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## Higher Hustle: Nipsey's Post Hip Hop Literacies

*Marquese McFerguson and Aisha Durham*

### *Abstract*

Nipsey Hussle is a post hip hop icon. In this essay, we mine popular music and media coverage of Nipsey to describe his artistry and advocacy anchored by his articulation of an African American diasporic identity, his ambivalence as an independent rapper within a mainstream music industry, and his leverage of Black capital in his Crenshaw community. We address these relationships—identity, industry, and community—to situate Nipsey within African American and hip hop literacies. By recalling relationships and roots, we call attention to emancipated blackness enacted by Nipsey Hussle.

### *Keywords*

hip hop literacies, post hip hop generation, Nipsey Hussle, hip hop culture, diasporic identity

Nipsey Hussle is an East African West Coast native son. The Eritrean-American Grammy-winning Rollin' 60s Crip-come-rapper-activist was catapulted to global fame after collecting Crenshaw cred for mixtapes reminiscent of the South Central street-savvy, politically-grounded “real” rap that reigned a generation earlier. A Tupac for our time, Nipsey delivers poetic hood prophecies that inform post hip hop generation critical social justice possibilities (Perry). In this article, we mine lyrics and interviews from his music catalog and media coverage to describe his artistry and advocacy, which are anchored by (1) an explicit articulation of a Black gangsta and global or transnational identity (Richardson 13), (2) a claim to Black independence as a contracted rapper within a white-owned commercial music industry, and (3) a direct investment in Black capital by building a brand, clothing store, and a coworking space for his Crenshaw community. These publicly-available media discussions about his relationships with identity, industry, and community define Hussle's hip hop literacies (Richardson & Ragland). By recalling these relationships, we call attention to the higher hustle by the hip hop icon to embody and enact liberation or emancipated blackness.

Hussle represents the post hip hop generation. M.K. Asante defines post hip hop as a “now” period of sociopolitical transition when self-aware Black youth *stand against* the “minstrel toxins” marketed by multinational music conglomerates and *stand with* the previous hip hop generation to combat community concerns, such as racial profiling (Asante 5-7; Durham 254). Put plainly, Asante asserts his generation will no longer be “collectively identified by a genre of music that we don't even own”

(5). Hussle addresses the structural constraints of Black artistry in commercial media. He opts to remain an independent artist for much of his career in order to retain creative and economic control of his music and his brand by launching a record label, All Money In (Asghedom, “Nipsey Breaks Down Gang Culture”). Later, we return to Hussle’s contentious relationship with the music industry to address how this stance attempts to defy the capitalist logic of blackness as a commodity.

In addition to his positions about community and commercial interests, Asante identifies the use of the term “post” as a generational construct that transcends music. He extends canonical research by Bakari Kitwana who distinguishes the hip hop generation from the white-oriented Generation X and demarcates it as a post-civil rights one for minoritized groups born between 1965-1984 (28-32). Hussle is part of the “post” generation grappling with the intensification of globalization, police militarization, mass incarceration, consecutive wars, economic instability, and job insecurity (Durham 254). Born in 1985, Hussle comes of age when West Coast-influenced (gangsta) hip hop dominates American popular culture and when a decades-long drug war is waged by California governor-turn-president Ronald Reagan. For example, mandatory minimum sentences for crack possession are introduced and harsher penalties for gang affiliation are redefined as “street terrorism” in California (Van Hofwegen). Local law enforcement amass federally-funded military-grade weaponry to launch unrelenting drug sweeps, busts, raids, and stings that place entire communities of color under siege. By 1990, the prison population dramatically increases in California with 23% of all African American men ages 20-29 cycling through some form of criminal justice supervision (e.g., prison, jail, probation, or parole) (Mauer and Huling 1). The popular perception and public policies shape the lived reality of Hussle and the post hip hop generation.

