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Black utopian and dystopian technological simulation: Tupac Shakur's holographic persona at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival[1]

> "Afrofuturism existed before it was called Afrofuturism
> and it will always exist.
> It's a human desire to want to shape your present and future."
> Ytasha L. Womack

Introduction

Since hip hop's nascent beginnings in New York City boroughs during the sweltering summer of 1973, people of color, within this genre of music and culture, have (re)used the newest technologies of the day to define and defy the collective imagination of people around the world.[2] As an illustration, scholar of critical theory and continental philosophy Bobby R. Dixon acknowledges, in the context of a discussion of Herbert Marcuse's philosophy of technology, how the boom box aided Black youth

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[1] I would like to thank the anonymous peer-reviewers, the editors of Świat *i Słowo (World* and *Word)*, and others at public talks and in private conversations with whom I shared ideas about Tupac Shakur and Black virtual reality who offered me feedback.

[2] Bobby R. Dixon, "Toting Technology," in: *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 138. Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 52–53, 91–92.

in the "[contesting of] public space."[3] The portable music player allowed them to invent original sounds of music and nurture fresh visions of life. In "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," cultural critics Mark Dery, who is often given credit for coining the term "Afrofuturism," Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose also comment on how hip hop "[digital] music [technologies]"[4] (such as "samplers, sequencers, [and] drum machines"[5]) have processed and possessed cultural belief – which "are themselves cultural objects, and as such […] carry cultural ideas."[6]

The groundbreaking machineries, equipment, and products that Black youth used are still available today, but many of these same tools of technology, just like the times we are living in now, have certainly changed. Scholars of the humanities and the social sciences, especially those focused on the intersection(s) between cultures, economies, and technologies, are characterizing the present moment as a "hyper-commodified digital age." Questions are consistently raised among them about the convergence(s) between the increasing realistic imagine producing systems, the cultural effects of communication instrumentations, and the controlling of quickly disseminated information formats for purely economic ends.

As a case in point, Black scholars, and others interested in (re)imagining possible "Black futures," have both criticized and praised the technological simulations of Black musical stars posthumously being brought back to life via burgeoning ***computer-generated imagery***.[7] Ethnic studies scholar Regina Arnold's "There's a Spectre Haunting Hip-hop: Tupac Shakur, Holograms in Concert and the Future of Live Performance," which appears in *Death and the Rock Star*, is one such example of criticism. Tupac Amaru Shakur, whose actual name is Lesane Parish Crooks, died on September 13, 1996 in Las Vegas, Nevada. He passed away in his mid-twenties at the height of his rap career. Tupac was "holographically" – i.e.,

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[3] Dixon, "Toting Technology," p. 138.

[4] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in: *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 212.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cf. Isiah Lavender III, "Further Deliberations on Black SF Criticism," in: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2017), pp. 164–171, accessed October 15, 2019, doi:10.5621/sciefictstud.44.1.0164. Cf. Dixon, "Toting Technology," p. 135.

a "2D illusion that used CGI animation and a special screen"[8] – resurrected at Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California on April 15, 2012. Arnold's basic argument is that Tupac's two-dimensional projection, developed by James Cameron's visual production firm, is emblematic of how Black bodies are mistreated in (post)colonial, racially bias societies even after they are dead. At the other end of the spectrum, commentators have optimistically interpreted the event as a more upbeat, celebratory "return of Tupac." Aaron Dodson, an associate editor of "The Undefeated," writes, "There was something authentic and visceral about the projection of Tupac that Coachella attendees experienced."[9] Dodson is insinuating that the "HoloPac" effect was a genuine and enthralling artistic expression of an imaginary utopia, if even for a moment of ecstasy for those in attendance.

In this essay, I am using Afrofuturism as an aesthetic and humanistic methodology, in conversation with hip hop studies and critical race theory, for interpreting Tupac's recreation at Coachella. Before I look in detail at the performance itself, let me say something about Afrofuturism. Scholar of race and science fiction Ytasha L. Womack offers a working description:

> Afrofuturism is an intersection between Black culture, technology, the imagination and liberation and I like to add mysticism as well. Generally, it looks at alternative futures and (possible) futures through a Black cultural lens. So it stretches the arts. It can be a process, a methodology. It can also be just an artistic aesthetic. It stretches to music, to theory, to other aspects of the arts.[10]

Afrofuturism is a theoretical and methodological means of "shaping the present and the future" through a Black cultural, theological, technological, and aesthetical liberationist orientation. Similar to womanist theology's

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[8] Regina Arnold, "There's a Spectre Haunting Hip-hop: Tupac Shakur, Holograms in Concert and the Future of Live Performance," in: *Death and the Rock Star*, eds. Catherine Strong and Barbara Lebrun (New York: Routledge 2016), p. 179.
[9] Aaron Dodson, "The Strange Legacy of Tupac's 'Hologram' Lives on Five Years After Its Historic Coachella Debut: On Dr. Dre's Order, an Academy Award-Winning Visual Effects Studio Spent Weeks Designing a Virtual Makaveli," in: *The Undefeated*, April 14, 2017, accessed January 11, 2020, https://theundefeated.com/features/the-strange-legacy-of-tupacs-hologram-after-coachella/.
[10] Ytasha L. Womack, "Afrofuturism: An Interview with Ytasha L. Womack," in: *Kentake Page,* April 5, 2015, accessed January 13, 2020, https://kentakepage.com/afrofuturism-an-interview-with-ytasha-l-womack/.

