Grinding All My Life: Nipsey Hussle, Community Health, and Care Ethics

Pyar Seth, Carlton Keith Harrison, and Jasmyn Mackell

Journal of Hip Hop Studies,
Volume 9, Issue 1, Winter 2022, pp. 77 - 92
DOI: https://doi.org/10.34718/0fs4-zx86
Grinding All My Life: Nipsey Hussle, Community Health, and Care Ethics
Pyar Seth, Carlton Keith Harrison, and Jasmyn Mackell

As John Legend said, “Nipsey was so gifted, so proud of his home, so invested in his community” (Martin, 2019). Though Nipsey Hussle certainly had a lyrical gift, the discourse after his murder remained largely focused on his work as a humanitarian and community activist. Hussle was a staunch advocate for gun control, police abolition, and education equity in Los Angeles and the State of California. Academic research has often neglected the very clear relationship between Hip Hop and health, particularly the underlying theme of improving community health. To our knowledge, Hussle never identified as a community health organizer. Still, community mobilization, outreach, and health promotion all figured centrally in his political philosophy. And so, in our paper, through an examination of the life and legacy of Nipsey Hussle, namely vis-à-vis digital media content, we reflect on Hip Hop not only as a musical genre but as a form of care and community health knowledge acquisition. Ultimately, we assert that Nipsey and his “Hip Hop capital” formed new solidarities around health justice, ushering in a wave of Black politics that positioned health as living longer and better, without fear of state and safety deprivation.

“I am an anomaly in my space. The way I exist is unique.”
— Nipsey Hussle, VladTV (2019)

Introduction

Sacrificed. Hustled. Paid the price. Grinding all his life. Ermias Joseph Asghedom, commonly known as Nipsey Hussle, was an American rapper, businessman, and activist from Los Angeles, California who had a voice that extended across communities. Hussle established an incredibly robust musical career for himself in the ever-competitive genre of Hip Hop. For example, in 2018, Hussle produced a debut album, Victory Lap, that went on to receive a nomination for Best Rap Album. Simultaneously, Hussle was a staunch advocate for gun control, police abolition, and education equity in Los Angeles and the larger Southern California area. Devastatingly, on March 31, 2019, Hussle was shot outside his store, Marathon Clothing. As the nation mourned the loss of a Hip Hop legend and commemoration began, the love for Hussle was clear. Although he did not necessarily achieve the same level of public acclaim as someone like a Biggie or 2Pac, he was known for his positivity — a singular ability to improve the life of anyone he touched (Ralph, 2019).

Reflecting on his upbringing in a Revolt Unlocked interview, Nipsey talked about the lack of healthy food in the Crenshaw area.2 “I grew up on fries, chili fries, barbecue,

---

1 “Nipsey Hussle on Spirituality, Telling the Truth, Creating Timeless Music (Full Interview),” interview with Nipsey Hussle by DJ Vlad on VladTV, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET1h_YSONc
2 Nipsey Hussle, “Nipsey Hussle: Why it was Important to Bring Healthy Food to the Area,” Revolt Unlocked, tv miniseries 2017–2018, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a-0amNCWuM
pastrami, Hungry Harold’s, all of that. But we came up in a different era. Now you hear all this stuff going on with the food [...] There should be something close that you can pull up to.” From here, Nipsey rallied to transform the Slauson Fish Market into a space that offered a wider array of healthy food beyond fried fish. One member of the community said, “If it was not for Nipsey, we would have nothing around here [...] Nip really for the hood out here.” Hussle was dedicated to collective prosperity in Crenshaw and nestled in a sustainable vision for individual and community empowerment through a combination of financial planning and political acumen (Blay, 2019). His principled economic organization seemed to have a unique capacity to mobilize communities. Who else had the ability to initiate a truce in the contested gang terrain of Los Angeles and reduce gun violence? Who else had the political acumen to facilitate a conversation between marginalized communities and local government on health and safety? And so, our paper began with taking note of a loose pattern; that is, health promotion in Hip Hop does not quite seem like an aimless, random, or one-off reference. It has felt intentional, central, and foundational to Hip Hop culture. Even when Nipsey was not using the term “health” directly, supporting his community educationally, creatively, and intellectually all did a type of community health work. Here, we not only seek to extend the study and scope of community health research into Hip Hop Studies but also show that Nipsey Hussle and his various Hip Hop literacies read and produced reality pedagogies (Emdin, 2016) — subjectivities that reflected a sense of “health in the everyday.” What made Nipsey and his political philosophy distinct? It was his attention to detail. It was his attention to not only “community health” but “community and health.”

