

Hussle and Motivate: An Afrocentric Understanding of Constitutive Rhetoric Toward Economic Empowerment in Nipsey Hussle's *Victory Lap* Album

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Abstract

This essay examines the rhetorical strategies of the late Nipsey Hussle regarding the intersection of cultural rhetoric, identity, economic success, and financial literacy. Using what I call Afrocentric constitutive rhetoric as a methodological lens, I argue that Nipsey empowers his listeners toward an identity of economic success, specifically for marginalized communities, underscoring the ontological capacity of Hip-Hop rhetoric. To support this claim, I analyze select lyrics from Nipsey's Grammy-nominated album, *Victory Lap*, released in 2018. Further, I illuminate the culturally distinct qualities of Nipsey's rhetoric by coupling theorizations of Afrocentricity and constitutive rhetoric and its impact on identity formation for his listeners. Finally, I maintain that a cultural approach to constitutive rhetoric positions scholars to better understand the nuance of culturally specific rhetorical productions related to identity and economic empowerment.

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On March 31st, 2019, the Hip-Hop community received news that 33-year-old, Nipsey Hussle (born Ermias Joseph Asghadam), was tragically murdered in Los Angeles, California, at his business, The Marathon Clothing Store, in broad daylight. According to reports, Nipsey was shot six times (along with two bystanders) after a minor confrontation over the alleged perpetrator's reputation as a "snitch" (TMZ, 2019). While we may never know what words were exchanged between Nipsey and his alleged killer, his untimely death brought tremendous grief to the Crenshaw community and Hip-Hop fans nationwide.

Nipsey began as a local rap star from Los Angeles, California, whose early popularity flourished through his mixtapes, *Slauson Boy Volume 1* and *Bullets Ain't Got No Name Volumes 1 to 3* from 2005 to 2009. However, Nipsey's rise to national prominence began with the release of his debut album, *Victory Lap* (Nipsey Hussle, 2018). Despite his initial reputation as a Rollin' 60s Crip gang member, his success as a musician led him to become a change agent in his community. According to Kelley (2018) of the *Los Angeles Times*, Nipsey "cut the ribbon on a combination co-working space and STEM center in the Crenshaw district," launched under the moniker Vector90 to address the lack of diversity in the STEM fields. Nipsey had also given a \$10,000 donation to 59th Street Elementary school in Los Angeles to refurbish the basketball courts (Wire, 2018). Before his untimely death, Nipsey continuously invested in his community, attempting to make a difference in the lives of individuals from his neighborhood. Much of this pivot from gangsta to entrepreneur and economic freedom advocate is expressed throughout Nipsey's debut album, *Victory Lap*, which this essay explores.

Public and Academic Commentary on Nipsey and His Album

Victory Lap garnered significant praise from Hip-Hop critics upon its release. According to Skelton (2018), of *Complex*, a popular Hip-Hop magazine, *Victory Lap* debuted at number four on the Billboard 200, selling an estimated 53,000 units, making it a commercial success. As expected, the "Marathon" theme continued to be embedded in his music, as displayed in the previous mixtapes, signifying a never-quit attitude on the road to success.

Glaysher (2018) of *XXL*, a popular Hip-Hop magazine, notes that “[Nipsey’s] street talk here is scripture-worthy—he practically evangelizes the gospel of how to maneuver and escape the trap.” Glaysher (2018) adds, “Victory Lap is heavy on thug motivation. . . .” Similarly, Pearce (2018) of *Pitchfork*, an online music magazine, adds, “[Nipsey] raps are still riddled with flashbacks to gangland survivalism, but he’s focused on his pivot to legitimacy, how he flipped Crippling on Crenshaw into a lucrative indie-rap career and then flipped that into an entrepreneurial enterprise.” Pearce (2018) further contends, “Black capitalism is foremost on his mind these days; he wants to build up his community and get others to follow, advocating for the grooming of more strong black men.”

In addition to Hip Hop critics’ commentary, academics have generally shown interest in Nipsey Hussle. While not precisely addressing the *Victory Lap* album, other scholars have examined Nipsey’s legacy, including analysis of tribute songs or posthumous references to him and his overall message on issues of race, culture, economics, health, and communalism (Kenner, 2022; Laurant, 2019; Magaña, 2022; McFerguson & Durham, 2021; Ralph, 2019; Seth et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). For instance, Miles (2022) conducts an ethnographic content analysis, analyzing ten posthumous released songs referencing Nipsey Hussle and his message. Miles (2022) concludes that Hip-Hop artists’, in this case, referencing Nipsey Hussle’s message and legacy, serve as “a form of consciousness that acknowledges our [collective] existence. . . our desire to care for Nipsey [and] our understanding of the conditions he faced” (p. 12). For Miles (2022), understanding Nipsey’s message may assist in new ways of surviving under an anti-Black regime. While the studies mentioned above offer insights regarding Nipsey Hussle, *rhetorical* attention to his discourse, particularly regarding his emphasis on community based economics and financial literacy, is absent.

