, a force, to be sure, that pervades the entire culture” (99). This is the version of Tupac that made him such a compelling choice for Dyson to examine in a full-length text—a book that is the best selling of Dyson's eight books in print. The success of Dyson's *Holler If You Hear Me* is not only evidence of Tupac's significance as a cultural figure, but suggests that the late rapper's core audience are themselves readers.

Tupac Shakur was a legitimate public intellectual—the organic intellectual that Antonio Gramsci describes in his classic text, *The Prison Notebooks*. I cannot help but think that those of us who are scholars and do the work of deconstructing the myth and symbols of Tupac Amaru Shakur are somehow hoping that we can be as relevant to the folks on the street corner as he was—and still remains.