The lived reality of Black youth in South Central is repackaged as “real” rap in popular culture. It is a commodified celebration of drug-related street life that Asante suggests the “post” repudiates. Researchers addressing Black masculine scripts or gender performances have described the hard body or brash bravado in “real” rap as a strategic pose needed for street life survival (Jackson 70; McFerguson, “Outkasted Black Masculinity” 69; White 43). Lifting the public-facing mask, contemporary hip hop studies also explores the interiority of Black masculinity that includes expressions of self-doubt, stress, and anxiety (Forman 1-2; McFerguson, “Unveiling Our Scars” 79). Compton’s Kendrick Lamar is an often-cited example (Chang). This search for deeper meaning animates the generational critique of gangsta hip hop in popular culture. It is important to note neither Lamar nor Hussle abandon “the real” wholesale. They work with it. Hussle, unapologetically references his gang association, which is sometimes noted by artists to gain respect and credibility in the rap industry (Gee). He is legible alongside prominent California predecessors (e.g., DJ Quik, MC Eiht, Eazy E, Kurupt, Snoop Dogg, Mack 10) and contemporaries (e.g., Game, YG 400, Jay Rock, ScHoolboy Q, Vince Staples). Still, he is also revered as an emcee for his ability to depict the fullness of Black life in the South Central District similar to filmmakers John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*) and Ryan Coogler (*Fruitvale Station*). Hussle’s depictions sometimes rely on heterosexist homophobic hyperviolent language. Here, we

might suggest Hussle rejects “the real fake” that he calls the “rap nigga” (Asghedom, “Rap Niggas”). The “rap nigga” is the media-manufactured gangsta minstrel defining Black men from the “post” generation. Instead, he rescripts the gangsta by lifting the mask and by identifying the structural conditions that produces him. In both interviews and lyrics, Hussle centers the devalued, dehumanized voices of his South Central community.

### *Hip Hop Literacies*

The articulation of Black identity, independence in the industry, and investment in community exemplifies Hussle’s hip hop literacies. Hip hop literacies are African-derived cultural practices developed by diasporic Black youth who manipulate, read, and produce language, gestures, and images to position and protect themselves in societies where they face public abandonment and precarious living conditions (Richardson and Pough 129; Richardson 2006, 43). Elaine Richardson situates hip hop literacies within broader Black ones, which are “based in the lived experiences of Black people and center the ways in which power and oppression operate in those experiences” (31). Hip hop literacies, in this way, are always already critical because they engage with power. Hip hop literacies serves as an important conceptual framework to understand the ways rappers perform and communicate culture, and it provides a critical lens to examine what Richardson describes as the interrelationship between performing products and performing authenticity and resistance in popular culture (12).

Street life is an important feature of hip hop popular culture where the gangsta—or the African adapted trickster turned “bad nigger” in the African American folk tradition—figures prominently in the underworld and the sonic lifeworld of Nipsey Hussle (Richardson 13). In ghettofabulous style, bawdy or lewd language, and hustle street consciousness, the gangsta challenges both race and class performances by defying codes of Black respectability and the conventions of Black subordination under white supremacy (White 43-44). At the same time when the dope-dealing gangsta functions as a race-class rebel, the figure can also conform to traditional American ethos of meritocracy and bootstrap capitalism. Hussle, whose rap persona recalls hard work, grinds inside the informal economy. It parallels, and in a way exposes, the violent, exploitative relations of the formal one in capitalism. Hussle harnesses the gangsta from street life to center his experience and others working outside or at the bottom of the capitalist economy (much like the California-founded Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter movement that privilege the working class). He imagines radical change from the bottom upward. We reference gangsta similarly. Its popular and political iterations inform his relationship to identity, the music industry, and the Crenshaw community. We mark these as hip hop literacies that aim for a higher hustle of emancipated blackness.

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### *Hussle's Hip hop Literacies: Identity, Industry, and Community Identity*

Hussle's Black bicultural blood family and Rollin' 60s Crip gang family anchor his hip hop identity. Both identities are marginalized. In US race-based conversations, for example, Black American immigrant experiences are decentered (Celeste 3-4); and, in class-based conversations residents with gang reps are derided as social problems rather than potential problem solvers in the community. In a bell hooksian move, Hussle mines the marginal space as a productive place of identity formation that enables him to pivot across multiple points of difference. He reclaims the two identities to offer audiences transnational blackness and bottom-up "street consciousness" to reimagine Black belonging.

