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PERFORMING HIP-HOP – ETHICS, COMPLEX ACTING AND TUPAC SHAKUR IN JUICE –

Apstrakt: *Hip-hop je neodvojiv od moralnih promišljanja vezanih uz često pogubna stanja mladih koji žive u ekonomski razorenim zajednicama u Americi i širom sveta, mladih često prinuđenih da pribegavaju kriminalu i drugim moralno sumnjivim delima radi preživljavanja i održanja. U kulturi koju globalno ovekovečuju medijski proizvodi što zarađuju trgujući slikama, etika tih medijskih proizvoda mora se posmatrati kao mera saučesništva u često opasnim performansima hip-hop ponude. Ovo istraživanje je pokušaj da se razumeju politike, estetika i posledice performativnih aspekata hip-hopa. Kao umetnička forma, hip-hop je performans koji stvara društveno nabijene implikacije. No, šta je stvarno u kompleksnoj izvođačkoj umetnosti kakva je hip-hop? U hip-hopu retko postoji granica između života i umetnosti zbog toga što je hip-hop način života, koliko i forma umetnosti; stoga se postavlja pitanje: koliko je hip-hop umetnost izvodenja i proizvodjenja društvenih i etičkih kodeksa, a koliko odraz nekih ranijih zakona? Kao najuticajniji i najprodavaniji hip-hop umetnik svih vremena, Tupak Šakur je važan primer performativne strane hip-hopa, naročito u njegovoj prvoj glavnoj ulozi, u filmu Ernsta Dikersona "Faca" (Juice, 1992). Hip-hop i mediji koji ga emituju stvorili su izuzetno opasnu izvođačku umetnost, a "faca" ili poštovanje često se moraju platiti životom. Prostor za ovu opasnu izvođačku umetnost stvoren je moralnim padom. Da bi se izvukao iz sumnjive situacije, hip-hop mora da se odupre nekontrolisanoj komercijalizaciji, istovremeno stvarajući prostor za uzdizanje ugnjetenih. On mora da obnovi i slavi svoj smisao za etičku svrhu.*

Ključne reči: *Tupac Shakur, hip-hop, kultura, etika, mediji, performans, rasa*

“As a form of culture with literally millions of participants across the globe...[hip-hop is] the best aes-

thetic gauge of the consciousness of the masses of people throughout the world and it expresses not only all that is ugly about them, but all that is beautiful and all that yearns to be free.”¹ This citation reveals the discursive influence of hip-hop, indicating its importance and relevance as a subject of study. Hip-hop is inextricably linked with moral reflections as they relate to the often dire state of young men surviving in economically-ravaged communities in America and throughout the world; young men who are often forced to resort to criminal activities and other morally-ambiguous actions for both survival and perseverance. As a culture that derives its significance from the ground up, hip-hop flowers through the social norms of a hazardous environment: the streets. The debate as to whether hip-hop simply mirrors or exacerbates these hazardous conditions is a crucial one.

The writer Tricia Rose, who initiated the cycle of hip-hop scholarship with her pioneering book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* in 1994, has now codified and thoroughly explored these debates revolving around hip-hop culture in her recent publication *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters* (2008). She organizes these debates as a top-ten list, directly incorporated into the book as chapter headings; the general contention of the book is that these debates are of a unique urgency in America today because hip-hop is the primary channel through which people discuss race. The top ten debates, the first five forwarded by the critics of hip-hop culture and the final five by its defenders, are:

1. Hip-hop causes violence
2. Hip-hop reflects black dysfunctional ghetto culture
3. Hip-hop hurts black people
4. Hip-hop is destroying America’s values

¹ General Baker and C.L.R. Odell. “Theses on hip-hop: preface to the second edition,” (Tuesday, November 07, 2006), http://democracyandhiphop.blogspot.com/2006/11/democracy-and-hip-hop-our-line_02.html (accessed October 12, 2008).

