“This Ain’t Just a Rap Song”: 2Pac, Sociopolitical Realities and Hip Hop Nation Language

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2Pac’s music was not merely rap songs. His music was and continues to be a platform for communicating important messages and concerns with his audiences. To relay these messages, he often used Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL). In this research, I will conduct a linguistic analysis to illustrate how 2Pac’s music communicated sociopolitical realities through his use of HHNL. To construct possible answers for the questions that guided this work, the researcher transcribed, coded, and analyzed a sample size of 2Pac’s music. From the sample of songs used, the researcher was able to detect three common themes throughout, namely relaying, resisting, and remaining resilient. This paper will present how 2Pac’s music (1) relays sociopolitical messages, (2) calls for resisting sociopolitical oppressions, and (3) urges strong resilience within the Black community.

Introduction and Rationale for Study

For many within my generation, rap music and Hip Hop culture have formed my identity, personality, and sense of self. Almost fifty years after its creation, this rap music continues to narrate the relatable realities of the marginalized and illustrate the artistic expressions of individual rap artists. As a fan of this genre, what mostly appeals to me are the various ways that rap artists creatively use language to incorporate social justice and activism in their music. One specific artist, Tupac Amaru Shakur (born Lesane Parish Crooks; June 16, 1971 – September 13, 1996), performing as 2Pac, often used his music as a platform to communicate social and political concerns with his audiences. His music was more than rap songs; they were messages to his listeners. Although Tupac was most certainly a notable entertainer and artist, it is equally important to remember that he was an activist who utilized his art to publicize his political opinions and beliefs. Though Tupac Shakur passed away in 1996, the messages reflected in his music remain relevant today. With these understandings in mind, this research will conduct a linguistic analysis to illustrate how “this ain’t just a rap song,” but how 2Pac communicated sociopolitical realities through his use of Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL).

Review of Literature

Tupac Shakur was, and is, the lyrical and physical embodiment of social protest. Frequently using vulgar lyrics and expressing himself with profane words, 2Pac was and

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1 Throughout the manuscript, I attempt to distinguish the person, Tupac Shakur, from the artist and public figure, 2Pac. However, in some areas it is hard to separate the two. Because of this, I use the names 2Pac, Tupac, and Tupac Shakur synonymously, but also to note that 2Pac was a rapper and Tupac Shakur was a person.
is popularly associated with a “gangsta” persona. Yet, more than a mere “rebel without a cause,” 2Pac interpreted his goon personality to be a political statement, and purposely utilized it to disrupt the status quo. Like the practices set in place by the Black Panther Party, 2Pac was brave enough to face America with his militant and radical beliefs. “Tupac saw thug life extending [Black] Panther beliefs in self-defense and class rebellion.” Further, 2Pac was a vocal and self-identified thug, because in the words of Tupac himself, “I’m not scared to say how I feel.” Furthermore, “the image of Tupac Shakur, with his heavily tattooed body and his middle finger in the air, also stands in for black rebellion and dissatisfaction.” In fact, one of his most famous tattoos included the words “thug life” transcribed across the core of his body. Without verbalizing a word, flashing this tattoo was enough for 2Pac to communicate his principles to the public. From his body art to his body language, 2Pac was extremely blunt with his distaste of U.S. society. This thug identity however, existed in conjunction with his other personalities.

An impressive body of work has focused on Tupac’s many, and oftentimes contradicting personalities, behaviors, and lyrical artwork. That is, Tupac exhibited a dualism that varied from being socially conscious, to promoting a thug lifestyle. Even his famous T. H. U. G. L. I. F. E. tattoo, which many interpreted literally (likely because of his public gangsta persona, and meaning of the tattoo before his rebranding of the term “thug life”), was actually an acronym that stood for “The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody.” This duality is further evident in the contradictory messages found between Tupac’s book of poems, The Rose that Grew from Concrete, and songs like “Hit Em Up.” Some scholars align Tupac’s work and legacy with the “trickster” tradition, whose music has convinced many fans that he has cheated death, or never actually died at all. Tupac was prophetic; he connected God to young hip hoppers, linked theology to the

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4 Dyson, *Holler if You Hear Me*, 113.
streets, and merged social justice, spirituality, and Hip Hop. “Tupac embodied both the theological and the profane, while still embodying an Christological persona that permeated much of his art.” In all, Tupac’s legacy is very complex. In addition to Tupac’s multilayered persona, his political beliefs are important to unpack.

For decades, many rappers have connected themselves with and promoted Black Nationalism and Black Nationalist thought. This could link to the popularity of the 1960s Black Power Movement. Challenging U. S. capitalism, Black Nationalism is “the political belief that practice of African Americans as a distinct people with a distinct historical personality who politically should develop structures to define, defend, and develop the interests of Blacks as people.” That is, considering the history, and socio-economic experiences of African Americans, Black Nationalism favors the structural development and well-being of Black people specifically. Affirming his Black Nationalist ideas, Tupac was conscious of the subordination of Black people, recognized the inequities of capitalism, and often-paid tributes to political prisoners who made sacrifices before him. Tupac’s political stance of Black Nationalism is also evident in his membership in Black Nationalist organizations, such as the New Afrikan Panthers. Further, Tupac’s T. H. U. G. L. I. F. E. ideology was comparable to the Black Panther Party’s 10 Point Platform. For example, both political stances proposed community economics, education, and health for Black people. Such social, political, and economic beliefs instilled within a young Tupac, tracing back to his childhood.