The Community Health Movement in Hip Hop

Community health is commonly defined as a branch of public health that focuses on the maintenance, protection, and improvement of health status in communities. Well before the development of the novel coronavirus, community health was not of marginal interest to Hip Hop culture; it has consistently existed at the center of the genre. As Davey D Cook said, “From day one, Hip Hop has focused explicitly on health.” Through the late twentieth century, a period that many refer to as the Golden Age of Hip Hop, artistry was heavily immersed in worries about crack cocaine and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Born in 1985, Hussle came of an age when the drug war, a narrative ushered in by the Reagan Administration, seemed to dominate public discourse. M.K. Asante discusses how several in Hip Hop — Tupac, Melle Mel, RUN-D.M.C., Kurtis Blow, and more — condemned the Reagan Administration and the racist system of American politics in their

---

3 Hussle, “Why it was Important to Bring Healthy Food to the Area.”
music. For Asante, here, Hip Hop was not merely a mode of expression; it was a political movement.6

From Styles P opening a small juice bar in New York to the Good Life Cafe in Crenshaw becoming a premier space in Southern California for both open mic talent and healthy eating, we contend that Hip Hop can and should also be conceived of as a “health movement.” Although a health condition like hypertension or heart disease has not been a focal point of Hip Hop lyrical content per se, there is quite an extensive history of those in the genre actively drawing on their personal relationship with trauma, depression, stress, and anxiety. A common assumption is that Hip Hop, a genre with pervasive hypermasculine tendencies, is diametrically opposed to any sign of weakness. But for the last decade, several people have taken a cue from the magnum opus of Biggie Smalls. In Ready to Die,7 The Notorious B.I.G. curated an album where he opened Hip Hop culture up to the nature of existential dread. Top to bottom, from the track “Everyday Struggle” to “Suicidal Thoughts,” Biggie dealt with a grim self-loathing that manifested from a creeping suspicion that “death was calling” and a feeling of being “worthless” in a community that “considered him the worst.”8 More recently, Saba also garnered considerable praise for his vulnerability on the album, Care for Me.9 In an interview with Tidal, Saba explicitly stated, “I fell in love with Hip Hop when I was playing NBA Live with my brother and the song, “Notorious Thugs,” by Biggie came on […] it felt like it was something for me. That was the summer I started trying to rap and make my own music.”10 The spotlight on mental health is only growing. Westside Boogie (Everythings for Sale, More Black Superheroes), Kid Cudi (Man on the Moon), Angel Haze (“Cleaning Out My Closet”), Rico Nasty (Anger Management), Dave (Psychodrama),11 to name a few, have moved the conversation on mental health beyond the notion that making and consuming music is cathartic to being vocal about the importance of therapy, self-care, and establishing healthy boundaries.

9 Saba, Care for Me, Saba Pivot, 2018. 
It is often taken for granted that community organizing for health is most effective when there is a shared history and where people have a mutually agreed upon value.\textsuperscript{12} Health politics has also often assumed that health promotion is a causal mechanism, a view that an individual actor can and should be held accountable for their behavior. However, Shana Redmond encouraged our scholarship to move past narrowly defined causal thinking.\textsuperscript{13} With her work on the relationship between Hip Hop and social change, Redmond discusses the distinct ability for Hip Hop to captivate the public and force people to listen. In a 2015 interview with \textit{YouthToday}, Redmond alluded to Kendrick Lamar and said, “Music is motivation, it is a sense of camaraderie […] popular music is a lifeline for people, and music from Kendrick can give a platform to communities who are too often silenced.”\textsuperscript{14} Known to be a familiar face in Compton, California, Kendrick Lamar has been very open about his faith in the healing power of Hip Hop. When he discussed his album, \textit{To Pimp a Butterfly}, with MTV, he said, “Nothing was as vulnerable as that record […] pulling from my experience of coming up in Compton […] going through change and accepting change — that is the hardest thing for man, accepting change.”\textsuperscript{15} Ultimately, the lyrical style of the album inspired the integrated health conglomerate Kaiser-Permanente to repurpose some of his lyrical content, believing that it would challenge the stigma associated with mental health illnesses. For Kaiser-Permanente, Hip Hop was seen as a vehicle by which someone could understand and consider their own vulnerability in a manner that was relevant to them.

