

Does the Keefe D Davis Trial Confirm that Tupac's Death was the Product of Psychosis or the Beginning of a Destructive Culture Fascinated with Gang/Street-Life, Incarceration and Death?

If a person lives long enough, we all experience events or tragedies that force us to stop, stand still and take in where we were. For those of us who love Hip Hop in Gen X, the killings of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Notorious BIG Wallace may have been those defining moments. For our parents, the Boomers, it may have been the assassinations of Malcolm X, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and or John F Kennedy.

Each of these deaths cataclysmically changed the trajectory of this country's path forward. Debates on the extent and characterization (i.e. assassination versus murder) are of no consequence. In each instance, we were forced: to stop; to grapple with an altered reality; and to perhaps look within .

I find myself writing this evening as the end of the Duane Keefe D Davis trial draws near. Almost 30 years after the killing of Tupac, the last alleged surviving assailant stands trial. Originally, it was suspected that four men participated in the killing. Amongst them was Mr. Davis's nephew, Orlando "Baby Lane" Anderson, who Tupac along with a group of men stomped out and unmercifully pummeled in the MGM Ballroom. What led to the brutal assault: he belonged to the South Side Compton Crips; and he and his friend allegedly snatched a Death Row Records Chain. At the time, with the exception of Calvin "Snoop Dog" Broadus (an alleged member of the Crips) and a few others, Death Row primarily identified with the Pirus, a subset of the rival Bloods gang.

Each day as this trial has progressed, I have been confronted by any number of questions. Firstly, whether embracing or even acknowledging gang culture has hurt the progress of Black and Brown people throughout America's inner cities? It's easy to get caught up in the sensational whodunnit rhetoric; and the questions of conspiracies that involve Sean P-Diddy Combs, Marion "Suge" Knight, the LAPD and or the US Government for that matter. But for urban communities, particularly for our young boys and men the questions are graver.

This trial has also forced me to examine my life 30 years ago, where I was on the day I learned that Tupac got shot and how I felt during the week he fought for his life. At the time, I had taken off a year after I graduated from undergrad. I was still in Los Angeles, living in a junior studio apartment working a job that barely paid above minimum wage at a large law firm.

I had befriended a co-worker, who associated with gang members. It was a Saturday night, and my co-worker wanted to break me out of my bookish shell. She insisted that I watch the fight with she and her friends accordingly. I would eagerly accept the invite, excited to experience yet another facet of life in LA.

At the party, I silently took it all in. Although I had had some exposure to what some may deem to be street life in Hollis, it was a whole different ball game in Los Angeles. Despite my geeky

East Coast origins, I was welcomed with open arms. We drank, some people smoked; and we all ate and laughed that the fight was probably going to be much too short for all the effort we had expended to commune together.

The banter continued, because we were indeed in communion. Black young people of differing backgrounds and life experiences, celebrating and enjoying the big fight. No matter where you were in life and location, Mike Tyson had a way of doing that for my age group. He was a force and many of us were thrilled to see him return to the ring after serving a bid in prison. We were enthralled and impressed by the raw power he exhibited. Mike Tyson's very existence provocatively presented a counternarrative: he challenged the conventional definitions of talent and success. He embodied the essence of Hip Hop, which dismantled the class mores and elitism associated with Black excellence and achievement.

And we were right, the fight was quick. Mike knocked out the unknown Bruce Seldon 1 minute and 49 seconds into the first round. By that time, we were all under the influence. High off of the excitement of the victory, we didn't want the night to end. So we played cards and dominoes, ate hot wings and talked smack....That was until word began to circulate that Tupac and Suge Knight had attacked a bunch of Crips in the MGM's ballroom.

Seeing me like a baby sister, my co-worker grew concerned for us both, but more so for me and she insisted that we leave the party. She viewed me as an outsider and because I was going to law school, she felt that I had too much to lose by hanging around. On top of that, she also saw me as a little sister, like a lot of people did at that time of my life, so she was super protective. Without much fanfare we left, and she insisted that I call her when I got home. Instinctively, I also was concerned for her, since I also had begun to learn the realities of gang life in LA.

A few hours later we would learn that Tupac and Suge Knight had been ambushed and that their car had been riddled with bullets. It would then come out that Tupac had sustained multiple gunshot wounds, but that he was still talking: full of bravado as they rode off to the hospital.