Hip-Hop and the Rhetoric of Economic Empowerment

To address this gap in the literature, I argue that attending to how Hip-Hop artists like Nipsey Hussle rhetorically construct empowering messages regarding economic and financial literacy is essential for several reasons. First, such an intellectual endeavor could provide more awareness and access to economic resources, particularly for marginalized individuals and communities, to advance their socioeconomic status. Second, understanding how rhetors empower their audiences to adopt an identity toward economic and financial literacy may provide a robust understanding of how rhetoric constructs identity, in this case, for audiences who desire more control over their

economic destiny to survive in a capitalist system. Lastly, comprehension of rhetorical messages about economics and financial literacy from Hip-Hop artists (some of the most influential rhetors in the contemporary era) may become vital in the movement toward economic equity and justice.

Historically, several Hip-Hop artists have rapped about the value of economics and financial literacy. For instance, The Notorious B.I.G. (1994) once said in his infamous song, “Juicy,” “damn right, I like the life I live ‘Cause I went from negative to positive’.” Here The Notorious B.I.G. is communicating a rhetoric of economic empowerment by conveying to his listeners that he prefers his current lifestyle, where money is no longer scarce, over his impoverished upbringing. The Notorious B.I.G.’s recognition of his previous identity as impoverished and in need of change to a more financially astable subject position is implied. A contemporary example can also be observed in the rhetoric of Seattle-based Zimbabwean American rapper, Drazé. Drazé strongly advocates for what he calls the “Black Wealth Movement.” In a song titled “Building Black Wealth,” Drazé (2020) raps, “where your treasure is, then your heart will be, so I spend money with folks who look like me.” Drazé explains the power of cooperative economics among Black communities in this excerpt. In an interview regarding the song, Drazé explains his message: “It’s about putting real dollars into the hands of African-Americans. To me building Black wealth is a practical response to the issues of gentrification, healthcare, education, healthy food. It all ties back to one thing, money” (Russell, 2020). In brief, Hip-Hop has had a long tradition of addressing issues such as economic and financial literacy.

In this essay, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of select lyrics from the following singles off the *Victory Lap* album: “Last time that I checc’d,” “Rap Niggas,” and “Young Nigga” because of their emphasis on economic and financial literacy. I utilize these songs as case studies to explore how Nipsey rhetorically empowers his listeners to embrace an identity toward economic and financial freedom. Further, this essay is interested in interrogating the ontological function of the “rhetoric of economic empowerment.” I define the rhetoric of economic empowerment as *an active call to symbolically improve or grant access to economic freedom and liberation to establish an individual’s or community’s citizenship and agency* (Bradfield, 2010; Fisher, 2016; Jones, 2017; Leaven, 2020; Stillion Southard, 2017). To clarify, rhetorical analysis (or criticism) is a “qualitative research method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (Foss, 2017, p. 6). In this way, rhetorical analysis or criticism is a method that seeks to determine how symbols, such as words or phrases, influence our understanding of

reality, in this case, identity. For Communication scholars, rhetorical criticism is employed to make sense of the speaker's messages (i.e., symbols), operating under the assumption that reality is based on the symbolic expressions used by speakers.

Because symbolic expressions are rooted in culture and identity (Borchers & Hundley, 2018), I employ what I am calling an Afrocentric constitutive rhetorical approach to make sense of Nipsey's rhetoric. Given Nipsey's cultural heritage as an Eritrean American, evaluating his rhetoric through an Afrocentric lens is proper. Additionally, the theory of constitutive rhetoric is essential, given this essay's emphasis on probing the ontological function of Nipsey's rhetoric. I contend that Nipsey employs three culturally distinct constitutive appeals: storytelling, ancestry, and the illusion of freedom. I specifically place the theory of constitutive rhetoric in conversation with Afrocentricity to underscore the culturally distinct quality of Nipsey's rhetoric of economic empowerment. Before diving into the analysis, it is appropriate to provide a brief background on how Afrocentric and rhetorical scholars have understood notions of identity.