relationship to feminist theology,[11] Afrofuturism originated in response to the institutionalized practice by "White imagination" future studies, as well as others, whose ideologies blighted out people of color's future existence. As a result of the lack of representation of "Black futures" in the world of cultures, a field of study was formally required and created to reimagine Black people in posthumanist and transhumanist discourse.[12] Afrofuturism is important partly because it is "born of struggle," emphasizing underrepresented visions and views of Black people and their contributions of imagined cultures. Scholar of communication Lonny J. Avi Books elucidates the manner in which "Afrofuturism is born out of cruelty, and that cruelty of the [White] imagination was a necessary condition out of which the African diaspora had to reimagine its future."[13]

My main argument is that Tupac's postmortem recreation at Coachella is a point of departure for discussing the Black utopian and dystopian imagery in a future existence through technology. It will be seen that Tupac's posthumous reproduction raises cultural, ethical, and theological questions about idealistic and undesirable representations of Black virtual reality – including issues that deal with various perspectives of alternative Black religious futures, resistance of Black artists to White appropriation, and altering of Black dead stars for the purposes of profit-making.

Black Utopian and Dystopian Technological Simulation

There are continuities and discontinuities between Black utopian and dystopian technological simulation(s) in cultures, aesthetics, and ideologies that needs to be made explicit. According to summations of

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[11] Cf. Ritch Calvin, "Feminism, Afrofuturism, and the Redefinition of Science Fiction," in: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2010), pp. 107–109, accessed August 3, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40649589. Susana M. Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's 'Fledgling,'" in: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3/4 (2012), pp. 146–166, accessed December 7, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333483. Cf. Clayton D. Colmon, "Queer Afrofuturism: Utopia, Sexuality, and Desire in Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah,'" in: *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2017), pp. 327–346, accessed November 8, 2019, doi:10.5325/utopianstudies.28.2.0327.
[12] Cf. Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, "The Black Imagination and the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative," in: *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative (Black Studies and Critical Thinking)*, eds. Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman (New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2011), pp. 1–14.
[13] Lonny J. Avi Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," in: *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2018), p. 101, accessed December 11, 2019, doi: 10.1080/14791420.2018.1435078.

various entries in the *Online Etymological Dictionary*, the word "utopia," deriving from the Modern Latin, means "nowhere," and connotes an ideal or perfect locale based on the imagination of a "visionary idealist." By "utopia," I generally mean, in this essay, an imagined state, space, and even identity in which something, everything or everyone, has reached or is about to reach, "reaching in the moment," a perfect ideal. In (Afro)future and (anti)humanist studies literature, utopia is oftentimes interpreted as a kind of "celebration," or at least a positive encounter, of alternative and newer forms of technology that has hithertofore been outside of the reach of human ingenuity. In essence, utopia connotes a euphoric attitude or disposition toward the (post)modern use(s) of technology. The idea of utopia is not, in other words, a morally neutral disposition but implies an epistemological stance. I follow scholar of science studies Chandra Mukerji's belief that scholars of contemporary "[…] digital culture […] [should] […] address the [possible] losses of power, identity and agency posed by the tradition of technological utopianism [...]."[14] By "dystopia," I generally mean, in this essay, an imagined or actual state of affairs, society, an event or identity in which some form of misery or injustice occurs, as seen for example in post-apocalyptic art where people may appear dehumanized and disfigured, on one end, or misrepresented and mischaracterized, on the other end.

What I want to emphasize is that the notions of Black utopian and dystopian technological simulations and the issues and topics that arise because of them are not always that far apart in terms of how we understand either of the concepts individually. That is to say, utopia and dystopia, it should be continually recalled, are dialogically and linguistically integrated with one another. Womack herself admits: "In the West we are used to separating all subjects. I think it will benefit us all if we started to integrate the different fields more. So that you can learn from Afrofuturism."[15] The "dys," which intimates "bad" or "abnormal," is a type of deviation of the standard. Dystopia is abstracted or adopted from "utopia," or the dreamland that has arisen or is on the horizon. While dystopia is a bad utopia, utopia is, at the same time, an ideal dystopia. The title of activist Deji

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[14] Chandra Mukerji, "Me? A Digital Humanist?," in: *Between Humanities and the* Digital, eds. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), p. 53.

[15] Ytasha L. Womack, "Afrofuturism: A Language of Rebellion," in: *Scenario Magazine*, March 12, 2018, accessed December 3, 2019, http://www.scenariomagazine.com/afrofuturism-a-language-of-rebellion/.

Bryce Olukotun's post "Utopian and Dystopian Visions of Afrofuturism: Is This a True Moment of Change, or Are We Just Seeing More Characters of Color in Sci-fi?" underscores the tension that exists between utopia and dystopia in Afrofuturism that scholars should take seriously.

Black Cultural Spectacle

The general consensus among scholars and commentators, irrespective of their personal feelings regarding the veracity and authenticity of the showcase, is that Tupac's computer-generated performance was a "Black cultural spectacle." On the surface, holographic images – Tupac's, or more recent ones such as Easy-E, Will.i.am, or Quavo – may appear to be mastered, docile, and tamed. Typically, a light beam image, regardless of how dynamic the picture-making, is not considered a living creature that has the power to control itself. At Coachella, the light projected onto an angled piece of glass however allows the audience to receive a "tangible impression" of Tupac's ghost-like visage. This is perhaps because, in the first line of the set, the producers posthumously provided Tupac's introductory lyrics as he exclaims, "What the f – k is up Coachellaaaaaa!!!!"[16] As a result, the show (dis)plays the "trickster role" – challenging in a cunning, inventive, and slight-of-hand way the norms of human existence – on human memory that kept Tupac alive. Virtually suspended in midair, Tupac rapped and danced alongside the real-life rapper Snoop Dogg. At the end of the musical set, Tupac magically evaporates by exploding to stun the crowd. The show was intended to be, for all intents and purposes, a utopic moment.