For many years, many consider Tupac Shakur, the son of a former Black Panther Party member (Afeni Shakur), and the stepson of a political prisoner (Mutulu Shakur), a “homegrown revolutionary.” Afeni Shakur instilled many of her political ideologies

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14 Hodge, Baptized in Dirty Water, xvi.
19 Stanford, “Keepin’ It Real in Hip Hop Politics.”
20 Stanford, “Keepin’ It Real in Hip Hop Politics.”
22 Mutulu Shakur, who is suffering from bone cancer, was released from prison on December 16, 2022. While this seems worthy of celebration, Mutulu Shakur is expected to die from cancer, and was approved to be released from prison because his condition has severely impacted his health.
23 Keeling, “‘A Homegrown Revolutionary?’”
into her son Tupac. Additionally, “Tupac’s exposure to political associates of Afeni contributed to the development and evolution of his political ideas.” That is, Tupac was the godson of slain Black Panther member Geronimo Pratt, the mentee of endless political figures, and a member of prominent political organizations. These relationships and experiences shaped Tupac’s sociopolitical ideology, and set the tone for him to be the metaphorical bridge that connected the gap between sociopolitical activism and rap music.

The connection between Black art and Black life are evident in Hip Hop. Black music genres, as social protest, operate to transform perceptions of history and society, as well as prescribe and mobilize for action. As an extension of this, Hip Hop provides communication, allows creativity, and favors the collective. It is “soul” and “realness,” “rooted in the African and African-American cultures that produced it.” Like African-American culture, rap music has origins in West African culture and communicative practices. This is significant because, as according to Jones (1994), rappers, like West African griots are the orators of their culture, or the living/breathing “archives and libraries” of their communities. African Oration “could include reciting poetry, storytelling, and speaking to drumming and other musical accompaniment. The spoken word was rarely plain, flat and unembellished. Oration always served a dual purpose: to inform and to entertain.” Similar to the African griot, the poetic oration of Tupac serves to both entertain and educate the masses. “Tupac descends from the African storyteller tradition, in which oral artists were referred to as griots.” Both entertaining and informational, rap griot and sociopolitical orator, Tupac Shakur often used African

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31 Jones, Say it Loud!: The Story of Rap Music, 19.
32 Jones, Say it Loud!: The Story of Rap Music, 18.
American Language (AAL)\textsuperscript{34}, and as an extension, HHNL, to discuss the sociopolitical realities of many African Americans.

Because American society largely separates along racial lines, there is also a racial segregation of language (except in some specific integrated spaces).\textsuperscript{35} AAL is one of many terms linguists use to categorize “English-based varieties spoken throughout the United States in African American communities, both rural and urban, south and north, male and female, and spoken among all socioeconomic groups.”\textsuperscript{36} Since many African American people speak AAL,\textsuperscript{37} historically, much controversy has followed the language.\textsuperscript{38} In conjunction with societal beliefs of racial inadequacies, African American speakers of AAL have often had to bear the stereotype of having poor grammar and being less credible because of their cultural vernacular.\textsuperscript{39} In turn, many inaccurately categorize AAL use as a verbal deficiency,\textsuperscript{40} which creates social biases against the language speakers, including both Black children\textsuperscript{41} and adults.\textsuperscript{42} Further, mass media has also portrayed African Americans as unintelligent because of their use of AAL, thus “the media’s presentation of Ebonics reflects the larger society’s perceptions (so often negative) of that which is Black.”\textsuperscript{43} Thus, the dominant society has aligned language use with power and status, to which African Americans and AAL have not greatly benefitted.\textsuperscript{44} Even within such structural confines however, Tupac has used such language to communicate to and for African American communities – most especially through his intentional use of HHNL.

Purpose and Research Question

According to scholar Samy Alim, HHNL characterizes by 10 tenets, and “refers not only to the syntactic constructions of the language but also to the many discursive and communicative practices, the attitudes toward language, understanding the role of language in both binding/bonding community and seizing/smothering linguistic opponents, and language as concept (meaning clothes, facial expressions, body movements, and overall communication).” HHNL encompasses African American Language, African American culture, and the language and culture of the Hip Hop Nation (HHN). This does not mean HHNL solely confines to African American communicative patterns, as the HHN is not exclusively bound to the confines of African American culture. This is evident in the globalized impact of 2Pac’s music and the different varieties of HHNL evident in the HHN. However, it is important to note that Tupac was a speaker of both AAL and HHNL, and therefore this linguistic analysis is steeped in the language that Tupac often engaged in. Hip Hop is more than a solitary culture. Hip Hop is raw, sexual, boastful, radical and reality. Furthermore, Hip Hop simultaneously exemplifies peace and unity, deviance, and a gangsta mindset, incorporating the experiences of pimps and hoars. Hip Hop is educational, linguistic, and is the language of the marginalized. Hip Hop is more than communication; it is liberation and a way of life. For many hip hoppers, “Hip Hop Nation is like ourselves.”