5. Hip-hop demeans women
6. Just keeping it real
7. Hip-hop is not responsible for sexism
8. “There are bitches and hoes”
9. We’re not role models
10. Nobody talks about the positive in hip-hop²

One can see that a majority of the debates around hip-hop center on either violence or sexism. Though both of these issues are ethical challenges of the highest order violence is the most pressing of all because it is potentially life-threatening. A large percentage of the hip-hop music that sells makes use of violent imagery and it is these images in the culture that will be analyzed in this study. Hip-hop is controversial and its ethical conundrums so urgent precisely because of its worldwide popularity, the influence it wields and the numerous profitable industries it is able to generate. Therefore, capital concerns cannot be divorced from any consideration of the aesthetics and ideology of hip-hop.

As a culture that is perpetuated globally through media outlets which profit from the images that are trafficked, the ethics of said media outlets must be judged in an attempt to gauge complicity in the often dangerous performances that hip-hop offers. Culture can be co-opted for the purposes of waging war, if not simply to control a people. However, when the war is already raging among those people that practice a unique and lucrative form of culture such as hip-hop, it must be understood who has something to gain and who has something to lose by controlling the cultural form in question. This study attempts to understand the politics, aesthetics and repercussions of that war by paying special attention to the performative aspects of hip-hop. The media often attempts to subjugate art in the achieving of certain ends that benefit those in power. The distance between those ends and the means that realize them can be measured in ethical terms and it is this calculation that functions as a thematic of this essay, along with the societal implications that arise as a result.

² Tricia Rose. *The hip hop wars: what we talk about when we talk about hip hop – and why it matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

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As an art form, hip-hop creates socially-charged implications with regards to performance. One of the more popular phrases in recent hip-hop slang is “keep it real,” which has serious repercussions when considering the performative aspect. “Keeping it real” refers to one’s actions, or rather, uniting one’s actions with one’s words. This is a gold standard in hip-hop culture and one of the worst things you can be labeled is “fake.” However, in the complex performance art that is hip-hop, what is real?

Performance in hip-hop as a socio-symbolic practice reflects urban societal norms. Those norms relate to archetypes in the urban community that often fall into limited, narrowly-constructed categories: either you are a hustler, which implies illegal activities, or you are an entertainer, which encompasses sports as well as the arts. These are commonly viewed as the only two options available to young African-Americans to rise above disenfranchised communities. The Notorious B.I.G. said it best in his song *Things Done Changed* (1994): “The streets is [are] a short stop. Either you’re slangin’ crack rock, or you got a wicked jump shot.”

Hip-hop often forwards a perception of urban lifestyles that fall into these facile categories and the media that controls and channels hip-hop is implicated in this process as well, therefore those that control the media also. Rose notes in her text that “the genre’s promoters capitalize on the illusion that the artists are not performing but ‘keeping it real’ – telling the truth, wearing outfits on stage that they’d wear in the street (no costumes).”³ As a result the imagery surrounding African-American men does not reflect the full spectrum and complexity of their experiences, nor their possible futures. This is an ideological tactic that emasculates black men in society, which also leads to their elimination – and it is a severe ethical problem, as the most certain way to destroy a people is to take away their ability to reproduce. Hip-hop is either complicit in this emasculation, or it strikes at the heart of this ideological attack in an effort to subvert it.

³ Ibid., p. 38.

Rose continues: “Part of this ‘keeping it real’ ethos is a laudable effort to continue to identify with many of their [hip-hop’s] fans, who don’t see their style or life experiences represented anywhere else, from their own points of view; part of it is the result of conformity to the genre’s conventions.”⁴ Hip-hop is a morally-ambiguous form because, again, it expresses all that is beautiful about a people and all that is ugly at the same time. Man is a morally-ambiguous creature, consisting of the capacity for evil and good in equal parts; the human condition is the struggle for supremacy of these capacities. If hip-hop is a virtuous art form, it is so because it reflects this duality without shying away from it; truth is the fundamental ethical question that art must be concerned with. Also, if hip-hop is morally-ambiguous, it is so because it is humanized.

