

## “I SEE NO CHANGES”

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Exploring Mass Incarceration in the United States Through  
Tupac Shakur’s Lyricism: a Decolonial Approach



*"I am society's child. This is how they made me and now I'm sayin'  
what's on my mind and they don't want that.  
This is what you made me, America." – Tupac Shakur*

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## Notes of the Author

This paper serves as my personal contribution to the collective learning process of my university's class on decolonial theory. We, as the students of this class, identify this process of learning to be of a collective nature because we believe that neither the acquisition nor the diffusion of knowledge should be characterized by a dialectical relationship between professor and students or among students. Along the lines of Paulo Freire's conviction that every human being is capable of looking at the world critically through dialogical encounters with others, our class formulated the goal of creating an online platform through which we can share our insights and enhance our collective learning process through meaningful conversation. As Freire accentuated almost 50 years ago, individuals can gradually - through dialogical encounters - perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it (Freire 1965: 32). The website, thus, serves as a tool through which to reconcile what Freire calls "the teacher-student contradiction", *id est* the antagonistic relationship between the teacher, who 'possesses' knowledge, and the student who is a mere "containers" to be filled with such knowledge (ibid., 72). This website has the three-fold purpose to a) provide a platform for sharing learning insights, b) to give students the chance to further exchange on such topics and, most importantly, c) to completely open the space to anyone and everyone who wishes to partake in this collective endeavor. The *raison d'être* for our website can then be articulated as an endeavor to educate each other "through the mediation of the world", to borrow once again from the words of Paulo Freire (ibid., 32).

*\* Another element of my contribution to the collaborative learning process and our aim to share gathered insights consists of contributing to the website rapgenius.com. The website provides users with background information on meanings of Hip-Hop and Rap lyrics and allows users to contribute to share his or her insights on the website, thus providing for a somewhat collaborative exploration of the deeper meanings of musical lyrics. The page for the song "The Uppercut", includes my contribution to illustrate and raise awareness of the deep socio-political interlinkages between Tupac Shakur's lyricism and the issue of mass incarceration and can be accessed here:*

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## Methodology

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This paper examines the issue of mass incarceration, especially its most striking feature, the racial dimension. The issue of mass incarceration is, first and foremost, a social issue and, as such, touches upon the lives of individuals, families and communities. By intertwining the music of Tupac, who was a respected voice within the Black community, with contemporary literature, I seek to break with the traditional antagonistic relationship between researcher and research topic and attempt to make the voices heard of those most affected by the here examined issue of mass incarceration.

Two major themes are addressed in this paper: mass incarceration as a system of social control and the War on Drugs as the driving force behind this system. Mass incarceration can be understood as the “what” while the War on Drugs answers the question to the “how”, more specifically the question “how did we get here”? Tupac’s lyricism informs the exploration at every step of the way. Many aspects of both the system of mass incarceration as well as the War on Drugs, are addressed in his lyrics and can be explored through them. But Tupac’s voice in this paper transcends the mere function of illustration. His commentary allows the reader to gain insights into the inner life of the Black community and the effects which the system of mass incarceration has had especially on impoverished ghettos. Since the here explored system of mass incarceration has had a paramount effect on a whole population - the Black community - I think of it as my responsibility as a researcher to make these effects visible through an authentic voice from within this community. As we will see Tupac’s lyrics add an invaluable dimension to the effort of understanding this complex issue.

The first part of this paper introduces Tupac Shakur as a multi-complex personality and explains what this paper will gain from exploration of the system of mass incarceration through his lyricism. The second part then sheds light on mass incarceration as a system of social control by giving a brief overview of the extent to which it has developed until the present day. The third part of this paper gives an answer to the question how this system was developed in the first place and examines key policies of the War on Drugs in more detail. The final part concludes with a small proposal for further research and provides space for me to share some final personal thoughts.