Most important to this work, HHNL verbalizes sociopolitical circumstances, and flips the script on the power structure of existing power dynamics.\textsuperscript{56}

Although there is literature on lyrical analyses of Tupac’s work,\textsuperscript{57} there is a need for more research to specifically center linguistics and Tupac’s use of HHNL in reference to sociopolitical conditions. To expand on this, I would like to examine how 2Pac uses HHNL in his rap music to communicate sociopolitical realities. To guide this research, I have formulated the following research question: \textit{How does 2Pac’s music make use of HHNL to communicate sociopolitical realities?}

\textbf{Positionality, Method/Data Analysis Procedures, and Methodology}

To construct possible answers for my research question, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed a sample size of 2Pac’s music. This section will discuss the methods and data analysis procedures utilized for this study. First unpacking my positionality, I will explain how I come to, and how I situate within, this research. Next, describing the selection process, I will discuss how I chose specific works for this research. Then, outlining the methodology, I will explain the framework used for the linguistic analysis of the chosen pieces. Last, I will discuss how I incorporated additional findings into this research.

While conducting this research, I felt very conflicted. Although Tupac is one of my favorite rappers, I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the controversy that often surrounded 2Pac’s public image and career.\textsuperscript{58} As a researcher, scholar, and Black woman, I have had to reconcile the many personalities and representations of 2Pac. On one hand, 2Pac was a lyrical genius, who was critical of the racist society that he lived in.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, I have a high level of respect for 2Pac’s music, body of work, and positive contributions to society. Yet to be consistent with my values, I remain critical of his misdeeds as well. On the other hand, Tupac Shakur was a convicted sex offender, charged for a crime committed against a Black woman.\textsuperscript{60} In 1995, Tupac received a prison sentence for sexual abusing a Black woman.\textsuperscript{61} Although he maintained he was innocent \textsuperscript{62} and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Alim, “Hip Hop Nation Language,” 394–95.
\item Bakari Kitwana, \textit{The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture} (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002).
\item \textit{Tupac Vs}, dir. Ken Peters, Concrete Treehouse Productions, USA, 2004.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
denied the sexual assault allegations;\textsuperscript{63} a court of law still found him guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. More recently, in 2018, the victim of this crime participated in an interview where she recollected all events that were once in question.\textsuperscript{64} During the interview, she recalled very vivid details of her attack, which were heartbreaking to hear. Even further, much of 2Pac’s music reflects the sexism and misogyny that is often prevalent in mainstream rap music and throughout commercialized mainstream American culture.\textsuperscript{65} While I see Tupac as a hero that is worthy of praise, I also see him as a person whose sudden death stunted his ability to grow in life. Discussing my conflicted feelings is necessary within this research and it is my hope that this allows the reader to understand that I approached this research as a Black woman who simultaneously loves Hip Hop and who understands the misogyny is common within popular culture. I did not approach this research to romanticize or idolize Tupac but to understand how some of his language use reflects the tenets of HHNL.

Before his death, 2Pac released five studio albums. Those albums include \textit{2Pacalypse Now} (1991), \textit{Strictly 4 My N. I. G. G. A. Z.} (1993), \textit{Me Against the World} (1995), \textit{All Eyez on Me} (1996), and \textit{The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory} (1996). To analyze a sample of Tupac’s robust work, I used these five albums and chose two to three songs per CD. The chosen songs released as singles, were amongst the popular songs on the airwaves during Tupac’s time, or songs that continue to receive frequent radio play today. These were purposeful decisions, as these songs were and are more likely to reach a larger audience because of their airplay, promotion, and popularity. To make an argument that Tupac was a sociopolitical orator, I thought it important to include his work that had the largest listening audience. Because \textit{All Eyez on Me} is a 2-disc album, I chose two to three songs per disc, which amounted to six songs chosen from the entire album. All other albums consulted were single disc records, so only two to three songs were chosen from the remaining four titles. The songs chosen from each album include: \textit{2Pacalypse Now} (1991): “Trapped,” and “Brenda’s Got a Baby”; \textit{Strictly 4 My N. I. G. G. A. Z.} (1993): “Keep Ya Head Up,” “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” and “I Get Around”; \textit{Me Against the World} (1995): “Me Against the World,” “Dear Mama,” and “Temptations”; \textit{All Eyez on Me} (1996), disc 1: “How Do U Want It?,” “I Ain’t Mad at Cha,” “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted”; \textit{All Eyez on Me} (1996), disc 2: “All Eyez on Me,” “Thug Passion,” and “Ratha Be Ya Nigga”; and \textit{The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory} (1996): “Against All Odds,” “Hail Mary,” and “To Live and Die in L.A."

To conduct a linguistic analysis of the songs, I consulted the Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL) framework shaped by Alim.\textsuperscript{66} This framework allowed me to code

\textsuperscript{63} Tupac Shakur, “VIBE Presents: Tupac’s ‘Lost’ Interview,” \textit{Vibe Magazine} channel on \textit{YouTube}, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4zAdiWMGIQ.