The notion of cultural performance,⁵ in which there is no strong border between daily life and societal roles, begins to get to the essence of the implications surrounding the performative aspect in hip-hop. Milena Dragičević-Šešić, who has written extensively on culture and art and their relation to public policy, notes, “The essence of performance is intermediality.”⁶ Her article *Umetnost performansa/The Art of Performance* explores the idea that performance is characterized by an erasure of boundaries in art. The erasing of borders is a common theme in hip-hop; “keeping it real” refers to mirroring one’s life with one’s art and vice versa. Very few art forms are saddled with this heavy burden of representation.⁷ Rarely is there a boundary between life and art in hip-hop and that is because hip-hop is as much a way of life as it is an art form (and a cultural movement). This becomes dangerous when one considers the popularity of gangsta rap music, for example. This fatalistic form is what creates the charged implications

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Aleksandra Jovičević and Ana Vujanović. *Uvod u studije performansa/Introduction to performance studies* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2007), p. 29.

⁶ Milena Dragičević-Šešić. “Umetnost performansa/The Art of Performance” *Zbornik FDU 4* (2001).

⁷ “Representing” is another powerfully evocative colloquialism in hip-hop culture, used to mean exactly what it signifies in its dictionary definition: “To act the part or role of.”

in the cultural performance of hip-hop – it is a performance art where the stakes are often life and death. The case of Tupac Shakur exemplifies this notion in a very powerful way.

The cultural performance that is hip-hop is characterized by Richard Schechner's concept of complex acting:⁸ socially and ethnically-coded acting that is realistic and anti-illusory. Traditional notions of acting are anathema in hip-hop's never-ending quest for representing the real. Complex acting means that when one performs one must create a self-effacing image that has, what documentary theorists would call, an indexical tie to reality. If complex acting is anti-illusory, that means it is subversive anti-acting; however, complex acting in the Schechnerian sense also refers to performing the social and ethnic codes of everyday living, which are real but rarely anti-illusory (in the dramatic sense of the term). Life is the ultimate performing art – we construct our personas over time and play them out in various fashions and settings every day. Therefore the question becomes what is the tension between hip-hop art as performing and producing social and ethnic codes, or reflecting pre-existing ones?

The hegemonic ideologies (expressed through media) state that young black men in America are an endangered species; those ideologies also state that young black men are dangerous lower class citizens to be engaged cautiously, which produces a social justification for their death drives. Rose writes, "This hyper-investment in the fiction of full-time autobiography in hip hop, especially for those artists who have adopted gangsta personas, has been exaggerated and distorted by a powerful history of racial images of black men as 'naturally' violent and criminal."⁹ If the media propagates these images and this ideology while at the same time profiting from their exploitation in hip-hop, an ethical conundrum immediately presents itself. In legal terms this is a conflict of inter-

⁸ Aleksandra Jovičević and Ana Vujanović. *Uvod u studije performansa/Introduction to performance studies* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2007), p. 37.

⁹ Tricia Rose. *The hip hop wars: what we talk about when we talk about hip hop – and why it matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), p. 38.

est, prohibited because it is transgressive of accepted morality (the morality of the ruling classes) and detrimental to a second party.

If the urban communities that so many African-Americans are sentenced to from birth are a “trap,” as current hip-hop slang has it, then they are the ultimate trap, the perfect trap – for this is a trap in which the subjects sometimes either do not want to, or are afraid to leave (whether consciously or unconsciously). The media utilizes the social system of hip-hop to set the parameters of this trap. To be exact, media refers to radio, television, cinema and record companies: those who buy and sell art and culture on the open market. As the filmmaker Robert Bresson has stated in his book *Notes on the Cinematographer*, “A system is bait for something.”¹⁰ The prey is the previously-mentioned endangered species: African-American men. We can now see that this war has economic implications, which means it is intertwined with the structures of power in a capitalist society. The socio-symbolic performance of “keeping it real” exemplifies this closed cycle. If you are not a real hustler, if you are not really in the hood (the trap), then you are not real “cool” in the eyes of the media and the consumer. The definitive performance that many hip-hop artists must live out is a performance of tragic irony in the postmodern¹¹ world, which is why so many contemporary hip-hop artists have lost their lives.¹²

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As the most influential and highest-selling¹³ hip-hop artist of all-time Tupac Shakur presents an important and interesting case study for the performative aspect

¹⁰ Robert Bresson. *Notes on the cinematographer* (Green Integer, 1997), p. 10.