But Kaiser-Permanente has not been the only large-scale health institution in favor of using Hip Hop to further health communication. Shortly after Hussle’s death, The California Wellness Foundation posted a story entitled, “Remembering Nipsey Hussle.” In the article, the foundation not only recognized Hussle as someone committed to improving the health of people in the state of California but they also discussed the power of his Hip Hop ethos. Hussle argued that Crenshaw needed approaches and strategies that matched their lifeworld. For him, Hip Hop was a natural resource, a fuel that matched the essence of the neighborhood. It was a platform to both identify and discuss emotion and share complex, untold stories — an empowerment-oriented practice that could be used to spread information. Andreana Clay has delineated how the genre has functioned as an essential tool for young Black people to increase political mobilization

in their local communities. Those associated with Hip Hop culture have often been labeled as troubled, or dangerous. However, Clay was quite keen on challenging that dominated, racialized notion and showcasing a cohort of thoughtful, creative, and courageous youth who insisted on using popular culture to fight against organized abandonment.

Based on his experience teaching a Hip Hop–centered English literature course in a Philadelphia high school, Marc Lamont Hill also discusses how the creative scheme, narrative style, rhythm, and flow of Hip Hop was a helpful tool for renegotiating classroom identities and balancing classroom power. As Nas famously said, “All I need is one mic to spread my voice to the world.” Here, one could interpret the minimalism of “one mic” as a representation of the transformative possibilities inherent to rhythmically expressed speech. Giving a person “one mic” is an invitation to empower a single voice, to provide a venue through which one can free associate, improvise, and maximize the potential to unblock repressed pain and existential angst.

Formulating a critical pedagogy with the ability to inspire in education and beyond, Raphael Travis later placed Hip Hop Studies front and center of the medical humanities conversation, documenting how art and creative expression can be used to cultivate health and humanize medical practice. For Travis, health equity is more than improving access to infrastructure or increasing investment in medical technologies; it is a commitment to ensuring that people feel cared for. It was here that Olajide Williams became inspired to create the initiative known as Hip Hop Public Health. Through an iterative cycle of program evaluation, academic research, and resource refinement, Hip Hop Public Health focuses on developing pedagogical strategies that encourage self-care. For example, more recently, Stand Up to Cancer (SU2C) partnered with Chuck D and Hip Hop Public Health to produce a health campaign on the low rate of colorectal cancer screening among Black and Latino communities. For Williams, Hip Hop is neither a panacea nor a cure-all, but rather a well-documented, responsive tool. Building on some of the extant literature on therapy, Akeem Sule and Becky Inkster contended that Hip Hop, like any form of music, can be implicated in the refinement of psychotherapies and

---

psychoeducation, the enhancement of recruitment and retention in psychiatry, and help with anti-stigma campaign messaging.22

At the same time, psychological intervention must be made culturally accessible. Hussle seemed to display an awareness of the healing power of Hip Hop well before the genre became attached to the medical humanities. Did his activism inspire his music or vice versa? For Hussle, one could deduce that it was likely a symbiotic relationship. He organized a sound that affirmed the history and communal narrative of Afro-diasporic people, destabilizing hegemony discourse and legitimizing counterhegemonic interpretation. Consider the following reflection offered by Shauntece Laurent on the life and legacy of Nipsey Hussle:

It was not until my junior year in high school that I regained interest in my education. The evolution of his music gave me language and hope to take interest in myself above any and all negative opinion about me and where I come from.23