Nevertheless, Tupac's technological mediation, as Arnold stressed, was the "virtual embodiment" of a real Black artist; "he," that is Tupac, was not merely the reproduction of a song sampling, but the freakish, dystopian Tupac becoming a fetishized "Black Other" for the entertaining of a mostly middle-class White audience. Indeed, Tupac, even though he is dead, was still "re-presented." Commenting on state and common law definitions of originality regrading artistic authenticity, scholar of cultural production Thomas G. Schumacher explains:

> The work of art is now seen as having lost an aura of authenticity and as having gained foundation in relations of power. However, the structures

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16 Westfestv, "Tupac Hologram Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre Perform Coachella Live 2012," in: *YouTube*, April 17, 2012, accessed December 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGbrFmPBV0Y.

of intellectual property rights are founded on notions of the work of art that has its aura intact. State and common law definitions of originality and authenticity still presume that the aura of the author remains intact after the processes of technological mediation.[17]

Tupac's performance was not "materially real" yet the "aura of Tupac" was still present through the technological medium, which means that Tupac, though dead, can still be effected and effaced through technological mediation. Technological productions are real enough today to make fake or unbelievable representations feel and look real enough, thereby affecting the "real image" the mainly White audience witnessed.

Yet, it is important to make clear that not just much, but most of hip hop since the 1990s was not initially and intentionally marketed to the inner-city Black youth, but to the White youth living in "gated communities,"[18] who "voyeuristically participate" in the Black inner-city life without enduring the inner-city struggles. Providing a working timeline regarding White consumers of hip hop, scholar of race and education S. Craig Watkins observes:

> After 1991 [...] there was a growing recognition that hip hop's market was much wider and whiter than previously understood. The revelation altered the very character of hip hop, or at least its commercial identity. For the first time in the movement's commercial history young [White] consumers, a crucial demographic in the cultural and economic mainstream, emerged as a primary consideration rather than an afterthought in the making and marketing of hip-hop-related merchandise.[19]

It is no wonder then, when asked who currently owns hip hop, Afrika Bambaataa, legendary hip hop founder of the Universal Zulu Nation,

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[17] Thomas G. Schumacher, "'This Is a Sampling Sport': Digital Sampling, Rap Music, and the Law in Cultural Production," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 448. Cf. Katharina Loew, "Tupac Lives! What Hologram Authors Should Know About Intellectual Property Law," in: *Business Law Today*, ed. Jana M. Moser (September 2012), pp. 1–5. Cf. Lindon Barrett, "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," in: *Callaloo*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1999), pp. 306–332, accessed August 16, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299452.

[18] James W. Perkinson, "Rap was Wrap and Rapture: North American Popular Culture and the Denial of Death," in: *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University, 2003), p. 137.

[19] S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 96.

opined: "White industry."[20] D.J. Kool Herc, one of the first DJs in hip hop history, followed suit by saying "Whites."[21] Accordingly, it is not too surprising that a mainly White audience in attendance at Coachella participated, even if only voyeuristically, in Tupac's virtual "Black likeness." Hip hop is a cultural, artistic, political, and religious movement started by people of color that White people enjoy. Scholar of Africana existential-phenomenology Lewis Gordon expounds, "[…] the heart of hip hop – [Black], [Brown], and [Beige] inner city youth – clearly suggests that the [Blackness] of hip hop stands in a different relation to its future than the nonblack world that celebrates it."[22] In line with scholar of law and race Imani Perry's claim about "hip hop production organically [emerging] […] [from] poor urban [Black] and Latino communities,"[23] Gordon indicates that White people and Black people in hip hop culture participate autonomously in cultural forms of "global blackness" through their own unique form(s) of ethnic identity/ies.

Though Black and White people may physically share the same temporal space(s) of hip hop, such as listening to the same song or dancing in the same dance hall, their lived-existence still remains very different from one another.[24] Tupac had learned to navigate his Blackness among, between, and within the two cultures. Tupac was, when he was alive, a crossover artist; his fan base included inner-city Black youth and White people across the world. If truth be told, White appreciation of Black culture and music is sometimes unconsciously motivated by sincere intentions. Yet attitudes and actions based on good intentions can still be

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[20] Nelson George, "Hip-Hop's Founding Fathers Speak the Truth," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 55.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Lewis R. Gordon, "Grown Folks Business: The Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop," in: *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason*, eds. Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby (LaSalle: Open Court, 2005), p. 116.

[23] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 203.

[24] Cf. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 103. Cf. Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 3. Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), pp. 33–34, 110. Andy Bennett, "Hip-Hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip-Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 189, 191. See Andy Bennett's discussion of "hip hop and whiteness."

forms of racism.[25] Because racism is a systemic and structural reality in the United States, it is oftentimes invisible to the naked eye, which enables well-meaning people to rationalize the status quo. As a result, White people are frequently unaware and unable to discern the depth of racism in their own views and actions, especially in regards to their appropriation of Black aesthetics.