Intersections of Identity, Afrocentricity, Constitutive Rhetoric, and Hip-Hop

For Afrocentric scholars, identity is rooted mainly in culture and commonality among an ethnic group (Asante, 1998; McDougal, 2020). From the Afrocentric view, Africans across the diaspora share a common bond regarding their cultural history, sensibilities, beliefs, and spirituality, among other areas (Asante, 1998; Karenga, 2003; Mazama, 2002; Smith, 2020). However, because of colonization, racism, and systemic oppression, Afrocentric scholars contend that many Africans across the diaspora have been culturally, psychologically, and intellectually dislocated (Archie, 2009; Asante, 1998, 2002; Mazama, 2001). With such dislocation, Afrocentricity serves as a corrective to improve the condition of Africans across the diaspora by igniting agency within its people and correcting the historical narrative of Africa and its contributions to the world. Afrocentricity, according to its chief proprietor, Asante (2007), is distinguished by five characteristics:

- (1) An intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs.
- (2) A commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class.

- (3) A defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature.
- (4) A celebration of “centeredness” and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people.
- (5) A powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people.

This notion suggests that identity for Africans across the diaspora can be understood as a consciousness of a collective African cultural identity, interest in the liberation of African peoples, and the centering of traditional African values in one’s analysis of reality. Given this conception of an Afrocentric identity, numerous academics have employed Afrocentricity as a framework to understand Hip-Hop. Several scholars studying Hip-Hop using an Afrocentric lens have concluded that Hip-Hop illuminates the agency of Black people, promotes collective self-esteem, is a liberatory form of education (in formal and nonformal ways), and Black pride (Dixon et al., 2009; Ginwright, 2004; Roberts, 1994; Watkins, 2001). Cummings and Roy (2002) explore the manifestations of Afrocentricity in Hip-Hop music through a rhetorical analysis of an array of songs. They conclude by noting that the sampled lyrics in their study “seems to be achieving balance, harmony, and transcendence in the community” (p. 74), critical components of the Afrocentric idea. In short, Afrocentricity has been a valuable lens for understanding identity within the rhetoric of Hip-Hop.

In addition to Afrocentric scholars, rhetorical scholars have also been concerned with the ontological capacity of rhetoric to construct identity (Burke, 1969; Lyne, 1985; Mailloux, 1991; J. B. White, 1985). For many rhetorical scholars, Charland’s (1987) conception of constitutive rhetoric has been regarded as one of the most influential essays on the relationship between rhetoric and identity. At a broad level, Charland (1987) identifies three vital ideological components of constitutive rhetoric, (a) narrative, (b) ancestry, and (c) the illusion of freedom. For Charland (1987), rhetoric’s capacity to constitute individuals to adopt a particular identity transpires through three ideological effects: a series of consistent stories about a community, the calling forth of an ancestral link (not necessarily familial) from one generation to another, and the symbolic creation of an illusion of freedom for its audience. In this way, the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric “does not simply position the individual toward action. It positions the individual toward the ‘correct’ action” (Hill, 2016, p. 40). Given this notion, constitutive rhetoric is a discourse that helps audiences form a “correct” or favorable identity (i.e., identity formation). I will return to these three ideological effects in

the analysis. Other scholars have also contributed to the comprehension of constitutive rhetoric in areas such as religion, sports, politics, and advertisement, essentially confirming Charland's initial conception of constitutive rhetoric (Andon, 2023; Buller-Young, 2022; Cowan, 2021; Putman & Cole, 2020; Zagacki, 2007).

More specifically, the rhetorical tradition of Hip-Hop has emphasized related topics to constitutive rhetoric, such as Black identity, politics, and resistance through discursive cultural productions of authenticity and the notion of "keepin' it real" (Armstrong, 2004; Fraley, 2009; Hess, 2005; Rubin, 2016). In terms of its constitutive function in shaping its listeners' identity, for example, Kumanyika (2015) analyzes the social justice campaigns of a local Hip-Hop activist group based in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, IHood Media. Kumanyika (2015) notes that IHood Media's rhetoric transformed disparate individuals into a collective subject to fight for social justice regarding police brutality and systemic oppression. He concludes that IHood Media's rhetoric ultimately "invites its audiences to feel consubstantial with their experiences of injustice. . . [and] offers a multi-faceted representation of social action" (p. 448). Here, constitutive rhetoric in the context of Hip-Hop can help form a collective identity for its constituents.

