

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Self Construction: Bibliomancy, AWP in Portland & Nipsey, Part 2

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, July 31st, 2019

A widely quoted axiom is that success is where opportunity meets preparation. The combination of hard work, living intentionally, and studying your craft culminates into the process of self construction. The process of self construction is something that the great science fiction writer Octavia Butler wrote a lot about. Both Octavia Butler and the late legendary Los Angeles hip hop artist Nipsey Hussle became who they wanted to be against all odds. They constructed themselves meticulously and knew exactly what they were doing.

This 2 part essay connects the dots between Self Construction, Bibliomancy, the AWP conference in Portland in March of 2019 and Nipsey Hussle. The essay is an omnibus account that discusses self construction, books as synchronicity, serendipity, the technology of the self, Foucault's Heterotopia, poets in Portland, Experiments in Joy and Funk as Testimony along with Octavia and Nipsey.

Read [Part 1: Bibliomancy](#).

Part 2: Nipsey Hussle, Social Agency, The Future of the City

The day after I got back from Portland, Los Angeles hip hop artist and local entrepreneur Nipsey Hussle was shot and killed. Hussle was shot in front of his retail store on Slauson in a shopping plaza that he owned and operated. [Nipsey's magnitude](#) has been recounted in countless articles, but essentially he is celebrated not only for his poignant music but the initiative and direct agency that he actualized in his immediate environment as an entrepreneur and community activist.

Nipsey's death hit particularly close to home for me because he was shot less than 1,000 feet away from my first teaching job at View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter High School. I taught at View Park from January 2008 until June of 2010. Moreover, not only did many of my students know Nipsey, his younger sister was in my class.

Monique Mitchell explains further: "Nipsey was our hood Jesus. He was a gift from the Black Madonna. He had knowledge of self, and embodied it. He walked, spoke, thought, and loved like a man who knew who he was, who knew who his people were. He is a man who came to remind us of our power. And he did."

Shortly after Nipsey's demise, *LA Taco* stated in their weekly Podcast that "There are Nipsey Hussle's Everywhere." *LA Taco* is correct in this statement because all over the city there are artist entrepreneurs working hard on their craft in the same spirit as Nipsey. I have met hundreds of these artists over the years and dozens of them have been my students.

Located on Crenshaw between 57th and Slauson, View Park started in the early 2000s and the school's mission was to get inner city students into the Top 100 colleges across the nation. (This happened. Almost all of the students went on to attend top schools and to accomplish incredible things.) I was hired to teach Poetry, Creative Writing and I eventually taught Journalism and Fiction as well.

It was in the first week of my Poetry class in early 2008 that I first learned about Nipsey Hussle. I was excited to be teaching near Leimert Park and I was thrilled to talk about local poets and hip hop pioneers like the Watts Prophets, Kamau Daaood, Freestyle Fellowship, Wanda Coleman, Medusa, Pam Ward, Peter J. Harris and Jayne Cortez. During this time, I was deep in researching poetic history like the Black Arts Movement and all of the funk and soul records from the 1960s and 70s that hip hop producers like DJ Premier, Pete Rock, Dilla and Dr. Dre were sampling.

I would bring in my boombox and play A Tribe Called Quest, DeLa Soul, Pharcyde, Freestyle Fellowship, Pete Rock & CL Smooth and other groups from that era. I would also talk about the legacy of Central Avenue, the music teacher Samuel Browne, Horace Tapscott and his Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra, the Watts Writers Workshop, the World Stage and how the Black Arts Movement in LA moved from Watts to Leimert Park from the 1960s into the 21st Century. Some of the students would dig it. The hip hop heads liked learning about how these producers sampled Roy Ayers, Donald Byrd, Marvin Gaye and James Brown.

The legacy of the community arts movement in Black Los Angeles was a theme I returned to again and again. One of the students, now a music producer, Dwayne Washington, told me he grew up playing music in Leimert Park. Nonetheless, they were often unimpressed with the stories or they just thought I was nostalgic, stuck in the past and playing oldies. Within a few days, one of the students asked me if I knew who Nipsey Hussle was. I told him I had heard of the old school comedian, Nipsey Russell.