¹¹ Hip-hop appeared at that time when there was a general shift towards the postmodern in art – the 70s. Hip-hop is perhaps the archetypal postmodern art form on a variety of levels; it is naturally characterized by pastiche, re-appropriation and intertextuality.

¹² The first notable hip-hop artist to be killed was DJ Scott LaRock from Boogie Down Productions in 1987. This disturbing trend increased in the 90s and beyond when Mister C from RBL Posse, Mac Dre, Big L, Stack Bundles, Jam Master Jay and of course Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G., among numerous others, were all murdered in the prime of their youth.

¹³ Over 75 million albums sold worldwide.

in hip-hop, particularly through his first starring role in a movie: *Juice* (1992) by Ernest Dickerson. Shakur was introduced to the arts at an early age: at 12 he joined Harlem's 127th Street Ensemble (a troupe of African-American actors), in which he performed the role of Travis in *A Raisin in the Sun*; as a teenager he studied at the Baltimore School for the Arts where he honed his skills in acting, poetry and music; when he relocated to Marin City, California during his high school years, he joined the Ensemble Theater Company. All of this formative training took place before he embarked on his hip-hop career in 1991; therefore, Tupac had a firm and diversified grasp on the performing arts and its history.

Tupac the rapper, the son of Black Panthers,¹⁴ quickly crafted a Black Nationalist image for himself, making his first appearance in a video for the song *Same Song* (1991) by Digital Underground dressed in traditional African garb while sitting on a throne and being carried by similarly-dressed black men and women. This image is a performance that subverts societal norms, creating an oppositional image towards the supremacy of white America. Tupac is using the revolutionary capacity of performance to “challenge, provoke, contest, and stake a claim.”¹⁵ However, this image disappeared in connection with Tupac almost as soon as it was created, replaced by a much more violently provocative image with revolutionary potential: the gangster. That this image is the more profitable (and ultimately more palatable) one for the media, it reveals the string pullers behind the curtains of this transformation.

Throughout the rest of his career, in the content of his art and in his everyday life, Tupac defined himself in opposition to the dominant ideologies he did not believe in. In doing so he simultaneously constructed the persona of an outlaw and performed an exaggerated role of complex acting that ultimately resulted in his death – the grand performance that gave him legendary status. It is his performance in the film *Juice*

¹⁴ His mother Afeni Shakur was an active member of the Black Panthers as was his stepfather Mutulu Shakur, his godfather Geronimo Pratt and his godmother Assata Shakur.

¹⁵ Jon McKenzie. *Perform or else: from discipline to performance* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.

that condenses, expresses and charts the development of this outlaw persona vividly.

Juice is the dramatic story of a group of high school friends in Harlem (New York City) who succumb to the pressures of living in the ghetto and decide to rob a store for money and power (or, “juice”). Tupac plays Bishop, the most passionate and unstable of the group – a young man who lives with his grandmother and his mentally-disturbed father who spent time in jail for an unnamed crime.

In the introductory montage sequence of the film when we first see Bishop’s father he is staring blankly at an animated program on his television, completely oblivious to the world around him. In the background of the frame Bishop regards him with a far-off sadness in his eyes, as if he can see his own future following the same path as his father’s. Bishop also harbors great fondness for his father – his split family is his soft spot. There is no mother present in the household, which is the initial perception of a hazardous urban norm that this film offers: fractured homes. A flawed upbringing causes the hip-hop artist and inner-city urban youths in general to relate to society in a skewed, anti-traditional manner, which inflects their performances as a “wild child.” Art mimics life here, as Tupac never knew his birth father and his stepfather spent more time in jail than at home. This is the first erasure of the border between art and life for Tupac, which codes his cultural performance as realistic complex acting with tangible social resonance.