Throughout the city and at our job, the days after the shooting were tense. We were all young, recent college grads and hip hop heads for the most part. Our jobs, were pretty mindless: there were approximately 25 of us who worked on breast implant litigation. We were beneath the paralegals; we provided document and administrative support. Our task: to organize the paper that inevitably inundated the firm's mailroom each day.

My office nickname was Stray, since my filing system made sense to no one else. There was just paper all over my section of the office, piles here and there. I was proud that despite the outward chaos, that I knew about each page of madness that came across my attorney's region... That intimate knowledge would pay huge dividends and win me an audience with the higher ups down the line.... In hindsight, I now laugh at the things I took pride in when I was young.

My office mate and I had a routine. She was slightly older, a bit worldlier and more serious. Yet the Tupac shooting had become our equalizer. She too listened intently as the urban radio stations gave hour by hour coverage. My office mate and I went back and forth between two radio stations: The Beat and Power 106.

The rest of our peers would stop by and share their thoughts. I would walk over to see my co-worker who's party I had attended, since she sat separately from us. She was a bit graver since she and her friends were a bit closer to it all. Nevertheless, like the rest of us, she anxiously listened to the radio in anticipation that Tupac would pull through, like he had in the past when he had been shot.

For the next six days, so many of us in Los Angeles would hold vigil. We would laugh that Tupac would pull through. The radio stations would play his music in heavy rotation. The City would try to move on with life as normal, as we all waited with bated breath for any updates. Again since he had been shot multiple times before, and since he had left the scene of the shooting talking, we were collectively optimistic.... That was until Friday, September 13th.

I am not sure if the skies were overcast from smog or not, but as the day progressed the drearier it became. Murmurs had gotten louder by that time that Tupac was barely holding on. Talk was that if he were to pull through, that he wouldn't be the man we knew. Celebrities seem to be streaming in to bid him adieu, to pay their respects. I wasn't a big Tupac fan, but like so many others, I had hoped that the scuttlebutt was the product of mindless speculation. It wasn't.

The word came out at around 4pm. It was as if the whole city's heart had stopped. For at least an hour, the disc jockeys announced that Tupac Amaru Shakur had joined the ancestors. My co-workers and I were in disbelief.

As was my routine, I drove to my hair appointment. There was extensive commentary surrounding the moments that led up to his Mother's decision to remove him from life support. Songs from his albums played as thousands of cars attempted to navigate thru the City's collective tears on the freeways. I sat in disbelief on the 105-E heading to Norwalk.... I was proudly from the East Coast, specifically from New York but also wondered if it was worth it.... If the so called East Coast West Coast beef and sparring were worth this talented man's life? Was it worth yet another Black man being taken out of play either by jail and or death by the age of 25? I wondered.

Theories abound regarding the circumstances that led up to his murder. The streets posited that it was gang related, somehow tied to the fight at the MGM. Others speculated that Suge may have had a hand in the killing. As the years progressed the theories got more grandiose. Conspiracies, larger agendas to silence the voice of Black resistance, to the even more fantastic ponderings about the Illuminati. These murmurings multiplied even more on March 9, 1997, when Christopher "Biggie" Wallace was murdered as he left the Los Angeles Petersen Automotive Museum.

Two charismatic Black men: who were once friends; who also occupied chairs at the top of the rap game; and who eventually became mortal enemies and rivals were both now dead. The blow to the hip hop culture and Black and Brown youth/adults was devastating. The jubilation and authentic power of the music and culture were snuffed out, only to be replaced by themes with a more nefarious perverse insatiable consumerism.

Since Tupac had recorded so much in such a short period of time, we would be treated to new music for several years after his death. The songs seemed to have presaged his murder, as if he knew his days were numbered. The same could be said for Biggie, who also seemed to be fixated with his own death. His first album was "Ready to Die," and weeks after he was murdered, his label released: "Life After Death." Sadly, like Tupac, Biggie would die within months of his 25th birthday.

I don't think anyone can quantify the countless discussions, think pieces and debates about what these two men could have been had their lives not been so senselessly cut short. Each year that went by, that these murders were not solved, further fueled the collective frustration and anger felt throughout the community.