While some may argue that identity is formed at several levels and must be negotiated to become actualized (Hecht et al., 2003; Phinney, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 2005), for many rhetorical scholars, identity is primarily constructed through the symbolic actions of the rhetor. Powell (2005), for instance, contends that identity formation is fundamentally anchored in discourses that embody the rhetor's fluid values and aspirations. Powell (2005) further asserts that "symbolic material," the relationship between symbols and self-actualization, plays a crucial role in developing one's identity. As Cramer and Hallett (2010) accurately note, "the selection of particular words can be a powerful tool in the construction of identity" (p. 257). Cramer and Hallett's (2010) interests in the influence of symbols as a constitutive force, along with the studies mentioned above, underscores the heuristic value of constitutive rhetoric as a lens to attend to Nipsey's rhetoric. Now that I have discussed how Afrocentricity, constitutive rhetoric, and Hip-Hop intersect with notions of identity formation, I turn to my analysis to offer the theory of Afrocentric constitutive rhetoric, using *Victory Lap* to illustrate and support such framework.

Constructing an Afrocentric Constitutive Rhetorical Approach to Hip-Hop

Nipsey's employment of Afrocentric storytelling helps empower his listeners to adopt an identity toward economic prosperity. The efficacy of this

constitutive appeal relies primarily on Nipsey's rhetorical ability to insert *Afrocentric* rhetorical characteristics and imagery in his lyrics that perhaps resemble many of his listeners' communicative practices and sensibilities. In the song, "Last time that I checc'd," Nipsey states:

Look, I laid down the game for you niggas, Taught you how to charge more than what they pay for you niggas, Own the whole thing for you niggas, Re-invest, double up, then explained for you niggas, it gotta be love (Nipsey Hussle, 2018).

In this excerpt, Nipsey tells a cultural story of Black people, particularly from an underserved socioeconomic class, who do not understand "the game" to achieve economic success. Nipsey symbolically inserts his audience in this narrative by explaining how he clandestinely "taught" them how to leverage their social capital into economic prosperity. He furthers this claim by mandating that because of his economic pedagogy, "it gotta be love," denoting that he deserves recognition given his unselfish desire to achieve collective economic success. Collective economic success can be understood as "[an enduring] strategy to build economic stability, wealth, and power to improve quality of life and address existing economic disparities" (Nembhard, 2008, p. 774).

What potentially makes this rhetorical move worthwhile is Nipsey's cultural understanding of Black poverty and his credibility as someone from an underserved background. In addition, Nipsey demonstrates the awareness that many of his listeners are, like he was, perhaps not knowledgeable about how to advance their lives economically. Consequently, when Nipsey uses lines such as "Young niggas in the set," he is speaking directly to gang members and others who live in underserved communities (i.e., the set) who may be financially illiterate as it relates to creating legal wealth. This rhetorical move situates his audience as active participants in his rhetorical narrative.

Nipsey extends this narrative by providing his audience with the imagery of the fluid nature of identity. He adds:

Black owners in this game are powerful races, Young niggas in the set that's doing it makeshift, Out the garage is how you end up in charge, It's how you end up in penthouses, end up in cars, it's how you, Start off a curb servin', end up a boss, It's how you win the whole thing and lift up a cigar, With sweat drippin' down your face 'cause the mission was hard' (Nipsey Hussle, 2018).

In this excerpt, he articulates what life could be like should his audience adhere to his discourse. This rhetorical tactic positions Nipsey's audience as

prospective characters in his narrative plot who are obliged to complete this task of achieving economic success for the story to cohere. Charland (1987) helps us better understand the constitutive function of storytelling when he explains that “to tell the story of [a member(s) from a particular community] is implicitly to assert the existence of a collective subject” (p. 139). This way, storytelling as a constitutive rhetorical function “leaves the audience with the only logical choice to finish the narrative” (Andon, 2023, p. 75). When Nipsey articulates his narrative with a *particular* audience in mind, he is, in effect, attempting to constitute a unified body, thereby cultivating their identity toward economic prosperity. While Nipsey’s message can certainly be absorbed by others who do not occupy an impoverished subject position, his rhetoric is undoubtedly fashioned and perhaps more meaningful for penurious Blacks (albeit hegemonically imposed) seeking economic prosperity.