It is no secret that Hussle and his music resonated deeply with South Los Angeles and Black communities across the country. He provided a counternarrative to inner city life in a manner that was palpable to the community he came from. Hussle continuously referenced his Los Angeles gang membership in his music and discussed the original intent of what it meant to be a gang member. In the past, to be a gang member was to contribute value and love to the community. Rather than look toward a racist police state for protection, many Black people viewed gang presence as the safer option. Hussle harnessed the gangster from street life to center his experience and other people working outside or at the bottom of the capitalist economy. As Marquese McFerguson and Aisha Durham have said, “Hussle refused to disavow his Crenshaw community, including the gang terrain that comprised it.”24

For Hussle, gang membership was not about criminal punishment. Gang life was a call to address violence — the violence of extreme poverty, aggressive policing, and the lack of sustainable infrastructure. His Crip connection was about brokering peace and showcasing a viable alternative to gang membership for Black youth. Working closely with the city to shore up neighborhood infrastructure, Hussle also recognized policing and gun violence as a public health concern long before most. “I would like to prevent as many people from feeling [lost] like that as possible,” he said to Davey D.25

---


Black men aged 15 to 34 represented two percent of the population but made-up thirty-seven percent of the homicidal death rate, Hussle worked to arrange a meeting with local government and law enforcement in Crenshaw. Unfortunately, he was murdered the day before that meeting was scheduled to occur.

Alongside his rap career, he started to heavily invest in businesses and real estate in the neighborhood to carve a path toward political, social, and economic success for Crenshaw writ large. In a sense, Hussle seemed to operate in almost direct accordance with the definition of community health provided by the World Health Organization (WHO). He “leveraged environmental, social, and economic acumen to sustain emotional and physical well-being to advance the concern articulated by the community.” He was a leading advocate for Destination Crenshaw, a 1.3-mile open-air museum celebrating Black history and artmaking in Crenshaw and Slauson. He committed to real estate revitalization. He invested in Vector90, a program aimed to connect Black youth in South Los Angeles to the Silicon Valley and provide educational support for them in science, technology, engineering, and math. He was also in the process of curating a documentary on the somewhat controversial yet notable self-proclaimed herbalist, Alfredo Bowman, commonly referred to as Dr. Sebi. In an interview with *The Breakfast Club*, Hussle claimed to be less interested in the soundness of methodology and more invested in facilitating a public conversation on holistic health. As described by Joseph Ocataviani, “What he meant to the community? If you want to look around right now, every single person that is out here [commemorating] his life, spending their time here, they are here because he spoke to them in some way, he inspired them in some way.”

Even with the release of his notable track entitled *Fuck Donald Trump* with YG, Hussle continued to hold community health in view. Although Black political behavior is not unidimensional, during an election cycle in which voter suppression was rampant, many Black communities across the country feared the nation would enact policies that would disproportionately harm them in health, education, transportation, and environmental safety. An engaged political citizen, Hussle believed that Trump signified a populist leader that would limit who “the people” could be, mobilize

---

28 *The Breakfast Club*, radio program, see full interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjiZBHh7abk
resentment, license disenfranchisement, and undermine overall well-being. In a 2018 interview with Hot 97, Hussle said, “In my hood, Trump is not the type of man deserving of respect.” A silenced Black political voice would almost certainly undermine health justice for Black people and, in turn, Hussle looked to express his frustration with American electoral politics. When Hussle decided to collaborate with YG on the song, he placed *Fuck Donald Trump* in a similar vein to N.W.A and *Fuck Tha Police*—it became an anthem for on-the-ground protesting and spawned a movement to condemn racial violence writ large. But FDT was not solely a musical diss toward a controversial political figure. The decision to collaborate with YG meant that a Blood and a Crip would partner to mobilize the Black voting bloc. Despite the contested gang terrain, their Hip Hop practice and discourse created a connection, with, within, and between their communities and facilitated open, interpersonal communication around public health. Here, what does it mean to see Hip Hop operate as a valuable, necessary political companion to health equity, one that both diversifies citizenship participation and health messaging?

