

Gangster Boogie: Los Angeles and the Rise of Gangsta Rap, 1965-1992

By

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Abstract

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“Gangster Boogie” details the early development of hip-hop music in Los Angeles, a city that, in the 1980s, the international press labeled the “murder capital of the U.S.” The rap music most associated with the region, coined “gangsta rap,” has been regarded by scholars, cultural critics, and audiences alike as a tabloid distortion of East Coast hip-hop. The dissertation shows that this uniquely provocative genre of hip-hop was forged by Los Angeles area youth as a tool for challenging civic authorities, asserting regional pride, and exploiting the nation’s growing fascination with the ghetto underworld. Those who fashioned themselves “gangsta rappers” harnessed what was markedly difficult about life in black Los Angeles from the early 1970s through the Reagan Era—rising unemployment, project living, crime, violence, drugs, gangs, and the ever-increasing problem of police harassment—to create what would become the benchmark for contemporary hip-hop music.

My central argument is that this music, because of the social, political, and economic circumstances from which it emerged, became a vehicle for underclass empowerment during the Reagan Era. It concurrently presented civic authorities, community organizations, the press, and, eventually, the nation’s top political leaders with a basis for the charge that hip-hop and violence were directly linked. The aim of this project is, primarily, to provide a lens for viewing events leading up to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and, secondarily, to address the oft ignored connections between the ascendancy of hip-hop and modern conservatism. I also intend for it to help bridge the gap between African-American cultural history and the historiography of the American West by reimagining the modern urban frontier, with all its temptations and contradictions, from the perspective of black inner-city youth.

For my sweet pea, Amalia

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CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction

In August of 1965, just one year after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and just days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act—two salient achievements of the Civil Rights Movement—an incident of police harassment near the Watts region of Los Angeles sparked a massive black uprising, a five-day riot that left thirty-five people killed, over 1000 injured, some 4000 arrested, and more than \$20 million in property burned or destroyed. The country was stunned and confused. Why a riot? Why California? Why Los Angeles? Why now? As President Johnson wondered, “How is it possible, after all we’ve accomplished? How could it be? Is the world topsy-turvy?”¹

The state government’s official report on the uprising and its causes, in fact, posed the pointed question, “Why L.A.?” It noted that unemployment among African Americans in Los Angeles County was two to three times higher than the county’s average. It noted that available jobs in areas like Watts tended to be temporary and did not provide adequate job security, and it noted a history of tension between black Angelenos and the police. The report suggested remedies, including more job training programs in the inner city, more low-income housing, and improved relations between black community leaders and law enforcement officials. It also indicated, however, that for African Americans in Los Angeles, “The opportunity to succeed is probably unequaled in any other major American city.” It stated that, in the riot areas, one-third of residents were homeowners and all residents had ample access to public facilities and services. Streets were wide and clean, and an abundance of trees, parks, and playgrounds made for a living environment akin to that in the city’s suburbs. Riot neighborhoods, to boot, had movie theaters, shopping districts, public transportation, and convenient access to voting facilities. The official report, in other words, while citing real problems, also perpetuated the myth of Los Angeles as the Promised Land and, in doing so, struggled to make sense of the uprising.²

In the 1980s, two decades after the 1965 Watts Riots, Americans continued to believe that Los Angeles was the place where blacks in the United States fared best. The California city’s affluent black political leaders, entertainers, sports figures, comedians, musicians, and television and movie stars helped reaffirm popular images of California as a paradise of sun, space, and opportunity for everyone who sought it out. Under President Ronald Reagan, the country as a whole was indeed in the midst of an economic upswing

¹ Quoted in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 305.

² For more on the scope of the “Promised Land” myth for African Americans in the West, see Lawrence De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); California Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, *Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning? A Report by the Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots* (Los Angeles: Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1965), 3.

during the decade—a period of marked growth comparable to the 1940s and 1950s. Not everyone benefitted the same, however. Industry deregulation boosted business profits but meant lower wages and fewer jobs for blue-collar workers. Broad tax cuts paired with increases in military spending meant fewer resources for federal services for the poor and unemployed. In inner city regions, including South Central Los Angeles, the Reagan Administration cleaved programs that provided subsidies for school lunches, youth job training, after-school programs, and health services, along with Aid for Families with Dependent Children (colloquially known as “welfare”). Federal assistance for the working poor and programs to help working parents were eliminated entirely. States received fewer federal grants for schools, libraries, public health clinics, and job creation programs. For those in socio-economically depressed places like South Los Angeles, in communities already marginalized by the effects of urban deindustrialization and institutionalized discrimination based on the conflation of race with class, the 1980s proved a decade of scarcity, not excess. In the mid-1980s, historian Patricia Limerick offered a prediction: “If the federal government implements the Reagan policy of reversing the historical pattern of using federal money to stabilize Western economies, historians will see the 1980s as a watershed decade.”³

