

“Now I Bang for Christ”

Rites/Rights of Passage

How can I live hip hop and still be Christian?

—RALPH C. WATKINS (HIP HOP DJ AND MINISTER)

God give free will, I choose to walk in love

But don't think 'cause I'm a Christian I forgot how to thug

—KHANCHUZ (GOSPEL RAPPER)

On a sunny and smog-heavy afternoon at Fatburger, Khanchuz and I leaned over greasy cheeseburgers, French fries, and my audio recorder. With eyes closed, he prayed over the hum of traffic: “Father God, thank you for this food we are about to receive. Lord, let it be nourishing to our bodies and strengthening to our spirits, Father God. We invite you to be in our conversation today, Father God. In Jesus’s name, we pray. Amen.”¹ Khanchuz, a former gangbanger and now gospel rapper, offered this “fast food” blessing on the small, caged-in sidewalk patio of a burger chain nestled in the sprawling Crenshaw Plaza shopping complex. Despite our surroundings, in that moment, all felt sacred. While we had only met briefly a week before in July of 2007—where rap star-turned-preacher Kurtis “Blow” Walker was delivering a sermon at the Hip Hop Church L.A. in Inglewood—Khanchuz immediately launched into the intimate details of his life story between slow sips of Sprite. He paused occasionally to wipe back a tear as I struggled to pose careful questions in response to his twisting tale of conversion.

Over a decade earlier in the early 1990s, at the height of the Los Angeles gang wars and amidst recurring environmental disasters, Khanchuz was a gangsta rapper who went by the name “Sleep.” He earned the title from repeatedly passing out in a drunken stupor with his friends. After Khanchuz “got saved,” he contemplated changing his MC name to “Awake,” but eventually settled on “Conscious” after searching an electronic thesaurus. As is typical in hip hop naming practice, he altered the conventional spelling to “Khanchuz”—something, he recalled, that

he used to do with his “homies” when he was “bangin.” Khanchuz’s first God-inspired rap was delivered inside a jail cell in Colorado to the rhythm of his fellow inmate’s plastic spoon tapping against the bars. “And now I bang for Christ,” he told me zealously, which constituted performing his street-hard brand of gospel rap with his hip hop crew ADK (Any Demon Killa) in between part-time work as a youth counselor for a South L.A. group home and a drug test administrant in Long Beach. For Khanchuz and many other gospel rap practitioners, “bangin” was not about selling drugs, pimping women, and toting guns but rather about how he represented his religious beliefs and fervently enacted his loyalty to Christ.² His spiritual repurposing of the term “bangin” was a jab at many of the demonizing discourses associated with “culture of poverty” politics.

Khanchuz was used to fielding questions about his commitment to both hip hop and Christianity. Given his “hardcore” look—tattoos, shaved head, goatee, gold tooth, baggy hip hop attire, requisite black sunglasses, and imposing hyper-masculine stance—most people were surprised to discover that he was a righteous and committed Christian. Across the way from Fatburger, Khanchuz once applied for a job at Wal-Mart where his interviewer asked him if he was “ghetto.” Just south of the Crenshaw Plaza outside his former apartment in Inglewood, prostitutes repeatedly asked him if he wanted to “take a ride” while local drug dealers offered him weed. He would tell them, “Dude, I’m so cool off that. You don’t even know.” And they didn’t. These were the continual acts of questioning and misrecognition that Khanchuz negotiated in his everyday life—on the streets but also in the church as congregants, clergy, and pastors often assumed he was just another impious rapper. As I sat across from him, I couldn’t help but feel that my interview questions were somehow linked to other forms and sites of questioning that he had been involved in with landlords, bosses, passersby, judges, reporters, ministers, police, pimps, and prostitutes.³

Another sip of soda prompted him to rap one of his lyrics: “Obey my thirst like Sprite and thirst for what’s right. I lay hands like Tyson in a spiritual fight.” As Khanchuz spoke of multiple conversions—the transposing of hip hop lexicons and street slang into religious settings, the transformation from performing gangsta rap to gospel rap, and the social and spatial changes that dramatically altered the historically segregated neighborhoods where gospel hip hop practitioners resided and worked—he mapped out a city at once profane and sacred, a city of catastrophe and renewal, a city of incarceration and possibility.

CATAclysmic Cartographies

This chapter focuses on the emergence of holy hip hop practitioners, recognizing that hip hop, as a genre and practice, “goes gospel” because people *convert* to Christianity. Rather than mere autobiography, holy hip hop conversion narratives

articulated complex and cataclysmic entanglements of nature, technology, culture, and the divine.⁴ Amidst narratives and discourses of urban peril and racial uplift, holy hip hop subjects and subjectivities emerged through an assemblage of agential forces and fields of power: the LAPD's policing practices throughout the 1980s and '90s as they represented an increasingly punitive criminal justice system, events and imaginaries linked to environmental disaster, forms of black Christianity, social programs of urban reform, the role of individual social actors, and the agency of religious beings.

In particular, the conversion narratives of gospel rappers such as Soup the Chemist, Khanchuz, B-Love, and Cue remapped and reinforced similar discourses of salvation regarding the *saving* of black youth from the perils of inner-city life, *rescuing* hip hop (especially gangsta rap) from its increasing profanity and commercialism, and *rehabilitating* parts of historically black L.A., especially Inglewood as a "fallen" city. These intersecting stories shared specific narrative parallels of fall and resurrection, disaster and rehabilitation, death and rebirth, mutually reinforcing each other and powerfully shaping how Angelenos defined and experienced L.A. as both utopia and dystopia, heaven and hell.⁵ In particular, this city of sunshine and beaches was the breeding ground for a host of urban anxieties linked to gang violence, natural disaster, inner-city poverty, and rioting throughout the 1980s and '90s. Mike Davis, in *Ecologies of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), examined the barrage of earthquakes, floods, and fires that tormented Southern California during the early 1990s, remarking, "Cataclysm has become virtually routine."⁶ Davis continued:

This virtually biblical conjugation of disaster, which coincided with the worst regional recession in 50 years, is unique in American history, and it has purchased thousands of one-way tickets to Seattle, Portland, and Santa Fe. After a century of population influx, 529,000 residents, mostly middle-class, fled the Los Angeles metropolitan region in the years 1993 and 1994 alone. Partly as a result of this exodus, the median household income in Los Angeles County fell by an astonishing 20 percent (from \$36,000 to \$29,000) between 1989 and 1995. Middle-class apprehensions about the angry, abandoned underclasses are now only exceeded by anxieties about blind thrust faults and hundred-year floods.⁷

What were the *effects* and *affects* of this level of disaster and tragedy on people and places? What stories were told, championed, and circulated in the wake of loss, dislocation, and hostility? How were certain city inhabitants grouped, labeled, and treated in moments of instability? How did people make sense of this landscape of uncertainty through music and other forms of social life? How did individuals, communities, and institutions enact agendas of change and rehabilitation, and which people and places were deemed worthy of such efforts at transformation?

The anxious and fearful rhetorics and imaginaries surrounding these events were articulated and deployed through the often racially inflected lenses of

religion, science, art, and the economic market. The practical and material responses to natural disasters and cultural uprisings—responses of rescue, rehabilitation, lockdown, and evangelism—were shaped by these powerful rhetorics. And yet, the imaginary of “paradise lost” pervaded the varied responses of religious leaders, scientists, musicians, and city officials, among others, as they struggled to “save” their own versions and visions of paradise. In the 1980s and ’90s, the Los Angeles Police Department scapegoated black and brown youth for the ills of urban existence, scientists blamed urban developers for transgressing environmental common sense, and religious radicals pointed the finger at the moral depravity of the entertainment industry. A 1995 *Los Angeles Times* article speculated, “There’s no question that [we are] caught in the middle of something strange . . . maybe God, as the biblical sorts preach, is mad at us for making all those dirty movies.”⁸ In turn, Hollywood has also played a prominent role in promoting and propagating the concept of apocalypse or “Last Days” through the genre of Los Angeles disaster fiction and film.