### Tupac Shakur

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*“Come listen to my true thoughts, my truest feelings.”*

Tupac Shakur’s music provides a unique lens for exploring the issue of mass incarceration and its multitudinous effects on the Black community. For this paper, his lyricism provides a canon of literature through which the social reality of mass incarceration can be explored in a scholarly manner. Using Tupac’s lyrics also serves as an attempt to make subaltern voices heard, in this case, the many voices of African Americans affected by the processes of mass incarceration as a tool of social oppression. Tupac, by virtue of his promoted *culture of resistance*<sup>1</sup>, lends a voice to the Black community, which otherwise often finds itself isolated from mainstream discourses, being ignored as passive objects of political narrations which narrowly focus on tactics of stigmatization and othering.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limits of this paper, the more complex meanings of Tupac’s culture of resistance cannot be discussed. But Tupac said about his own music: „My music is talking about the oppressed rising up against the oppressor. That’s what my music is about. So the only people scared sis the oppressor.“

Tupac's music resonated with a wide audience<sup>2</sup> and captivated popular opinion to an extent that transcended race barriers. Recognized as the greatest rapper of all time<sup>3</sup>, his music continues to live on to this very day and will likely last *ad infinitum*. But Tupac's legacy extends far beyond the record selling of LPs and winning of awards. The complexity of Tupac's character and his meaning to the Black community is fabricated by his significance not only as a rapper, but as a sage intellectual, authentic voice and respected activist for social justice. As a critic of America's society in general and its legal system in particular, he had a remarkable ability to analyze the reality around him and express his experience through the channels of his music in a way that penetrated deep into the consciousness of anybody willing to listen to the deeper meanings of his lyricism. In his song "Unconditional Love", Tupac urges us to respect the complexity of his persona and to understand him as more than a rapper: "*Come listen to my true thoughts, my truest feelings... Cause it ain't easy being who we are / Driven by my ambitions, desire higher positions / So I proceed to make G's, eternally in my mission / Is to be more than just a rap musician / The elevation of today's generation / If I could make 'em listen.*"

While Tupac's musical genius has been widely recognized and is regularly being celebrated, his unique critical commentary on social issues is not being remembered or valued to the same extent. This is especially unfortunate, since many themes of his songs have not lost their relevance but are ever-present in current discourses and matters of social concern. The ever so frequent headlines of unarmed Blacks being killed by police or mistreated during their time of imprisonment is a sad reminder that the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement or perhaps the election of Barack Obama did not, to the contrary of popular opinion, end the era of discrimination and oppression of African-Americans in the United States. Widely shared conceptions of America as a society that entered a "post-racial age of colorblindness" paints a picture of America as a free modern country, when in fact many current conditions trigger memories of darker times of American history that were supposedly long left behind.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, Tupac's critique of the American justice system is ever so relevant and exploring the current reality of mass incarceration through the lens of his music can also enrich the process of situating the present day reality in its deeper historicity - an invaluable step in the process of investigating social reality.

At his point I want to add that Tupac Shakur's critique of American society and the significance of his contributions to (African-)American culture have been recognized widely, as is illustrated by the inclusion of his work into various university curriculums.<sup>5</sup> Oftentimes, however, academic examinations of his work fail to appreciate the multidimensionality of Tupac's art forms as well as the inherent cryptic messages and interwoven layers of symbolism. Scholarly discourses on Tupac's music often tends to exclusively focus on aspects of violence, criminality, and sexism in his lyrics.<sup>6</sup> While these were indeed recurrent themes in his music, the narrow approach of exclusively focusing on these topics ignores the complexity of Tupac's transmitted messages and their multi-faceted correlation to social issues by fragmentizing his artistic elements into

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<sup>3</sup> 2004 *vibe* magazine poll, source: Tupac Shakur Biography (2006)

<sup>4</sup> a current report the U.N. Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent within the U.N. Human Rights Council stated that the current police killings of black people in America are reminiscent of the past racial terror of lynching. Source: <http://thefreethoughtproject.com/u-n-police-killings-u-s-reminiscent-lynching-amp/>

<sup>5</sup> see for example the 2003 Harvard University Symposium on Tupac called "*All Eyes on Me: Tupac Shakur and the Search for a Modern Folk Hero*"

<sup>6</sup> even Josh Nisker's commentary on Tupac's work, which recognizes Tupac as an "intellectual", concludes with the interpretation of his music as a „counterproductive force that engenders a violent survival ethic among Black youths“, and even goes as far as dismissing his music as a contribution to „further racial disparity“.

irreconcilable poles – often as a tactic for validating pre-assumed opinions about Black culture or as a means of feeding the self-serving rhetoric of those who condemn Hip-Hop and Rap culture as violence-glorifying and misogynistic.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a deeper, more complex analysis is needed to unpack the messages that are imbedded in his songs.