As an extension of the "Afrofuture utopian ideal" of memorializing Black ancestors, Tupac's holographic image represents ways of "seeing Blackness" beyond this lifetime realm, which would otherwise render him personally and artistically invisible. Tupac himself had considered it a success that his name continued to appear in the press after his early beginnings with Digital Underground; if it was not, he felt that he was getting too comfortable with his own successes. The legendry rapper Dr. Dre produced the replica of Tupac at Coachella. Dr. Dre had worked with Tupac when he was alive on Mad Max, post-apocalyptic video ventures like "California Love." Apparently, Dr. Dre was acting in the capacity of a 'cultural historian' who ensures that people of color are remembered well into the future. Womack explains:

> It's one thing when [Black] people aren't discussed in world history. Fortunately, teams of dedicated historians and culture advocates have chipped away at the propaganda often functioning as history for the world's students to eradicate that glaring error. But when, even in the imaginary future – a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines – people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down.[26]

Dr. Dre had helped recreate the late and great Tupac icon in a way that had not been done to date. Olukotun comments:

> A truly transformative Afrofuturism would find creators confronting prejudices within [Black] culture. […] This utopian vision of Afrofuturism is enticing, but it hasn't arrived yet. Right now, there are a number of very

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[25] Samuel R. Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction," in: *NYRSF.com*, August 1998, accessed September 15, 2019, https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html.

[26] Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), p. 7.

real challenges for Afrofuturism to overcome in order to take hold in mainstream culture. In the dystopian vision, no one on the business end of creative industries – the agents, marketers, publishers, producers – takes risks on creators of color.[27]

In the larger scheme of things, Olukotun is suggesting that we need to continually rethink and offer fresh visions of Afrofuturism. There is not a monopoly, in other words, on Afrofuturism, especially because "Blackness" is not – and has never been – a monolithic experience for all African Americans living in and beyond the Black Atlantic.[28] Tate explains, "Perhaps the supreme irony of [Black] American existence is how broadly [Black] people debate the question of cultural identity among themselves while getting branded as a cultural monolith by those who would deny us the complexity and complexion of a community."[29] There are many versions of hip hop, multiple techno-cultural impacts, and various ways of being Black. During his lifetime, Tupac did not personally believe he could easily assimilate into the American suburbs because of his Blackness, and he also concluded that living in the inner-city was unsustainable for a Black multimillionaire. Tupac believed that White and Black people needed to improve intra- and inter-racial relationships. Olukotun observes, "[Afrofuturism should] become a liberation movement of the imagination for all people."[30]

Black Commodity

As critics and supporters of the late rapper's Coachella showcase have well chronicled, Tupac was made into a "Black commodity" for primarily White social and economic consumption. If scholars think about the ramifications of creating "virtual futures," especially about dead Black

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[27] Deji Bryce Olukotun, "Utopian and Dystopian Visions of Afrofuturism: Is This a True Moment of Change, or Are We Just Seeing More Characters of Color in Sci-fi?," in: *Slate.com*, November 30, 2015, accessed October 3, 2019, https://slate.com/technology/2015/11/utopian-and-dystopian-visions-of-afrofuturism.html/.

[28] Marc D. Perry, "Hip Hop's Diasporic Landscapes of Blackness," in: *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International Since the Age of Revolution*, eds. Michael O. West, William G. Martin and Fanon Che Wilkins (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 232. Fernando Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 7. Heather D. Russell, "Post-Blackness and All of the Black Americas," in: *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, eds. Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 110–143.

[29] Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Touchstone, 2015), p. 153.

[30] Olukotun, "Utopian and Dystopian …"

people who have been routinely victimized in life, then they need to consider Black-future-simulations as matters of "human rights." While it may be true that dead Black people should have rights too, as I contend that they should, including images of themselves in the future, it is also important to stress that it is not unusual for rappers – including their families, friends, fans, and wider audiences – to seek profit from their own labor and the labor of others.[31]

Hip hop is not against material prosperity, which includes the making of substantive amounts of money, as present-day moguls such as Jay-Z, Puff Daddy, and Drake can attest. Rose herself notes, "The contexts for creation in hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities, they involved struggles over public spaces and access to commodified materials, equipments, and products of economic viability."[32] During the rise of hip hop in the 1980s and 1990s, it was sometimes stated and other times just assumed, that if artists themselves seek considerable monetary gain, then they would be seen as or accused by those outside and within the hip hop genre of "selling out" their craft or culture. This is one of the reasons why Peruvian-American rap star Immortal Technique rapped about the choice between "The Message or the Money." However, the personal desire to make a lot of money and do one's artistic work are no longer mutually exclusive choices in the hip hop community.[33] Immortal Technique admits he makes more money being an independent artist than he might by signing with major record labels. Giving Dr. Dre approval to make the exhumation of Tupac, **Afeni Shakur, Tupac's mother,** was thrilled that her son was remade. In return, Dr. Dre was prompted to donate to the Tupac Amaru Shakur Foundation.

Tupac's avatar did not necessarily lose its political, moral, and social power simply because it was commodified for commercial, mainstream, or

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[31] Cf. Dr. Richard Oliver and Tim Leffel, *Hip-Hop, Inc.: Success Strategies of the Rap Moguls* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), p. 106.

[32] Trisha Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 40.