Along these lines, holy hip hoppers prefigured the City of Angels as modern-day Babylon in their everyday conversations and music. Many gospel rappers emerged in Los Angeles at this particular conjuncture, in the midst of environmental eruptions, social unrest, culture wars, and a web of discourses and debates around urban renewal and redemption unique to California’s Southland. Their holy hip hop soundings were audibly entangled in these complex social assemblages and cartographies of catastrophe.⁹

FONTANA FOUNDATIONS

The story of holy hip hop in the City of Angels begins appropriately with an aural misrecognition and a case of mistaken identity. Soup the Chemist, one of the first African American hip hop MCs to “go gospel” in the 1980s, was in route to a youth church service in Fontana, his new religious hip hop track, “Listen Up,” booming from his car speakers as he pulled into the church parking lot. The year was 1986 and Soup had just committed his life to Jesus.

Soup had been interested in God since boyhood; it was his uncle’s death that first caused him to question the existence of Heaven. He studied many different religions throughout the Inland Empire as a youth, becoming a Jehovah’s Witness, then a follower of the Nation of Islam, and eventually a student of metaphysics. Christianity was difficult for Soup to accept as he did not resonate with the picture of a white Jesus and felt that it was a white man’s religion. He recalled, “I can remember feeling angry after watching *Roots*, and studying the history and philosophy of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.”¹⁰ But after suffering through and surviving a violent head injury, Soup felt that God had saved him.

In the early to mid-1980s, during this time of religious exploration, Soup was equally compelled by hip hop music and culture. Influenced by the early hip hop sounds of Grandmaster Flash, the Cold Crush Brothers, Double Trouble, Run DMC, and Rakim, Soup began training as a DJ at the Delmann Heights Community Center in San Bernardino. He had made his first mixtape in 1983 in remembrance of his musical mentor, DJ Tracy Houston, who was shot to death. In 1986, after a drug-addicted crew member stole all his DJ equipment, he began to question his life of partying and ceased making and listening to hip hop altogether. He sold all his vinyl records and became a member of Loveland church in Fontana. Soup recalled for me the time period following his conversion (also over a Fatburger, but this time fifty miles east of Crenshaw Plaza in Rancho Cucamonga): “For a whole year I did no music, no nothing, but I was going crazy. I hate choir music. It was killing me, so I started writing my own gospel raps. I started writing rhymes for me. I was studying a lot—just trying to understand what the heck I was doing.”¹¹ He then lamented that nobody was making gospel rap in those days except for Stephen Wiley, whom he felt lacked a street sensibility so inherent to hip hop.¹² Two other God-inspired hip hop tracks emerged that same year—Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew’s “All the Way to Heaven” (1986) and MC Hammer’s “Song of King” (1986)—but both releases were squarely planted in the commercial hip hop market. Soup remained apprehensive about integrating hip hop aesthetics with his newly devout lyrics.

Hip hop and Christianity finally merged musically for Soup on his gospel rap track “Listen Up,” where he unveiled a moment in his conversion story on the last verse. Aside from tackling topics such as war, poverty, and terrorism, he rapped about his days as a party animal and how he “couldn’t wait to hit all the clubs, flirt with the freaks and get a buzz.” He pinpointed the moment of his conversion:

Flopped on the couch and turned on the TV
 But there really wasn’t nothing for me to see
 Till this guy on TBN started getting to me
 He said either you will go to heaven or hell
 And if you don’t believe me, time will tell

He fell to his knees and began to pray in front of the Trinity Broadcasting Network—the world’s largest religious network and America’s most-watched faith channel.

Once parked outside the Fontana church, Soup sat in his car with the windows rolled down and listened to some gospel rap tracks he had mixed earlier that day. His slow “old school” rhyming couplets traversed a simple Casio keyboard bass line and sparse, hard-hitting hip hop snare and bass drum hits. A man parked next to him, overhearing the hip hop beat and muffled lyrics of “Listen Up,” approached Soup’s car to reprimand him for playing “that stuff out loud like that” near a house



FIGURE 2. Soup the Chemist above the Los Angeles skyline, c. 2013. Photo courtesy of Daley Hake.

of prayer. But as the man came closer and *listened up* to the exact words, he paused. “Man, are they talking about God in that?” he uttered in surprise. “That track is tight! Who is that?” Soup, still skeptical of how his gospel rap might be perceived by churchgoers, replied cautiously, “Oh, this dude I know. You really like it?” The man asked for a copy of the cassette, which eventually found its way into the hands of the youth pastor at the church.

A few days later, Soup received a call from his new fan, youth pastor Kevin Schubkegel: “Hey man, that guy who’s rapping on the cassette, do you know him?” Soup finally came clean and admitted, “That’s me, man.” Pleased to have located the mystery MC behind this new brand of pious hip hop, Schubkegel immediately invited Soup to rap for the youth of Loveland, who, while somewhat shielded from the gang wars and aggressive policing practices that terrorized residents of South Los Angeles, were also experiencing the effects of racial segregation, deindustrialization, and joblessness.

In the 1940s, Fontana—a historically blue-collar and working-class city east of Los Angeles that Mike Davis refers to as “Junkyard of Dreams”—once offered African Americans the promise of new life in the Citrus Belt: upward mobility, agricultural abundance, and resplendent respite from the urban swarm of inner-city life. *The Eagle*, Los Angeles’s progressive black paper, featured prominent ads for “sunny, fruitful lots in the Fontana area” during this time. Davis explains:

For pent-up residents of the overcrowded Central Avenue ghetto, prevented by restrictive housing covenants (‘L.A. Jim Crow’) from moving into suburban areas like the San Fernando Valley, Fontana must have been alluring. Moreover, Kaiser’s Richmond Shipyards were the biggest employer of Black labor on the coast, and there was widespread hope that his new steel plant would be an equally color-blind employer. The reality in Fontana was that Blacks were segregated in their own tracts—a kind of citrus ghetto—on the rocky floodplain about Baseline Avenue in vaguely delineated “north Fontana.”¹³

It is fitting that holy hip hop in the City of Angels would emerge in Fontana—a city in the heart of the Inland Empire that “has been both junkyard and utopia for successive tropes of a changing California dream” and is still suffering from sedimentations of class inequality and racial segregation.¹⁴ This time the dream was holy hip hop, which signaled a larger dream to reconcile Fontana’s seemingly insurmountable juxtapositions. That gospel rap would share the same birthplace as the Hell’s Angels (emerging just forty years earlier in 1946) is also fitting as they both epitomize the hard-edged, fraternal grace of outlaw culture. Even notorious gangster and bootlegger Al Capone once owned a home there. The house still stands, with a large “C” on the chimney. Soup also used to identify himself with a capital “C” when he was doing secular rap, going by the name Super C. Some say it stands for Super Christian, although Soup later explained that the “er C” stands for “everyday remembering Christ.” To be sure, the emerging sounds of holy hip hop in Fontana sat somewhere between Capone and Christ, gangsterism and grace.

Soup too was caught in between his *street* aesthetic and his newfound loyalty to the *church*. “I’m not a Christian rapper,” he reflected. “I’m a rapper who’s a Christian. I was a rapper first and then I became born-again. I didn’t want to be put in a box where every rap I write had to be about Jesus because that’s not how I live. I wrote

songs that dealt with all sorts of situations—money, all kinds of things.”¹⁵ The first few times Soup performed at youth services in Fontana, he and the congregation were both “tripping out.” This was the first time anyone had heard gospel rap.