## The System of Mass incarceration

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*"It ain't a secret, don't conceal the facts /  
the penitentiary is packed, and it's filled with Blacks."*

One of Tupac's most notable and popular songs is his track "Changes." Originally recorded in 1992, it was released posthumous in 1996 and quickly became a poetic anthem for illustrating the African-American struggle in a polarized and discriminatory American society. In this song, Tupac reflects on the struggles of being black in America and portrays a picture of the American criminal justice system as systemically unjust: *"I see no changes. Wake up in the morning and I ask myself / Is life worth living or should I blast myself? / I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black / My stomach hurts so I'm looking for a purse to snatch / Cops give a damn about a negro, pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero / Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares? / One less hungry mouth on the welfare."* These lyrics address issues of poverty, hopelessness, drugs, and police violence; they speak to the deep psychological pain that captured Tupac's thoughts, leading to despair (*"I seen the future and it's hopeless!"* ["R U Still Down"]) and even to suicidal thoughts (*"Is life worth living or should I blast myself?"*). But these verses also paint a broader picture of daily life in American ghettos. American society in the 1990s was racially segregated in many aspects. Decades of persisting residential segregation through policies such as "redlining"<sup>8</sup> and housing discrimination lead to hyper-segregated neighborhoods and urban ghettoization, creating a reality for poor people of color that stood in sharp contrast to the lives of mainstream society. Tupac's lyrics address the issue of poverty in ghettos and underline the vicious cycle of joblessness, crime, violence, and drug addiction that resulted directly from high rates of poverty. In the song "My Block" Tupac depicts: *"And the system is suicidal with this Thug's Life / Staying strapped, forever trapped in this drug life / God help me, cause I'm starving, can't get a job / So I resort to violent robberies, my life is hard."* His portrayal of life in black neighborhoods further echoes feelings of sadness and neglect: *"Can't sleep cause all the dirt make my heart hurt / Put in work and shed tears for my dead peers / Mismatch from childhood where I went astray / Till this day I still pray for a better way / Can't help but feel hopeless and heartbroke / From the start I felt the racism cause I'm dark [...] But don't cry through your despair / I wonder if the Lord still cares, for us niggas on welfare / And who cares if we survive."* Another major theme in Tupac's lyricism is the omnipresent danger of incarceration for people living in poor neighborhoods. His verses reflect his own time in prison (*"These penitentiary time's be so heavy on my mind / At times it's like I'm living just to die / I'm living in hell / Stuck in my jail cell / Stranded in the county jail"* ["Soon As I Get Home"]), the constant risk of being incarcerated (*"Will I see the penitentiary or will I stay free?"* ["It Ain't Easy"]), the aspect of racial injustice within imprisonment

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<sup>7</sup> for readings on violence and misogynies in Rap culture see e.g.: The Journal of Negro Education (1991)

<sup>8</sup> redlining as urban strategy was the practice of ranking and color-coding neighborhoods in order to evaluate which ones were worth of mortgage lending. This tactic shunned certain neighborhoods for their "inharmious" racial groups and cut them off from essential capital thus highly segregating cities based on race. Mostly attributed as a result of the National Housing Act of 1934, this practice pre-existed this policy and continues, in some dimensions, to present day. See for example: Washington Post 2015.

(*"The penitentiary is packed, and it's filled with Blacks"* ["Changes"]), as well as the vicious cycle of prison time resulting in more crime and imprisonment (*"Too many brothers daily heading for the big penn / Niggas commin' out worse off than when they went in"* ["Trapped"]) or *"Now what the hell can we get from jail? / More tricks for the crime rate, this is hell"* ["High Speed"]). However, before we can deeper analyze Tupac's commentary on incarceration and his reading of the social reality in black neighborhoods, we must first become aware of the current state of mass incarceration in the U.S. and the elements that gave rise to this reality.