[33] QualityMediaHK, "Immortal Technique – The Message and the Money (Prod by Southpaw) (Lyrics)," *YouTube*, June 25, 2009, accessed November 3, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2jW2-EVM_w. M. Cf. Elizabeth Blair, "Commercialization of the Rap Music Youth Subculture," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 497–504. Cf. Ted Swedenburg, "Homies in The 'Hood: Rap's Commodification of Insubordination," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 579–591.

what some may deem as superficial purposes. Theologian of youth culture Ralph Watkins explains, "[…] it is presumptuous to view commodification [of Black art] as the utter erasure of [Black] youth agency and cultural politics."[34] The same is true regarding the relationship between Jesus Christ and commercial hip hop. Hip hop theologian Daniel Hodge concedes: "Even within commercial hip hop, Jesus is still present. He might be packaged up, blinged out, and rolling in an Escalade to be sold to the highest bidder, but nonetheless, he is still present within the industry of Hip Hop community."[35] Black religious art does not lose the cultural capital it carries once people of European descent (mis)appropriate it. A comparison of hip hop cultural identity in particular can be made with Black identity in general. Discussing Black identity at the nexus between categorization and institutional power, scholar of history and race Paul Gilroy elucidates: "Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and [legitimizes] it is persuasive or institutionally powerful."[36]

To be fair-minded, Black people have neither historically owned nor ran many of the new social media platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – or major art festivals such as Coachella, for that matter. Yet, they have, on several occasions, had the greatest influence on technological revolutions. Scholar of sociology Michael Eric Dyson explains: "[…] we [African Americans] didn't originate a lot of this technology, but we forced it into broader use. Look at the beeper, the pager, the cell phone – most of this technology was run through our communities first, or at least we made it viable, sexy, [and] cool."[37]

Tupac's technetronic (re)production functioned as a utopian-esque "ethnic coolness" that had the potential to affect the "symbolic weight" of White consumers' aesthetic appetite. Addressing the question of whether "a commodified identity [can] be authentic"[38] and the general impact

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[34] S. Craig Watkins, "Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 569.

[35] Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2010), p. 295.

[36] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 102.

[37] Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), p. 34. George, *Hip Hop America*, pp. 52–53.

[38] R.A.T. Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity," in: *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 107.

Black gangster hip hop has on America, scholar of cultural studies R.A.T. Judy concludes:

> When the OG [Ice-T] points out how the process of consuming rap is tantamount to the "niggafication" of [White] suburban youth, he is doing more than remarking on the inevitability of popular culture's dissemination [...] This is the age of [hyper-commodification], in which experience has not become commodified, it is commodification, and *nigga* designates the scene, par excellence, of commodification, where one is among commodities. Nigga is a commodity affect. The OG offers exhibition of this, on the one hand, reminding us that his rhymes come from "experience," and, on the other hand, claiming that virtually everyone involved in the commodified affect of his experience is a nigga[.][39]

Hip hop icons such as Ice-T and Tupac are both products of their times and figures who change the times in which they live. Tupac was a West Coast gangster rapper who engaged in the "niggafication of America." He had rejected the nihilism stemming from the state of worldly affairs. He was a rap guru who lived his message by preaching "thug ethics," a mantra tattooed on his stomach: "Thug Life" means that the "hate you gave little infants f*cks everybody." As a commercially successful international star, Tupac galvanized a generation of hip hop fans to listen to his radical rap lyrics.[40] During Tupac's lifetime, commentators depicted him as an immoral gangsta rapper, partly because he produced rap lyrics that fueled such depictions like those in the song "Hail Mary." He raps this song on stage at Coachella – where he does not admit to being a killer, but explains the conditions under which killing in self-defense might be necessary. His raps exemplified the dystopian climate of Los Angeles at a time of documented acts of anti-Black racism committed by the police. For that reason, Tupac often rapped about his own stints in jail.

Public philosopher and social critic Cornel West, as well as other scholars of culture and performance such as Daphne Brooks and E. Patrick Johnson, speculate about the role that Blackness and performance play

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[39] Ibid., 113.
[40] Cf. George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis, "Talkin' Tupac: Speech Genres and the Mediation of Cultural Knowledge," in: *Counterpoints*, Vol. 96 (1999), pp. 119–50, accessed July 17, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42975834. Karin L. Stanford, "Keepin' It Real in Hip Hop Politics: A Political Perspective of Tupac Shakur," in: *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2011), pp. 3–22, accessed September 10, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25780789.

in the "culture of authentic recognition" due to White supremacy. West himself observes:

> To be a [Black] artist in America is to be caught in what I have called elsewhere 'the modern [Black] diasporan problematic of invisibility and namelessness.' This problematic requires that [Black] people search for validation and recognition in a culture in which [White] supremacy assaults on [Black] intelligence, ability, beauty and character circumscribe such a search.[41]

Tupac's holographic image exists and functions in a cultural legacy of White supremacy's desire to constantly control, manipulate, and assault Black visibility, intelligence, agency, and character. One practical remedy may be creating, presenting, and sustaining more Black artists, art forms, and artifacts via "their own image," while acknowledging we are living in a hyper-commodified era. Womack explains: "There are still [Black] artists negotiating with their ability to create their own image, because they are told it is not sellable. We live in a society where everything is [commoditized], which does not always have to be a bad thing, but when it starts to inhibit people from mirroring themselves it becomes problematic."[42]

Black Religious Iconography

Scholars and commentators have interpreted Tupac's technological reproduction through a critical theological lens. By critical theological lens, I mean they have questioned the key assumptions and implications of Tupac's reappearance through the language of "God-talk." Scholar of media studies Russell A. Potter, as well as others, use terms like ghosts, spiritual entities of dead people, or other types of religious language to discuss Tupac's reincarnation at Coachella. In "Tupac's Posthumous Live Tour," Potter wrote in *The New York Times*:

> There's a rumor that this Tupac "hologram" is going on tour, and that other such reincarnated artists – maybe a virtual John Lennon to sing duets with Paul McCartney – are in the works. But I hope it's not true; the reani-

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41   Cornel West, "Horace Pippin's Challenge to Art Criticism," in: *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2000), p. 450. Cf. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 135, 139. Cf. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 1–16.