The Compton-based group Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.) formed within this set of circumstances, and when they broke onto the national scene in 1988, they represented a dramatic sea change not only in the trajectory of black music but also in the role of black inner-city youth in American popular culture. With their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*, which included the tracks “Parental Discretion Iz Advised,” “8 Ball,” “Gangsta Gangsta,” “F-- k Tha Police,” and the title track “Straight Outta Compton,” N.W.A. became not only the most vilified hip-hop act since the genre’s birth but also one of the most reviled music acts of the century. Music critics, parent groups, politicians, leaders of the black community, and even many within the hip-hop industry were aghast. How could something so dark and cynical come from the sunny environs of “La-La Land”? As a rap act, critics reasoned, N.W.A. was a burlesque, reciting fantastic tales of violence, sexual conquest, and police harassment in order to command attention; it was pageantry meant to shock. “NWA’s method involves heavy rotation of the word ‘motherf***er,’ without which the album would be considerably shorter,” one critic sniped. “Their espousal of every anti-social action from murder to gang-rape inevitably results in the extension of the characteristic rap braggadocio from mere boasts of microphone prowess to death threats.”⁴

The music, in fact, was deliberately crafted to be aggressive, provocative, and offensive. “Gangsta rap,” as this permutation of hip-hop would be labeled, had descended from the New York-based “hip-hop culture” movement, but in its musical production, its lyrical content, and its regional consumption, it was a different phenomenon entirely. The tempo of gangsta rap was markedly slower—leisurely—and underpinned not by instrumentation but by a throbbing, hollow bass line, often produced using beat-making technology like the Roland TR-808 drum machine. Funk samples, rather than the rock,

³ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1987), 31.

⁴ Andy Gill, “Record Reviews: Taking a Rap on the Knuckles,” *The Independent*, Sept 8, 1989.

disco, and soul breaks preferred in the East, lent themselves to these synthesized rhythms. Particularly unique, however, were its over-the-top, expletive-laced lyrics about violence, sex, drugs, and the day-to-day hustle to get by. Gangsta rap poetics were designed to be explicit in language and imagery, and they were crafted to illustrate the harsh realities of the ghetto without concern for moral accountability; its artists chose not to proselytize but to posture, even when it meant that this approach ran directly counter to mainstream trends in hip-hop. More historically significant than the music's aesthetic distinctions, however, was the speed with which gangsta rap, initially dismissed as a cultural outlier, became the center. Within just five years of gangsta rap's debut, its artists had become trendsetters for the commercial music industry, defying naysayers who imagined Los Angeles rap as a cartoonish spectacle without mainstream appeal.

Urban historians and historians of the West, therefore, offer a useful analytical framework to explain how a Los Angeles rap group dismissed by the established hip-hop industry for their California origins and forsaken for their artistic choices ultimately became the benchmark for that industry. Geographically, culturally, environmentally, and politically, these historians have defined Los Angeles as both exceptional and emblematic. In the wake of the Watts Riots, Robert Fogelson in *The Fragmented Metropolis* (1967) identified Los Angeles as a developing city that became a paradox: an "anti-urban metropolis," built rapidly and fortified by race and class divisions.⁵ The notion that fragmentation increasingly isolated minority ghettos even before World War II begins to provide a context for understanding the long fuse of the Watts Riots and, relatedly, the proliferation of gangs in the inner city in the years that followed.