The issue of mass incarceration has recently moved from the periphery to the center of contemporary discourses on America's social justice system. The next paragraph will briefly outline the key elements of the current system of mass incarceration in the United States, which has been described by Michelle Alexander as a "system of racial control" (2010: 58).<sup>9</sup>

No other country incarcerates more of its citizens than the United States. American prisons and jails currently hold more than 2.2 million people.<sup>10</sup> Despite making up less than five percent of the world's population, the U.S. is home to almost 25 percent of the world's prison population.<sup>11</sup> Even more staggering than today's number of incarcerated people is the development of that statistic over the past 40 years. In 1972 there were about 192,000 prisoners (sans jail population) in America. Within the next 36 years that number increased to 1.6 million in 2008, which constitutes an increase of over 730 percent. One possible explanation for this increase of the prison population could be a corresponding increase of crime rates, after all prisons were invented to punish those breaking the law as part of a 'correctional' process. However, studies looking at crime rates in the U.S. over time show that the violent crime rate has dropped dramatically since 1990 to a historical low-point today, even lower than the international norm.<sup>12</sup> The lack of correlation between crime and punishment is nothing new. Governments use punishment primarily as a tool of social control, and thus the extent or severity of punishment is often unrelated to actual crime patterns (Alexander 2010: 7). This truth becomes evident when comparing the crime rates in Germany, Finland and the United States between 1960 and 1990, which were almost identical. During same time period however, the incarceration rate in Finland fell by 60 percent, the German rate was stable and the U.S. incarceration rate quadrupled, illustrating that each government chose to impose different levels of punishment (Tonry 2014: 14).

The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. In his song "God Bless the Dead", Tupac addresses the double standard in judicial sentencing and the resulting racial disparity: *"See I'm old enough to know that ain't justice / and all the courts, same way they fucked us / And why the hell am I locked in jail / They let them white boys free, we be shocked as hell."* The United States today incarcerate a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid (Alexander, 2010: 6). African-American men today have a higher chance to end up in prison at least once in their lifetime (ca. 33 percent) than getting married (ca. 31 percent) or getting a college degree (ca. 28 percent).<sup>13</sup> These numbers only intensify in certain inner-city neighborhoods like in Chicago's impoverished North Lawndale neighborhood, where 70 percent of all black men between the ages of 18 and 45 have a criminal record (Street, Z Magazine). African Americans constitute almost 1 million of the total 2.3 million prisoners and are incarcerated at roughly six times the rate of whites.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michelle Alexander is by far not the only scholar who describes America's justice system as a system of social control.

<sup>10</sup> The Sentencing Project (2016), available at: <http://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>11</sup> source: World Justice Project (2015): Rule of Law Index

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Statistics (2013) available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus13.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Black Demographics (2016), available at: <http://blackdemographics.com/black-male-statistics/>

<sup>14</sup> NAACP Criminal Justice Fact Sheet (2016), available at: <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

*"The war on drugs is about you and me /  
And yet they say this is the home of the free / But if you ask me it's all about hypocrisy / The  
Constitution, yo, it don't apply to me."*

If growing crime rates were not the driving force behind the dramatic increase of America's prison population, the glaring question is what triggered this exorbitant increase. Let us go back to looking at the empirical evidence for the development of America's incarceration rate. But this time, instead of comparing incarceration to crime rates, we compare it to the number of individuals serving time in prison on drug charges. In 1980, 41,100 Americans were incarcerated on the merit of drug violations. This number rose to 493,800 in 2007, an increase of 1100 percent. In fact, when comparing rates of drug arrests in the U.S. between 1980 and 2000 with the incarceration rate during the same time period, the resulting graphs on a two-axis scale look surprisingly similar.<sup>15</sup> This helps us to identify the factor that is today widely recognized as the driving force behind the unwarranted increase of America's prison population, including its racial disparities. We are talking about the War on Drugs. Announced by President Ronald Reagan in 1982 as a response to the crisis caused by crack cocaine in poor inner-city communities, this political campaign sought to put Reagan's promise to 'crack down on crime' into action.