**Crip Family.** The transformation of the small-time hustle of an 11-year-old candyman-shoeshine boy into the big Hussle begins after he leaves his mother's home to join the Rollin' 60s Crip family (Berish). He joins the gang to adapt and survive street life. In the song, "Crenshaw and Slauson (True Story)," for example, Hussle shares a harrowing coming-of-age narrative about the hardness that has robbed him of his humanness, his childhood. He remembers being a kind-hearted, humorous, charismatic kid who smiled often until he had to deal with violent threats (from rival gangs and aggressive cops), extreme poverty, and the tragic deaths of close friends in the "mean streets" (Asghedom, "Crenshaw & Slauson"). It hardens him. "I was raised in South Central LA ... As kids we come from nurturing, but there is a lack of that, and the coldness you get from going outside and having to survive. You get in survival mode," he told a Hot 97 radio host (Asghedom, "Nipsey Breaks Down Gang Culture"). It is violence—the violence of poverty, aggressive policing, and other gangs—that moves Hussle to join the Rollin' 60s Crips.

The Crips carry multiple origin stories. Before its gang reputation, Crips might have reflected parts of the Black Power Movement when groups like the Black Panther Party would regard the working class and lumpenproletariat (or so-called underclass) as vanguards of the revolution. Here, C.R.I.P. is an acronym for Community Revolution In Progress (Fremon). Another Crip origin story claims a group of teen boys banded together to protect themselves from other teen gangs in an increasingly violent Southern Los Angeles area (Williams). Both stories recall self-preservation and community protection as primary concerns for the creation of the Crips. These stories mirror the rapper who joins the gang for protection and who hustles in the formal and informal economy to preserve his community.

One way Hussle draws on his Crip identity as a rapper with street credibility is through his artistic collaborations that serve as a figurative olive branch to gang rivals. Together, the Pirus and Bloods are sworn enemies of the Crips. The decades-long bloodshed between the gangs is well documented (Peralta). Still, Hussle collaborates with The Game (Jayceon Taylor of Cedar Block Pirus), Jay Rock (Johnny McKinzie Jr. of Bounty Hunter Bloods), and YG (Keenon Jackson of Tree Top Pirus). The South Central rappers do more than drop verses over beats. His collaborations are invitations for Black men to see each other as brothers rather than rival gang

members. This represents the political and cultural work—the higher Hussle—that he leverages to strengthen community.

Speaking to a Dallas based radio host who assumes he has left Rollin’ 60s Crips, Hussle asserts:

I’m not out the gang. You don’t get out of a gang, truthfully. You just, you redirect your energy. I’m not a gang banger. [T]hat ain’t nothing you gone ever put down. Because, if you ever put it down you never were a part of it for real. You don’t just hang up your rag and say I’m not from this community no more. (Asghedom, “Nipsey Hussle Talks About What His Real Name Means”)

Hussle refuses to disavow his Crenshaw community—including his fellow gang members who comprise it. Hussle uses his affiliation with the Crips to further extend that figurative olive branch to law enforcement. In a letter to members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), Hussle writes:

Our goal is to work with the department to help improve communication, relationships and work towards changing the culture and dialogue between LAPD and the inner city. We want to hear about your new programs and your goals for the department as well as how we can help stop gang violence and help you help kids. (Madden and Carmichael)

The proposed Monday meeting with LAPD would have happened if it were not for Eric Holder who brutally murders Hussle a day earlier (Griffith). In the wake of Hussle’s death, members of the LA Crips and Bloods discuss a cease-fire and a possible peace march. By Friday, once sworn enemies share a unity walk at the intersection of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue to honor the homegrown hip hop icon (Muhammad). Hussle offers us a “true story” to address violence—violence of extreme poverty, aggressive policing, and warring gang culture. On record and in real life, he uses his Crip family connection to stop violence, to broker peace.

**Eritrean (African American) Family.** Before his Hussle hip hop persona, Ermias Joseph Davidson Asghedom is a second-generation African immigrant child of an Eritrean father who flees war to settle in California in the 1980s. Throughout his childhood, Hussle learns about his East African heritage and as a teen takes a 3-month trip with his father to Eritrea where he connects with his African family and reconnects with African roots that shape his Black American identity (Jennings, “Nipsey Hussle had a Vision for South L.A.”). Eritrea informs how Hussle considers coexistence as an African American and as a Rollin’ 60s Crip to strengthen Black communities—local and transnational.