\textsuperscript{64} “Ayanna Jackson on Meeting 2Pac, Sexual Assault, Trial, Aftermath (Full Interview),” Ayanna Jackson interviewed by Vladimir Lyubovny (DJ Vlad), February 13, 2008, \textit{YouTube}, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CVBov9O1GA

\textsuperscript{65} Kitwana, \textit{The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture}.

\textsuperscript{66} Alim, “Hip Hop Nation Language,” 393.
the transcribed songs for common themes of HHNL. Coding for the 10 tenets of HHNL, I determined the most common tenet used by Tupac throughout the songs. In the next section, I will discuss the major findings of this work. Although not reflected in the major findings of this research, I will introduce tenets of HHNL that are not included in the major findings. These supplemental findings will support the major findings.

**Findings**

“HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf the HHN,” and therefore, “rappers are insightful examiners of the sociopolitical matrix within which HHNL operates.”\(^6^7\) With this understanding, I was able to detect many sociopolitical realities orated by 2Pac. From the sample of songs used in this research, I was able to detect three common, sometimes overlapping, themes throughout relaying, resisting, and remaining resilient. Here I will present how 2pac’s music: 1) relays sociopolitical messages, 2) calls for resisting sociopolitical oppressions, and 3) urges and recognizes strong resilience within the Black community.

**Relaying**

Acting as a messenger of the streets, much of 2Pac’s language use relays many of the sociopolitical realities experienced by Black people that reside within Black American communities and neighborhoods. In other words, 2Pac’s music conveys the social and political realities of the Hip Hop Nation (HHN) to his listeners. Tupac expresses relaying in the songs “Trapped,” “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” and “All Eyez on Me.”

Being a member of the community that he identified as oppressed, as well as a victim of police brutality, Tupac used HHNL to communicate his anger with oppressed and oppressor relationships.\(^6^8\) “Trapped,”\(^6^9\) narrates the realities of police harassment, police brutality, incarceration, and other oppressions experienced by most Black communities.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{They got me trapped} \\
\text{Can barely walk the city streets} \\
\text{Without a cop harassing me, searching me} \\
\text{Then asking my identity} \\
\text{Hands up, throw me up against the wall} \\
\text{Didn’t do a thing at all} \\
\text{Tellin you one day these suckers gotta fall}
\end{align*}\]

\(^6^7\) Alim, “Hip Hop Nation Language,” 394.  
Being “trapped” expresses the sentiment of many African American people within inner cities. Many African Americans have reported a routine of feeling like a suspect. Distrust of the police is correlated with both concentrated neighborhood disadvantage and personal experiences with negative and involuntary police contacts. Examples of historical policing are “the stop-and-frisk rule,” which made it constitutionally permissible to stop, question, and frisk him or her—even in the absence of probable cause. Such practices of racial profiling unfairly targeted African Americans. It is evident that being “trapped,” or caught in a cycle and experiencing constant policing, is a much-documented negative sociopolitical experience for many African American people.

In addition to police harassment and police brutality, 2Pac also relays the realities experienced by some adolescent Black girls. Understanding the sociopolitical climate, 2Pac narrates the story of a twelve-year-old girl that is seemingly in a sexual relationship with an adult male, and who consequently becomes pregnant. That is, “Brenda’s Got a Baby” relays some young women’s experiences with statutory rape and unwanted child pregnancy.

Every state has some of law on statutory rape, which curbs teenage pregnancies and protects naïve and vulnerable youth from adult exploitation and coercion. The exploitation and coercion of experienced by many young girls parallels that of “Brenda”

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who become pregnant by men, not boys or minors.\textsuperscript{75} Although there are social support programs for the teenage mothers,\textsuperscript{76} many of these pregnant teenagers will likely face life-long challenges. “Long-term consequences of teenage motherhood include lower educational attainment, socioeconomic disadvantage, greater psychosocial difficulties, and higher rates of marital instability and single parenthood.”\textsuperscript{77} As relayed by 2Pac, Brenda was in a cycle of poverty, with very little options to get out of her situation. The tragic end to Brenda’s misfortune was prostitution, and ultimately her early death. A multilayered and tragic reality, statutory rape is a huge socio-political concern.

To escape poverty and economic hardships, some turn to crime, while others will boast they possess material or tangible wealth. In a capitalist society, money and the social economy are political. “Rap lyrics create a particular economic sphere, one with its own symbolic values, its own vernacular, and most importantly, its own politics.”\textsuperscript{78} This often illustrates via braggadocio, and the discussions of criminal lifestyles. This overlapping narrative of an underground career and a boss style of life are common in 2Pac’s music. The relaying of a criminal and flashy lifestyle, whether real or imagined, is evident in “All Eyez on Me.”\textsuperscript{79}