In his famous song "Changes" (1998) Tupac states: *"Instead of war on poverty, they got a war on drugs / So the police can bother me."* These lines illustrate two key features of the War on Drugs, which would define both its theoretical intention and its practical impact. Firstly, the War on Drugs was a government-sponsored campaign targeted against the historically underprivileged, namely African-Americans, especially poor people of color in impoverished neighborhoods. Secondly, the War on Drugs was facilitated through an unprecedented involvement of the police force, who carried out staggering amounts of searches and arrests through military-style tactics while being constrained by very few legal rules (Alexander 2010: 16). As Alexander pointedly illustrates in her book, *The War on Drugs*, while outwardly articulated in race-neutral terms as a war against crime, was in truth informed in its very design by racial prejudice and bias. Reagan's 'colorblind' rhetoric on crime "was clearly understood by white (and black) voters as having a racial dimension, though claims to that effect were impossible to prove" due to the absence of explicitly racist language (ibid., 48). This aspect of the War on Drugs is of crucial significance because it illustrates, that political motivations aimed at racial segregation and their corresponding strategy of social control did not disappear after the Civil Rights Movement – it was merely redesigned as an adaptation to the current political climate. It is important to understand the political intensions of the War on Drugs when analyzing its policies and effects. Reagan's political campaign used two major themes: crime and welfare. His rhetoric was racially coded – using terms like "welfare queen" as a "not so subtle code for 'lazy, greedy, black ghetto mother'" – and targeted at poor working class whites while almost always accompanied by the promise to be 'tough on crime' (ibid., 49). And since proneness to violence and criminality was largely attributed to African-American men, who were described as "human predators" (clearly a continuance of deep-rooted prejudice and racial bias), the target of the War on Drugs was pretty much predetermined: the undeserving "other", meaning black people in ghettos. Perhaps nothing illustrates the racial motive behind the War on Drugs better than the fact, that the war was started at a time when illegal drug use was on the decline and before crack

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012). The graph can be accessed here: <http://www.combatingglobalization.com/img/Prisonhouse-chart-4.gif>

cocaine even appeared in inner-cities (ibid., 6). In "Words of Wisdom", Tupac recognizes the hypocrisy and factitiousness of the War on Drugs: "*The war on drugs is about you and me / And yet they say this is the home of the free / But if you ask me it's all about hypocrisy / The Constitution, yo, it don't apply to me.*" Tupac recognized, that the target of this government-sponsored war was the historically underprivileged black community ("*Instead of a war on poverty, they have a war on drugs / So the police can bother me*"). In "My block", he raps "*I wonder if the Lord still cares, for us niggas on welfare / And who cares if we survive*". This verse does not only address poverty but also its interconnectedness with the War on Drugs. During the initiation of this war, DEA antidrug funding increased from \$86 million to \$1,026 million, while funding for agencies responsible for drug treatment, prevention, and education was dramatically reduced, illustrated by the reduction of the budget for the National Institute on Drug Abuse from \$275 million to \$57 million (Alexander 2010: 50). Later, during Clinton's presidency, Washington slashed funding for public housing by \$17 billion (a reduction of 61 percent), while boosting corrections by \$19 billion (an increase of 171 percent), "effectively making the construction of prisons the nation's main housing program for the poor" (ibid., 57). In this context Tupac's verses "*I'm tired of being poor, and even worse I'm black*" and "*give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare*" speak volumes to the cruel neglect of poor people in America, who's government just declared a war on them.

Tupac was extremely conscious and educated about the specific policies of the War on Drugs. His song "The Uppercut" contains following lyrics:

"Who's runnin' these streets, I said that's cocaine  
Cause in the dope game, niggas'll die before they go broke mayne  
Another hustler making major cash  
'Til the punk police come an' raid ya ass  
Now you stressed doin' fed time, and it's a bitch  
Cause the judge gave you eight years, you doin' six  
And we know that you can't hang, you a trick  
Rolled over turned snitch like a biatchhhh"