In more recent years, historians studying the West—the fantastic frontier with all its temptations and contradictions—have re-imagined its more modern social, political, cultural, and physical landscapes as correlating to a very "American" set of values and trends. By doing so, they have asserted that Los Angeles, and in some cases all of the West, is key for understanding twentieth-century America. Modifying Robert Fogelson's exceptionalist thesis about Los Angeles, Mike Davis reveals in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990) that the tensions festering in "the city of sunshine" could serve to magnify the kind of class warfare and racial tensions that had begun to plague cities all over the country in the age of deindustrialization. He describes how organizations, such as the Los Angeles Police Department, the Black Panther Party, the 1970s-era Crips and Bloods street gangs, and the modern Ku Klux Klan, helped to define Los Angeles as a dystopian "fortress." Davis further finds that gaps in income, in cultural identity, and in race were deeply entrenched in the architecture, the laws, and the politics of the Southland. Unlike Fogelson, however, he concludes that, by the 1980s, the city's idiosyncrasies had become apparent in other major urban centers all over the country. Los Angeles, once an anomaly, had become a model for urban development in the post-war era.⁶

The scope of Eric Avila's book *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (2004) is a bit narrower than Davis's project. Avila's work is focused on just four cultural institutions that emerged in post-war Los Angeles: Disneyland, film noir, Dodger Stadium, and the elaborate freeway system,

⁵ Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

⁶ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990).

which by the late 1950s crisscrossed the region. His exploration of the specific links between new sites of cultural production and the formation of new racial identities reveals the significance of Los Angeles as a model for studying the far-reaching effects of the marginalization of minorities in urban regions throughout the country. His work, particularly because it includes rich analysis on the rise of racially coded and class defined forms of leisure in Los Angeles, does much more than any other historical monograph on post-war Los Angeles to hint at the rise of youth cultures within communities of color, such as street gang networks, Chicano car clubs, graffiti cliques, and gangsta rap.⁷

Within the broad scope of the American West, Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987) also suggests what California can illustrate. The "legacy of conquest" in the frontier West, she argues, is a mixed bag. The West is traditionally representative of American triumphs, but it also reflects failure, particularly in the struggle for white domination and the suppression of racial and ethnic minorities. The white majority in modern Los Angeles, viewed through Limerick's lens, is fragile and conspicuously limited in terms of its hold on mainstream culture. In this way, Limerick's synthesis of historical narratives of the West has nothing to do with gangsta rap while it also has everything to do with gangsta rap. What began as a polarized genre of hip-hop, one shunned by the public at large, including hip-hop fans and artists outside of the region, would become by the early 1990s, the fastest rising pop culture phenomenon since rock-and-roll in the 1950s. In the case of hip-hop generally, and gangsta rap more specifically, the cultural mainstream, once a vehicle for white domination, becomes a tool of the underclass.⁸

Read in combination with Davis, Avila, and Limerick, Robin D. G. Kelley's essay "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles" (1994) is telling. Writing in the wake of the 1992 Rodney King Riots, Kelley describes gangsta rap—still a recent phenomenon—as an outlet for L.A.'s poor, working-class black youths. He argues that hip-hop, particularly in Los Angeles, served as a "hidden transcript" of resistance within the context of the post-industrial urban crisis.⁹ As "race rebels," rappers contradicted those of the older generations of black Angelenos who, like Central Avenue musician Dootsie Williams, argued that youths were oblivious to the nuances of racial oppression. "At one time, we could easily recognize racism because it was so blatant," Williams complained to fellow musician Johnny Otis in the 1980s, "but today it is so smooth and sneaky that our younger generation of Blacks is lulled into a sense of false fantasy. Hell, they don't even know they're being discriminated against."¹⁰

Kelley's historical analysis of hip-hop remains one of the few pieces of scholarship to attempt to understand gangsta rap, specially, as a response to the problems

⁷ In his epilogue, Avila mentions hip-hop explicitly, though he does not explore the topic in great detail. Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

⁸ Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*.

⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1994), 183-228.

¹⁰ Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head!: Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 21.

of modern capitalism in a racially divided society. Other scholars, including Tricia Rose, Todd Boyd, Nelson George, Jeff Chang, Cheryl L. Keyes, and Gwendolyn Pough, have treated gangsta rap within larger analyses of hip-hop, but they have all ultimately struggled—and, in the cases of Rose, George, Keyes, and Pough, failed—to consider rebellion and commercial success as compatible and sometimes synonymous.¹¹ Rose’s acclaimed study *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, for instance, argues that Compton hip-hop artists developed a “West Coast style of rap” and emerged in the late 1980s from a framework already defined by New York-based groups like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. She concludes, however, that unlike these two ideologically charged groups, “West Coast” gangsta rappers scoffed at social responsibility in favor of profit. By doing so, Rose argues, gangsta rappers diluted the potential for hip-hop to be politically conscious and culturally relevant. Rose aims to expose the contradictions in the music and in the lifestyles of the artists, an approach that focuses critically on content without directly addressing the historical roots of gangsta rap or building a foundation for understanding the genre’s increasingly global poignancy.¹²