However, I will pose some provocative questions surrounding both men: did these two brilliant men exhibit a form of nihilistic and fatality driven PTSD, that was rooted in a twisted desire to belong, to assert their manhood to such an extent that it led to their inevitable deaths? Has our community's collective failure to examine the toxic fixation and glamorization of street life led to a proliferation of even more violent gangs, gun driven culture and the mass incarceration of Black and Brown males in the country's inner cities? Are we in a better or worse place today than we were 30 years ago, especially in light of the murders of Julio Foolio, Pop Smoke, Nipsey Hustle, Young Dolph and any number of others?

Since the closing arguments for the trial of one of Tupac's alleged assailants are anticipated this week, I will focus just on Tupac. This position will be controversial to some, but I will take it anyway. The instability and trauma that Tupac sustained as a child drove him to a self-destructive fascination with belonging to a violent sub-culture to which he did not belong.

By all accounts, Tupac was a talented child and adolescent. By the time he was in high school, he was deep into performing arts: dancing, rapping and acting. These gifts would lead to his entry into the world of entertainment, as part of the rap group Digital Underground's entourage. First as a roadie, then a dancer and ultimately as a rapper.... Tupac would not only enmesh himself in the group's act, which was light-hearted and fun, his raps and lyrics would steal the show. Brilliant and driven however, a few verses within a comedic ensemble would not be sufficient, as such he would move back to the East Coast and delve into acting.

In stark contrast to his work with Digital Underground, Tupac would take a number of dark roles on the big screen. Amongst them: the trigger happy homicidal Bishop, in "Juice;" the ruthless antagonist Birdie, in "Above the Rim;" and the working class, sensitive devoted grieving single

father Lucky, in “Poetic Justice.” Each role seemed to tap into a different facet of Tupac’s psyche, and in each instance, he seemed to be more drawn to the darker side of existence in the inner city.

One can argue that “2Pacalypse Now,” Tupac’s first solo album, was a canvas. An artist, Tupac’s impassioned lyrics painted pictures that depicted the perils of urban life. Teenage pregnancy, police brutality and racism were juxtaposed with playful collaborations with his former group mate Shock G. The album beckoned a transition of sorts. It allowed those of us who enjoyed Tupac’s antics with the Underground to view him as more serious, insightful and conscious.

From a bleak perspective, one may also argue that it reflected the beginning of Tupac’s descent. So much so that perhaps this period in Tupac’s life may have been a time where he experienced cognitive dissonance. Was he a revolutionary? Was he just an artist who sought to entertain? Was he an angry Black man trying to survive in a world where he felt the odds were inevitably stacked against him? Was he all of those things and more? To say that Tupac was a complicated man would be an understatement.

Having moved around so much as a child, along with his mother’s incarceration, it was clear that Tupac desperately sought to belong. It was also clear that he was desperately trying to define his voice as a Black man. At this point in his life he resided primarily on the East Coast. During this period he ran the streets with the likes of Stretch from the rap group Naughty By Nature and Mike Tyson.

The other people he was drawn to on the East Coast were a bit more dubious, and the authenticity of the friendships were also a bit questionable. High off of the villainous roles he played onscreen, Tupac would also be drawn to the likes of Haitian Jack, James “aka Jimmy Henchman” Rosemond and other notorious criminals. Coincidentally, he would also forge a close friendship with Biggie, who at the time had one foot in the streets trafficking drugs and guns and the other foot in the music booth. He rapped about the very lifestyle he sought to leave. Nevertheless, as time progressed and events unfolded, it was not clear whether any of these men were truly his friends and or whether they had any part in his eventual demise. Like most things that result in tragedy, accounts and motivations vary.

Biggie, Mike Tyson and others warned Tupac about the company he was keeping. Undeterred, Tupac insisted on vigorously navigating this perilous and foreign terrain. His efforts and friendship would be rewarded: by multiple gunshot wounds in a botched robbery at Quad Studios; allegations of sodomy and illegal weapons possession; followed by a 9 month bid at Clinton Correctional facility. Tupac’s attempt to live a Thug Life existence on the East Coast was calamitous and almost fatal, unfortunately he refused to take heed and continued to pursue a similar existence out west.

Bailed out of prison by West Coast impresario Suge Knight, Tupac went from one extreme to another. He went from wanting to belong to and run with the likes of Haitian Jack and Jimmy

Henchman, to declaring all-out war on not only them but his good friend Christopher Wallace and Sean P-Diddy Combs.