A detailed analysis of these verses tells a complex story about the realities of the War on Drugs and the discrimination against black people. "*Whose runnin' these streets, I said that's cocaine*" clearly refers to the crack cocaine epidemic in inner-city neighborhoods, which brought unspeakable devastation and suffering to families. But the words "*who's running the streets*" in reference to cocaine also speaks to another truth about the drug crisis. Political rhetoric, together with enormous help by the media landscape made crack to be the "story of the year"<sup>16</sup>, creating a real media bonanza about the "demon drug". These stories had a clear racial subtext. Articles typically featured black "crack whores", "crack babies" and reinforced racial stereotypes by describing black mothers as irresponsible "welfare-queens" or black men as "predators" (Alexander 2010: 52). These stories, which were often exaggerated or providing false information, gathered nation-wide support for the War on Drugs, helping the government to allocate over \$2 billion for the implementation of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which legitimized the participation of military in drug arrest and allowed the death penalty for drug-related crimes. So when Tupac says, that cocaine is running the streets, he refers not only to the devastating effects of drugs on its addicts and their families, but also to the fact that crack has become a distraction from the root causes of social ills, focusing the whole countries' attention on a literal war against criminal drug dealers instead of focusing on issues such as poverty. A congressional record from 1986 speaks volumes: "If we blame crime on crack, our politicians are of the hook. Forgotten are the failed schools, the malign welfare programs, the desolate neighborhoods" (as cited in Alexander 2010:

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<sup>16</sup> Time Magazine headline from 1986.

53). Or in the words of Tupac: *"I shed tattooed tears for years / For my dead homeboys and my prison peers / Ya'll ain't never heard my cries"* ("When Thugs Cry").

After Tupac explains (in lines 2 and 3 in the above quote), that people will do anything before they go broke - including consuming and selling drugs - he states in line 4: *"til the punk police come an' raid ya ass."* Here, Tupac is referring to the unprecedented involvement of the police in the War on Drugs. Drug arrests between 1990 and 2010 increased by over 80 percent<sup>17</sup>, and affected minorities, especially African-Americans, at significantly higher rates. A study by the Centre for Constitutional Rights shows that of all people stopped by the NYPD during 2004 and 2012 by so called "stop and frisk" stops (also a tactic developed and legalized during the War on Drugs), only 10 percent were white and 90 percent non-white (52 percent Black).<sup>18</sup> Tupac describes the constant police harassment in ghettos in his song "Trapped": *"They got me trapped / Can barely walk tha city streets / Without a cop harassing me, searching me / Then asking my identity / Hands up, throw me up against tha wall / Didn't do a thing at all."*

Tupac's next line in "The Uppercut" reads *"now you stressed doin' fed time (...)"* This line is interesting because it refers to federal sentencing, which is much harsher than state court sentencing and was used in exorbitant higher rates for punishing crimes by African-Americans. A study by the American government found, that out of two thousand people charged with federal crack cocaine violations over a three-year period, all but eleven were black, and none were white (Alexander 2010: 116). One of the policies which legalized such extreme rates of racial disparity is sentencing was the famous "100:1 ratio", which referred to the federal law which constituted to punish crack offenses one hundred times more severely than offenses including powder cocaine. This vastly different form of punishment on two substances of the same form<sup>19</sup> is a perfect example for the above mentioned 'tough on crime' policies, which were not explicitly racist but absolutely intended to discriminate minorities. The main difference between the two forms of cocaine is that crack cocaine is predominantly consumed by Blacks whereas the powder form is mainly used by Whites (ibid., 112). Together with mandatory prison sentences, this policy gave courts legal legitimization to punish African-Americans severely harder. Tupac was conscious about this injustice: *"Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right / Cause both black and white is smokin' crack tonight"* ("Changes") and *"I can't find a trace of equality"* ("Trapped").

Tupac also pointed out another form of legalized injustice in his song "My Block", where he raps: *"Teardrops and closed caskets, the three strikes law is drastic / And certain death for us ghetto bastards."* The controversial three strikes law mentioned here, mandates a sentence of twenty-five years to life for recidivists convicted of a third felony, no matter how minor. For many legal scholars and lawyers, these sentencing laws presented a form of "cruel and unusual punishment", something the Eight Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is protecting its citizens from. But through legislative processes, too complex to explain in detail<sup>20</sup>, the War on Drugs circumvented the Eight Amendment (among others) and legalized severely harsh forms of punishments against minorities in various dimensions. In this light Tupac's verse *"But if you ask me it's all about hypocrisy / The Constitution, yo, it don't apply to me"* from earlier becomes even more intelligible.

