

R elevant HETORIC

The More things Change, the More they Stay the Same:

Tupac Shakur's "hologram," Victorian Death Customs,
and American Voyeurism



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Killed violently and at the height of his stardom, Tupac Shakur joined the many other celebrities, artists, and musicians to die in their prime before fading out of the spotlight. The questionable circumstances surrounding Tupac's death are still, more than twenty years later, the topic of news headlines, such as 2014's story about Tupac's last words.¹ Tupac is still relevant: over the past several years, many articles have been published about him, including about the sale of Tupac's 1996 Hummer (it sold for \$300,000),² a criticism he leveled at Donald Trump in 1992 ("You want to be like Trump? Gimme, gimme gimme. Push push push push! Step step step! Crush crush crush!"),³ and a thirty

minute podcast on NPR investigating the public's long-lasting fascination with Shakur.⁴ The years since his death have seen many tributes to his short life: albums, concerts, books, songs, movies, musical theater, and a recently announced multi-part docuseries on Shakur by Allen Hughes.⁵ Shakur's legacy in rap music history and in popular culture is firm. Writing about his short and storied life and career, Alan Light reflects, "Tupac was a lightning rod, a screen onto which millions of people projected their feelings about rap, about race, and about the young black man in America."⁶ Further, Jay Z's 2010 memoir, *Decoded*, mentions comparisons between himself and Tupac and Biggie Smalls (née Christopher Wallace), an East Coast rapper also gunned down in his mid-twenties. He says, "When people make the comparison [between Jay-Z and Biggie and Tupac]—as they always do—they're comparing my work not just with the work of Big and Pac, but with what they could've been—should've been—and what their lives and deaths represented to the entire culture. Their shadows still loom over all of us who were their peers."⁷ In addition to his musical legacy, Tupac Shakur's body, as it was alive and as it is dead, is an obsession many people still share. This obsession is rooted in our country's history of physically and financially exploiting black bodies and, in 2012, curiously attained physical form in a Victorian theater trick-cum-contemporary computer technology: a singing, dancing "hologram"⁸ of Tupac Shakur.



In “Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small⁹, and Hip-Hop Eulogy,” Lindon Barrett specifically discusses the dead, black body, which “may be an ultimate figure of regulation [and] unruly desire.”¹⁰ This conflicting treatment of black men in our society can be seen in the way that it literally and figuratively polices black men’s bodies while simultaneously celebrates and appropriates hip-hop culture. Barrett’s argument, a neo-Marxist rendering at the intersection of consumerism, desire, and race, points to the problem of not conforming to polite society’s transactional norms (an extended example of the consumer-vendor meaningless but expected pleasantries “Have a nice day” script versus black men’s defiant ‘swagger’ is used throughout the article). To Barrett, black men’s (including Tupac’s) resistance to consumer-vendor politesse challenges capitalism altogether and results in their imprisonment or death.¹¹ He uses the contemporary example of five black teens swaggering in a store and being shot at by a nervous store-owner, presumably nervous because of the teens’ “impolite” stances.

Had Barrett lived to see¹² the “hologram” of Tupac Shakur that was created for the 2012 Coachella Music Festival, he would have witnessed the slain black youth reanimated to embody that very same swagger that may have contributed to his death. Very much a successful capital venture, the Coachella Music Festival brought in over \$47,000,000 over its two weekends the year that Shakur “performed.” The



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“hologram” was Dr. Dre’s idea; he and Snoop Dogg pitched it to the company Digital Domain, whose “psychologically and spiritually unfathomable” task was to create a digital likeness of Shakur.¹³ Tupac “performed” alongside Snoop Dogg for a couple of tracks to a crowd of 80,000 both weekends of the Coachella festival.¹⁴ On the surface, Shakur’s “hologram” is an instance of the twisted interactions of artistry, fetishism, and capitalism, which alone warrants discussion.