Furthermore, what makes Nipsey’s storytelling Afrocentric, is his arbitrarily assumed role as the griot, a communal storyteller in traditional West African culture. The griot is “instrumental in holding a community. . . together. . . [for] their physical, spiritual, and intellectual survival” (Banks, 2010, p. 23). Nipsey’s use of Afrocentric storytelling functions effectively with his audience because stories, as White (2006) puts it, “serve a powerful function . . . [and] help us to make sense of our worlds and help us to know ourselves in the midst of incompleteness” (p. 35). In this sense, Nipsey’s Afrocentric storytelling helps his audience move their identity from incompleteness to completion (i.e., economic prosperity), essential for their continued existence in a capitalist society. Scholars have noted that the value of an Afrocentric worldview, in terms of identity formation, is that it promotes high self-esteem in Black individuals, which in turn helps one achieve personal goals due to the agency this worldview engenders (Spencer et al., 2001; Velez & Spencer, 2018).

While it is easy to assume that storytelling is a universal rhetorical strategy that can be effective for all audiences, Afrocentric storytelling is perhaps more meaningful to Black audiences because of its ability to connect to an audience in a culturally specific way. All discourses and knowledge are rooted in culture. Asante (1998) notes, “cultural differences do exist and must be explained by perspective” (p. 184), implying that when stories are told, what makes them rhetorically effective is the rhetor’s ability to infuse rhetoric and themes rooted in the audience’s culture. Even Charland’s (1987) study of the Canadian Québécois movement emphasized the significance of the intersection of culture and rhetoric. Therefore, to erroneously detach culture from rhetoric is to assume that all rhetoric is functional in all rhetorical situations. However, one needs to look no further than the challenges White artists have historically had with dominating the Hip-Hop genre. While there

have been some breakthroughs (delicately stated), such as Vanilla Ice, Eminem, and Macklemore, White artists have struggled to gain significant attention and acceptance from Black listeners due to issues of authenticity and credibility (Armstrong, 2004; Hess, 2005). Hence, Nipsey's employment of Afrocentric storytelling underscores his recognition of the power of speaking from a culturally centered position. Furthermore, this approach facilitates his audience's potential to form an identity that embraces economic prosperity.

Additionally, while Hip-Hop rhetoric has been criticized for promoting hyper-materialism, Nipsey's rhetoric underscores a unique approach toward economics that is more communally based. As described in the excerpt above, Nipsey resists commercial demands of promoting hyper-materialism and instead promotes ownership by acknowledging the epistemological challenges of understanding economics for his culture. He does not assume that everyone shares his knowledge of wealth building and ownership. Said differently, Nipsey promotes an ideology that denounces the "acquisition of goods. . .for short-term use or nonfunctional purpose to maintain one's personal identity. . .[and] status" (Singh, 2022, p. 257). Nipsey's claims are further intensified when he suggests that he deserves recognition because he was willing to engage in the pedagogy of economics rather than keep the information to himself. To that end, Nipsey seeks communal economic success rather than individual success. Nipsey's understanding of cultural rhetoric is further demonstrated in his rhetorical ability to connect his audience with their cultural past.

Sankofa: The Ancestral Link in Hip-Hop Rhetoric

In the song "Rap Nigga," Nipsey raps, "We the No Limit of the West, nigga, Percy Miller at his best, nigga, Jigga with the Rollie and the vest, nigga" (Nipsey Hussle, 2018). Here, Nipsey draws attention to the economic success of the music label, No Limit Records, headed and owned by Master P (Percy Miller). He also highlights a veiled image of Jay-Z (also known as Jigga) with a Rolex watch on his wrist, underscoring Jay-Z's economic success. Not only does Nipsey situate himself with Percy "Master P" Miller and Sean "Jay-Z" Carter, two prominent economically astute Hip-Hop artists, but he also offers these individuals as symbolic illustrations of the value of embracing an identity toward economic success. Visualizing the financial success of Hip-Hop artists like Master P or Jay-Z helps paint a clearer vision of what economic success could entail should one adhere to Nipsey's rhetoric. Hill (2016) notes that "constitutive rhetorics. . .offer individuals new subject

positions to replace or rearticulate previous constitutions rendered problematic or incompatible with the material world” (p. 33). In this way, a listener of Nipsey’s rhetoric may be more inclined, from an intrapersonal perspective, to confront their economic challenges and attempt to advance their identity toward economic prosperity. Due to Nipsey’s discourse being aimed toward Black audiences, primarily from underserved communities, this rhetorical move is theoretically more effective because Nipsey’s primary audience (like his former self) may perhaps be in what Phinney (1993) would call the unexamined cultural identity stage, where economic success and financial literacy may not have been imaginable.