Finally, the last three lines of "The Uppercut" refer to the common practice by police and prosecutors to turn people they charged into "snitches" in order to charge even more people. Prosecutors can pressure defendants with mandatory sentences into plea-bargains and then "motivate them to cooperate" to give up information about family members and friends, thus

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<sup>17</sup> drugwarfacts.com, available at: <http://www.drugwarfacts.org/cms/Crime#sthash.zW1AcVmZ.dpbs>

<sup>18</sup> Center for Constitutional Rights (2013)

<sup>19</sup> powder cocaine and crack cocaine are almost perfectly identical on a molecular level; see: [http://www.salon.com/2013/08/10/busting\\_the\\_crack\\_propaganda\\_myths\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2013/08/10/busting_the_crack_propaganda_myths_partner/)

<sup>20</sup> for a more detailed analysis, see chapter 2 „The Lockdown“ in Alexanders' „The New Jim Crow“

turning people against each other, hence Tupac's rhyme "and we know that you can't hang, you a snitch / turned over like a biatchhh."

## Conclusion

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This paper examined the issue of mass incarceration in the United States through the exploration of Tupac Shakur's music and lyricism. As stated in the introductory chapter on Tupac, this approach intended to make the voices of those heard, that were most affected by the injustices of mass incarceration: the African-American community. As the illustrations above have shown, Tupac's commentary on social reality, poetically imbedded into his lyrics, offers a unique perspective on this complex issue and provides a powerful and important tool through which the pain and suffering of black people in America become visible. This paper also pointed out, that in order to understand the current situation of mass incarceration in the U.S., one has to become aware of the factors which triggered these unprecedented developments of the past 40 years until today. The War on Drugs and the reality of mass incarceration must be examined cohesively in order to truly understand the roots of Tupac's portrayed images of despair, frustration, and culture of resistance in American ghettos. This paper can only be seen as a humble beginning to such an endeavor which could be much more comprehensive by including more lyrics of Tupac, the influences on his artistic expressions (like Shakespeare or W.E.B DuBois), and their recurrence in modern Rap music, just to name a few. Tupac's and The Outlaw's "culture of resistance" deserves a deeper examination as well, and there are plenty of resources available within decolonial theory such as Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" or critical race theory in general.

For me, as an author, it was important to use Tupac Shakur's lyricism to show the far-reaching effects the War on Drugs had – and continues to have – on the Black community. His poetic lyrics provide such powerful insights to the complexity of human consciousness. While I was writing on this paper in a small café in East Harlem (fittingly situated right on the corner of W.E.B. DuBois street) an older African-American gentleman engaged me in a very interesting conversation after seeing that I was reading "The New Jim Crow". After we exchanged on some of the injustices of the War on Drugs and the effects which the system of mass incarceration has on the Black community he told me: "This is why I take anti-depressants. Because of this system which has destroyed our families." He made this comment in such a nonchalant way, almost as an unimportant side note, but to me this honest statement spoke volumes and made me think long after our conversation had ended. Unfortunately, many current discourses on mass incarceration have an exclusive focus on policy or law reform. But I think that a comprehensive, integrative and holistic approach is needed to truly understand the complexities of this issue and its impact on American society, especially the pain which it caused within families and individuals, such as my friend from the café.

Tupac's song "Changes" ends with "*some things will never change*", which expressed his hopelessness in regards to the coming of true change. But he also stated in an interview that, while he might not be able to change the world, he guarantees that he will inspire the brain that will ("*I'm not saying I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world.*"). I think that Tupac inspired many people and his thoughts are ever-present in today's society and echoed in important undertakings such as the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Tupac's lyrics resonate deep within my consciousness and he definitely inspired me to have meaningful conversations with other people. In "Me Against the World", Tupac reminisces: "*The question I wonder is after death, after my last breath/ When will I finally get to rest? Through this suppression/ They punish the people that's askin' questions/ And those that possess, steal from the ones without possessions/ The message I stress: to make it stop study your lessons/ Don't settle for less - even a genius asks questions.*" I understand this as Tupac's urge to us, to ask the right questions

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and to engage in conversation. I hope that this paper, and our classes' website project, can be a humble attempt in stimulating such conversations.

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