Was hyper as a kid, cold as a teenager
On my mobile, callin’ big shots on the scene major
Packin’ hundreds in my drawers, fuck the law
Bitches, I fuck with a passion, I’m livin’ rough and raw
Catchin’ cases at a fast rate, ballin’ in the fast lane
Hustle ‘til the mornin’, never stopped until the cash came
Live my life as a thug nigga until the day I die
Live my life as a boss player, ‘cause even getting’ high
These niggas got me tossin’ shit
I put the top down, now it’s time to floss my shit
Keep your head up, nigga, make these mothafuckas suffer
Up in the Benz, burnin’ rubber
The money is mandatory, the hoes is for the stress
This criminal lifestyle, equipped with a bulletproof vest
Make sure your eyes is on the meal ticket, get your money


\textsuperscript{78}Alf Mikael Rehn and David Sköld, “All About the Benjamins–Hardcore Rap, Conspicuous Consumption and the Place of Bragging in Economic Language,” paper presented at CMS 3 Conference, 2003.

Some of the bragging, boasting, and showcasing that goes occurs in Hip Hop culture, is sometimes fiction, rather than truth as artists often must negotiate between the business of rap (what sells) and the art. Regardless, this bravado can serve as a reflective fantasy of the real-life experiences that some have or desire to have. When “All Eyez on Me” saw its release in the 1990s, cell phones were not widespread or affordable, neither were Mercedes Benz vehicles. Therefore, 2Pac is using language to relay that he enjoys a rich life – a life to which most Americans were not privy. His “boss life” accomplishments relay to people who possibly strive for similar endeavors and notoriety. Therefore, Tupac is speaking to a larger community of people who either respect, aspire to join, or are within a similar lifestyle. True to the sociopolitical milieu, style, wealth, luxurious items, and a gangsta persona are social and political factors that are worthy of bragging rights, trend setting, and public emulation.

Although this section considers the way that 2Pac relayed sociopolitical realities in just a few of his songs, one can find similar language in many songs sampled for this research. This includes the relaying of his social, frequent, and short-term relationships with women in “I Get Around,” “Temptations,” “How Do U Want It,” “Thug Passion,” and “Ratha Be Ya Nigga.” The relaying of neighborhood and familial realities are evident in “Keep Ya Head Up,” “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” “Me Against the World,” “Dear Mama,” “I Aint Mad at Cha,” and “To Live and Die in L.A.” The social experiences of living lavishly gangsta relay in “2 of Amerikas Most Wanted.” Last, Tupac relays sociopolitical conflict in “Against All Odds,” and internal and external conflict in “Hail Mary.”

Provided here are some examples, as stressed in “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” To Live and Die in L.A.,” and “How Do U Want It?”

Resisting

Hip Hop can be empowering because it encourages resistance. Along with relaying, or communicating the sociopolitical realities of local neighborhoods, 2Pac called on community members to resist sociopolitical oppressions. In other words, 2Pac does not believe that Black people should willingly accept subjugation or inequity. Instead, 2Pac promoted a means of fighting back, called for defiance, and encouraged combating social and political oppressions evident in some Black communities. Provided here are some examples, as stressed in “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” To Live and Die in L.A.,” and “How Do U Want It?”

84 Shakur, “Tupac Revolutionary Speech.”
Tupac was a proponent of armed self-defense and encouraged members of Black communities to do the same.\textsuperscript{85} Featured on his second studio album, “Holler if Ya Hear Me”\textsuperscript{86} is a song of sociopolitical resistance. Using HHNL, Tupac suggests specific resistances needed for change. Instead of being killed by police officers, Tupac suggests violent uprising.

\begin{verbatim}
I guess cause I'm Black born
I'm supposed to say peace, sing songs, and get capped on
But it's time for a new plan, BAM!
I'll be swingin like a one man clan
Here we go, turn it up, don't stop
To my homies on the block gettin dropped by cops
I'm still around for ya
Keepin my sound underground for ya
And I'ma throw a change up
Quayle, like you never brought my name up
Now my homies in the backstreets, the blackstreets
They feel me when they rollin in they fat jeeps
This ain't just a rap song, a Black song
Tellin all my brothers, get they strap on
And look for me in the struggle
Hustlin 'til other brothers bubble
\end{verbatim}

Historically, many white Americans prefer that Black people not resist sociopolitical oppressions because “Black protest represents a devastating threat to the image most white Americans have of their society and their roles in it.”\textsuperscript{87} In fact, many white people were opposed civil rights protests of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{88} More recently, following the injuries and eventual death of Freddie Gray, the majority of White America responded fairly similarly to the 2015 Baltimore protests (largely popularized by the media as the “Baltimore riots”). Instead of attempting to understand institutional racism and reasons why the youth of Baltimore were so upset, many white Americans took to their social media accounts to refer to the protestors as thugs and criminals.\textsuperscript{89} Tupac understood the politics of white America’s preference for submissive and oppressed Blacks, over Blacks who are self-
empowered and resisting sociopolitical circumstances. Calling for an armed resistance to oppression, Tupac supported the disruption of an oppressive society, by any means necessary, even if such disruption is against the preference and interests of the majority population.