Moreover, his rhetorical investment in the historical connection between various Black cultures and economics enables Nipsey’s constitutive appeal of “ancestry” to function as a source of economic empowerment for his audience. Rather than bring to the fore economically successful outgroup figures who may be unfamiliar to his audience, Nipsey opts to recall the history of financially astute Hip-Hop artists who come from a similar cultural background or, as Mills (2014) suggests, “subject positions with which the audience [already] identifies” (p. 114), thereby enhancing his credibility. The rhetorical use of “ancestry” as an ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric “transcends the limitations of individuality” (Charland, 1987, p. 139). Such rhetorical tactic sanctions the rhetor to draw a closer connection with their audience through discourse, emphasizing a collective identity. In this case, when Nipsey highlights the economic success of Master P and Jay-Z, two culturally familiar artists, he is constructing an ancestral link between himself, Master P, Jay-Z, and his audience. It is important to note that the ancestral link in constitutive rhetoric does not necessarily imply a familial relationship with predecessors or previous generations. Instead, it suggests “a history, motives, and a *telos*” (Charland, 1987, p. 140) for the present audience. As Hill (2016) indicates, “constitutive rhetorics simultaneously constrain actions and provide the subject with agency to enact or resist roles in the ideological narrative” (p. 37). In other words, Nipsey’s constitutive appeals of “ancestry” suddenly position his audience to possibly outgrow their economic limitations and move toward economic prosperity like their non-familial “ancestors,” Master P, Jay-Z, and Nipsey, underscoring the ontological capacity of his rhetoric.

Likewise, in the Afrocentric sense, ancestry is both familial *and* cultural. The Afrocentric idea must not be reduced to (individual) familial dimensions as that would be antithetical to the collectivist objective of Asante and other Afrocentric scholars. Afrocentric scholarship rests on philosophical assumptions that a cultural continuity exists among Africans

across the diaspora and must be recovered to achieve true freedom and liberation (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Mazama, 2002; Smith, 2020). Although Master P and Jay-Z are not family members of Nipsey's listeners, their cultural practices in economics and financial literacy are still prescriptive. It is important to note that Master P and Jay-Z founded their independent record labels in the early to mid-90s before forming partnerships with commercial outlets, respectively. For example, Master P signed an unprecedented deal (at the time) with Priority Records, where he would own the rights to his masters (Cornish, 2016). While this deal was unique at the time, more importantly, it underscores a rhetoric of economic empowerment by a Hip-Hop artist. Master P was only able to resist commercial demands because he was no longer simply an artist but now an independent business owner, giving him more control over his lyrical content. Master P and Jay-Z have an estimated 200 million and 1.3 billion net worth, respectively (Western, 2022). This kind of wealth allows for more control over one's economic destiny.

Asante (2020) writes, "we must reorient our education. . .honor our ancestors, respect our traditions, interrogate our practices, and correct the errors of the past and present" (p. 209). In this way, Hip-Hop artists such as Nipsey, Master P, and Jay-Z can be exceptional exemplars for correcting and reorienting the identities of Black communities in relation to economics and financial literacy. Moreover, these Hip-Hop artists' rhetoric may also assist individuals within Black communities in achieving an identity focused on *ownership* rather than hyper-materialism. While some may question the value of a rhetor's cultural investment of their audience's ancestry, the speaker and the audience are indivisible in the Afrocentric rhetorical tradition. Therefore, they have equivalent authority regarding sense-making in the rhetorical transaction (Alkebulan, 2003; Asante, 1998; Collins, 2001; Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003).

Given this understanding, it is essential that a rhetor, when speaking to a Black audience, observes the audience as an integral component of the meaning and efficacy of the rhetorical transactions, including a robust understanding of the audience's cultural history and lineage. In short, the strategic grouping of other economically successful Hip-Hop artists (e.g., Master P and Jay-Z), both from within the culture, specifically from a class perspective, not only establishes the ancestral link but also bolsters Nipsey's claims about the value of an identity that embraces economic success. While the ancestral link is essential in Nipsey's rhetorical approach, perhaps the illusion of freedom enables his audience to shift their identity toward economic success.

