"A Homegrown Revolutionary"?: Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party

Author(s): Kara Keeling

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"A Homegrown Revolutionary"?: Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party

by Kara Keeling

In his closing essay "Closing Salvo: Dark Age," Thomas Frank, editor of the selection of newspaper writings by various contributors that appear in the book *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos From The Baffler* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), characterizes the current conjuncture of social and economic trends as "the cultural miracle." According to Frank, the present "unprecedented unlinking of economic cause and social effect" (Frank 257) encompasses and produces several phenomena, including, importantly, the widespread substitution of the act of "consumption" for the processes of "dissension" or "rebellion," or "thinking" for that matter. In the face of global economic restructuring and "the most vicious attack on the public well-being by private wealth in decades," Americans exhibit "the most abject reverence for private wealth to characterize our public culture in decades" (Frank 257). This is the nature of the cultural miracle. Precisely when one would expect widespread dissatisfaction and social unrest, there appears the opposite—widespread reverence for and consent to that very system responsible for the devastation which causes one to expect rebellion in the first place.

The contributors to *Commodify Your Dissent* recognize this "miracle" as a general trend, highlighting the ways in which recent business literature and marketing schemes have adopted much of the rhetoric and strategies of 1960s-style rebellion not only in order to sell products, but also as a means by which to ensure the consolidation of already existing structures of power. I want to draw attention here to one of the ways in which this general trend is part of the particular situation of African Americans today. In the face of a condition that Clarence Lusane, author of *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), refers to as "an African American social calamity," (Lusane 443) gangsta rap emerges as a hyper-commodified form of rebellion and, as part of this mysterious, but intriguing, phenomenon, Tupac Amaru Shakur emerges as commodity, philosopher, and representative of the children of the civil rights/Black Power generation.

For those unfamiliar with this remarkable young man, Tupac Shakur was (until his death —the result of a drive by shooting in 1996) a rapper and an actor. As in many contemporary narratives about the success or failure of African American men, the figure of "the mother" looms large in his story. One month after being acquitted on charges that she was part of a Black Panther Party plot to bomb public spaces in New York City (a trial referred to as that of the Panther 21), Afeni Shakur gave birth to Tupac in June of 1971. As if this were not enough to tie him to the black radical tradition, Tupac bears the same last name as Assata Shakur, the former Black Panther member who now lives in Cuba, a fugitive from American injustice. Mutulu Shakur calls him 'son'. And, he is the godson of Geronimo Pratt, a Panther whose prison sentence was recently overturned.

With Afeni's connection to the Black Panther Party at the forefront, the discourse about the life and death of Tupac Shakur (referred to here as "the Tupac discourse") casts him as a symbol of the contradictions,

disappointments, strivings, and realities of the Black Power era's children. Because Tupac was imprisoned on rape and sodomy charges and was shot five times before he was eventually killed in a drive by shooting, because in his lyrics he sometimes called for black-on-black violence, talked about doing drugs, placed top priority on making money, and treated women like sex objects, the conclusion most often drawn about him in the Tupac discourse (and, by extension, about the generation of which he is symbolic) is that he failed to live up to the potential afforded him by the new opportunities open to black people since "the '60s." Because in Tupac's lyrics and interviews he offered his listeners insightful observations about the connection between the violence and nihilism in the world in which he lived and the systemic oppression of black people in America, "the Tupac discourse," in the same breath in which it castigates him, also hails him as a 1990s-style revolutionary. As Armond White says in one of the more thoughtful meditations available about Tupac, "The child who attempts to make a new world from his parents' past is a homegrown revolutionary" (White 12).

OVERWHELMINGLY, the reactions to Tupac, including the reflections about him produced after his death, are infused with varying degrees of disappointment. As journalist and author asha bandele admits, "the nationalists, all of us, young and old, had hope in him. Born in prison to former Panther"— (actually, Tupac was born after his mother was released from prison, but the "born in prison" narrative about Tupac circulates as part of his "star text" and serves to authenticate his relationship to the history of black political struggle) — "stepson of a political prisoner, he was going to be the one, was going to make records about the struggle, carry the torch, take the word to the masses. We really said that" (bandele 27). Implicit in bandele's disappointment is a nostalgia for the past, figured as that time when there really were revolutionaries, a time when people struggled to create change. In particular, there is a nostalgia for the Black Panther Party and the propagation of the Black Panthers as the real black revolutionaries.