42   Womack, "Afrofuturism: A Language of Rebellion."

mated dead are never the people they were before. Oh, they sing the same, and rap the same, and have the same distinctive tattoos and hand gestures. But they don't have the complexity, or the humanity, to really compel our interest. They're ghosts – ghosts in a new machine, perhaps – but at best they are no more than the shadow of the shadows that they cast upon us, back when they were alive.[43]

As seen above, Potter finds it very problematic for the resurfacing of dead artists via technology. These holograms are never, Potter purports, the same as the people they are trying to represent. They lack the richness, complexity and frankly the humanity to compel popular interest. It is not just a fad but a trend. There seems to be more and more conversations about 'virtual stars' going on tour. However, Dr. Dre has been on the record saying emphatically that Tupac's reappearance was a onetime occurrence. There are no plans of taking Tupac's avatar on the road.

In "Post-Mortem Projections: Medieval Mystical Resurrection and the Return of Tupac Shakur," scholar of trans-historical critical engagement Alicia Spencer-Hall also reports on and uses utopian-style theological language about Tupac:

> As with the medieval saint, connection with the resurrected Christ also sustains the reality of Tupac's resurrection. Tupac's last album to be recorded during his lifetime features a drawing of the rapper's crucifixion on its front cover which cannot but feed into the confusion of his life/death. Indeed, one website listing theories as to Tupac's faked death jumps upon the crucifixion cover as potential evidence: 'The cover of his next album, [sic] has 2Pac looking like Jesus Christ. Could he be planning a resurrection?' (Wilson n.d.) This sentiment is echoed on various other websites almost word-for-word (Belmont 2009; Maxwell 2006). Comments on YouTube align Tupac with a quasi-Messiah figure too. One, by cute1337, simply refers to him as the "GOD": 'The GOD IS BACK!' (cute1337 2012). Liner notes from Tupac's The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory (Makaveli 1996) identify the executive producer as Simon, from which one theory site extrapolates a fairly stretched Biblical parallel[.]
> [...]
> Comparing medieval saintly resurrection to the 2012 performance allows us to understand the true reality of what we are seeing when we watch

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[43]   Russell A. Potter, "Tupac's Posthumous Live Tour," in: *The New York Times*, April 19, 2012, accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/20/opinion/tupac-live-and-onstage.html.

the Pac-O-Gram performing. Not a resurrected Tupac, but a re-born construction of Tupac-the-rapper star. By consequence, new potential interpretations for medieval hagiography are revealed: a perspective of the saint as spiritual 'star.'[44]

While Potter questions the use of Tupac and the potential of other future stars, such as the deceased legend John Lennon and the living legend Paul McCartney from the Beatles, going on "virtual tours," Spencer-Hall, though expressing her own reservations, denotes the religious benefit of a "re-born construction of Tupac-the-rapper star" to (re)conceptualize Western theism, spirituality, and immortality.[45]

Following Spencer-Hall's line of reasoning, Tupac's "Black resurrection" both replicates and replaces aspects of White-Western-Christendom. Tupac had viewed himself as the "Black Jesuz,"[46] believing that Jesus needs to be radically rethought as a racial minority, because he felt that African Americans could then see themselves in Jesus and thereby learn to love themselves spiritually anew. In terms of transhumanist-incarnational-ministry, Tupac, as "Black Jesuz,"[47] inverts the story of Christ by becoming Christ in "holographic flesh."[48] Tupac, when he was alive, had founded the rap group "**Outlaw Immortalz,**" believing that at the level of physical existence the world can only kill a person once. He raps about half dead outlaws who run the streets and whose enemies die.[49]

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[44] Alicia Spencer-Hall, "Post-Mortem Projections: Medieval Mystical Resurrection and the Return of Tupac Shakur," in: *Opticon1826*, December 2012, accessed November 15, 2019, http://ojs.lib.ucl.ac.uk/index.php/up/article/view/1327/651.

[45] Cf. James W. Perkinson, "Tupac Shakur as Ogou Achade: Hip Hop Anger and Postcolonial Rancour Read from the Other Side," in: *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, eds. Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 396–402. Cf. Michael K. Wilson, "Because the Spirits: Visualizing Connective Consciousness through Diasporic Aesthetic Imaginaries," in: *New Frontiers in the Study of the Global African Diaspora: Between Uncharted Themes and Alternative Representations*, eds. Rita Kiki Edozie, Glenn A. Chambers and Tama Hamilton-Wray (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), pp. 333–356, accessed November 3, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/j.ctv65sxqz.24.