The Power of nommo in Afrocentric Constitutive Rhetoric

Nipsey's ability to manifest an illusion of freedom for his audience rhetorically underscores the constitutive nature of his discourse and emphasizes the Afrocentric characteristics of his rhetoric. The duality of constitutive and Afrocentric rhetorical devices embedded in Nipsey's discourse offers his audience the symbolic opportunity to be unified in identity and a chance to be liberated toward economic freedom. For example, in the song "Young Nigga," Nipsey encourages his listeners by expressing the following:

pressure on your shoulder, How you gon' deal with it? Say it's all uncomfortable when you transitioning, but it's all beautiful when you get rich in it, When you start killing shit and they all witness it, Money roll faster than niggas could spend the shit, Open more businesses with you and your niggas that['s been] watching your vision and being more generate, Like a Ford dealership, we up in Forbes. . . (Nipsey Hussle, 2018)

Here, Nipsey directly addresses his audience about the burden of economic success. However, he reiterates that only through engaging in the chaos that comes with success will one realize their financial potential, manifesting the illusion of freedom for his listeners. The illusion of freedom as an ideological effect "does not just move subjects toward a new identity and goal. It is also moving them away from a former identity and goal. It moves them away from a previous space and demands dissociation with certain previous constitutions" (Hill, 2016, p. 40). As a result, when Nipsey articulates the challenges of embracing an identity toward economic success but later reveals the upside of such endeavor, he gives his listeners the illusion that they, too, can handle the complexities of economic success and freedom.

The Afrocentric quality in the excerpt above lies in the liberating nature of Nipsey's discourse. In the Afrocentric rhetorical tradition, this phenomenon is known as *nommo*, the "generative and sustaining power of the spoken word" (Asante, 1998, p. 96). As a rhetorical device, *nommo* embodies the potentially liberating nature of discourse because of its emphasis on speaker-audience interaction (Townsend, 2019); that is, it avoids a linear communication model. As Yancy (2004) notes, "*nommo* is capable of concretizing the Black spirit in the form of action" (p. 291). When a rhetor draws upon the power of *nommo*, they can sway their audience into believing that they have the agency and power for action to achieve peace and harmony in their lived experiences. In this case, peace and harmony may come from adhering to Nipsey's rhetoric about attaining an identity that embraces economic

prosperity. In short, like constitutive rhetoric, *nommo*, as a cultural-rhetorical product, can offer its adherents an illusion of freedom.

Some may argue that creating the illusion of freedom for an audience can be the most intricate task for the speaker. Zagacki (2007) makes this argument in his analysis of President G. W. Bush's Iraq war rhetoric. He illuminates the paradoxes of constitutive rhetoric in cases where interpretations of ideological concepts such as democracy or freedom are not culturally and historically bound. He further asserts that "at one level of paradox, Bush used the word 'democracy' to designate what the Iraqis *were*, but he employed a word that designated something the Iraqis *were not*" (p. 276). Simply put, the American conception of democracy is foreign to Iraqis. Zagacki highlights in his analysis the paradoxes of constitutive rhetoric, particularly as it relates to the manifestation of the illusion of freedom, is the need for a rhetor to not only come from the culture but also speak from an emic perspective. This notion is why an Afrocentric understanding of constitutive rhetoric is crucial to understanding the power of *nommo* and how orators create such an illusion of freedom in cultural contexts.

Lastly, Nipsey's rhetoric of economic empowerment appeals to his listeners because his message does not paint a picture of economic success as simple and easy. Instead, Nipsey explains that on the road to financial success, it is essential that one is prepared for the challenges that lay ahead. By acknowledging the difficulties of upward economic mobility, Nipsey's rhetoric may appear more authentic, making the illusion of freedom seem viable. This rhetorical message differs from other mainstream artists that encourage hyper-materialism in a way that suggests to listeners "that acquiring more possessions leads to happiness" (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012) without genuinely engaging in critical conversations about the obstacles of amassing wealth. This omission may lead listeners to participate in self-destructive behaviors to attain wealth because they may think the path to economic success will be effortless. Nipsey creates the illusion of freedom for his listeners by drawing on the rhetorical power of *nommo*, a discourse that privileges the emic approach to rhetoric.

Conclusion: Hussle and Motivate the People

This essay aimed to explore Nipsey Hussle's rhetoric, using select lyrics from his debut album, *Victory Lap*. In the analysis, I proposed a theoretical framework, Afrocentric constitutive rhetoric, to demonstrate how Nipsey rhetorically empowered his listeners toward an identity of economic prosperity. The rhetorical moves made by Nipsey demonstrate the significance and ideological effects of culturally centered rhetorics; that is, a speaker must draw upon

an invention that engages the specific cultural history, communicative practices, and sensibilities familiar to their audience. Storytelling exists in all cultures; however, it would be a misreading of the cultural context if the speaker dismisses the language and communicative structure familiar to their audience. In the Afrocentric sense, the narrator plays the role of the griot, the one who is the bearer of tradition, the instructor of morals and life skills necessary for communal survival (Johnson et al., 1997; Kouyate, 1989; Smitherman, 1977). With that said, Nipsey's assumed role as an Afrocentric storyteller (i.e., griot) is paramount in the effectiveness of his rhetoric because of the historical trust Black communities confer to cultural orators regarding interpretations of the world and prescriptions (e.g., the Black preacher).