In the beginning of the film, when Bishop steps out of his home onto the mean streets of Harlem the camera frames his feet as he walks. This is a visual echo of Bishop’s mantra to “get the ground beneath your feet,” which he expresses later in the film and which means that one has to get a solid footing in reality; this shot also has ironic meaning because Bishop is the least grounded of all the characters in the film. As he walks the song *So You Want to Be a Gangster* (1991) by Too \$hort¹⁶ plays on the soundtrack, which

¹⁶ Too \$hort was the first hip-hop artist from Northern California (particularly, Oakland) to have wide commercial success, marked by the release of his 1988 album *Life is...Too \$hort* which sold over two-million copies. Tupac began his hip-hop career in Oakland. The use of this song in this scene links Tupac to the history of hip-hop in the region he represented.

is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of playing the role of a gangster. This musical composition comments directly on the story, as this is the chosen role that Bishop plays; the song also comments in an outward direction, as a warning to those of the hip-hop generation who engage in a cultural performance without strong borders. That lack of a border, that inability to get the ground beneath your feet, is what endangers young black men. The comment is also a prescient warning to Tupac, the multi-layered performer, who sank deeper and deeper into the role of a gangster in both his artistic career and his daily life. This descent is foreshadowed by his role as Bishop and the trajectory he follows in the film, which concludes with his final descent into darkness from high above the city; a fall from grace off a building rooftop, which results in his death.

In this early in the film, as Bishop takes his first confident steps as a practicing gangster, he is accosted by a Puerto Rican gang called “Rapido Muerte” (in English “Quick Death,” another foreshadowing of his demise and a symbolization of the stakes of urban cultural performance). The leader of the gang, Radimez (Vincent Laresca), accuses Bishop of projecting an image that he is superior to others and confrontationally questions whether this is true or not. Bishop immediately begins the coded performance (what Rose calls “full-time autobiography”) that is intended to prove he is big enough to live up to his image.

These are the sorts of social tests that young black men go through in urban communities on a daily basis – and one must perform well. The result is overly-complex acting, which is a tool designed to allow one to survive in a tough environment, because if you do not act like you have “juice” people will see a sign of weakness and use it against you. Again, hip-hop reflects a dichotomy of urban social reality: one is either victim or aggressor. The rapper E-40¹⁷ wrote a song called *Practice Lookin’ Hard* (1994) in which he claimed, “I got a mirror in my pocket and I practice

¹⁷ E-40 is another iconic hip-hop artist from Northern California, particularly the city of Vallejo. Like Too \$hort, not only was he a pioneer of Bay Area hip-hop music but he was also known for his pioneering independent business strategies. Both Too \$hort and E-40 regularly collaborated with Tupac in their music.

lookin' hard." Pimp C of the group UGK wrote in the song *One Day* (1996), "Niggas be lookin' shife, so I look shife back. Can't show no weakness with these bitches, get your life jacked." These lyrics¹⁸ exemplify the desire and urgent need to perform in the urban environment, as well as the tragic cyclical and self-reflexive nature of that performance.

Performing daily social roles has life or death consequences for the young black male and hip-hop artists alike. This is the trap, or the game that one is forced to play. Good acting can sometimes save you, through the third of three functions that the writer Jon McKenzie ascribes to cultural performance: "The possibility of conservation and/or transformation."¹⁹ Through a believable transformation into a gangster the possibility of conserving one's life is extended. This is a fundamental conceptualization of cultural performance as social efficacy. Bad acting can cause a double fate: being perceived as fake, or being dead. This is the tragic irony of the urban cultural performance: if one is successful in this transformation, one's life is still at risk due to the transgressive role and the violent implications surrounding it that have been adopted; if one is unsuccessful, or fake, then they are left at the mercy of forces far greater than them – foes who are peers and can act as judge, jury and executioner. This unique paradox produces a sociologically-deterministic and ethical site for performance studies to be engaged with, moving them away from aesthetics and closer towards a purer form of humanism.