According to the dominant perspective, to receive the label “thug” was negative because it meant that the individual was a menace to society. Tupac however, held respect and admiration for those that the dominant society deemed thugs, as many of those “thugs” were his mentors, father figures, and support system.\(^{90}\) 2Pac understood the thug narrative, and flipped the power dynamics by making “thug” an empowering identity. For 2Pac, “Thugs” were brave resisters with a long history of protecting their humanity. He did this with his own image, his T. H. U. G. L. I. F. E. tattoo, and with the use of HHNL (“To Live and Die in L.A.”)\(^{91}\)

*I love Cali like I love women*  
*Cause every nigga in L.A. got a little bit of thug in him*  
*We might fight amongst each other, but I promise you this:*  
*We’ll burn this bitch down, get us pissed*

In an ode to this West coast city, 2Pac acknowledges challenges within LA neighborhoods, but ultimately, the people in the neighborhood will stand together against injustice. Often referred to as “thugs” on the news and in media,\(^{92}\) neighborhood protestors in LA have been known to burn everything at the face of racial injustice. In fact, in 1965, the residents of the LA Watts neighborhood could no longer accept racism or police brutality, and the tensions erupted into a multi-day riot.\(^{93}\) By the end of the rebellion, many businesses were burnt some lives were lost, and many were injured.\(^{94}\) Nearly three decades later, the city went up in flames again; following the police beating of Rodney Glen King (April 2, 1965 – June 17, 2012), and the death of Latasha Harlins (January 1, 1976 – March 16, 1991), a 15-year old Black girl that died at the hands of Soon Ja Du (Korean: 두순자), a 51-year-old Korean-American convenience store owner.\(^{95}\)

Ultimately, 2Pac understood power relations between the dominant society and the

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\(^{90}\) Tupac Shakur, “Tupac on Growing up Poor, His Rise to Fame & His Future,” MTV News channel on YouTube, 1995; Sept. 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpPbYGJr0Q


\(^{94}\) Matei and Ball-Rokeach, “Watts, the 1965 Los Angeles Riots.”

marginalized and that no one could take that power away. In other words, 2Pac used HHNL to communicate resistance.

Although Tupac believed that racist systems and socio-political inequities were factors that oppressed members of African American communities, others believed that rap music was the number one threat to African American communities (and American society in general). During the 1990s – the peak of Tupac’s career – a group of American politicians started a campaign against commercialized rap music. The 42nd president of the United States, President William Jefferson “Bill” Clinton, made the charge that rappers were socially irresponsible. The former Secretary of State for Pennsylvania and a delegate to the White House Conference on Civil Rights, Cynthia Delores Tucker (known as C. Delores Tucker; October 4, 1927 – October 12, 2005) denounced rap music as “violent and misogynistic.” Robert Joseph Dole (known as Bob Dole; July 22, 1923 – December 5, 2021) condemned not only rap music, but also the companies that support and benefit from the music. Some Black leaders at the time, such as William “Bill” Cosby and Jesse Jackson, were similarly vocal against Tupac’s “womanizing” music. This public conversation did not end in the 1990s, as Hip Hop still receives criticism for shaming and objectifying women, and encouraging violence against women. Tupac resisted this narrative that rap was public enemy number one in “How Do U Want It?” Using HHNL, Tupac explains that he, Hip Hop, nor Hip Hop artists are the enemies of Black people.

C. Delores Tucker, you’s a motherfucker
Instead of tryin' to help a nigga, you destroy a brother
Worse than the others, Bill Clinton, Mr. Bob Dole
You're too old to understand the way the game's told
You're lame, so I gotta hit you with the hot facts
Once I'm released, I'm makin' millions, niggas top that
They wanna censor me, they'd rather see me in a cell
Livin' in hell, only a few of us'll live to tell
Now everybody talkin 'bout us, I could give a fuck

Like we the first ones to bomb and cuss
Nigga, tell me how you want it

Conveniently expressed in a sexually suggestive track toward women, 2Pac claims he is not behaving in an irresponsible way toward the Black community, but through presenting his music, is doing his job. Addressing some politicians by name, 2Pac accused the democrats, republicans, and all those in-between, of censorship. Dismissing the political criticisms, Tupac acknowledges the hypocrisy, because the people before him have, and those after him will continue to produce similarly vulgar music. This is evident in Country and Heavy Metal music; however, politicians have not attacked those genres of music, or the genres’ artists.\textsuperscript{102} Even in Opera music, women “are usually portrayed as wanton and shallow and easily manipulated for sexual purposes.”\textsuperscript{103} 2Pac’s resistance here seems to be that despite the negative criticism, he will continue to make money from his music, even on a sexually suggestive track. Although Tupac is no longer alive, African American communities continue to battle social, economic, and political challenges and inequities.

One can also find direct and indirect resistance in multiple songs sampled in this research. Resistance is evident in Tupac’s attempts to resist women in “Temptations”; Resistance to police brutality in “Trapped”; Resistance to social and political detractors in “Against All Odds”; Resistance to defeat in “2 of Amerikas Most Wanted,” and in “Hail Mary”; Resistance by hustling in “All Eyez on Me,” and Resistance to the opposition in “Against All Odds.”