Building Community with Neighborhood Nipsey

The student immediately let me know that Nipsey Hussle was a local MC that lived nearby and that he was up and coming. He also told me that Nipsey had a vision for improving the community in a similar spirit to the older artists I spoke about and that Nipsey always looked out for everyone in the neighborhood. I looked Nipsey up online and was glad to be put up on game. Even in 2008, he was already a neighborhood legend with a significant local and online following.

My student's story about Nipsey taught me to pay attention to my students' interests and use artists in class that they can relate to. I started having them write about their surroundings and their family stories. We would go out onto Crenshaw sometimes and I asked them to write about what they saw in their daily lives. I also decided to run my class like an open mic. We would write and then perform it right after they wrote it.



Eventually we even had an open mic in my class everyday at lunch. Having the students share their

words was much better than me lecturing about the past. Besides the act of having the students express their voices everyday was the very embodiment of the community arts movement I was always talking about. Monique Mitchell was one of those students and she took to Poetry instantly.

Monique's older brother [Dante Mitchell](#) was also one of those students. He was my student in 2008, the year before I had Monique. Now 11 years later, he records with fellow MC, Alonzo Wells aka ZOth3rd and their producer Mannie Jay. Their crew is called CIPHER COMPLETE, and their teamwork on stage is like EPMD. They exude charisma and always rock a crowd. They use hip hop to promote community activism.

Beyond their music Dante and Alonzo have each worked for over a decade with youth teaching sports and creative writing. They recently hosted a youth book drive at Esowon Books in Leimert. They will be hosting a Back to School Drive in August providing school supplies, teaching the process of making beats, and providing free haircuts for the youth. Their music consists of riveting stories of inner city living over soulful beats. Similar to Nipsey, they aim to inspire listeners to pursue their dreams. Their self-titled debut album, "the CIPHER COMPLETE," will be dropping soon.

Dante's girlfriend, [Assata Madison](#), also went to View Park and she too is an artist entrepreneur. She is a choreographer, tap dancer and teaches boot camps to young women building self-esteem and tap skills. Assata is a member of Syncopated Ladies, a Female Tap Dance Band created by the Emmy-nominated tap dancer and choreographer, Chloe Arnold, protege of Debbie Allen.



Assata and Dante are a power couple in the same way that Nipsey and his partner Lauren London were. Assata has performed worldwide with the Syncopated Ladies. Their viral videos have amassed over 50 million views and they have worked with Beyonce, performed on *Good Morning America*, at the US OPEN, and they have also performed to sold-out audiences in their full-length concert, "Syncopated Ladies: Live."

Another former student sharing the social agency of Nipsey, Dante and Assata is Khadijah McCaskill. [Khadijah McCaskill](#) was my student for two years at View Park Prep. First in Journalism and then in Creative Writing and Poetry. Khadijah was the Editor of the school paper by her 10th grade year and she has since graduated from Bryn Mawr University, taught in Costa Rica and worked with several nonprofits in both Washington D.C. and Los Angeles.

Khadijah is a freelance writer and she grew up a few houses south of Slauson right by La Brea. She remembers seeing Nipsey on the Metro bus all the time. Khadijah recently told me:

"My mom drove me to school my freshman year for the last time. I sat up straight, paying attention to the route more than ever. I was going to take the bus from now on. Even though I was happy for the freedom, I was still nervous. Sometimes my friends would get on the bus with me. We would laugh and drop coins as we piled on the bus, excited to be done with school. 'That's Nipsey,' my friends would whisper darting their eyes towards the back of the bus. I knew he was some local rapper. We had a lot of local rappers. Not many of them rode the bus. It happened all of the time. 'That's Nipsey.'

"It happened so much that it became a habit for me to get on the bus and dart my eyes towards the back. He wouldn't always be there. Time went on, my friends started driving. It seemed

like Nipsey did too. It seemed like posters for his mixtape were on every post and pillar on ,what is now, Obama Blvd. And he was there too.’“There’s Nipsey’s car!’ A sleek, inconspicuous, black car would glide by. I was visiting LA from college in Philadelphia. Nipsey had blown up for real this time! The posters on the bus stops had turned into friends on the east coast trying to put ME on. One late-night run to Seven-Eleven. On Slauson? You know the one. Nipsey rolled up right next to us.”

Ebony McCaskill is not related to Khadijah but they were both stalwarts in my Journalism class. Ebony was a freshman the year that Khadijah was a senior and they both wrote exceptional articles. Ebony was in my Fiction class the following year and she also ended up winning awards for her short stories. She graduated from Brown University and is now back in Los Angeles teaching Math.