**Care Ethics: A Conversation for Public Health**

Beyond understanding how community health is defined, measured, and evaluated, there is also a substantive point to be made on the politics of care that Nipsey embodied. Christina Sharpe has theorized care by working through the following: Can I live? Where can I live? How can I live? Can I live and not, just, barely, almost, survive? For Sharpe, although Black people continue to make life alongside, during, and within the endless cataloging of atrocities enacted on them, one should ask: Can we hear them— their sorrow and joy, their pain and refusal, and their insistent desire and demand? Adjacently, here, there is also a question about descriptive and substantive representation. How could someone with no connection to a particular demographic or population represent that community? How could someone rapidly ascend to high-profile commercial success and believe they hold the same relationship with the community they left behind? For Sharpe, however, the grammar of care is a necessary epistemological distinction. That is, we must be able to attend to people, and their very real, living desire for more than what we presently have. For example, in a 2006 interview, Hip Hop journalist Davey D asked Hussle, “How come you not blinging like that?” Hussle replied with the following: “I rather invest in some real estate [...] a real asset to take care of my people [...] growing up as a kid, I was looking for somebody — not to give me anything — but somebody that cared.” It would not be an overstatement to say there was a strong, reciprocal love between Hussle and Crenshaw. The evidence: those

---

35 Sharpe, “And To Survive,” 177.
36 Evans, “Nipsey Hussle’s Commitment was to his L.A. Neighborhood.”
from Crenshaw often referred to Hussle as their “Black Prince.”

But his ambition and creative process were not solely motivated by sheer love for the neighborhood. Hussle articulated a responsibility to establish real change outside of his own interest — “me being an influential artist and young and coming from the inner city, it just made sense.”

Initially, for some, a distinction between love and care may seem to be quite semantic but as Selma Sevenhuijsen said, an ethics of care is a particular “moral practice, a disposition, a daily need, and a way of living.” In opposition to individualism and neoliberalism, it is an acknowledgment of vulnerability, interconnectedness, dependency, embodiment, and finitude as basic characteristics of human life.” Hussle seemed to offer a grammar of care focused on capacity building and creative expression, all of which help us live longer and better. To quote Saidiya Hartman, “care, here, is imagined as an antidote to violence.”

During the twentieth century, Los Angeles developed a strong reputation for providing employment opportunities for underrepresented communities across the board and soon, it became an increasingly popular destination for Black people. There was an allure to the city that seemed to expand the Black economic imagination; Los Angeles seemed to be “a state of mind.” As Robin Kelley documented, entertainment in LA, namely Hip Hop, resembled a kind of street ethnography, one that exemplified the quotidian realities of Black life and simultaneously prompted deep engagement with people, place, and the political in a manner that could not be defined by a singular method or approach. In the fabric of rapidly changing cities, Black people adopted innovative strategies of belonging to craft a new route toward political representation. Los Angeles was no exception.

Some Black communities have embraced a pervasive strand of Black capitalism that equated Black ownership with freedom. Although Hussle urged his community to own their neighborhood, he preached a more nuanced form of entrepreneurial liberation and consumerism. He argued that Crenshaw should “buy back the block,” a mission that looked to move beyond the epic folklore and mythical prowess of Black-owned businesses. Oftentimes, public health discourse has leaned toward extending life, without specific detail to how life is lived. Hussle seemed to articulate that community health is

---

37 Martin, “Nipsey Hussle Had a Vision.”
38 Evans, “Nipsey Hussle’s Commitment was to his L.A. Neighborhood.”
also about feeling good while alive, living in relation to each other. In a 2013 interview with VladTV, he said, “It is never about the money […] it is about maintaining a connection and respect with the community.” He stressed the importance of holding a meeting on a doorstep or front porch to exhibit the possibilities for business to be a public, inclusive endeavor — an ethics centered on interpersonal communication rather than a benevolence of virtue. Care functioned as a selective mode of attention, a space to affirm strength and share joy.