The key scene of significance for analyzing performance in *Juice*, as well as media culpability in constructing and commodifying performance, comes at the climax of the first act when Bishop reveals the method to his madness while among his comrades. The scene begins with Bishop watching the classic film noir *White Heat* (1949) by Raoul Walsh, starring James Cagney. Remembered and celebrated as Cagney's definitive performance in the role of a gangster,

¹⁸ "Hard" is hip-hop slang for "mean," or "tough;" "shife" means the same thing, with an added undertone of connivery. "Jacked" is hip-hop slang for something stolen.

¹⁹ Jon McKenzie. *Perform or else: from discipline to performance* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 31.

Bishop takes special notice of every move that he makes. The implicit statement is, again, that the media is complicit in this dangerous game of representation (a statement is also made on the historical lineage of crime in America as an institutional force, as well as its mythologizing).

There are parallels between Cagney's character Cody Jarrett and Tupac's character Bishop, most notably in their mental imbalance, their unyielding devotion to their parents bordering on mania and their irrational drive to make it to the "top of the world," as Jarrett famously states in the film. Bishop believes in this constructed performance so much that he mimics it in his ideology and his actions. This element of complex acting is representative of hip-hop, as many artists emulate their favorite movie stars, sometimes adopting their name and/or persona.²⁰ In the postmodern world everything is a reconstructed copy; this copying has ethical and social repercussions, as these artists construct an image of illicit behavior for others to follow, which perpetuates the cycle of violence through performance that so many young black men are caught in; or, as Rose defines the top debates in hip-hop, the potential is there for hip-hop to reflect black ghetto culture and (by extension) to hurt black people.²¹

According to Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach in their edited text on performance, race "exists in much the same way that theatrical and other performances exist – as copies without originals."²² If the notion of "race" can be likened to a postmodern construct, cultural performance is implicated in that construction, just as "race" is historically implicated in the construction of nations.²³ Therefore, what we hold dear to ourselves and our notion of ourselves – our

²⁰ A most notable example would be the Houston, Texas hip-hop artist Scarface, who derived his name from the film *Scarface* (1983) by Brian De Palma. This film has achieved mythical status in the hip-hop community and is considered to not only be an irreproachable classic but also a schematic on how to live one's life and perform successfully as a gangster.

²¹ Tricia Rose. *The hip hop wars: what we talk about when we talk about hip hop – and why it matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

²² Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (eds.). *Critical theory and performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 137.

²³ Ibid.

identity – is the direct result of performing. If we create our identities through complex acting, through mimicry of other constructs with no idealized original as a model, then the urban hip-hop performance is truly an exercise in tragic irony. In this instance it seems the only door to escape this cycle is to return to mimicry of the true benevolent, life-giving original: God. The ubiquitous religious iconography in the hip-hop film is a subtle reminder that the primacy of God must be restored; the crucifixes that so many young black men wear urge them towards this sanctified emulation, this shot at redemption, this merging with God. However, Bishop does not wear a crucifix around his neck – he wears a golden gun. This is the blasphemous idolatry that ruined him both within the text of the film and in real life.

Bishop watches the famous conclusion of *White Heat* when Cagney screams up to the heavens, “Made it, Ma! Top of the world!!”, before incinerating himself in a fiery explosion; he is happy with this ending and feels that if you have to go out, that is the way to do it – with your destiny in your own hands. Also, the implication is that if you have to go out you should go out in a violent way, performing just as a classic gangster would. This is the performance that Tupac himself took to heart and utilized throughout the rest of his career as his “full-time autobiography.”