Ebony is exercising the same social agency that Nipsey, Monique, Dante, Alonzo and Khadijah are. She recently told me about how much she enjoys teaching. “I teach at a high school in Watts,” she said, “and before then I served at a middle school just 5 minutes away from where I went to school. While in college, I saw the necessity of going back into the communities that helped shaped me. Teaching math with the visibility of a black, queer woman puts me in a position to inspire my students with the expectation that they will do the same when they get older.”

Three other students in the same Journalism class that Khadijah and Ebony were in are Dari Smith, Miles Patrick and Kay Franklin. Miles Patrick now makes beats and did the cover art for the student poetry book I published two years in a row. Dari wrote incredible record reviews for our school paper and his vocabulary was always off the charts. He and Kay Franklin are lifelong friends and they have collaborated on musical projects and live events across the city. Kay Franklin was up on the beats of J Dilla back in 2008 and he always impressed me with his musical knowledge. Dari and Kay are old souls and they continue to prosper.

Dari describes Kay’s music: “I’ve heard him transition through styles and I have heard folders worth of instrumentals that some people would probably love to have in their library. Now that hip-hop has become what it is in 2019, I cannot just box him into a genre.” Kay rhymes but he also sings and he was rocking the house back in the 11th grade a decade ago. Kay and Dari live just blocks away from where Nipsey did. One of Kay’s latest tracks includes [an animated video](#).

There are more students than I have the space to name that are paying it forward in this same fashion. One more is Candace Lee. She was also my student at View Park in 2009 and now she is a Senior Environmental Specialist at Metro. She graduated from Pomona College in 2014 and she is already doing innovative work in sustainability and green infrastructure and leading the charge in projects using permeable pavement and other methods to save water.

There are also more musical groups like ShadowsOfSociety, started by former student [Christopher Siders](#). Siders, like Dante Mitchell is involved in both community activism and hip hop. While he attended California State University Monterey Bay, he was on the frontlines as an ally fighting for gender equity and feminism. He directed and acted in plays, hosted a radio show, wrote freelance articles and performed spoken word at Dominican University, Stanford University and dozens of high schools. He even conducted feminism workshops at Soledad Correctional Facility with his friend Janice Bonello.

All the while Siders was doing all of this work, he has been a part of collective of hip hop artists

called ShadowsOfSociety. They came together at View Park in 2009. Siders was one of the leaders of our Writers United Poetry club that met everyday in my room at lunch to share poems. Siders is joined in this collective by Ivan Anderson, Jay Stevens and sometimes, [Jamal Carter](#). They aim “to continue the tradition of challenging the current soundscape of hip hop by fusing sounds from other genres such as Pop, Techno, Industrial, Soul while staying true to the art form of creating fun, thought provoking lyrics and content.”



Dante Mitchell, Monique Mitchell, Jamal Carter

The name ShadowsOfSociety is intentional. “Ghosts like shadows are everywhere,” Siders tells me. “Shadows like ghosts come from everything. The difference is that shadows, are visible everywhere. Almost to the point that they can go unnoticed oddly enough. We were those shadows once upon a time until we began to scream loudly. Scream boldly and mean it. Shadows on the rise. From the ashes to the Mothership and beyond.”

Hundreds of Nipseys

It is incredible to see all of these students making a difference around Los Angeles and beyond. Justin May is another student from my Journalism class a decade ago. He has worked in the corporate world since graduating from UNLV on Brand Development and digital marketing and recently he decided to start his own Management Company, “[Uptown Access Creative Group](#).” May told me that he grew up with so many talented musicians and artists that he wanted to partner up with them and utilize his astute business ability to promote and empower artists so they could concentrate on creating rather than the business side.

Besides the students, my former colleagues are also doing great things. [Cassandra Lane Rich](#) and I taught the Journalism Class together one year at View Park. She has worked as a journalist and English teacher and she is now the managing editor of *LA Parent* and before that she worked for the Dodgers. Cassandra has mentored legions of young writers and she reads her work across the city. She is a generous colleague and whenever we see each other we reflect back on the incredible students we had in common at View Park.