When Tricia Rose reflected on the status of Hip Hop in America, she feared that it had lost the “locally inspired explosion of political exuberance and political energy tethered to the idea of rehabilitating communities.” For Rose, Hip Hop seemed ill; it did not seem to care anymore. Although there is no denying the glorification of sexism, homophobia, and violence within some Hip Hop lyrical content, there could also be space for us to consider, as Ralph Ellison once said, that “Power does not have to show off. Power can be confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying.” In the era of social media, Hussle optimized his image and worked to ensure that his voice held extramusical cultural heft. Arguably, Hussle became the most notable independent Hip Hop artist of our time. He regularly connected with his fanbase on Instagram and Twitter, providing them with an exclusive look at everyday life in the genre. Understanding the increased public appreciation of anecdotal evidence, video footage, and street ethnography in contemporary American society, Todd Boyd examined how success in the world of Hip Hop genre is often linked to whether an artist can maintain a consistent, real image. In the same 2018 interview with Hot 97, Hussle offered the following: “Look, I am just a student of the game. Period. […] This life is temporary, and you have to give everything you have. You have to empty yourself.”

Albeit subtle, care ethics is an important departure from the logic of authenticity that has pervaded Hip Hop scholarship. Street life has remained an important conceptual framework in the discipline because of the premise that a gangster is a unique race-class

---

44 Interview with Nipsey Hussle in 2013: “VladTV Full Interview with Nipsey Hussle (RIP)”: HYPERLINK "https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSmjSPAdc40"https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSmjSPAdc 40


48 Blay, “Nipsey Hussle’s Work in the Black Community Went Deeper than You Think.”

49 Todd Boyd, Am I Black Enough For You? Popular Culture from the “Hood” and Beyond (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

50 “Nipsey Hussle on Victory Lap, FDT + Kanye and Ownership,” interview on Hot 97, June 8, 2018, see full interview on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec0uxHUDG8A
rebel, a figure who does not conform neatly to traditional American meritocracy or bootstrap capitalism. Yet, by focusing more on singularity and the individual life of Nipsey Hussle, we attend to what Christina Sharpe termed a “ordinary note of care.” We bear witness to the atmosphere, the condition of Black life. To examine Hip Hop and care ethics alongside one another is to draw attention to how the genre is continuously used to express an abiding connection to a particular community, to recall the voice of a forgotten street. As Bonnie Honig described, to care is to “cultivate anticipation of another world and to live now dedicated to the task of turning this world into a better one.” Instead of being a passive spectator and consumer in the world as it is, Hussle strived to be an active creator, commencing on a quest beyond the conventional notion of authenticity to construct street credibility, reliability, and extend an intergenerational conversation on cultural preservation. As he said on the track Crenshaw and Slauson (True Story): “I been that [explicit] before the fame happened and repped LA before it came back in. True to this game. Do it big till they remember your name. Hustle.”

Conclusion

Given the dearth of research on the life and legacy of Nipsey Hussle, we hope that our paper can help firmly situate his voice within the field of Hip Hop Studies. Future research should continue to examine his discography as well as explore the diverse politics of health and care across Hip Hop, from Public Enemy to Megan Thee Stallion. When Hip Hop is taken serious ground for political, social, and economic thought, our scholarship is sure to move in an exciting direction. To conclude, we can never forget that Hip Hop is a transnational project. Given his reputation and reach, Nipsey Hussle is evidence of the mutually reinforcing processes of localization and globalization, the kind of care that must be directed toward marginalized, subordinated, and disenfranchised communities in Los Angeles and beyond. “In his music and media coverage, he described Black identity as gangster and global, independence as a Black artist with creative and financial control […].” As Bobby Hundreds said, “Nipsey is everywhere, omnipresent, resurrected day after day, joining communities in Los Angeles and across the globe.” Nipsey Hussle raised the level of communicable work that we should all now be

51 Sharpe, “And To Survive.”
52 Daniel White Hodge, The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).
56 McFerguson and Durham, “Higher Hussle: Nipsey’s Post Hip Hop Literacies.”
57 Bobby Hundreds, This is Not a T-Shirt: A Brand, a Culture, a Community – A Life in Streetwear. (New York: MCD/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).
accountable for. We have no choice but to remain accountable to the vibrancy of his life and legacy.

Hustle.
Bibliography


Emdin, Christopher. For White folks Who Teach in the Hood ... And the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education. Boston: Beacon Press, 2016.


Travis, Raphael, Jr., and Scott W. Bowman, “Validation of the Individual and Community Empowerment Inventory: A Measure of Rap Music Engagement among First-Year