

## Blindness

Tupac Shakur emphasized the importance of vision, prophetic<sup>1</sup> and otherwise, in songs throughout his music career and often invited listeners to observe some person, action, or occurrence. Like a filmmaker selecting shots and editing footage, he directed his audience's attention with verbal cues – “Believe in me and you can see the victory / A warrior with jewels, can you picture me?” on “Life of an Outlaw,” for example. The absence of vision, or blindness, is similarly important to Tupac's work and serves different purposes depending on the context in which it is introduced.

As discussed elsewhere in this guide, Tupac was taught the importance of education by his mother, Afeni, since before he was old enough to read. As he matured, he developed into a voracious consumer of books with a keen understanding of the power of knowledge. In many of his songs, Tupac equated the absence of knowledge, or ignorance, with blindness. Sometimes, Tupac used blindness to reveal his own ignorance: of the enemies plotting against him (“Perhaps I was blind to the facts, stabbed in the back” on “Only God Can Judge Me”); and “I should have seen the signs, I was blinded” on “Holla at Me,” a song that was written as a response to the Quad Studios robbery in November 1994); of the emptiness of materialism (“I'm living blind, searchin' for refinement, cursed” on “Fame”); or of how to escape the violence that ultimately destroyed him (“I can't read the signs / I'm blind, but a nigga know he need his nine” on “R U Still Down? [Remember Me]”); and “I ain't afraid to die, I want to see what's after this / I'm livin' blind, writin' rhymes 'til they capture this” on “U Can Be Touched”).

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<sup>1</sup> Tupac claimed to have prophesized the Los Angeles riots of 1992 on his 1991 album, *2Pacalypse Now*. He rhymed, “Now the tables is turned around / You didn't listen, until the niggas burned it down / And now Bush can't stop the hit / I predicted the shit in *2Pacalypse*,” on “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto,” a song that was originally released as a B-side in 1993 before being remixed and put out as an A-side in 1997.

That ignorance was often feigned, Tupac's blindness often willful. What did Tupac not want to see? The consequences of the violence he often observed and occasionally committed? Unlike many other rappers of his era, Tupac rarely depicted black-on-black crime without relating the horrific consequences. That is one reason why his catalogue can be so depressing to listen to. Tupac frequently reminded his listeners of the innocent victims, the "miniature caskets, little babies / Victims of a stray, from drug dealers gone crazy." At other times, however, Tupac consciously ignored the terror wrought by gunfire. One of the more interesting artistic choices he made was to invoke blindness when he, as the narrator or subject of his rhymes, related the perpetration of violent acts. On songs like "Pain," "Me and My Girlfriend," and "Smile," Tupac emphasized that he did not look his victims in their eyes when he pulled the trigger, that he shot blindly. Is that because Tupac was trying to portray himself as an out of control thug with no conscience or, as "Smile" suggests, as a lost soul trying to find God without meaningful spiritual guidance? Perhaps one, the other, or both depending upon what the particular song called for.

Tupac's lyrics referencing blindness were not always immediately personal. The ignorance he wanted to expose was more pervasive than that. For example, as stressful as Tupac's youth in crime-ridden American neighborhoods had been, he was never really a gang member. From his arguably detached point of view, the tragic lives that the Bloods and Crips eke might have seemed like a form of blindness. He rarely judged gangbangers, but it is not a coincidence that he told listeners to "close [their] eyes" so that they could "hear the ballad of a dead soulja." Tupac made the connection between gang violence and blind ignorance more explicit on "Tears of a Clown," where he rhymed, "Red or blue? What set you claim? Does it make a difference? / One day we're gonna work it out and overcome this ignorance," and on "High Speed," where he described the thug life's inevitable outcome: "Keep a [bulletproof] vest

through these hard times, knowin' it's useless . . . Whatever happens, happens / Whoever fall, dies / We fresh out of time, livin' blind, so we all ride.” From Tupac’s perspective, the perspective a young black man educated by a socially-conscious mother, ignorance led young gang members to “ride on [their] own kind,” snuffing out the promise of the lost generation that he eulogized on songs like “Life Goes On” and “Pour Out a Little Liquor.” Sadly, Tupac became a victim of the cycle of violence he chronicled. Entangled in Los Angeles street rivalries following his release from prison, he was allegedly murdered by a member of the South Side Compton Crips in September 1996.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Tupac’s critical eye was not always trained upon the African-American community he was so much a part of. As a black man and the son of Black Panthers, Tupac had first-hand knowledge of America’s blindness toward his own suffering and the suffering of his people. Personal experience taught him that he was a second-class citizen in his own country, a lesson he succinctly described on “Letter to the President”: “How hypocritical was Liberty? / That blind bitch ain’t never did shit for me.” He also warned Americans about the consequences of their indifference on “They Don’t Give a Fuck About Us” – “I told you last album, we need help ‘cause we dyin’ / Give us a chance, help us advance, ‘cause we tryin’ / Ignore my whole plea, watchin’ us in disgust / And then they beg when my guns bust” – and on “Only God Can Judge Me” – “And all my memories, of seein’ brothers bleed / And everybody grieves, but still nobody sees.”

As bleak as so much of Tupac’s music is, and as heartbreaking as his own life story was, there are inklings of optimism, roses growing through cracks in the concrete, in his bars as well.

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed descriptions of the circumstances of Tupac’s murder, please read the ALEXANDER, FRANK; ANDERSON, ORLANDO; and Las Vegas Shooting (September 7, 1996) articles elsewhere in this guide.

Tupac knew that the wisdom that comes from applying knowledge was critical to remedying the problems he reported – on “Black Jesuz,” he said, “Blast ‘til they holy, high / Wise, no longer blinded.” Tupac also recognized the importance of compassion and understanding for the less fortunate. On “Ghetto Gospel,” a song that he recorded for a compilation that was released to benefit the Special Olympics, he implored listeners in personal terms: “The world looks dreary / When you wipe your eyes, see it clearly / There’s no need for you to fear me / If you take your time and hear me, maybe you can learn to cheer me.” Tupac can no longer speak out about the injustice, inequality, and ignorance of our time but the messages in his music are as true today as they were when he first recorded them. His lionization across broad segments of America’s citizenry – black, white, rich, poor, and otherwise – provides some hope that his country is slowly, painfully slowly, opening its eyes.

*See also 2Pacalypse Now; ALEXANDER, FRANK; **America; Amorality;** ANDERSON, ORLANDO; “Ballad of a Dead Soulja”; “Black Jesuz”; The Black Panthers; Bloods and Crips; **Compassion; Death; Despair and Hope; Education;** “Fame”; Gangsta Rap / G-Funk; “Ghetto Gospel”; “High Speed”; “Holla at Me”; **Hypocrisy;** “I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto”; Las Vegas Shooting (September 7, 1996); “Letter to the President”; “Life Goes On”; “Life of an Outlaw”; Los Angeles Riots (1992); **Materialism;** “Me and My Girlfriend”; New York Shooting (November 30, 1994); “Only God Can Judge Me”; **Politics;** “Pour Out a Little Liquor”; “R U Still Down? [Remember Me]”; **Racism; Religion;** SHAKUR, AFENI; “Smile”; Storytelling; “Tears of a Clown”; “They Don’t Give a Fuck About Us”; “U Can Be Touched”; **Violence;** “Who Do You Believe In”; and Writing Style of Tupac.*