Everybody was tripping out. You know, they had never heard Christian rap. It was 1986. So I was like, man, this is a trip. But I was scared to talk because I was still *street*. I wouldn’t talk. And everybody kept saying, “Hey, give your testimony.” I was like, “No no no.” I said, “I go to church but I’m still trying to get myself, you know . . . I ain’t on that level.” “Just rap then,” they said. It made such noise that they wanted me to do it at Sunday service too. I was like, “Aw, I ain’t rapping in no Sunday service, man!” Dude was like, “Nah nah, I’m telling you. Everybody is raving about it. Just do that same song you did.” So I did it again. The beat was real old school—drum machine.¹⁶

An experienced MC and hip hop artist, Soup was still learning how to express himself in the language and format of testimony, unsure whether he could articulate his story and himself in the parlance of the church without resorting to certain kinds of hip hop slang and terminology that might be deemed inappropriate in such a holy setting. For Soup, religious conversion took time and practice.

Eventually, Soup and his gospel hip hop crew—Soldiers For Christ (S.F.C.), which included DJ Dove and emcees Brother G and QP—started getting calls from churches throughout San Bernardino and Ontario. They performed at many different youth services for Victory Outreach churches throughout the area. At one such service, the three hundred young people in attendance rose to their feet, clapping their hands and shouting in praise. One teenage boy was inspired to start writing his own gospel rap lyrics. The next time Soup performed at a Victory Outreach service he pressed up one thousand cassettes of S.F.C.’s first, self-produced gospel rap album, *Fully Armed* (1987). Like “Listen Up,” the album featured the “old school” hip hop drum machine and Casio sounds of the 1980s and contained a wide range of samples from the Philadelphia sound of Gamble & Huff to the theme song from *Happy Days*. A couple tracks featured Soup rhyming in a distinctive reggae-dancehall style and even shouting down “Babylon.” The title track featured a drum machine, record scratching, and a simple four-beat rock guitar riff with Soup delivering faster, more complex rhymes in a more distinctive East Coast style of delivery reminiscent of KRS-One.

The next time S.F.C. performed at Victory Outreach, they sold every last album out of the trunk of Soup’s car in the church parking lot. Soup’s gospel rap was producing cataclysmic reactions throughout the Southland. In order to capture the burgeoning spirit of this new movement, he and DJ Dove coined the phrase holy hip hop. “We started it right there in West Covina. Victory Outreach presents Friday night Holy Hip Hop. They tried to put me in the box of ‘Christian rap,’ so we had to come up with our own saying.”¹⁷ He also changed his name to Soup the Chemist to invoke a new intention behind his music.

An interesting fact about me is that I love clam chowder. I would be on the school bus when I was a kid and while everybody had their potato chips or candy, I'd whip out my can of clam chowder. They called me Soup. That name stuck with me; I dropped the "o" and just kept "Sup." As for the Chemist part, in science, chemistry causes a reaction. I wanted to be a musical scientist or chemist so to speak. When my lyrics hit the ears, a reaction occurs.¹⁸

Later, he would reincorporate the "o." Soup's statement paralleled Pastor Graham's invocation of holy hip hop as *earthquake music*—"music that shakes our souls and moves the ground we walk on." Inspired by his new musical science and the social possibilities of merging hip hop and Christianity, Soup the Chemist began a California movement, Raising a Nation That Will Obey, among the newly emerging Los Angeles-based holy hip hop groups that followed in S.F.C.'s wake. In the late 1980s, the movement was seventy-five strong. Soup assembled all of them in front of the Watts Towers to take a photo for his new album cover. The towers, made of found rebar, steel rods, and glass from soda bottles, have held an important place in the imagination of black art and politics. In the 1960s, "As the gangs began to become politicized, they became 'al fresco' churches whose ministers brought the gospel [of Black Power] out into the streets."¹⁹

And in the late 1980s, as gang wars were raging across L.A., a mass of young black and Latino men gathered in Watts in broad daylight. Soup recalled, "Imagine seventy-five people standing in the street. Everybody thought it was a gang. All the Crips and Bloods were over there. It was funny. They're coming out with their guns thinking it was about to pop off and we're all there with our Bibles. Once they found out what it was they were tripping."²⁰ Another instance of holy hip hop misrecognition. Soup and his Nation were bangin' for a different cause, *fully armed* with Bibles instead of guns, scripture instead of bullets.

GETTING HAMMERED FROM ALL SIDES

While Soup was Raising a Nation That Will Obey, the Los Angeles Police Department, various local community organizations, and the black middle class responded to the prevalence of gang activities in Los Angeles in various ways. During the 1980s, the LAPD, led by Police Chief Daryl Gates, initiated a much more aggressive, stringent, and uncompromising attack on gang culture (*read* young black and brown youth) throughout the greater Los Angeles. Gates began such security policies during the 1984 Olympic Games held in L.A. with expanded gang sweeps, which were implemented across wide areas of the city but especially South Central and East Los Angeles. Between 1984 and 1989, citizen complaints against police brutality increased by 33 percent.

In 1987, the LAPD Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) initiative and antigang task force Operation HAMMER initiated one of the

deadliest assaults on South Los Angeles. CRASH was an elite special operations unit of the LAPD established by Chief Gates in 1977 and tasked with combating gang-related crime. The influx of crack cocaine had dramatically increased gang violence throughout Los Angeles. Initially operating in the early 1970s as a unit of the 77th Street Division of the LAPD under the name TRASH—an acronym for Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums—the name was changed after activists argued that the name was harmful to the image of black and brown youth. By the 1980s, each of the LAPD’s eighteen divisions had been assigned a CRASH unit, and under Operation HAMMER, CRASH officers conducted numerous raids that resulted in the mass arrest and imprisonment of black youth, some of whom were gang members, some of whom were just innocent residents.

On one such raid in 1988, droves of police officers descended on two apartment buildings at the corner of 39th Street and Dalton Avenue. A *Los Angeles Times* article reported:

The police smashed furniture, punched holes in walls, destroyed family photos, ripped down cabinet doors, slashed sofas, shattered mirrors, hammered toilets to porcelain shards, doused clothing with bleach and emptied refrigerators. Some officers left their own graffiti: “LAPD Rules.” “Rollin’ 30s Die.”²¹

The following year, Nancy Reagan accompanied Chief Gates during a drug bust of a “rock house” in what was then South Central. After the suspects were cuffed and arrested, he remarked: “These people are beyond the point of teaching and rehabilitating.”²² This view of innate black criminality began the philosophy behind the modus operandi of the LAPD. Specifically, the dominant discourse regarding young males and crime lumped youth offenders into two groups. White youth were generally considered “delinquents” in the restless and rebellious transition of adolescence who would eventually calm down in a more normative, law-abiding stage of life. Black youth, on the other hand, were considered juvenile criminals incapable of being rehabilitated into functioning, healthy members of society.

The seeds of these attitudes were planted under LAPD Chief William Parker, who was known for his racist commentary and policing tactics that in part fueled the 1965 Watts riots. Those who lived in L.A. in the 1940s and ’50s remember this darker side of Parker, a man who was quoted calling black folks “monkeys” and referring to Latinos from the “wild tribes” of Mexico.²³ During this same time, Chief Parker railed against the activities of the Group Guidance Unit “because they ‘gave status to gang activity’ by treating gang members as socially transformable individuals.”²⁴ By the late 1980s, the insidious nature of these attitudes had grown into a forest of thorns for black and brown youth in Los Angeles attempting to survive and navigate a cityscape of joblessness, dislocation, violence, and abandonment. Gaye Theresa Johnson has argued that “the militarization of urban space, anti-immigration policies, loss of assets, and disenfranchisement” all contributed to what she terms “spatial immobilization” among black and brown poor communities in Los Angeles.²⁵

The successive criminalization of black and brown communities notably coincided with the rise of hip hop music and gangsta rap, especially in Los Angeles. The invocation of “black noise” and sonic terrorism often accompanies discussions about the spiritual poverty of the Hip Hop Generation. It is easy to see how hip hop culture and gang culture become aligned in these larger discourses linking to the “culture of poverty.” While some gospel rappers were actually former gang members, almost all young black men on the streets of L.A. in the 1980s and ’90s fell under the highly inclusive category of “suspected gang member” by the LAPD. One’s religious beliefs don’t always register in the eyes of racial profiling.