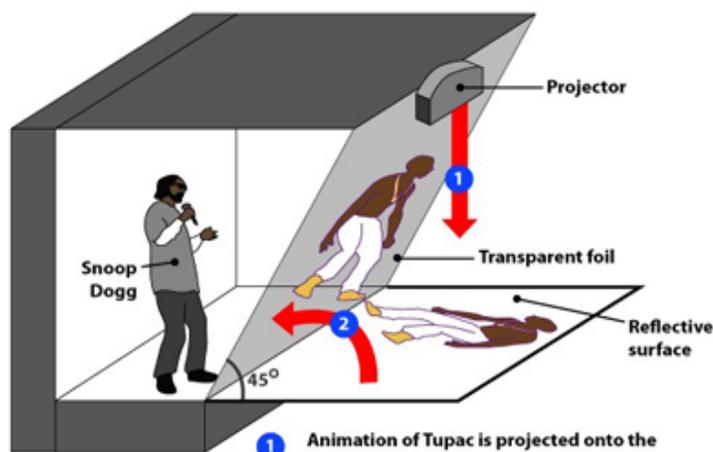
Photo Credit: “Tupac Hologram Performance at Coachella, 2012” by evsmitty
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evsmitty/6944469622>

Zooming out even further, however, the racial and cultural implications of this “hologram” become concerning. Black bodies have long been sites of media attention and discrimination, but lately the deceased black male body, specifically, has been a problematized subject under national scrutiny. We need only think of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Stephon Clark and the violence enacted on their bodies to name a few recent cases of public fascination with deceased black males. Tupac’s “hologram,” of all the other dedications to him and artistic renditions of him, embodies the ancient concerns over death and resurrection, as well as the more contemporary issues of blackness and the abuse of black bodies in today’s America.



Photo credit: Le Monde Illustré, 1862, via Wikimedia Commons.

Situated in the historical treatment of death and the dead body, Tupac’s “hologram” has direct ties to both Victorian theater technology and their known preoccupation with death. The technology behind Tupac’s “hologram” originated in Victorian England with the invention of “Pepper’s Ghost” by John Henry Pepper and Henry Dircks, also the creator of phantasmagoria performances, in 1863. A contemporary write-up of the invention distinguished Pepper’s ghost from the boring, run-of-the-mill ghost known to theatergoers of the time. The author writes, “Modern researches [*sic*] in spiritualism have led to one practical result- the discovery of a ghost. Not of an ordinary old-fashioned ghost, appearing in the midnight hour to people with a weak digestion, haunting graveyards and old country mansions, and inspiring romance-writers into the mischief of three-volume novels; but of a well-behaved, steady, regular, and respectable ghost, going through a prescribed round of duties, punctual to the minute—A Patent Ghost, in fact.”¹⁵ How the ‘ghost’ comes to life is through an optical illusion, in which an actor playing the ‘ghost’ acts the part in an enclosed area below and in front of or next to the main stage. Glass or some other clear and reflective surface is set up on the main stage at a 45 degree angle towards the sub-stage and as light on the main stage is lessened but brightened in the smaller room, whatever is being acted out in the smaller room will project a ghostly image on the larger stage.



Source: Musion Eyeliner system patent (U.S. Patent No. 5,865,519, "Device For Displaying Moving Images In The Background Of A Stage"); Musion Systems Ltd.

- 1 Animation of Tupac is projected onto the mirrored surface
- 2 Image is reflected onto the transparent screen, which is angled such that the audience sees Tupac but not the foil.

Graphic by Roxanne Palmer for the International Business Times

Photo credit: Tupac's 'Ghost,' by Roxanne Palmer for The International Business Times, via <https://gizmodo.com/this-is-how-the-tupac-hologram-that-wasnt-really-a-holo-5903092>

For Tupac's ghoulish resurrection, a life-like projection was used in place of an actor¹⁶ and thus Tupac's image was not a true "hologram." It was a modernized Victorian ghost.