From a narration perspective, Nipsey's economically empowering rhetoric provided a sense of reality for his adherents by grounding the stories of himself, Master P, and Jay-Z in a culturally unique manner. One cannot simply tell the story of billionaire Jay-Z without first discussing his early drug-dealing days and grind toward economic success. Without such details in the story, an audience may not identify with the rhetoric presented. This notion suggests that stories that figuratively place listeners as key characters within the plot by using familiar emblematic characters are better positioned to construct an audience's identity symbolically. Thus, an Afrocentric constitutive rhetorical approach allows critics to deduce how rhetors empower a community through storytelling in a culturally specific way, in this case, economically.

Next, an analysis of Nipsey's rhetoric reveals the cultural value of his message in promoting a shared identity with his listeners and other economic successes such as Master P and Jay-Z. Because many major labels mandate that Hip-Hop artists promote destructive ideologies, such as hyper-materialism, in their music, it is essential to acknowledge artists who resist those commercial demands that promote short-term ideologies. Rather than be rhetorically constrained by mainstream companies, artists like Nipsey (e.g., Drazé, Master P, and Jay-Z) utilized their rap lyrics to promote identities that emphasize community-based economics, specifically for Black communities. By creating an ancestral link (albeit non-familial) between himself and his listeners, Nipsey symbolically collapses "time and space. . .so that narrative identification occurs, regardless of any historical or geographic separations among [listeners], and the [listener] takes their place within the reality and the collective identity that the rhetoric constructs" (Putman & Cole, 2020, p. 210). In this manner, Nipsey's rhetoric regarding adopting an identity toward economic success and freedom is hypothetically inescapable for his audience due to the creation of an ancestral link; that is, the listeners are held in abeyance from resisting his proposal of a new subject position that

embraces economic advancement. As Hill (2016) accurately explains, constitutive rhetoric exists at the “intersections of ideology, collective identity, and unity” (p. 31). Hence, an Afrocentric constitutive rhetorical approach may assist scholars in better assessing how the ancestral link, as an ideological effect, can emancipate marginalized communities toward corrective action that could lead to liberation and freedom.

Finally, interrogation of Nipsey’s lyrics underscores Hip-Hop rhetoric’s power in terms of identity formation for its listeners. The ideological effect of the “illusion of freedom” from an Afrocentric constitutive rhetorical standpoint speaks to the value of *nommo* or esthetics in Afrocentric discourse. Asante (1998) notes, “[Afrocentric rhetoric] convinces an audience not merely through attention to logical substance but through the power to fascinate, to generate energy. . . the speaker’s ability to convince is greater than if he or she attempted to employ a formal logic” (p. 90). Hence, the persuasive force in Hip-Hop rhetoric lies in its ability to convince its followers through its interests and enchantment with vivid imagery and the privileging of the esthetics of language. With this understanding, one can appreciate the value of Nipsey’s rhetoric more readily regarding its ontological capacity. In this way, Nipsey’s rhetoric can allow his audience to actualize an identity that embraces economic success because the lyrics constrain them to “follow through” with the flow of the musical tide. In short, an Afrocentric constitutive approach helps illuminate a more culturally distinct understanding of Hip-Hop rhetorics’ ontological ability to empower identity formation, in this case, toward economic emancipation.

In closing, this study illuminates the value of taking a cultural approach to the theory of constitutive rhetoric. An Afrocentric understanding of constitutive rhetoric helps better describe the nuance and efficacy of Black rhetorical productions. By attending to the Afrocentric qualities embedded in Hip-Hop rhetoric, one is more capable of realizing the constitutive nature and the ontological capacity of Hip-Hop discourses to influence identity formation, particularly in marginalized communities. As Lindsay-Dennis (2015) accurately notes, “socialization constitutes the indirect and direct messages transmitted from one generation to the next that contribute to identity formation” (p. 511). Simply put, active listening to Hip-Hop music is a socialization process that contributes to identity formation, preferably in a positive direction. To that end, Hip-Hop artists possess the rhetorical power to shape the identity and economic landscape for Black communities across the diaspora, as Nipsey did before his untimely demise.

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