As Operation HAMMER subjected African American and Latino youth to increasingly harsh state laws, members of the black clergy and segments of the black middle class employed “God’s Hammer”—the Bible—to further critique the moral depravity of inner-city youth in relation to God’s law. (One is also reminded of the anti-hip hop pastor, G. Craig Lewis, sledge hammering and burning hip hop CDs in pulpits of megachurches).²⁶ Scholars have referred to this reaction by the black middle class as “black-lash,” and thus, the LAPD’s approach to crime can not only be considered an act of white backlash. Leaders in black communities across the Southland also supported the tactics and approaches of Chief Gates and Mayor Hahn.

In the late 1980s, the NAACP supported Mayor Hahn’s attempt to impose martial law on the Playboy Gangster Crips, while the South Central Organizing Committee (SCOC), a church-supported local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), called for greater police deployment against street youth. Davis elaborates on the growing cross-generational tensions in African American communities:

Black middle-class revulsion against youth criminality—indeed the perception that dealers and gangs threaten the very integrity of Black culture—is thus translated through such patriarchal bluster, into support for the extremist rhetoric of the gang-busters . . . How is it that inter-generational relations within the Black community have suddenly grown so grimly foreboding?²⁷

Some of these internal polarizations began in the 1970s as African American public sector workers and professionals successfully integrated themselves into city business and the semi-skilled working classes in the private sector continued to suffer job losses due to factory closures and economic outsourcing.

Since the 1965 Watts riots, economic conditions in South Central had actually gotten worse, with unemployment rising from 5.6 to 8.6 percent.²⁸ Tensions between the LAPD and the South Central community reached an all-time high in 1992, resulting in the most lethal American riot of the century. Violence, looting, and arson exploded in the wake of the beating of a black motorist, Rodney King, by five LAPD officers and their subsequent acquittal by a jury composed mainly of white jurors. After five days of rioting, more than 50 Angelenos were dead, over

2,000 injured, and almost 17,000 arrested.²⁹ Property damages were estimated at \$1 billion, and it took 20,000 police officers and National Guardsmen to return the city to some semblance of normal.

Not surprisingly, attempts to redevelop and reinvest in the riot area, such as Rebuild L.A., fell short. Ice Cube’s third album, *The Predator*, which was released within months of the 1992 riots, featured “We Had to Tear This Muthafucka Up”—a song directed at the police officers acquitted in the trial. Cube, known for attacking Jews, police, and politicians alike in his lyrics, rapped the following over a jazzy upright bass line:

Tearin’ up shit with fire, shooters, looters
 Now I got a laptop computer
 I told you all what happened and you heard it, read it
 But all you could call me was anti-Semitic

Ice Cube went on to talk about how the inner city had to give President “Bush a push” and how his “National Guard ain’t hard.” He warned America that “You had to get Rodney to stop me,” otherwise we would “have teared this muthafucka up.” While Ice Cube was offering his controversial take on the riots, the West Coast Rap All-Stars—a collaboration of West Coast hip hop artists including Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Tone-Loc, MC Hammer, and Shock G, among many others—had planted the seeds of reconciliation and togetherness through their 1990 hit single, “We’re All in the Same Gang.”

The story that received much less attention was the gang truce between the Bloods and the Crips that was brokered on April 28, 1992—a day before the riots broke out. Hundreds of black men gathered in Watts, once again, not with Bibles or guns but to declare a ceasefire between the two notorious black street gangs. The L.A. murder rate had just topped a thousand per year. Skip Townsend, a Rollin’ 20 Blood from West Adams, commented, “I mean I couldn’t even pump gas. I couldn’t go to the grocery store. I couldn’t do anything without interacting with someone who would want to hurt me or I’d have to hurt them.”³⁰ Another young man there that evening of the truce in front of the Nickerson Gardens housing project was Aqeela Sherrills. Sherrills, a former Grape Street Crip, remarked, “*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, James Baldwin’s *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. These things challenged me. They politicized me and they also gave me courage and language to begin to speak with folks in the neighborhood about what was happening.”³¹ Those who brokered the truce used the 1949 ceasefire agreement between Israel and Egypt as a blueprint for a formal written peace accord in 1994, revealing how these local geographies of violence and attempts at amity were implicated in global struggles for peace. While the truce lasted ten years with crime rates in Watts dropping significantly in the subsequent years, gang shootings continued. Sherrills lost a son in 2004.

SPIRITUALIZING SELF-HELP

Beyond the highly critiqued Rebuild L.A. initiative, black communities in Los Angeles responded to the riots and ongoing violence in a number of ways. Black churches and local community organizations engaged in religiously driven responses to help “troubled” youth. Social programs such as Amer-I-Can, Homeboy Industries, and Gangsters Anonymous have been premised on helping people change their attitudes and behaviors as opposed to just locking them up. Many of these services and self-help programs were anchored in Christian beliefs and spiritual ideals as well as self-help ideologies. Gangsters Anonymous attempted to help gangsters recover from pathologies of gangsterism and crime. Like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, it followed a twelve-step program that outlines a course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion, or other behavioral problems through accepting a greater power (i.e., God).³²

Kenny Mitchell, an African American longshoreman and Inglewood native now in his late forties, founded Gangsters Anonymous in Los Angeles. He actually came up with the idea for the new society while in Alcoholics Anonymous. He recalled in a *Los Angeles Times* interview:

One day, I was doing my fourth step with my sponsor, who was also a gangster. We got to the part about being powerless, and I said to him, “We need this for us!” If I’d had someone tell me this long ago, I wouldn’t live wanting to control everything around me ... Years later, I sat down with the blue book (the handbook of Alcoholics Anonymous) and I almost rewrote every page. Our first meeting was in 2001 at a barbershop on Western. The police came and accosted the gangsters who came! ... We saw a need to recover as gangsters, and to show the world we can recover. We have been meeting ever since.³³

The LAPD was certainly not convinced that “gangsters” were capable of recovery, whether it was in the form of religious conversion, imprisonment, or programs focused on behavioral modification. Not all African Americans have wholeheartedly supported programs like Gangsters Anonymous and the Community in Support of the Gang Truce (CSGT). Alluding to black-lash in a different context, sociologist Joao Vargas argues:

Gang prevention groups, while able to draw support and sympathy from progressive social groups and movements, are not able to gain widespread acceptance among various social sectors of inner-city residents. A considerable number of Blacks, especially the relatively well-off, openly nurture a strong aversion to all that is related to gangs—and they remain aloof to both the market-oriented, individualistic wishes of success, and the claims for social justice that are part of CSGT’s programs. Without recognition and support, the gang truce and the significant results it has achieved are at risk. The peace movement runs against the grain of both contemporary politics, determined in great measure by the public-sanctioned necessity of ever-expanding law-enforcement apparatuses, and widespread perceptions about

the social and racial components of poverty and social deviance. In this worldview, gangbangers will always be gangbangers, irrespective of their allegiance to the values and practices of the wider society: gangbangers are prisoners of their immanent social and racial essence.³⁴

The worldview that posited gangbangers as “prisoners of their immanent social and racial essence” was certainly an incarcerating view of black and brown youth that revealed the ways in which gangbangers and former gangbangers were trapped by and in various racialized discourses of criminality throughout the last couple decades of the twentieth century.³⁵ This sense of being trapped and confined manifested in the literal caging of iron prison bars, handcuffing during street-side interrogations, exclusion from certain labor markets and jobs, and spatial segregation into particular areas and neighborhoods in the city.³⁶ Statistics in the early part of the twenty-first century showed that in Los Angeles County, one in three African American men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine is under the supervision of the criminal justice system, either in prison or in jail, or on probation or parole. This situation was often attributed to alleged deficiencies in the character and morality of inner-city dwellers, but, as Vargas asserts, “it illustrates the reduced opportunities Black youngsters have in the formal economy and suggests orchestrated institutional efforts to maintain social exclusion.”³⁷ Working within these incarcerating realities and discourses, young African Americans found ways to move and maneuver within myriad constraints and confinements. The dialectic of entrapment and setting free was even present in the language of juvenile delinquency. As Khanchuz told me one afternoon, sitting in his office at a Group Home facility that houses and treats youth with criminal records, “a juvenile youth achieves ‘emancipation’ and is released if he or she successfully completes the entire program.”³⁸

The next section will explore how gospel rappers navigated these carceral cartographies—terrains of upheaval and discipline—in relation to their religious conversions. The conversion narratives of Khanchuz, B-Love, and Cue show how many holy hip hoppers disrupted and exceeded many of the expectations of those *hammering* from all sides.

NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION

Those seeking a change from gangster and gangbanging lifestyles went a number of routes. Holy hip hoppers found their “emancipation” through religious conversion; they used hip hop music to mend and transform the environmental and social chaos surrounding them. For them, religious conversion not only initiated a spiritual *rite of passage* but also granted certain *rights of passage*—a route moving beyond incarcerating tropes and traps of “black criminality” as well as passageways into a wider array of public spaces, arenas of professional opportunity

and cultural production, and fields of possibility. The making of spiritual moves, musical moves, and spatial moves were all deeply enmeshed. The allied movements of holy hip hoppers were not done outside of authoritative structures or in an effort to necessarily free themselves completely of such formations. Rather, the submission to certain higher powers and forms of control accorded them specific freedoms and flexibilities.

The varied and intersecting responses of the state (e.g., the LAPD), the church, and social programs constituted the nexus of structures, practices, and assumptions that shaped the everyday possibilities and constraints of holy hip hoppers from the 1980s to the early 2000s. The disciplining laws of these domains—court or state law, God’s law, and social laws of proper conduct and communal well-being—comprised a complex terrain of subjectivation and governance. The exact laws that young African Americans chose to submit to in the pursuit of certain types of freedom and opportunity had specific emotional, physical, and musical consequences—consequences that then shaped how people understand their agentive capacity as well as God’s influence.

Conversion is a particularly productive site through which to understand the bifurcated and sometimes contradictory nature of agency in religious hip hop practice.³⁹ Conversion, as a modality of agency, is a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable. Conversion is both inflicted upon the “believer” in a moment of profound faith and surrender *and* strategically enacted as a conscious position-taking in relation to a complex array of social variables. Like other devout religious followers, gospel rappers often displaced their own agential capacity, letting Jesus “take the reins” or “take the wheel,” as they would often say. They attributed positive events in their lives to the divine intervention of Jesus and blamed the trickster Devil for unfortunate occurrences and stumbling blocks.⁴⁰ Their religious conversions posed a powerful challenge to anthropological theories of agency. As Talal Asad has argued, “Conversion is regarded by moderns as an ‘irrational’ event or process, but resort to the idea of agency renders it ‘rational’ and ‘freely chosen.’”⁴¹ And yet, to say that the moment of religious conversion owes something to cultural systems (as opposed to individual agency) is to intrude “culture” into a moment when it seems the most irrelevant and the hand of God the most palpable.

Taking into account the agency of the otherworldly means moving beyond valorizations of human control and accepting individual agency as a dialectic of action and passivity (to the will of God). Here, conversion defines a new set of choices rather than being “the result of an entirely ‘free choice.’”⁴² Moments of surrender, acquiescence, and discipline can actually enable opportunities for liberatory action and practices of freedom. Holy hip hoppers were entangled in a complex set of power relations that enabled conditions of both possibility and constraint; how they moved within laws of culture, nature, and the divine defined their agential

field of action. In this way, their stories moved beyond the tales of victimization that pervade the “gang-book genre”—tales that depict black youth and especially black men as violent, uncontrolled predators whose behavior defined the social crisis of contemporary urban life.⁴³ Further, grassroots gospel MCs in Los Angeles were generally not in control of the dominant narratives circulating about holy hip hop.⁴⁴ In the face of multiple misrecognitions and stigmatizations from church leaders, the commercial music industry, the LAPD, and secular hip hop artists, it is not surprising that gospel hip hop artists were inclined to give their testimony or conversion narrative as a strategy of reauthorization. Testifying became an important practice of self-fashioning and means toward lived belief, especially in the face of demonizing discourses associated with the “culture of poverty.” Through the repeated *seismic soundings* of conversion, gospel rappers authored their new religious selves into being.

How did the presence of hip hop in gospel rappers’ lives disrupt the teleology of the conversion narrative that often glosses over long periods of resistance to organized religion as well as interactions with Islam and Rastafari? How did the performance of holy hip hop conversion narratives cloak other truths?⁴⁵ What were holy hip hoppers legitimating through their stories of conversion? What resources and networks did their conversions grant them access to? What histories of music, urban space, and racial formation were implicated in their narratives of salvation?

TRANSCENDENT TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Khanchuz’s conversion story highlighted the imprisoning discourses of black criminality and incarceration even as it challenged them. Gang culture remained a central part of Khanchuz’s life, even when he was working in the formal economy. After receiving his diploma from Associated Technical College, he began working in the telecommunications field as a network engineer. While he was making an annual salary of over \$50,000, he remarked, “At the same time, I didn’t have my life right with the Lord. So I was doing a lot of stuff that wasn’t righteous, wasn’t positive. I’m a network engineer but I’m a gangbanger too. Nine to five, I was a network engineer but I would come home at night and hit the streets of L.A. and I’m a straight gangbanger, drug dealer. Making good money but still selling drugs at the same time. How stupid is that?”⁴⁶ Khanchuz performed so well at his telecommunications job in fact, that his boss promoted him to run his own network site in Denver. With this relocation, new pay raise, and expanded professional responsibilities, he decided to quit gangbanging. Although with no one working under him in his plush tenth-floor office in downtown Denver with 360-degree views of the entire city, he quickly made the office his “party spot.” He recalled, “So I literally used to be in my office, smoking weed. There was a liquor store across the street. I would walk across the street and get me forty ounces of beer. It was easy. Once you

learn how to work that tandem switch there wasn't anything else to learn. If there was anything new to learn, they would come out and train me. It was real simple work—wiring, testing a circuit. So, I started making friends out there.” Khanchuz’s office became a site for all kinds of networking.

After a couple of years in Denver, Khanchuz fell in love with a Haitian woman. Her family was highly skeptical of his West Coast gangsta style and tried multiple times to stop their daughter from seeing him. After a few months, Khanchuz got into a confrontation with his girlfriend’s brother about a cell phone that he had lent her. Upon hearing who the phone came from, her family promptly confiscated it. Khanchuz went over to her family’s house to ask for it back and what began as a civil conversation eventually ended in Khanchuz’s arrest for felony menacing. Khanchuz explained the altercation: “The brother comes to the front door and says, ‘Get away from my mama’s house, nigger, nigger.’ It was the way he was saying it. They’re from Haiti and they’re black but they say, ‘We ain’t niggers ‘cause we weren’t slaves.’ Saying this and that—whoop, whoop, whoop. That’s their mentality. Now, if I had had the mentality I have now I would have called the police, told them what happened, and said, ‘Meet me over there so I can get my stuff.’ But no, I’m Mister-big-thug-gangbanger. I can handle this on my own.” Here, in a confrontation between American and Haitian blackness, Khanchuz experienced a black-lash of a different kind. After the police ran his record in Los Angeles at the station, his previous offenses began to light up the computer screen. An invocation of ancestral enslavement resulted in a thirty-day jail sentence with a bail amount of \$50,000. His story mapped out a carceral cartography that linked Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, where chains became bars that gave birth to beats.