However, both the nostalgic and the disappointed responses to Tupac are inadequate to address the serious and urgent convergence of conditions and historical causes which conspire to produce Tupac's star text. By virtue of its implicit expectation that "today things will be better," "disappointment" subscribes to a view of history as inherently progressive and linear. "Nostalgia," the longing for a time before when things were better, reveals the lie in "disappointment's" view of history which expects that things will keep getting better (disappointment is preceded by high expectations). In each case, the tendency is towards a romanticization of the past, here specifically the Black Panther Party, which renders that past disconnected from the present and, importantly, closed to critique. In this way, the disappointed reaction to Tupac Shakur precludes the possibility that the Black Panther Party itself played a role in his production. Moreover, each reaction, nostalgia or disappointed, refuses to recognize the profound and complicated differences between the contemporary moment and "the '60s." That is, each ignores the differences between the moment which produced the Black Panther Party as a reaction to adverse social and economic circumstances and that which produces Tupac Shakur as a reaction to similarly adverse, but substantively different, circumstances. Likewise, at the other end of "the Tupac discourse" reaction spectrum are Tupac's fans who, by upholding him nostalgiacally as a martyr, a revolutionary, or a prophet, render Tupac similarly closed to critique.

I WANT TO AVOID SUCH PITFALLS in my consideration here of the star text of Tupac Shakur as well as in my thinking about the Black Panther Party. Because both Tupac and the Black Panther Party, in different, but related ways, have captured the imagination of African America and, in particular, of its young people, it is vitally important to open each to the processes of critique. In what follows, through a consideration of the role of the Black Panther Party and the discourse

about it in the production of the star text of Tupac Shakur, I hope to illuminate the ways in which important changes since the emergence of the Black Panther Party have served to magnify their "mistakes." (I use the term "mistake" here advisedly.) Huey Newton, in fact, recognized the emergence of these changes and used that recognition as the basis for the development of the Panthers' praxis of "revolutionary intercommunalism." Now, we collect the dynamics Newton recognized under the rubric of "globalization" or "global capitalism." By virtue of the widespread circulation of the image of the Black Panther Party and the contemporary currency of that image, a set of the Black Panther Party's "mistakes" predominate in the star text of Tupac Shakur.

FROM ITS INCEPTION, the Black Panther Party was particularly savvy about the primacy of the process of identification in political struggle and of the role of the image in that process. For example, Bobby Seale explains one of his and Newton's assumptions about the importance of carrying guns: "We knew that at first the guns would be more valuable and more meaningful to the brothers on the block, for drawing them into the organization; then in turn we taught them from the Red Book" (Seale 83). Initially, guns were important to the Panthers not only in order to stress the need for warriors (read: men) to defend their black communities, but also as a way of creating an image with which the "brothers on the block" could identify and thereby be called into the political struggle. In this way, the Black Panther Party, in their leather jackets and berets, with their above-ground confrontational visibility, served as a lightening rod for the affective identification of thousands of people in America and, eventually, worldwide. One can witness the success that the Black Panther Party had (and continues to have) in organizing a viable collectivity, men and women, around the signifier "blackness" in Angela Davis's account of the power of "the image of the leather-jacketed, black bereted warriors standing with guns at the entrance to the California legislature . . . I saw that image in a German newspaper while studying with Theodor Adorno in Frankfurt. That image... called me home. And it directed me into an organizing frenzy in the streets of South Central Los Angeles" (Davis 319-320).

This image, which achieved global circulation in the late 1960s, has played an immeasurably large role in establishing the Black Panther Party as the epitome of black radical militancy. Angela Davis, Tracye Matthews, and others have provided excellent critiques of the ways in which this image excludes the role of women in the Party and how this, in turn, works to omit from our cultural memory struggles within the Party around questions of gender and sexuality. This image's exclusion of women and its omission of any attempt to posit femininity as itself a "revolutionary value" allows for and supports a reading of the Black Panthers as narrowly nationalist, misogynistic, and homophobic. And, while it certainly helped to organize brothers on the block into a formidable political force under the tutelage of an educated vanguard, this image, by and large, has come to define our cultural memory of the Black Panther Party. In addition, it is this early image of the Party, produced at a time in which the Party still defined itself and its struggle as male-centered, which continues to be reproduced in films and in music. With each redeployment of this image, the legacy of the Party is reconsolidated simply in terms of it — an image to which the Panthers owe a considerable amount of their success in organizing people, calling them into the Party. Now, the image of black men wearing leather jackets and berets and holding guns stands in for an actual engagement with the particular exigencies of the moment and, as is the case with the circulation of most images in postmodern culture, circulates devoid of any of the serious and important thinking produced by the more educated cadre of men and women in the Party.