The Victorians' handling of their dead was quite different from today's distant and sanitized handling of our dead. Most people in the nineteenth century died at home; their bodies were prepared and said goodbye to at home and funerals were extravagant. Things that were part of the deceased's life became keepsakes, small remembrances and reminders of the fate that awaits us all. Called *memento mori* (Latin for 'remember you will

die'), traditional keepsakes were hair, clothing, death masks, post-mortem photography and other things that may be best left to the imagination. Deborah Lutz, author of *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* writes, "Corporeality, for many Victorians, lent the resonance of subjectivity to objects, laded them with leavings of the self. Part of this understanding of the body-as-thing was informed by the desire to find in and through these keepsakes an active, revived love for that individual now dead."¹⁷ Thus keeping, say, hair from a loved one kept some semblance of that person alive. While today we might offer the platitude, "We'll always have our memories," Victorians might have said, "We'll always have her elaborate hair wreath encased in glass, framed in black walnut, hanging in the bedroom." Allegedly, some of Tupac's remains were used as a sort of *memento mori*: the other members of the Outlawz, a rap group founded by Shakur, claimed to have rolled some of Tupac's ashes into a joint and smoked it as tribute to his life.¹⁸ Although this claim has been rejected by Tupac's late mother, Afeni Shakur, and others, even the idea of it aligns with the Victorians' urges to keep their dead close. Smoking ashes may seem an odd choice of tribute, but Victorians kept ashes and used them as keepsakes; they sometimes even sprinkled a pinch inside their books.¹⁹



Photo credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooch_containing_human_hair_Europe_1701-1900_Wellcome_L0058632.jpg
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There is something about humans that long to keep a relic of a loved one's life. Perhaps it is to possess some of their residual energy; perhaps it is to remind us of our own mortality.

Tupac's "hologram" may be an attempt at *memento mori*. Usually *memento mori* remind people of death because they're macabre and represent "human bodies in an advanced state of decay."²⁰ Although Tupac's "hologram" was meant to be life-like, it ends up being a ghoulish figure. Despite being based on Tupac's likeness and featuring the singer's tattoos and physical carriage, the representativeness and the falseness of his "hologram" is obvious. When you

look closely, the blue-tinted body is just a little too narrow, a little too flat, a little too *young*, representing Tupac in the height of his success with his *Thug Life* tattoo proudly displayed over his muscular abdomen.

The Tupac we see in the "hologram" is wishful thinking, and in that thinking, misses its mark. We know if Shakur were alive today, we would be looking

at a 48-year-old man, not a 25-year-old superstar (an aging Snoop Dogg brings this point home by rapping side-by-side with his once-peer). Although clearly not in a state of decay, one almost can't help but to think of Tupac's bodily reality when faced with what he looked like almost 25 years ago. One common form of remembrance from the Victorian period was post-mortem photography. Scholar Dan Meinwald describes post-mortem photography as being of variable quality: "The best of them almost preserve the illusion of life, while others fail pathetically."²¹ These sentiments have also been leveled at Tupac's "hologram": people had blisteringly divisive reactions to it, some calling it "terrifying and distasteful"²² and some saying it was "mind-blowing."²³ It is interesting to apply the Victorian interest in death and their practice of post-mortem photography to the "lack" of bodily proof of Tupac's death. Tupac died several years before the first cellphone with a camera came out. To a die-hard fan who desperately wants to believe that Tupac survived the shooting, there is very little photographic evidence to prove he died. The one photo that was supposedly taken after his autopsy is widely believed to be faked and Suge Knight, record producer and Tupac's driver on the night of his murder, as well as his son, Suge Knight Jr., has publicly claimed Tupac is alive and well and living "on an island."²⁴



Photo credit: "Tupac 'hologram' at Coachella2012," by evsmitty [CC by 2.0 (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evsmitty/7090519919>)], via Flickr.

Tupac was cremated the day after he died and his family cancelled the public memorial they originally planned,²⁵ and this absence of closure and mass farewell lends the “hologram” even more importance as a way for fans to say goodbye to a body that was so desired as well as the cause and recipient of much violence during his life. For many yearning to say goodbye (or hello again for that matter) to Tupac, the eerie recreation of his body failed to deliver the kind of comfort that memento mori gave Victorians, and thus the search for Tupac’s body continues today.