And this brings us to the jail cell in Colorado. Khanchuz was not yet “saved” or practicing Christianity at the time, but the gospel began to creep into his music.

I wrote my first gospel rap when I was in jail, not even trying to write gospel. We made up a rap group of inmates called Eleven Able because that was the cell number we were in. Me, this dude, Law, this other guy, Wicked. He had a plastic spoon in his hand. He had long fingernails and I don’t know how he would be making a beat that was out of this world. Just with that! It would sound like we had a stereo up in there. And we would be up in there writing rhymes, rapping, and entertaining the inmates and the guards. It was like a band. So Law said, “Let’s try to write a spiritual song.” That was the first gospel rap song I did. I wasn’t even trying to write a gospel rap. I wasn’t even trying to say, now I’m going to live my life for God now. That wasn’t even a thought in my mind. We were in there saying when we get out of jail we’re going to record a CD.⁴⁷

While it took Khanchuz another year or so to actually weave his way to God, this experience catalyzed an awareness of spirituality through song. After further jail sentences, he decided to pack up all his belongings and return home to Los Angeles. His girlfriend, defying her parents’ demands, joined him on his journey back west.

They arrived broke and in disarray, forced to live at Khanchuz’s father’s house, which was located at the geographic center of a major gang war, where Khanchuz had formerly banged as a member of the 51st Street Cat-Walk Neighborhood Crips (CWC). He explained the “home” he returned to in South Los Angeles:

At the time in my neighborhood there was a gang war going on between these three gangs that all lived in the same community. I lived on 51st street so there was the 51 Trouble Gang (Gangsta Crips), then there was the 40’s (the neighborhood Crips) and they don’t get along with the Trouble gangs. Then there was a Blood gang called the BNG’s. They were just killing each other off, man. Just shooting people in the streets and asking no questions. If you were walking anywhere in the neighborhood they just figured you weren’t from that ’hood and would just shoot you no questions asked.⁴⁸

Embarrassed by and frustrated with what he was able to offer his sweetheart in terms of “a life,” Khanchuz reluctantly bought her a bus ticket back to Colorado, promising that he would call for her once he secured housing and a job. He never did end up seeing her again.

Returning to this hostile urban environment added to Khanchuz’s confusion and despair. One hot afternoon under the blazing sun, he was walking down his block to the corner store to buy a beer and he saw an old friend, Michelle, sitting on her porch with two older women. Michelle called, “Hey Sleep, come here and let me give you a hug and kiss.” He swaggered over to receive his warm greeting, but the other two women hit first with a question: “Why are you walking around here with all this stuff going on?” Khanchuz responded, “I’m not about to be a prisoner in my own home. I’m not for either one of these gangs.” The women asked if they could pray for him before he continued on and he agreed. Holding hands in a circle, they prayed for God to protect him and grant him a safe passageway on these treacherous streets. Tired of being imprisoned in his own neighborhood, Khanchuz took a short walk through embattled grounds that ended up dramatically changing the course of his life, resulting in both a *rite of passage* and newfound *rights of passage*. One of the elderly women on the porch, Ramone, would later play a major role in Khanchuz’s eventual conversion to Christianity. Historical sedimentations of race and place, intertwined social and economic conditions, and personal trials in Khanchuz’s life had all broken him open to such a change, but it was one telephone conversation that encouraged him to “let God take the reins.”

Khanchuz assumed Ramone was calling to help him find a job, but she had another agenda. “God had me call you for another reason,” Ramone uttered softly. For the remainder of the telephone call, Khanchuz stood in silence and just listened:

She started telling me about everything that I’ve been through, everything that I was thinking about. And she started getting so deep into my life that I was like, I’m scared. I started crying and my hands were shaking. Oh my goodness. I was just a



FIGURE 3. Khanchuz in his “old gang ’hood” on the block where his father lives in South L.A.

teary mess, snot running down my nose. And you know how people say they hear God speak. Well, I heard an audible voice as if someone was standing right over my shoulder yelling, “I sent her to you! She can see you right now! She can see you crying! Say something! Say something! Say something!” And I got so scared that I could hear this, that all I could say was “How do you know this about me?” She was so calm, she said, “Baby, God told me these things about you. That’s how I know. Not only did God tell me about everything you’ve been through but he also told me about everything he wants to do for you. Do you know what God wants?” Then she started running off all these things I’ve ever wanted. It brought me so much joy because I had already realized that this was God, and to realize that God wants to give all these desires of my heart. There’s no way somebody told her these things.⁴⁹

By the time Khanchuz finished relaying this portion of his story to me, his dark eyes glossed over with tears and I felt as if he was transported back in time to this visceral and extraordinary moment of religious calling.

After his conversation with Ramone, Khanchuz decided he would “try God” and see what happened. Inspired by the example of Ramone’s relationship with God as well as the felt presence of God during this exchange, he began to look for a church home and other Christians to fellowship with in his daily life. Despite

being raised in the church, developing an authentic and adult relationship with God was new territory for Khanchuz. Up to this point, he had tried to find happiness through everything else but the Lord—“drugs, gangbang, women”—but none of it worked. Now he was surrendering to Jesus in a moment of conversion that was crosscut by both divine and human intervention, during the fragile intimacy and profound auralty of a telephone call.

From the gospel rap reverberating from jail cell eleven to God’s cry to “Say something!” echoing through the phone line, spirit, in Khanchuz’s life, has always arrived through sound. As he moved deeper into his religious practice, he began to write rhymes about his new relationship with Christ. But it did not come easy. He explained: “So I tried to write about God back then and I couldn’t. I could only write about what I felt and I was still in those streets. Something would happen on the streets and I would write about it and then bring it back to the homies the next day. They’d be like, ‘Dang, man! You caught that whole scene, everything that went on. That’s tight.’” Khanchuz then pleaded to God, “Let me write about you, Lord.” He wanted to “pour” his new love for God into the vessel of his lyrics. Since that day, Khanchuz has not been able to write a secular rap. He described his new compositional process: “I can go to church now and hear a sermon that the pastor preach, go home and put it in a rap—just like I used to see what was going on in those streets. Something that deals with my spirituality—I can put it in my raps.” The church, not the streets, served as the new territorial context for his lyrics. Spiritual practice, instead of gangbang, became his ultimate subject matter. His brethren, rather than his homies, was his intended audience. One of his early gospel raps invokes multiple geographies and spatial metaphors—both sacred and profane:

Glory be from the seed I was willed the one
 Oh woe is me so I plead Lord thy will be done
 And *kingdom* come, manifest, as it is in *heaven*
 Joy and peace with my brethren, not lusting worldly possessions
 But seeking peace intercessions and bangin *churches* as clicks
 No more Bloods and the Crips just like y’all didn’t exist
 I know y’all going to be pissed to find out *heaven* ain’t got no *ghettos*
 But I hope Pac was right about a *thug paradise*
 Not quite, see the light, get your life right with Christ
 Bang hard on the Devil, pray with all of your might⁵⁰

Khanchuz’s conversion was a challenging and ongoing process—a winding road filled with bumps and backslides. As he recalled, “I didn’t drop everything in my life just to become a Christian. At that point, I was still smoking weed, still drinking. Eventually, I cleaned up my entire life.” These early lyrics clearly revealed the prevalence and proximity of gang culture in Khanchuz’s daily life. He and his

holy hip hop crew, ADK, whose lyrics transposed the predatory impulse to annihilate rival gangs onto demons and the Devil, brought the fraternal solidarity and militant nature of gang culture to their musical projects and evangelism. References to black brotherhood, from political organizations to hyperviolent street gangs to religious bands of believers, infused his lyrics. Even in his outgoing message on his cell phone, he represented his fellow demon killers and offered a short spiritual instruction. During those years in L.A., when my calls to Khanchuz would go to voicemail, I looked forward to hearing his righteous message before the sound of the beep: “ADK. God bless. Any Demon Killa. Sorry I’m not available to take your call. If this is a state of spiritual emergency, hang up, fall on your knees, and call on Jesus.” Then one of his gospel rap tracks—a spiritual and seismic beat with a gangsta rap feel—dropped in for another ten seconds. Although Khanchuz may not have been available to talk, he affirmed Jesus’s capacity to answer the call of those in the midst of spiritual crisis. Khanchuz was a telecommunications expert after all. He, more than most, knew how the right call at the right time could make all the difference.