BUILDING UPON OUR CULTURAL MEMORY of the Black Panther Party, the image of Tupac Shakur, with his heavily tattooed body and his middle finger in the air, also stands in for black rebellion and dissatisfaction. Like the carefully crafted image of the Black Panther Party, the star text of Tupac Shakur

has been painstakingly fashioned in order to win the identification of people across the globe. This time, however, the call is to buy records, not to join a political party. As the contributors to the volume *Commodify Your Dissent* make clear in a more general context, the consumption of Tupac's music (and, I think it is fair to argue of rap music in general) has taken the place of political struggle as a means by which to redress social and economic wrongs. Unfortunately, in the place of the type of intellectual labor the Black Panther Party came to demand of its members, Tupac offers those who identify with him a "disjointed and episodic" "conception of the world" (Gramsci refers to this type of philosophy as "common sense") which upholds and in many cases demands, the unequal distribution of wealth and the quest for ownership of private property, including, importantly, women as property. Perhaps most insistently, Tupac reveled in the potency of his inheritance, Panther-style warrior black masculinity.

In Tupac's star text, recourse to this image of black masculinity as the stuff of black revolution serves to sanction and support Shakur's own sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. The Panthers' current status as closed-to-critique allows for this to continue. The Panthers, perhaps by necessity, made this particular legacy possible through the calculated production of their image. This legacy is reproduced through nostalgic retellings of Panther history and through disappointed reactions to the present day's problems. Tupac Shakur capitalized on this particular legacy at a time in which, according to Nikhil Pal Singh, "Black aesthetic commodities — 'Black performativity,' if you will — is that much more prominent within the public sphere, even as Black 'citizenship' is increasingly devalued" (Singh 89).

THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT TUPAC SHAKUR did not also have something important to teach those engaged with the legacy of the Black Panther Party. On the contrary, Tupac offered many invaluable and astute insights into and observations about that legacy which he felt profoundly. For example, when asked, "What about the Tupac who's the son of a Black Panther, and Tupac the rapper?" Shakur responded:

> Tupac the son of the Black Panther and Tupac the rider. Those are the two people inside of me. My mom and them envisioned this world for us to live in, and strove to make that world. So I was raised off those ideals, to want those. But in my own life, I saw that that world was impossible to have. It's a world in our head. It's a world we think about at Christmas and Thanksgiving. I had to teach my mother how to live in this world like it is today. She taught me how to live in that world that we have to strive for. And for that I am forever grateful. She put heaven in my heart."(Powell, http://www.vibe.com/archive/feb96/docs/tupac.html)

AS TUPAC'S STAR TEXT MAKES VISIBLE, part of the Panther's legacy is a narrative of disillusionment. Afeni Shakur, like several other former Panthers, including, poignantly Huey Newton, struggled with a drug addiction. Tupac resists buying into the narrative of a utopian black revolution, but in so doing, he posits the Black Panther Party's struggle as one rooted in another world. As recent and emerging work about the Panthers makes clear, it is crucially important to intervene in the creation of the Panthers' legacy, demonstrating the ways in which their struggle remains rooted in this world even while at the same time highlighting the differences between their socio-economic reality and our own. All the while bearing in mind, of course, the fact that, like Tupac, we are not innocent.

Fortunately for those of us faced with this daunting task, as Matthews, Davis, and others point out, the Black Panther Party did make critical and important revisions of their early conceptualization and image of themselves and their struggle as a male-centered, gun-dependent, thug-life phenomenon. Instead of as a set of super heroes, the Black Panther Party deserves to be acknowledged as an organization which subjected itself to constant self-criticism, debate, thought, and revision. The work of bringing this history to light has begun on the page. Now, it remains for the image of the Black Panther Party, that which constitutes our collective cultural memory of that influential and intriguing group, to be revised in the light of that history.

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Spirit Whispers

(Inspired by the life & passing of Dr. Erskine A. Peters)

out of the night
into the hours of day
I hear them calling
from frozen tree branches
    crackling to survive
I hear them calling
from shadows of corners
    saying *I am here, I am with you*
I hear them calling
from music that creeps softly
    singing lullabies and inspirations
out of the night
into the hours of day
whispers, voices now tiny
    saying *You must survive, You must go on*
whispers, voices now tiny
    now banked in memory
out of the night
and into the hours of day
there is more than we know
    here on this earth & out there beyond
there is more than we know
    saying *Learn what is in you, Love what is in you*
there is more than we know
    that will forever keep us strong

– Angela A. Williams