Returning to the Hot 97 interview, Hussle adds:

It was profound going over there. It made a huge impact. I was different. There is me before I went and me after I came back ... I was still knee-deep in what was going on in LA when I came back, but I had a different ... [Hussle pauses.] You know you got those two voices. [He points to his shoulder.] This one became a lot louder. I couldn’t fake like I wasn’t exposed to the way

things could be ... I couldn't just embrace the narrative of this is how this shit goes and it is what it is. That [gang violence] wasn't reality to me no more. (Asghedom, "Nipsey Breaks Down Gang Culture")

In both radio interviews Hussle provides critical reflection about his West Side Crip and East African blood families that anchor his bicoastal, bicultural Black identity. Hussle does disavow violence; he does not diss members of his Crenshaw community. Building on Richardson and Imani Perry who describe the gangsta and outlaw figures respectively, Regina Bradley suggests cultural and social outcasts draw from experiences of otherness in generative ways to offer counternarratives about blackness (12-13). Hussle rescripts the dominant narrative about the gangsta as disposable, deviant, and wholly unproductive by demonstrating his own civic and cultural engagement. Moreover, he uses his life story of cultural citizenship to rewrite African Americanness within a global context of transnational blackness (Celeste). In doing so, Hussle offers the post hip hop generation an Afropolitan identity that is neither class nor country bound (Neal 152-153). He engages in what Anima Adjepong describes as a Afropolitan project by fusing his immigrant-raised African-sense of Eritrean ethnicity with his diaspora-defined Black American racial identity (249). His full embrace of all folks who make up the Black community characterizes one of Hussle's hip hop literacies.

### *Industry*

Independence or self-reliance marks the "self-made" Black rapper in relation to a largely white-owned music industry. Independence is a second example of Hussle's hip hop literacies. Hussle develops his street grind as a teen. First, he bikes, buses, and walks five hours to create beats and record music in a one-hour free Saturday summer course at the Watts Tower Art Center (Jennings, "Tens of Thousands Mourn Nipsey Hussle"). He applies his dogged commitment to making music to selling mixtapes from the trunk of his car. Hussle copies the entrepreneurship that he witnesses on Slauson Avenue where Muslim brothers sell incense and the independent newspaper, *The Final Call* (Berish). It is the buy-Black capitalism magnified in Eritrea that becomes the blueprint for building his music business success, which is seen in his creative production, community-centered content, and contractual labor within and against an exploitive industry.

**Creative production.** Hussle gains notoriety because of his mic skills but it is his marketing of self-produced mixtapes that makes the rapper renown. Before he drops an album, Hussle relies on his local fanbase to market his "brand" and his mixtapes. Mimicking multinational corporations like Nike under late or consumer capitalism, Hussle advertises his new album with limited copies on social media. For Hussle, limited supply builds demand. He controls its distribution to promote scarcity and imbues abstract meaning to justify the upcharge of \$100 per copy. It works.

Addressing the Crenshaw album rollout in a radio interview, Nipsey said:

Normally, you distribute your hard copies to retail. You send them to Best Buy, Target, your mom and pops [stores], but we didn't have a deal. We were indie. So we didn't have a retail relationship. So, we printed up our own hard copies and did a popup shop in L.A. We did a limited amount ...

There is only a certain amount [of] J's [or Nike Jordan sneakers] they are gonna release. It's only gonna be a certain amount of pieces. And that got people sitting around the corner camping out and paying high for it ...