For whatever reason, the dead body captivates, frightens, and simultaneously attracts and repels us. Based on the reactions to the Coachella “performance,” clearly the “hologram” did plenty of attracting and repelling. Jason Lipshutz, hip-hop writer for *Billboard*, explained his discomfort with the technology: “[w]atching a visual recreation of the rapper traipse around the stage in choreographed movements felt incorrect, as if trying to capture the energy that Tupac exhibited in his life and rhymes was a fool’s errand.”²⁶ Although Lipshutz supports the technology that allows dead celebrities to “tour” again, he recognizes the eeriness of the reanimation, as well. Prince, before his death in 2016, was adamant that his likeness would never be used in holographic technology. In a 1998 interview with *Guitar World*, he said: “Everything is as it is, and it should be. If I was meant to jam with Duke Ellington, we would have lived in the same age. That whole virtual reality thing... it really is demonic. And I am not a demon.”²⁷ Although Prince explicitly made his wishes known, Justin Timberlake planned to create a Prince hologram for his Superbowl halftime show in 2018.



Photo credit: "Prince-Guitar_pink"
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After a public outcry, Timberlake promised he wouldn't use that technology, in order to respect Prince's wishes. Instead, he performed on piano while footage of Prince playing guitar was projected on a huge screen behind him. Timberlake's motive was allegedly to pay his respects to the late artist (the Superbowl was held in Prince's hometown of Minneapolis in 2018) but considering that the event has billions of dollars wrapped up in it, the ethics become murky. Consent and assent are major issues with this kind of technology. Although Tupac's mother gave her blessing to Dr. Dre for her son's "hologram," it's worth noting that Tupac didn't address this concern the way Prince did.

With multiple posthumous releases, there's no doubt that plenty of money has been made off Tupac's music and likeness over the past two decades. The "hologram," costing over \$100,000, is no exception. Tupac's album sales spiked after his "performances" at Coachella; in the eleven days after the concert, 7,000 albums sold and two of his Coachella songs were downloaded 22,000 times, plus "California Love" contributed another 11,000 downloads.²⁸ At first glance, this is easy to swallow: a highly publicized technological phenomenon is sure to boost sales. A darker read of this information points to the exploitation of a



Photo Credit: "Tupac Hologram Performance at Coachella, 2012" by evsmitty
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/evsmitty/6944469368/in/album-72157629849141323/>

dead celebrity for capital gain. Tupac had no say in his image being used and, for many, that information is unsettling. The appropriation and display of Tupac's 'body' brings to mind dreadful images of slave auctions and lynchings from this country's past²⁹ and the ghoulishness of it conjures a séance. By enacting the "hologram," the creators and the consumers who paid to see it found a way to control a man whom to many seemed out of control during his lifetime. It also allowed viewers a way to reexperience Tupac's death—at the end of the set, his "hologram" bursts into detonation-level white light and then a million fragments before disappearing. Although Janelle Croshaw, Digital Domain's (the company in charge of creating the "hologram") visual effects supervisor, compared the process to childbirth, the use of Tupac's "hologram" can also be seen as both his reanimation and second death.



Photo credit: "Black lives matter too." by Mario Hounkanrin
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Beyond the questionable ethics of holographic technology used for dead celebrities, the racial implications of this kind of technology must be taken seriously. The enslavement and destruction of black men is deeply rooted in American history. One could see Tupac as having twice been killed by white America. First, his nascence was infiltrated by a world of poverty and a power structure dominated by whites that he couldn't safely become a part of. Barrett says, "The social disposition of young black men by U.S. cultural forces cannot by *any stretch of the imagination* be captured" by social politesse and niceties.³¹ Like Barrett's example of the teens shot at in a bodega, Tupac's blackness and unapologetic swagger, undergirded by a long history of racism, made him a body at odds with capitalism's smooth-running machine. He made money and earned power and fame, but he did it living a life that gave him an early and violent death. In this light, a "hologram" of Tupac is an easy way for people to make money off his legend without having to deal with his "uncontrollable" body and attitude. Michael Eric Dyson, who discusses Tupac's body at length in his book *Holler if you Hear Me*, also discusses the violent fate that many people of color face, and have faced for centuries, in this country. Dyson says, "The thought of Tupac's body lurching backward in suffering as he sought to dodge his murderer's assault is the thought of black males left vulnerable to arbitrary destruction."³² Tupac's music is saturated with lyrics about his own demise, paranoia about being plotted against and spied on, using drugs and alcohol to both numb his pain and embolden him to face his enemies, and wishes that things could be different. On many tracks, Tupac raps about how the racial and economic divide in this country harmed him and helped him develop his 'thug life' motto as a reaction against inequality. In the song, "Trapped," Tupac raps:

You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion
Happiness, living on the streets is a delusion
Even a smooth criminal one day must get caught
Shot up or shot down with the bullet that he bought
Nine millimeter kickin' thinkin' about what the streets do to me
'Cause they never talk peace in the black community
All we know is violence, do the job in silence
Walk the city streets like a rat pack of tyrants –trapped.³³

Shakur's above lyrics are typical of the resignation to a life of violence and early death that so much of his music describes. Many of his tracks also mention love and call for justice, a fact that may be overshadowed by his more undeniably violent songs. This mix of poet, prophet, gangster, and instigator speaks to the roundness of his character as well as his divided ideological leanings. Dyson further observes that "Tupac [is] perhaps the most powerful symbol of the multiphrenia that divides the young black urban mind. By rhetorically embodying the person murdered, the person wanting to murder, and the person mourning a murder, Tupac captured a huge range of desperate black response to death's dominion."³⁴ Though Dyson's book was published more than five years before the Coachella concert, we can connect the idea of multiphrenia, the idea that "the traditional ideal of a single, coherent self is gradually replaced by a sense of self as fragmented and decentered," and which fragmentation ultimately brings about a "conflict in values, ideals, opinions, and motives"³⁵ to Tupac's "hologram." The many versions of Tupac-- Tupac as thug, as poet, as prophet, as convicted rapist, as doting son, as black Jesus, as 2Pac, as Makaveli, as dead, as alive-- all contribute to the complicated legend that he has left. These labels are also problematic because each attempt to distill Tupac into one dimension, much like his "hologram."