[46] Ralph Watkins, "Rap, Religion, and New Realities: The Emergence of a Religious Discourse in Rap Music," in: *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 191.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Cf. Anthony B. Pinn, "Handlin' My Business: Exploring Rap's Humanist Sensibilities," in: *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 95.

[49] Tupac Shakur, "Hail Mary," track 2 on *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, compact disc (Interscope Records, 1996).

Tupac's "Christ like" re-emergence through technological mediation can intimate a "utopic response" to existing "dystopian material conditions" placed on the limits of Black embodied life. Dyson explains: "[…] technology imposes brutal confines and blunt restrictions on [Black] life; conversely, in some ways technology opens up possibilities of self-expression or collective expression that are infinitely interesting."[50] Tupac had, throughout his much-chronicled life, feared no one and nothing – not even death itself.[51] Because Tupac had many manifested issues in his life, including the fact that he did not have a consistent male father figure in his life and his conception of Black masculinity was nurtured based on street life,[52] as a result, a single mom, Afeni Shakur, enriched her son's life by sharing Black Panther teachings with him.[53] Tupac contributed to the belief in a "Black God" who can save "ghetto people" from their troubles in songs like "Only God Can Save Me."[54] Theologically speaking, an afterlife is morally required, because of the unmerited amount of evil, suffering, and harm experienced by "the least of those"[55] on the margins of society. The reality of life after death, given that people of color often die far too young, becomes a real possibility for them.[56]

At the end of the day, frank and open conversations about (mis) representations about "Black future resurrections," coupled with socially conscious activities to address the legacy of anti-Black racism, can effectively effect wistful thoughts of self-becoming. Womack herself notes: "On the Afrofuturism Twitter site, I like to say that 'The Future is Yours' or the 'Future is Ours' and I say that because I like people to understand

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[50] Dyson, *Know What I Mean?*, p. 33.

[51] Tupac Shakur, "Death Around the Corner," track 14 on *Me Against the World*, compact disc (Interscope Records, 1995).

[52] Derek Iwamoto, "Tupac Shakur: Understanding the Identity Formation of Hyper-Masculinity of a Popular Hip-Hop Artist," in: *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2003), pp. 44–49, accessed October 16, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41069025. Seneca Vaught, "Tupac's Law: Incarceration, T.H.U.G.L.I.F.E., and the Crisis of Black Masculinity," in: *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2014), pp. 87–115, accessed July 15, 2019, doi:10.2979/spectrum.2.2.87.

[53] Kara Keeling, "'A Homegrown Revolutionary'?: Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party," in: *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 29, No. 2/3 (1999), pp. 59–63, accessed September 8, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41058705.

[54] Tupac Shakur, "Only God Can Save Me" (ft. Rappin' 4-Tay), track 10 on *All Eyez on Me*, compact disc (Death Row, Interscope Records, 1996). Cf. Tupac Shakur, "Lord Knows," track 8 on *Me Against the World*, compact disc (Interscope Records, 1995).

[55] Cf. St. Mathew 25:40 (New Revised Standard Version).

[56] Cf. Dery, "Black to the Future," p. 208.

that they are co-creators in this universe and that ultimately we created the spaces that we live and work in and that's a good thing to recognize that."[57]

Conclusion

There are three main ideas that I would like to discuss at the close of this essay. The theme tying all the points together is that Tupac's "afterlife," as a holographic attraction and the ramifications of this phenomenon for cultural representation, are a sign of bigger issues not only for famous Black artists and Black scholars of Afrofuturism but really everyone living in a hyper-commodified digital age, where everything and everyone seems up for sale.

First, I suggest it is the conjunction "and" in the title of my own essay "Black Utopian and Dystopian Technological Simulation" as well as Olukotun's post "Utopian and Dystopian Visions of Afrofuturism" that helps to de/center some current conversations about Tupac's performance. I feel that much of the commentary about the (re)creation of Black people in the future used with an either utopian or dystopian framework may be a bit too rigid, narrow, pedantic, and redundant – similar to the categorizing by some people of hip hop as either "good hip hop" or "bad hip hop." Admittedly, I did wonder, before completing the research for this essay, "From what methodological perspective(s) can Tupac's holographic effect offer hope or empowerment, contrary to the negative interpretations of the technologization of life in many posthuman theories?" Yet I insist now that both utopian and dystopian elements, currents, and moments can co-exist within a given piece of Black virtual reality, such as the Tupac one at Coachella, even as White consumers reuse, repackage, and repurpose it. My point is that the dystopian can help arouse the utopian to emerge and vice versa. In "The Fine Line between Utopia and Dystopia," scholar of comparative literature Zsanelle Morel explains:

> Dystopian elements are necessary in maintaining equilibrium in a func-
> tional and progressive society. Although this may be counterintuitive, [the-
> re is a …] need for a balance between the negative and positive aspects in
> order to vary the roles that members within the society must fulfill. Also,
> without dystopian elements, there would be no incentive to stimulate chan-
> ge and progress. This would create a stagnant society without innovation or

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[57] Womack, "Afrofuturism: An Interview with Ytasha L. Womack."

improvement. Therefore, to avoid the creation of such a banal and fruitless society, the vital necessity of dystopian elements is apparent.[58]

To be sure, there is a level of subjectivism to the conceptions of the utopian and dystopian perspective, seeing that universal judgments may be particular to the person doing the viewing. Utopia and dystopia for me are not just commentaries and visions about ideal and undesirable representations, but they inform the multiple dimensions of human ontologies, aesthetics, and epistemologies that can assist individuals in the stimulation of "banal and fruitless societies." If one chooses to be a wholesale critic or a diehard apologist regarding Tupac's reemergence, it can unintentionally delimit insights about the confluence(s) between Black utopian and Black dystopian sensibilities, especially as high-tech phantoms seem to be signs of the times.