I realized its value in scarcity. Music is the opposite. If a billion people want it, a billion people can get it. But the hard copy version, imma do a thousand of these and sell them for a hundred dollars each. And I'm going to sign them and make them double down as a concert ticket. So, if you buy one of these hard copies, you can get into this concert that you can't buy tickets to. The first night in L.A. we sold the whole thousand. Jay Z bought 100 of them and the other 900 we sold at the popup shop. That opened my eyes to a lot as far as how we can approach the game different and be successful. (Asghedom, "Nipsey Hussle Talks Victory Lap")

The commercial success of the album fuels his desire to remain an independent artist. Unlike other aspiring young rappers who might cut a record deal to bank bonuses and company perks, Hussle's marketing suggests cutting the industry's "middleman" might maximize profits. His mixtapes and album sell without a major distributor. When he signs with Atlantic Records, Hussle retains ownership of his masters, which includes the legal right to license recordings to third parties to use in television shows, films, commercials, or sampled songs. He maintains his independence by retaining financial and creative control over his artistry.

**Contractual labor.** Contractual independence distinguishes Hussle from "rap niggas." In the song of the same phrase, he states "I own all the rights to all my raps, nigga" (Asghedom, "Rap Niggas"). Wordplay here works within and against capitalism. Capitalism develops from slavery when Black people are deemed property for white owners to extract unfettered labor without compensation. Capitalism hinges on slaveability or the ability to commodify both bodies and things through blackness (Smith 67). During the Jacksonian period, poor propertyless white people distinguish themselves from enslaved Black persons by asserting claims of ownership—ownership of their white bodies and white labor needed to enter contracts and later to vote (Ogbar 13). This race-class relationship, rooted in slavery, informs modern capitalism. Hussle calls attention to Black ownership at the same time he recalls blackness-as-commodity by deploying "nigga." He is not an owned rapper. Here, we might return to Richardson via Hussle who addresses hip hop as a negotiation between performing commodity (i.e., white-owned Black culture) and performing resistance (i.e., Black-owned Black culture). To be certain, music ownership does not guarantee Black radical politics. Independent label owner and convicted killer Suge Knight of Death Row Records is an example. Regardless, Hussle recognizes a *freedom* in owning his music—owning his Black self—in the music industry with the creation of his label All Money In (Asghedom, "Nipsey Breaks Down Gang Culture"). It is the economic freedom that



translates to the creative and political empowerment for him and for members of the post hip hop generation.

**Community-centered content.** Hussle maintains creative freedom—marketing to a broader audience, remembering his Crenshaw roots. Mass appeal matters if Crenshaw comes. Hussle references the hyperlocal with album and song titles: Crenshaw, Slauson Boys I, Slauson Boys II, Fly Crippin, Blue Laces, and R.S.C for Life (Rollin Sixties Crip for Life) are examples. The street autoethnographer creates a sonic lifeworld in his mixtapes about the Crenshaw District. Hussle employs the African-derived collective-I or what Norman Denzin describes as the “universal singular” that mines a particular (Crenshaw) experience that is at once speaking to broader scenarios, stories, or struggles (268). Hussle provides an example by referencing the LA Lakers’ LeBron James. “Lebron is from the hood. He from the struggle,” Hussle said. “I think anyone who is a hip hop head and comes from the struggle, Nip Hussle is gonna be one of your favorite narratives and one of your favorite approaches to hip hop ... He fits who I’m speaking to” (Asghedom, “Rap Radar”).

Hussle’s hip hop literacies is characterized by his claim of independence—his claim to owning his Black body and Black body of work. Even as a contracted artist, he adopts an agentic stance in an industry that wills rappers to bend to the will of the market. Hussle resists becoming a commodity or an owned rapper. We mark this as a resistance within and against capitalism. More than rappers negotiating a record deal, Hussle invites Black people to recognize our worth and value—our Black capital—needed to build our communities.

### *Community*

The refrain of community is echoed in all hip hop literacies. In music lyrics and media interviews, Hussle re-members his homeplace as a vibrant space where displaced, dispossessed people are rich in resilience and resourcefulness. The self-reliance he hones early on street corners and afterschool classes makes possible his “self-made” brand of hip hop entrepreneurship, which capitalizes his business investment for social change (Lombard 3; Madichie 169, 187). Hussle buys back his block. He buys two properties abandoned or devalued to create new space, new opportunities. The coworking space and clothing store extends Hussle’s grassroots activism of paying forward by giving back. He is still brokering for people working above and under ground. Hussle’s investments in Crenshaw properties are investments in Crenshaw people. We mark this form of Black capital, community investment, as the third articulation of Hussle hip hop literacies.