TRANSFORMATIVE TELEVANGELISM

Like Soup, B-Love heard God’s call through the television. An African American mother of four children and gospel MC with the collective Hip Hopposite, she recalled, “I was tired of doing me.”⁵¹ B-Love began rapping at the age of eight while also attending Phillips Chapel—a Methodist church in Santa Monica—as a youth with her grandmother “‘cause it was tradition.” At various points in her life, she had forayed into what she deems the “New Age” health and spiritual world, Egyptology and “African American consciousness” communities, before she “got saved.”

I didn’t pursue a relationship with Christ until I got into some trouble. I was about nineteen and started to be like, Lord, where are you? And you know, he got me out of a little trouble I was in. After that point, I still was doing my own thing and it really wasn’t until 2000 when I really said OK, I’m gonna do this ... I was a single mother and in a toxic relationship with my children’s father. I separated from him. I was going through a lot of stuff. I was sick of doing it on my own and doing it my way. I was still dating guys and looking for love in a sense. I was smoking weed and just getting high. You know, nothing too crazy, just kind of like, this is not it. And God just tapped me on the shoulder and said, “It’s time to come to the faith.”⁵²

B-Love attributes the initial moment of her conversion to a television special featuring Bishop Noel Jones—born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and brother to disco singer, actress, and model Grace Jones—who makes frequent appearances on Black Entertainment Television (BET) and the Church Channel (You can also

watch his sermons on GodTube, the Christian counterpart to YouTube). B-Love eventually got saved in his church, Greater Bethany Community Church in Gardena, now renamed the City of Refuge Church and boasting over 17,000 members. Unhappy with the direction her life was heading, she collapsed on the floor of her bedroom to the bishop’s moving, Pentecostal-inspired sermon. “I found out about him on TV and the Holy Ghost came and met me on the floor one morning.”

As a young girl, B-Love was watching female hip hop acts such as Salt-n-Pepa and Roxanne Shanté on *Yo! MTV Raps*, attempting to recreate the bold and brazen styles of these MCs. It was again through the television that B-Love received a life-changing lesson. This time it was the gospel of black female empowerment through music. She was particularly drawn to Roxanne Shanté: “She was just tough. She had attitude. She was hardcore. Back then, the N.W.A. stuff was coming on the scene and she was like, ‘I ain’t taking no mess.’ Run DMC, EPMD—all those guys really inspired me to do it.” At night she would sit in her room, listen to the radio, and scribble down their rhymes so that she could rap them on her own. From there, she began writing her own lyrics and eventually formed the rap duo Diadora (taken from the shoe brand Diadora) with another female lyricist. Initially, she used a lot of profanity in her lyrics, but then “transitioned into a more conscious style” where issues of “community” and “standing up for the sisters” dominated her music. After B-Love “got saved,” she struggled, like Soup and Khanchuz, to figure out how to express her relationship with God in her music. She recounted:

There was no Christ in my lyrics but I remember this one song called “Paper Chase.” It was about struggling and trying to be positive. It went like this, “Every single morning I get up to get my paper. Thank the lord for another day, he’s the mover and the shaker.” I was kind of on a Lauryn Hill tip before she came out, but they wasn’t really feeling that tip. Lil Kim had just come out. But I just kept putting Him (God) in—in a bar there, or the chorus—and thinking about my blessings. I wasn’t thinking about gospel rap, I was just like, “This is my life.” I was still talking about other things. I think I had just one song that I dedicated to God, you know, like a lot of secular artists do. After so many doors slammed in my face, I said, “I’m good, I’m done.” I was tired. I was a single mom at the time working full time and I would go to studios late at night. Meetings after meetings late at night and finally I said, “I’m cool, I’m done.” And I prayed about it. God said, “*You have to use your gift.*” I would literally wake up out of my sleep and have something to write on a piece of paper, like I gotta get this out. I blew it off but just kept doing it and finally I thought, all right, let me be obedient. I will keep a notebook by my bedstand.⁵³

Gospel rap found B-Love on an AM radio station. The DJ was playing local holy hip hop artists I.D.O.L. King and Gospel Gangstaz. That was when B-Love began considering herself a gospel rapper. To deny this call on her life would be a greater sin than using popular music to worship Jesus. While her conversion was channeled through a television, she eventually saw her music as a *channel* through

which God speaks. Invoking another technological metaphor, B-Love continued, “I’m taking my time with my music because I really don’t want anything *micro-waved*. I really want God to just speak through me and rap about topics that He wants me to talk about. ’Cause you know I used to lady rap the blues but now I lady rap the gospel.” Her hip hop music was for the glorification of God, but also for the empowerment of the women who first inspired her to rap.

BETWEEN MALCOLM AND MARTIN

Stephen “Cue” Jn-Marie, a former secular rapper turned gospel rapper, was born in Barbados and raised in the flood-prone and fault-ridden city of Baytown, Texas (a.k.a. Little Beirut), but would say he was baptized in the streets of L.A.’s Babylon. Since moving to Los Angeles, another geographically unstable region, in 1989, Cue has resided in a variety of places, including Long Beach, Inglewood, and Compton where he lived across the street from a notorious gangsta rap producer. He was one of the original members of the College Boyz, an early ’90s West Coast rap group that included fellow Baytown-bread MC of Caribbean descent (and now actor) Romany Malco.⁵⁴ Known for their dynamic combination of gangsterism and Black Power politics, they were the first hip hop act to sign with Virgin Records. Their rookie album, *Radio Fusion Radio*, featured the 1992 hit singles “Hollywood Paradox” and “Victim of the Ghetto,” the latter of which peaked at #68 on the Billboard Hot 100 and #1 on the Hot Rap Singles. Sharing stages with the likes of Tupac and DJ Quick, they also debuted on *The Arsenio Hall Show*.

Despite minimal success, Cue remembers this as a dark time. He was living in Compton during the 1992 riots. Images of storeowners on their roofs with guns still haunt him. “I remember the feeling when we heard the news that none of the officers involved in the beating of Rodney King were convicted: hopeless.”⁵⁵ During this time, Cue was also hustling on the streets of Los Angeles. In 2008, over a coffee we had at Pann’s Restaurant, the famed location of Samuel L. Jackson’s dramatic monologue in the movie *Pulp Fiction*, his voice deepened with intensity and grit as he busted into a rap from those early days:

My Chevy riding high so I can touch the sky
 I told y’all I was coming, run the streets
 Like Marion Jones at track meets
 You can’t get me⁵⁶

“Stuff like that,” Cue explained. “And what I mean by “I run like Marion Jones” is that I run the streets, but I was in violation ’cause I was running dope, right? You got it? But you’d have to sit down and talk to me to get that.” These statements illustrated how life facts are often secreted and embedded within metaphors, analogies, and rhyme. Cue also interpreted his conversion through the lens of hustling. In

another conversation about six months later, Cue restated his decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ as a savvy business move: “I’ve been hustling all my life; I know a good deal when I see one.”