In Fall of 2014, I started teaching at Southwest College, on Imperial Highway in the area between Watts and Inglewood. The following year, I taught at St. Bernard High School in Westchester/Playa Del Rey where many of the students were from the Crenshaw District and came from similar circumstances as my former View Park students. I even taught a few younger siblings from former View Park students because some of the Bernard students had gone to View Park for middle school.

These more recent students continue the inspiring legacy that my View Park students started. We have published a number of my former St. Bernard students here at Cultural Weekly including [Rosalinda Flores](#), [Camille Jacome](#), [Givon Hester](#), [Stephanie Escobar](#), [Erin Preimesberger](#), [Chase Perry](#), [Kyana Morgan](#), [Amari Cawthorne](#), [Lucas Elzey](#), [Larry Li](#), [Khaliq Black](#), [Monica Santiago](#), [Czarina Dominguez](#), [Natalie Izabal](#) and [Adam Amanuel](#).

[Adam Amanuel](#) was an exceptional student of mine while I taught at St. Bernard High in 2015. Amanuel is a poet and also award-winning basketball player. He was the MVP in his CIF Section in 2015-2016. Adam grew up on Vermont, just a few blocks west of Exposition Park and USC. He not only continues to write poetry, he has started his own clothing line, **Amore Ami**. Adam is of


Eritrean descent like Nipsey Hussle. His father knew Nipsey's dad well and Adam met Nip a few times around the neighborhood.

"Ermias Asghedom better known as 'Nipsey Hussle' provided hope for kids like myself," Amanuel says. "Nipsey Hussle embodied everything that my fears wouldn't let me and taught me that my fears shouldn't define me but instead should inspire me to conquer them, and how important our time on this earth is and how we capitalize from it. A mentor to many, his dreams will continue to live through us. My father and I were both huge fans of his spirit and music." Amanuel's biggest role models are his father and Nipsey. He met Nipsey a few times because their families were connected. "Though we vaguely knew each other through family," Amanuel shares, "we always seemed connected. Nipsey Hussle gave a boundless dream to an Eritrean kid who strived to be just like him, and I can't thank him enough for that."

Like Khadijah McCaskill noted, there are hundreds of Nipsey Hussles everywhere, they are on the bus, at the market, in the car next to us. Circling back to Octavia Butler and self construction, they are constructing themselves and simultaneously building a better world around us.

Cities in the 21st Century continue to become more complicated and they are only going to improve if citizens come together to contribute. Whether it is Portland or Los Angeles, Foucault's Heterotopias are everywhere and the only way we can bridge the gap is for citizens to invest their spirit and energy in the city. This practice of social agency and investing in the local landscape is what made Nipsey Hussle extra special in addition to the messages in his music. In his song "Bigger Than Life," he states:

*Life is what you make it, I hope you make a movement
Hope your opportunity survives the opportunist
Hopin' as you walk across the sand, you see my shoe print
And you follow 'til it change your life, it's all an evolution
And I hope you find your passion 'cause I found mine in this music
But I hope it's not material 'cause that's all an illusion*

I have seen dozens of young people following the example of Nipsey with their own vision of  improving the city. Coming back to the idea of Bibliomancy mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Nipsey was also an autodidact like Octavia Butler. Through his process of goal setting, research and reading, he harnessed the materials around him to become who he wanted to be.

Luis Rodriguez's book, *Hearts & Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times*, offers a blueprint and vision for creating community in these fractured times and his message aligns with Nipsey Hussle and all the others following his lead. Rodriguez writes: "Almost always the development of a worldview is linked in some way to art—music, the visual arts, dance, writing—to the intersection of external and internal energies that impel is onto a creative terrain where spirit and body, the conscious and unconscious, the universal and the singular, the personal and the social live through us in a delicate dance."

The delicate dance lives on. Nipsey developed his worldview through both his music and entrepreneurial spirit. Though he is gone his legacy continues in legions of youth investing their spirit in rebuilding the city. Some are involved in music, poetry and the arts but others like Candace Lee are making a difference through visionary eco strategies. Others like Ebony McCaskill are educators. There are thousands of young people across Los Angeles and beyond

working behind the scenes to make things better. Others like my current student [Joshua Jones](#) honor their father.

“Nipsey showed us that transcendence is possible when powered by belief of self,” Monique Mitchell says. “He lives on forever in the hearts and lives of his family, friends, and all he touched.” Salute to Nipsey Hussle and the millions of young people following his lead to make a difference in their immediate world and build community. The marathon continues.

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