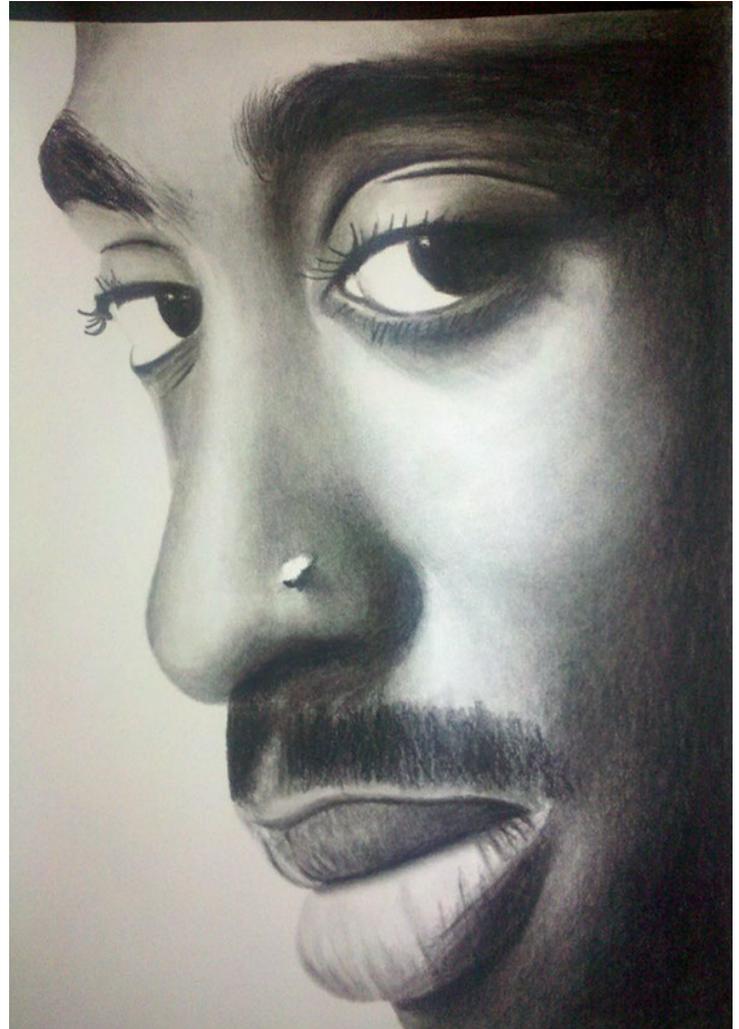


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The repercussions of multiphrenia are seen in the earlier example of the shooting that killed a black youth for nothing more than his demeanor. Although Pinn and Easterling, scholars at Rice University who wrote about Tupac in 2009, contend that Tupac “pushes beyond the ability of White supremacy to create and control Black bodies by refusing to be named or captured, to be confined to time and space in particular ways,”³⁶ I have to disagree. The “hologram” enabled Tupac’s image to be re-created and then re-destroyed, perpetuating a cycle of violence against black bodies in this country. Linda Tucker writes, “[w]hite America’s ways of seeing, representing, and disciplining black men today can be traced to the historical images and disciplinary methods that characterized [lynching rituals and blackface minstrel performances]”.³⁷ Thus, the caution against posthumously using a celebrity’s likeness, no matter what celebrity it is and whose idea it is, should be taken seriously.



Photo credit: "Whitney Houston in New Jersey 1986" by tm_10001 is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

In February 2020, a legend will go on tour. More than two dozen dates have been announced across Europe and the UK, with dates in North America to follow. Tickets start around \$70 for a show that would have been impossible fifteen years ago. Whitney Houston, who died in 2012 of accidental drowning, will reappear on stage, courtesy of Base Hologram. Joined by musical accompaniment, dancers, and lights, Houston’s hologram will fill concert venues across the globe. As with Tupac’s “hologram,” Houston’s has also generated mixed reactions. One Twitter user said, “capitalism will recreate your likeness and project it in front of millions, so it may posthumously profit off you for eternity. [T]here are truly no limits to its ethical depravity. [N]othing is sacred.”³⁸ About Shakur, Dyson says, “what is constant is the zealous cultural response that settles around his myth, his legend, and his body.”³⁹ Many celebrities and artists will become posthumous money-makers because of this burgeoning technology but, beyond the ethical and racial implications of such use, they will not capture the impact that living, breathing artists have.

An extended quote from Dyson reminds us of the importance of vitality: “Because he was young and vital, Tupac’s body has become metaphoric in the way that John Brown’s body has...[b]ut his breathing and walking body, his living and loving body, his rapping and acting body, his angry and defiant body, is the body that matters most, because without it, we would have no record of his spirit in our lives...”⁴⁰ It’s common to focus on what is gained with technological advances, but Tupac’s situation begs us to ask what we are losing.

End Notes

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- ⁷ Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Random House, 2010), 99.
- ⁸ The word "hologram" is misused when referring to the technology that brought Shakur's likeness to the stage. It is, however, the dominant descriptor of that likeness and it what I will use throughout the article, albeit in quotation marks, to distinguish it as a "hologram" in theory only.
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- ¹⁰ Lindon Barrett, "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (1999): 306, *JSTOR*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3299452>.
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- ³⁶ Pinn and Easterling, "Followers of Black Jesus," 38.
- ³⁷ Linda G. Tucker, *Lockstep and Dance: Images of Black Men in Popular Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 45.
- ³⁸ [Cam.] (@birth_marxist). 2019. "capitalism will recreate your likeness and project it in front of millions, so it may posthumously profit off you for eternity. there are truly no limits to its ethical depravity. nothing is sacred. rest in peace to whitney Houston." Twitter, September 17, 2019, 4:41 p.m. https://twitter.com/birth_marxist/status/1174075968719400961.
- ³⁹ Dyson, *Holler*, 267.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.