Before choosing Christ, Cue wrestled with whether or not to become a Christian or a Muslim. It was the 1992 Spike Lee film, *Malcolm X*, which brought him closer to God:

I went to watch the movie *Malcolm X* and I felt like God was saying something to me. There were two phrases that were really heavy on spirit because I was thinking about becoming a Muslim because I thought Christians were kind of soft. There were two phrases: “He died too soon” and “I want you to be like him.” I felt like that’s what God was saying to me. So it took me a little while to crystallize whatever God was calling me to do—to crystallize the call he put on my life . . . I heard about Jesus before and I was struggling with how can a man be God. At the point when I was watching the movie *Malcolm X*, I realized that even the Nation had set Malcolm up. You feel me? I felt like even Jesus was more pure than Mohammed. So I chose him. I believe it was God who showed me that. But how do I come with Malcolm and Martin at the same time?⁵⁷

This attempt to fuse the spirit of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. was at the core of Cue’s music and activism. His politics as a local organizer embodied the philosophies of both black political leaders at different stages of his life. His hip hop music drew aesthetically from Muslim hip hop artists such as Rakim (affiliated with the Five Percent Nation) and Ice Cube. He was nurtured on the hard-hitting Black Power funk grooves that would become the musical bedrock for early hip hop in the late 1970s and early ’80s, bringing with it a strong Black Nationalist current informed by Nation of Islam doctrines and rhetorical practices. Cue loved Public Enemy and became influenced by their Black Nationalist politics and social and stylistic militancy. Even now, as a gospel hip hop artist in his forties, he still talks about the profound effect Muslim rappers have had on his soul and his sound. In an interesting twist of fate and faith, it was Cue’s walk with hip hop and Islam that routed him toward Jesus.⁵⁸ “I came to God in 1994,” he told me—the same year as the major Los Angeles earthquake. “I realized that it was time to walk in his path.”

Despite his relationship with Christianity, Cue has always felt a deep kinship with Malcolm X. Both were hustlers who underwent a religious conversion and became politicized. Before Malcolm found Allah in prison, he worked as a waiter at Small’s Paradise while hustling inside the basement space. Ingratiating himself in the sordid Harlem underworld, he was eventually fired after referring an undercover military agent to a prostitute. Cue was also drawn to the black Muslim icon because like Malcolm, he too had roots in the West Indies. Cue commented, “The Gospel has always been reggae. I grew up listening to reggae—I’m more Dread than Christian. I’m a follower of Christ but . . . I’m more of a Rastafarian in terms



FIGURE 4. Cue Jn-Marie and Flava Flav of Public Enemy at the Los Angeles Skid Row Hip Hop Summit in 2012. Photo courtesy of Michael R. Moore.

of culture.”⁵⁹ Even in his early music with the College Boyz, he tried to infuse their West Coast rap sound with dancehall reggae aesthetics, sometimes even rapping with a distinct Jamaican accent. Cue had a particular penchant for mixture. His use of dancehall elements was typical in early hip hop music; it was the DJ-ing and MC-ing practices associated with mobile sound system culture in Jamaica that would inspire West Indian immigrants such as Afrika Bambaata, DJ Kool Herc, and Grandmaster Flash to create hip hop in the crucible of the Bronx. Dancehall music and Rastafarian culture have been central animating forces in hip hop music. And so Cue’s holy hip hop practice, drawing from the spiritual energies already percolating in hip hop, merged multiple black religiosities—Christianity, Islam, and the Rastafarian movement—as it connected Jamaica, Barbados, Texas, New York, and California.

Initially, when Cue became a deacon at Faithful Central Bible Church housed in Inglewood’s multipurpose indoor arena, The Forum, he didn’t want anything to do with hip hop. There was a stigma attached to the music, especially among churchgoers, and he was already getting flack for not looking the part. He continued, “I was one of the first deacons who wore braids, and people couldn’t even deal with that. They would look at me funny and things like that. That was 1994, 1995. And now you can see the difference between then and now because now everyone at Faithful Central wears braids.”⁶⁰ Over time and after meeting a few gospel

hip hop artists at Faithful Central, including Kirk Franklin, for whom he was a personal trainer in 1999, Cue began to see how he could reconcile his relationship with Jesus and hip hop. In particular, he wasn't very impressed by the gospel hip hop music he was hearing and felt that the beats and the lyricism were subpar to the secular hip hop that he was accustomed to performing and listening to. Taking matters into his own hands, he started a record label and began to make sense of what it would mean to do gospel hip hop on his own terms. He stated:

The only thing I'm merging is Jesus . . . I don't even want to bring in the religious . . . There's nothing wrong with religion but I don't want to bring the religious aspect to our music. I just want Jesus. That's it. I want to take Jesus and just dump him in the hip hop world like nobody has ever heard of in church before . . . the sense of who he is, 'cause that's what's going to change people. . . . For us, it's becoming easier and easier to do gospel hip hop because we understand the hardness of Jesus. He was a lion and lamb at the same time. We understand that. The challenge is not to be condemning our own youth. We focus on mostly praising and worshipping God but in our context.⁶¹

Cue felt much more comfortable participating in gospel hip hop after making the distinction between “religious” hip hop and merging hip hop with Jesus. For Cue, reconciling Jesus's manhood with his own was a critical aspect of his conversion. Jesus accompanies him wherever he goes, as illustrated in the statement, “You'll notice I walk on this line that looks like I'm gonna fall off and that's because I know Jesus is right here.”⁶² Holding the tension of opposites in his music and everyday practices was a key part of Cue's dynamism and success as a street evangelist and hip hop musician.

GOSPEL GANGWAYS

The lives of gospel rappers, set against ecologies of fear and apocalypse, demonstrated the highly moralized and spiritualized nature of discourses about urban life and urban decay in Los Angeles in the latter part of the twentieth century. We must then question the common assumption that urbanization necessarily leads to both secularization and the decreased relevancy of Christianity in the lives of African Americans. On the contrary, it appears that modern individualism, ideologies of self-help, and the freedom to choose one's own religious (or nonreligious) path may in certain circumstances produce even more devoutly religious subjects, in turn strengthening the symbolic power of organized religion.

Gospel rap practitioners were *hip hoppifying* Christianity and *Christianizing* hip hop simultaneously in ways that cross-cut, enhanced, and sometimes disrupted both processes. Hip hop, in particular, was the musical practice through which they made sense of complicated and sometimes messy religious conversions (conversions that were ongoing), as well as one of the essential threads that

linked holy hip hoppers' pasts and presents. Hip hop was the beat they bounced to as they walked with God. It was how they made sense of where they had been so they could figure out where they were going. Gospel rap became a means through which Christian rappers aestheticized and inculcated their new spiritual selfhood. Gospel rap became *earthquake music*. These *seismic soundings* that emerged from the environmental and social chaos of Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s also generated moments of urban rapture. As hip hoppers converted to Christianity they utilized gospel rap to fashion their newfound religious identities in ways that did not exclude their previous cultural affiliations and musical affinities.⁶³ While gospel rap appeared to be a natural outcome of their life paths, oftentimes it was initially an uncomfortable practice and mode of identification. At the same time, it appeared to be a profound expressive arena for working out and wrestling with their new religious selves.

One theme that threads these holy hip hop conversion experiences together is the experience of freedom in and through the act of submission to God, once again evoking the relationship between black religion and black liberation. As relayed here, conversion was one way to pave a *passage* through L.A.'s uneven grounds—one response to the ways that black bodies and hip hop bodies were (and continue to be) discursively marked, segregated, and disciplined in contemporary urban landscapes. Coincidentally, the word *gang* originates from the Old English word *gong*, meaning a journey, a way, or a passage. Gangster, then, signifies someone who makes a way or a passage. The gangster and the convert, then, may share more than meets the eye and the ear. Or, perhaps, the road to Jesus is the gospel rapper's gangway (i.e., passageway). Holy hip hoppers banged for Christ within and in spite of intersecting laws of the state, nature, culture, and God. Constrained by these various disciplining and uneven terrains of power, moments of freedom were enacted.