After watching Cagney destroy himself, then seeing a sensational news media report on a childhood acquaintance named Blizzard (Darien Berry) dying in a shootout with the police, Bishop becomes charged with emotion and lays into his friends with an analysis about their status in society. He does not feel they have any respect, also saying that one has to be ready to die for it, like Cagney and Blizzard. As he tells his friend Q (Omar Epps), “You gotta get the ground beneath your feet, partner. Get the wind behind your back and go out in a blaze if you got to!” Otherwise, he feels you might as well be dead. The death drive, the desire to perform as a real gangster would, is Bishop’s only concern. He thinks that is the only way one can make a name for himself and without a name, you are nothing. Performing ably leads to fame, fame leads to notoriety and respect and dying for that respect leads to immortality – it is no coinci-

dence that Tupac later named himself and his rap associates “Outlaw Immortalz.”²⁴

After *Juice* Tupac’s career trajectory began to take a more confrontational and violent turn. He was involved in a shootout that left a young boy dead, another shootout with off-duty police officers and he was famously shot himself in a robbery attempt at a recording studio. The gangster persona began to merge with Tupac’s rap persona and his image changed accordingly. Gone were the initial days of traditional African dress delineating a proud, conscious representation; Tupac could now be seen photographed with guns, drugs and various tattoos that promoted the thug life he was living. Performance becomes life and life becomes performance.

By the time Tupac released *All Eyez on Me* (1996), the first double album in the history of hip-hop, he was in the midst of an increasingly violent war of words between his West Coast-based record label Death Row and the East Coast label Bad Boy.²⁵ The main site of conflict in this war of words was the music performed by Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G. and their respective record labels (owned and operated by multinational conglomerates) profited handsomely off of this clash. Ultimately both rappers were shot and killed as a result of this war – legendary actions which marked the end of the golden age of hip-hop music, because by this point in time and the absurdity of these courses of events there truly was no separation line between life and art. Performing had

²⁴ The Outlaw Immortalz utilized aliases derived not from media constructions but rather controversial historical figures and dictators. Tupac gave himself the alias Makaveli, which referred to the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli; Yaki Kadafi was named after Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi; Kastro was named after Cuban leader Fidel Castro; E.D.I. Mean was named after the Ugandan president Idi Amin; Hussein Fatal was named after former Iraqi leader Sadaam Hussein; Napoleon was named after the French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte; Mussolini was named after the leader of the Italian Fascist Party Benito Mussolini; Komani was named after the Iranian political figure Ruhollah Khomeini.

²⁵ The West Coast/East Coast rivalry in hip-hop was sparked by the shooting and robbing of Tupac, which occurred in a New York building housing a recording studio that The Notorious B.I.G., a Bad Boy artist, was using at the time. Afterwards, Tupac felt that The Notorious B.I.G. had something to do with the attack and lashed out at him through his music.

become fused with living; the transformation was complete. The stage even became a trap – which one could not get off or out of, because one would not be able to maintain his space in the social hierarchy. Hip-hop and the media that sustains it have created a most dangerous performance art and the “juice” that one struggles to earn must often be paid for at the expense of lives.

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Rose, as deft a media critic as she is a cultural one, includes an appendix in her book entitled “Radio Station Consolidation.” This title is in reference to two media conglomerates that control a disproportionate amount of the broadcasting outlets that specialize in hip-hop music: Clear Channel Communications, the largest owner of full-power FM, AM and shortwave radio stations in America;²⁶ Radio One, which owns 69 radio stations in 22 of the largest American cities.²⁷ Rose feels that these media conglomerates are responsible for exasperating the situation surrounding violent hip-hop because not only do they make a great deal of money from exploiting this product, they also minimize the alternatives available to listeners due to their overwhelming market share and determination of song exposure. The reason that these media conglomerates were able to achieve an oligopoly is the United States Telecommunications Act of 1996.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 represented the first major change to telecommunications law in the United States in over 60 years. As a result of this act, which amended the Communications Act of 1934, it was no longer illegal to own more than one mass media outlet in any given market. The laws of 1934 were initiated to prevent broadcast monopolies from forming; instead, after the 1996 deregulatory act a concentration of media ownership grew. This eventually resulted in Clear Channel Communications turning a profit of \$3.5 billion USD in 2005.²⁸

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clear_Channel_Communications (accessed on April 19, 2010)

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_One_%28company%29 (accessed on April 19, 2010)

²⁸ “The Top 25 Radio Groups by Revenue” *Radio World* 30 (2006).