Second, I believe that Tupac's (re)creation signals larger debates that need to continually happen about the present-day content and form as well as the future direction of Afrofuturism. Because Tupac's (re) production indicates multiple significations of Blackness and their myriad of political implications, we, as scholars of culture and technology, need to ask the appropriate questions to explore the divergent aims and effects that Tupac's, as well as others', technologies have on Black life within the context of a vibrant, budding, and dynamic Afrofuturism that does not become homogenous. Is Tupac's performance at Coachella, even if it is an unrealistic and unfair Black dystopian imagery, still part of Afrofuturism? Where does utopianism and dystopianism begin and end in Afrofuturism? Who determines the canonicity of Blackness in technologies?

I agree with musicologist Justin A. Williams' argument, "Rappers who use the symbolic immortality of Tupac Shakur […] to their own ends create alliances and associations within rap subgenres, both creating memorial processes and encouraging canon formation."[59] I would add that scholars as well as rappers who use or comment on the "symbolic immortality of Tupac Shakur" are engaging in canon formation(s) too. That is, Black scholars, journalists, artists, and others earnestly engaged

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[58] Zsanelle Morel, "The Fine Line between Utopia and Dystopia," in: *The Prolongation of Work*, April 25, 2016, accessed October 3, 2019, https://sites.williams.edu/engl117s16/uncategorized/the-fine-line-between-utopia-and-dystopia/.

[59] Justin A. Williams, "Post-mortem Sampling in Hip hop Recordings and the Rap Lament," in: *Death and the Rock Star*, eds. Catherine Strong and Barbara Lebrun (New York: Routledge 2016), p. 195.

in the furthering of the Black humanities and Black social sciences, who have commented on Tupac's performance at Coachella to enhance public awareness, understanding, and dialogue are part of the hip hop community and Afrofuturism's shaping of the future.

Third, I imagine that examining how commodified machineries are shaping the future for celebrities provides an opportunity to think about how all of us are shaping and being shaped by tools of technologies. As a consumer myself, it is hard to avoid purchasing the newest devices on the market. The new Samsung Android phone I recently purchased replaced, over the years, the conventional landline phone and the Dell laptop computer I am writing on replaced, over the years, the old-fashioned typewriter. I want to talk and write about my own future and much of it is done via modern modes of technologies, which includes emailing, texting, and Zooming, in a society heavily influenced by hip hop.

As a Black man who loves hip hop, I know that people in my ethnic group tend to die earlier than in other communities – as seen most recently in the racial disparities of coronavirus infections in the U.S. Following scholar of social technologies Alexander Weheliye's insistence that Black Studies emphasizes the "shifting configurations of [Black] life,"[60] scholar of the Black Press Kim Gallon advances a 'technology of recovery' theory in which marginalized people's humanity can be perceived by (re)inventing digital tools with their own image.[61] I concur with Gallon, Womack, and others on the need for more authentic Black self-representation(s) in the world of technology. However, it is neither the prevalence of Black utopian nor the dominance of Black dystopian self-imagery in the future through new kinds of technology alone that is in question for me. Rather, it is the analysis of the combination of the two that is intriguing.

Tupac's self-stylized urban dialecticism – the bridging of life's misfortunes and mishaps into an imaginative and intelligible whole – is a key facet of what made him a revolutionary artist. He was able to synthesize the two worlds of Black utopia and dystopia into music that transcended the time and the trends of the day. It was the mixture of Tupac's anger and rage with his joy and happiness is what births the genuine sounds of music

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[60] Alexander Weheliye, *Habea Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminism Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3.

[61] Kim Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities," in: *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 46.

that have not been heard before. It was Tupac's pain that he experienced along with the love he was able to share that created songs that empowered an entire generation.

From my personal point of view, Tupac's technological simulation should not be an affront to those who study and support hip hop aesthetics, but a reminder that despite the (mis)appropriation of Black culture's pain there is still beauty that arises from a place that other cultures can only truly view from the outside looking in.

Roy Whitaker
Black utopian and dystopian technological simulation: Tupac Shakur's holographic persona at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival

Tupac Shakur's holographic persona at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California is a point of departure for discussing the Black utopian and dystopian imagery in a future world through technological innovation. In conversation with hip hop studies and critical race theory, Afrofuturism is used as an aesthetic and humanistic methodology to interpret the manner in which Tupac's posthumous representation complicates ethical, cultural, and theological debates about idealistic and undesirable depictions of Black virtual reality. Understanding Tupac's routine through an Afrofuture perspective presents a model for assessing perceptions of virtual Black life in the context of a range of social issues, including the perspectives of alternative Black religious futures, resistance of Black artists to White appropriation and altering of Black dead people for the purposes of profit-making. Tupac's performance underscores the need for broader dialogue, not only on the racial implications of post-human mediations in public space, but also the ideological challenges that Black scholars of future studies face due to larger cultural concerns, especially those of the White hegemony in a hyper-commodified digital age.

Keywords: Tupac Shakur, Afrofuturism, Technology, Utopia, Dystopia
Słowa klucze: Tupac Shakur, Afrofuturyzm, Technologia, Utopia, Dystopia