**Coworking space.** Hussle builds capital to reimagine his Crenshaw district. He partners with Black LA developer David Gross to build Vector90, which is a two-story property with private offices with coworking or shared spaces where entrepreneurs can grow their business without the big initial investment in property ownership (Gross). It is the first floor of Vector90 where Afrofuturity is concretized. The youth STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) program bridges California’s inner city with Silicon

Valley. There, we might see an aerospace engineer Aisha Bowe or computer scientist Alan Emtage in the making. The youth program is called, *Too Big to Fail* (Kelley). It recalls the public bailout of private corporations to prevent economic collapse and widespread catastrophe. Hussle takes a similar approach to Black inner city youth with his time, energy, and capital (Ekpo). In the Crenshaw District where some people see blight Hussle sees possibility. *Source* Writer, Ime Ekpo, reports the program might be modeled in Atlanta, Baltimore, and Washington DC. Hussle banks on Black capital.

**Marathon clothing store and brand.** Coming full circle, Hussle buys a clothing store and launches a designer line in the same shopping center where he used to sell music in the parking lot. It would be his second attempt after police raids and his brother's prison sentence (Asghedom, "Nipsey Hussle's Journey"). Fashioning himself after Jay Z and Puff Daddy, Hussle adopts the FUBU branding for the Crenshaw community. Crenshaw *is* the brand. One of its most profitable items is a plain shirt with cursive type that reads: Crenshaw. Representing Crenshaw is not the cultural appropriation of Forever 21, which markets Compton cool with its "NWA, Straight Outta Compton" shirts to a largely white consumer base (Tefler). Marathon is based in the Crenshaw district and employs residents, some of whom with previous criminal records, that serves as a testament to his commitment to an inclusive community where all people have value and valued interests.

The name Marathon itself is significant to consider how he perceives himself and his Crenshaw community. He said Marathon represents:

Endurance ... It stands for staying down. It stands for not quitting and accepting the ups and downs of whatever game you commit yourself to and riding it out. Because that's the reality of greatness or success, it comes with a rollercoaster ride ... To make that the basis of our fashion line, I look at it like we are honoring the people who ain't quit. We honor the people who stayed down. (Asghedom, "Nipsey Hussle's Journey")

The store opening, for Hussle, is not a sprint. It comes to represent a race he has run in community with resiliency. Two years later, Nipsey Hussle is murdered outside of the Marathon Clothing Store by Eric Holder, an assumed Rollin' 60s Crip gang member. "Nip put his heart and soul on Crenshaw and Slauson," his younger brother says at Hussle's funeral (Dalton). An Eritrean flag drapes the casket in a street of more than 20,000 mourners. Crenshaw and Slauson—the location of Marathon Clothing—is renamed Nipsey Hussle Square (Nissen). "The marathon continues," is their rally cry for a community and a generation.

### *Conclusion: Homerun*

In this article, we pointed to the Higher Hussle—the bigger than hip hop literacies as critical social justice possibilities of freedom that Nipsey rescripts from the bottom-up. In music lyrics and media coverage, he described Black identity as gangsta and global, independence as a Black artist with creative and financial control, and Black capital *in and with* the community where he brokered peace and literally

built viable opportunities with Marathon and Vector90. We recognize these collectively as a form of emancipated blackness. When Hussle and his post hip hop generation contemporaries like Lamar dare to drop the mask to make room for different performances of masculinity, they provide permission for all of us to live out our full humanity.

We close by remembering Hussle and “Loaded Bases” (Asghedom). On the track from his debut studio album, Hussle lamented that the obstacles in the Crenshaw District should have blocked him from becoming a multimillion-dollar musician. They didn’t. He “Willie Mays” them (Asghedom, “Loaded Bases”). With musical hits, Nipsey helped place Crenshaw players in better positions to win in life. The first base might have a Rollin’ 60s Crips he employed at the Marathon clothing store, the second might have included a Crenshaw rapper signed to All Money In Records, and on third base there might have been a Too Big to Fail STEM kid encoding Afrofutures. The bases are loaded. Nipsey Hussle reminds us with Black solidarity, we are bound to win.

Ermias Asghedom you made it, home.

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