For the next 11 months, a war of words and shooting incidents between the camps would ensue. It would be Suge and Tupac with Death Row against Diddy and Biggie by way of Bad Boy Records. During this time, both Suge and Tupac would morph even more into the Piru Blood gang personas. This evolution would take place, despite the fact that neither of them were actually gang members. Nonetheless, outwardly they would boast their affiliation, donning blood red clothes and driving blood red cars amongst other things. Both Tupac and Suge would brazenly embody these roles, oblivious to the inevitable lethality of the consequences.

On the other hand, unbeknownst to most, Diddy would hire South Side Compton Crips as security as the words and violence escalated between the camps. What started out as violence between record label heads who had one foot in the streets, became another facet of a decades long gang war.

Time and time again, I would hear people say that Pac, Suge and Diddy needed to stay out of gang business. That none of them were of the streets and that gang politics was not to be played with; again these warnings would go unheeded. It was the insistence on becoming a part of a toxic and lethal masculinity fueled gang culture, that led a diminutive Tupac to believe that he could pummel a reputed shooter and prominent gang member in the middle of a casino.

The Pirus that were part of the Death Row entourage knew what was in store. They knew that Baby Lane Anderson was a shooter (killer), and that violent retaliation was inevitable. It was an integral part of gang life. In essence, in gang culture, the assertion of respect by way of gunplay was a must. Someone would have to pay in blood for the beating, for the disrespect; no pun intended.

Knowing these realities and having previously sustained multiple shots at Quad Studios, what would drive Tupac to place his life imperil yet again? What would push him to initiate a conflict to which he had no vested interest? Was he indeed lost?

I would argue that he was. That like so many young men and women who are now Bloods, Crips and members of any number of other gangs, throughout the country today, that Tupac lacked a sense of self and recklessly sought belonging in all of the wrong places at all costs. I would also argue that because we did not have these discussions then, and refused to concede the possibility of any form of psychosis or PTSD, that we have lost a significant segment of an entire generation of our community.

Turn on any radio station or go on YouTube at any time, and you will see one drill rapper after the next: shouting out gang affiliations; brandishing weapons; mocking the demise of their rivals; and conceding their inevitable demise in either prison or death. What should be even more troubling is that the most successful drill rappers will cite that they were inspired by

either Tupac and or Biggie; as if they learned nothing from their tragic, senseless yet avoidable demises.

Disturbingly, what distinguishes this generation from mine: is that they tell on themselves aka self-snitch: they don't care if they get caught; they seem to embrace jail culture as an inevitable outcome of jumping off the porch; they eagerly delve into a life of crime; and they don't fear death, not theirs or anyone else's.

With that said, as Keefe D's trial comes to an end this week, I implore myself and others to at least reflect on where we have collectively gone wrong that as a people that we glorify criminality and gang life? How did we get to a point that the need to belong, to assert ourselves by any means became so high that we were willing to do so even in the most toxic fashion?

Ironically, at 60 years old Keefe D, a one-time gang leader and drug trafficker would be brought down because he would self-snitch. Perhaps an act of regression reflective of the times, he would nevertheless insist on his 15 minutes of fame.

An alternative take may rest in more profound and urgent motivations. In several interviews, Keefe admitted that he was strapped for cash and that he had been diagnosed with cancer. As he watched Detective Greg Kading do the interview circuit to promote his book, Keefe threw caution to the wind.

Disregarding a legally specious proffer agreement, after getting away with an alleged murder for over 25 years, Keefe D must now face the strong prospect that he may spend what remains of his life in prison. With that said, this trial and its aftermath can either be a sign of the times or a wake-up call. Lest we lose even more communities of young people like we have already seen in Jacksonville, Chicago and now the Bronx and Brooklyn. We must do more than think and talk, we must push our corrupt kleptocratic politicians to act... They must be pushed to work with the community to replace our collective nihilism and selfishness, with hope and action. We must do better....

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Postscript: At approximately 5pm, after less than three hours of deliberations, a jury of Mr. Davis's peers convicted him of murder in the first degree. He is expected to be sentenced before the Court on October 13, 2026. After the verdict was read, Mr. Davis and his lawyer announced their plans to appeal the verdict.