If these media conglomerates are acting in an unethical manner it seems that the United States government is also complicit in this endeavor by paving the way through its legislative actions. During the 90s hip-hop music accounted for more than 10% of the total album sales in the US, making it the third most popular genre in terms of sales;²⁹ by 2003 hip-hop reached its peak in the marketplace at 13.3%, making it the second most popular genre.³⁰ The deregulatory actions of the government were set into motion during the peak of the golden age of hip-hop when the genre was on the rise. In this light those actions can be seen as an effort to capitalize, contain and control. Yet another facet of the tragic irony that characterizes hip-hop is that though the culture was created as a rebellious outlet for the disadvantaged, it is now domesticated as a tool and used as a pre-emptive attack against its multi-cultural creators by those who were initially the target of its rebellion.

A space is created for the dangerous performance art of hip-hop by way of ethical slippage. With the blurring of boundaries in this fashion the media has been able to solidify its grip on hip-hop culture by exploiting its salacious aspects for financial (and ideological) gain. Hip-hop plays its role too, by creating fodder for the corporate machine, while an unjust society has developed the conditions that sustain this wicked playground in the first place. Karl Marx once said that capitalism and the bourgeoisie, more than anything, have produced their own gravediggers. Hip-hop has done so as well, with the assistance of the media as undertakers. In order to extricate itself from this dubious situation hip-hop must resist rampant commercialization while providing a site that is conducive to the uplifting of the downtrodden. Hip-hop must strive to be more than a commodity – it must be a method, of resistance and refinement. It must renew and celebrate its sense of ethical purpose. The stakes are high, when one recalls the widespread popularity that hip-hop enjoys and the unity it can potentially nurture. Again, as Marx has said, there is a world to win, and there are lives in the balance.

²⁹ http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/3/0/1/1/3/pages301139/p301139-2.php
(accessed April 19, 2010)

³⁰ The Recording Industry Association of America 2008 Consumer Profile.

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PERFORMING HIP-HOP

– ETHICS, COMPLEX ACTING AND TUPAC SHAKUR
IN JUICE –

Summary

Hip-hop is inextricably linked with moral reflections as they relate to the often dire state of young men surviving in economically-ravaged communities in America and throughout the world; young men who are often forced to resort to criminal activities and other morally-ambiguous actions for both survival and perseverance. As a culture that is perpet-

uated globally through media outlets which profit from the images that are trafficked, the ethics of the said media outlets must be measured in an attempt to gauge complicity in the often dangerous performances that hip-hop offers. This study attempts to understand the politics, aesthetics and repercussions of the performative aspects of hip-hop.

As an art form, hip-hop creates socially-charged implications with regards to performance. However, in the complex performance art that is hip-hop, what is real? Rarely is there a boundary between life and art in hip-hop and that is because hip-hop is as much a way of life as it is an art form; the question then becomes, what is the tension between hip-hop art as performing and producing social and ethnic codes, or reflecting pre-existing ones? As the most influential and highest-selling hip-hop artist of all-time, Tupac Shakur presents an important case study for the performative aspect in hip-hop, particularly through his first starring role in a movie: *Juice* (1992) by Ernest Dickerson.

Hip-hop and the media that channels it have created a most dangerous performance art, and the “juice,” or respect, that one struggles to earn must often be paid for at the expense of lives. A space is created for this dangerous performance art by way of ethical slippage. In order to extricate itself from this dubious situation, hip-hop must resist rampant commercialization while providing a site that is conducive to the uplifting of the downtrodden. It must renew and celebrate its sense of ethical purpose.

Key words: *Tupac Shakur, hip-hop, culture, ethics, media, performance, race*