Resilience

Last, in addition to relaying sociopolitical truths and encouraging the resistance of sociopolitical challenges, 2Pac uses language to describe and encourage the resilience of the Black community. His music ensures his listeners that we will all remain strong, that through it all we always bounce back, and as a collective, we continue to survive such oppressive realities. This can be seen in “Keep Ya Head Up,” “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted,” and “Me Against the World.”

“Keep Ya Head Up,”\textsuperscript{104} recognizes common struggles experienced by many members of urban communities and uses these collective narratives to convince the audience that things will indeed get better. The language here acknowledges systemic oppressions but insists that we cannot allow such inequities to break us. Instead, we must continue to survive.

\textsuperscript{103} Stoia, Adams, and Drakulich, “Rap Lyrics as Evidence,” 331.
We ain’t meant to survive cause this a setup  
And even though you’re fed up  
Huh, ya got to keep your head up  

(Chorus) Keep ya head up, ooh, child, things are gonna get easier  
Keep ya head up, ooh, child, things’ll get brighter

The struggle communicated through much of rap is rooted in “the pain of black-American experience, which began with slavery,” and exists in society today. Surviving such pain is evidence of continued resiliency. “After experiencing some of the most brutal forms of injustice and dehumanization in U.S. history, African Americans continue to survive and function with remarkable resiliency,” and “this tenacity for survival is embedded in the history of African American resistance and an intense desire to be free.” Tupac was cognizant of both systemic oppressions and Black resiliency, and uses HHNL to remind his listeners that they are indeed a resilient people.

Tupac also demonstrated resilience through the communication of his personal experiences. Using his lived reality as an example, “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted” incorporated HHNL to share resilience of sociopolitical challenges.

They wonder how I live with five shots  
Niggas is hard to kill on my block!  
Schemes for currency and dough-related  
Affiliated with the hustlers, so we made it  
No answers to questions, I’m trying to get up on it  
My nigga Dogg wit’ me, eternally the most wanted

In 1994, Tupac was robbed and shot five times. In the United States, approximately 100,000 people receive wounds from gun violence each year, and more survive gun violence than die from it. However, those that survive gun violence generally have some lingering trauma and feel a constant compromising of their life and

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105 Jones, Say it Loud!: The Story of Rap Music, 20.
Although probably suffering from similar psychological effects of being a victim to gun violence, Tupac was resilient. In other words, Tupac’s language use explains that he can be resilient because he comes from the strength of survival, street life resilience. Not only did he outlive this attempt on his life, but also he remained resilient with the support of his community. His support system was especially strong from his friend and former labelmate, Snoop Dog.

Also, according to 2Pac, even when one feels alone in the world, they can continue to be resilient. Using HHNL to communicate the horrors of society, “Me Against the World” provides a formula for being resilient through a challenging life.

Tupac seems to promote resilience by advocating for education, political power, and hard work. Historically, African Americans have used such self-help tactics by educating Black communities, creating political parties, and gathering voters to be resilient through socio-political oppressions. This was evident in the organization of freedom movements.

schools, the Black Panther Party, and voter registration drives. This legacy continues today through the efforts, service, and aktivisms of Black Motherwork, grassroots organizations, National Pan-Hellenic Council Greek Lettered Organizations, churches, and other regional, national, and international groups. 2Pac did not ignore the fact that many African Americans face inequity and used his knowledge of the HHN to encourage them, while providing his perspective on solutions to sociopolitical problems: self and community empowerment and advancement.

Tupac also communicates resilience in other songs. Some include surviving through struggle in “Holler if Ya Hear Me,” “Me Against the World,” and “Dear Mama.” 2Pac shares his resilience through social and political criticism in “How Do U Want It,” and in “All Eyez on Me.” 2Pac explains remaining resilient from oppositional attack in “Against all Odds,” and being resilient through intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges in “Hail Mary.”

Additional Findings

The data collected for this research provided many examples of the way 2Pac communicated sociopolitical concerns and highlighted multiple tenets of HHNL. Although this research does not require them to be deconstructed fully, I think it is important to at least note that language throughout the songs included in this research also included rich aspects of HHNL. Supportive of the major findings of this research, the table below illustrates several examples of such features.

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## 10 Tenets of HHNL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenet</th>
<th>Definition/Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tenet 1</strong>: HHNL has its roots in AAL (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>Because HHNL is spoken by African Americans, it is therefore rooted in the culture and language of its creators, African Americans/AAL. “The language of hip-hop is African American Language” (Smitherman 1997, 7). This can be seen in 2Pac’s use of the existential “it,” and zero copula in “Dear Mama” (Shakur 1995b)</td>
<td>Existential “it”: “It’s a struggle every day, gotta roll on” Zero copula: “You [are] in the kitchen tryin to fix us a hot plate”</td>
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<td><strong>Tenet 2</strong>: HHNL is one language variety used by African Americans (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>African Americans are fluent in many language varieties, and HHNL is just one of those varieties. Rappers are also fluent in the Language of Wider Communication, and they often switch back and forth between language varieties in which they are fluent. This is evident in “Brenda’s Got a Baby” (Shakur 1991b)</td>
<td>“I hear Brenda’s got a baby. But Brenda’s barely got a brain. A damn shame, the girl can hardly spell her name. (That’s not our problem, that’s up to Brenda’s family). Well let me show you how it affects our whole community.”</td>
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<td><strong>Tenet 4</strong>: HHNL is a unique language of its own (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>The language has its own “grammar, lexicon, and phonology, as well as unique communicative styles” (Alim 2004, 394). An example of HHNL grammar is the use of “illin,” which 2Pac uses it to refer to “tripping,” acting crazy, or not usual. This is seen in “Me Against the World” (Shakur 1995a)</td>
<td>“Carries to children ’cause they’re illin’”</td>
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<td><strong>Tenet 5</strong>: HHNL is a combination of music and literature (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>“HHNL is simultaneously the spoken, poetic, lyrical, and musical expression of the HHN” (Alim 2004, 394). This is evident in the poetic imagery delivered by 2Pac in “Hail Mary” (Shakur 1996h)</td>
<td>“Picture paragraphs unloaded, wise words bein quoted. Peeped the weakness in the rap game and sewed it (or “disown it/sowed it,” as various sources cite the lyric differently). Bow down.”</td>
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<td><strong>Tenet 8</strong>: HHNL reflects the regional variation of its</td>
<td>Because California is one of the places that had a strong impact on Tupac’s language use and culture,</td>
<td>“Better learn about the dress code, B’s and C’s.”</td>
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<td>Tenet 9: HHNL operates as a mechanism of communication between the members of HHN (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>Rap music is a platform for rappers to talk amongst each other or send messages to each other. Tupac utilizes “Against All Odds” to remind Dr. Dre of old beef, to intimidate Mobb Deep, and to threaten or challenge Puff Daddy. In other words, Tupac uses “Against All Odds” (1996g) as a mechanism to communicate a direct message to other members of the HHN.</td>
<td>“You living fantasies, nigga I reject your deposit. We shook Dre punk ass, now we out of the closet. Mobb Deep wonder why nigga blewed them out. Next time grown folks talk, nigga close your mouth. Peep me, I take this war shit deeply. Done seen too many real players fall to let these bitch niggas beat me. Puffy lets be honest you a punk or you will see me with gloves. Remember that shit you said to Vibe about me bein a thug”</td>
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<td>Tenet 10: HHNL incorporates sociopolitical realities and experiences (Alim 2004).</td>
<td>“HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf the HHN,” and therefore, “rappers are insightful examiners of the sociopolitical matrix within which HHNL operates” (Alim 2004, 394). This can be observed in “All Eyez on Me” (1996d).</td>
<td>“The feds is watchin, niggaz plottin to get me. Will I survive, will I die? Come on let’s picture the possibility. Givin me charges, lawyers makin a grip. I told the judge I was raised wrong, and that’s why I blaze shit. Was hyper as a kid, cold as a teenager.”</td>
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**Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations**

Because of the poetic oration used by 2Pac, many consider Tupac Shakur a sociopolitical orator of Black experiences. In his music, 2Pac used HHNL to become a rap griot. Although released decades ago, 2Pac’s music continues to reflect relevant realities present in society today. Using HHNL, 2Pac relayed sociopolitical truths, urged the
resistance of sociopolitical oppressions, and encouraged the resilience of the Black community against sociopolitical injustices. This is evident in his discussions of police brutality and harassment, his call for counterattacking oppressions, and his reassurance of the Black community’s strength to continue surviving. Tupac was an avid social activist, whose legacy and activisms continue to live on through the teachings of his music. His music is symbolic and provides the awareness needed to spark change amongst the masses.

This linguistic analysis adds to the existing literature on HHNL and examinations of Tupac’s work and experiences. While providing significant information, this piece does have limitations. The Hip Hop Nation is global, expands outside the US and throughout the diaspora, and transcends racial and ethnic boundaries yet, this research is largely African American centered. Future studies can examine Tupac’s language use and impact from a more global perspective. In addition, this research only includes information from a portion of the songs released before Tupac’s death. An all-inclusive study could assess every song on the five albums to better understand how all of the music released before his death does or does not exhibit aspects of HHNL. Other research conducted could yield varying results, as findings could reflect different tenets of HHNL. After all, since art and language are subjects of interpretation, understandings of HHNL and primary sources could vary. Future research could also build upon this work by examining sociopolitical examples throughout Tupac’s body of music. Future comparative studies might also consider some of the similarities and differences that distinguish the HHNL used by Tupac and other rap artists. Finally, rather than just using music created by Tupac, further research could consult interviews, speeches, poetry, and other primary sources that could provide insight on Tupac’s use of HHNL.

In conclusion, the stories and narratives of the oppressed are extremely relevant and very necessary. Communicating the everyday realities of such groups could lead to serious conversations around solutions, could make space for prevention of such oppressions, or could encourage the much-needed discussions of resistances required for the subjugated. For example, better understanding the cycle of mass incarceration, the systemic oppression of Black people, and the experiences of teenage mothers could prompt resolutions, deterrence, or counter responses, all of which could be connected to some of Tupac’s (possibly prophetic) music and activisms.

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