Jeff Chang, a reigning authority on the history of hip-hop, is more successful at outlining the nuances of social experimentation within the genre. By carefully reconstructing the circumstances that gave rise to hip-hop culture, reaching all the way back to the 1940s, when urban planner Robert Moses proposed a six-lane expressway to run through the heart of the South Bronx, Chang provides scholars with a historical model for fleshing out the significance of the music. Chang carefully documents the crucible of white flight, deindustrialization, and economic decline within which the defining “elements” of hip-hop culture—the MC, the DJ, the graffiti artist, and the breakdancer—were forged. Once this foundation had been established in the Bronx, and once groups such as Whodini, Run-DMC, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five had broken through to the popular mainstream, Chang explains, young artists elsewhere latched on. In his story, Los Angeles rappers, including Toddy Tee and Tracey “Ice T” Marrow, utilized the New York sound to produce something distinctly sinister. Chang acknowledges that this “new breed of renegades” was not simply a replication of something birthed on the East Coast. His overarching argument, however—that hip-hop is a progressive movement formed in opposition to the status quo—ultimately assumes hip-hop to be a linear and unified development. In this way, Chang, like other hip-hop scholars, have missed an opportunity to define hip-hop, through its varied and sometimes incongruous legacies, as a complicated and often contradictory popular culture sensation.¹³

¹¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 2002); Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

¹² Rose, *Black Noise*.

¹³ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*.

This dissertation is an attempt to unfold the conventional storyline of hip-hop, to draw gangsta rap from the margins, and to provide a historical framework—with Western historiography in mind—for explaining the cultural, social, political, and economic significance of a wayward musical subculture. The first two chapters explore the historical circumstances from which the Los Angeles hip-hop scene emerged. Following this introduction, Chapter Two pivots on the 1979 police shooting of Eula Love, a middle-aged black woman killed in front of her South Central Los Angeles home. Her death, the investigations that followed, and the related history of failed attempts by Los Angeles minority communities to establish an official, voter-mandated police review board demonstrate the vast, impenetrable authority of the Los Angeles Police Department, increasingly the most notorious police force in the nation. By establishing the futility of old strategies in the search for improved police-community relations in South Los Angeles, the chapter lays the foundation for the defiance that characterized the city's newest black youth street gangs as well as the music that would eventually become associated with them.

By the early 1970s, Los Angeles had become host to a growing web of well-established and increasingly well-funded black gang organizations. Mexican Americans had dominated the city's mid-century gang networks, but in the wake of the Watts Riots L.A.'s African-American youths, perpetually unemployed, harassed by police, and economically isolated, began solidifying their own street cliques, including the infamous Crips organization. Chapter Three, entitled "Everybody's Gangbanging," examines the changing tone of street gang culture in Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the responses from within and without the black community to the growing threat of gang-related violence. By describing the city's advancing war on gangs, the support among black community leaders for aggressive anti-gang law enforcement tactics, and the simultaneous proliferation of gang networks, this chapter lays the groundwork for the national response to the explosive popularity of the music that arose from gang-associated social groupings.

Chapter Four delves into the social worlds of Los Angeles black youths rooted in the gangs detailed in Chapter Three, with a particular emphasis on two simultaneously developing yet incongruent scenes: the New York-inspired uptown club circuit and the mobile DJ party scene, which emerged largely from South Los Angeles' gang-populated ghettos. By comparing and contrasting these two thriving music scenes—each rich with artistic and entrepreneurial experimentation—this chapter provides a lens for understanding the cultural, philosophical, and musical differences between "East Coast Rap" and "West Coast Rap." The chapter argues that the latter, at this very early stage, was inextricably linked to the gang lifestyle that was becoming all too familiar to youths in the city's poor black communities. This association was key to the ways in which the musical production, lyrical themes, and trends associated with Los Angeles rap developed. In other words, the proliferation of street gangs in the region—particularly in South Los Angeles—set the tone for this developing urban music culture.

Chapter Five extends this discussion by exploring the growing link, perceived and proven, between rap and violence out West. The 1986 riot at the Fresh Fest rap showcase in Long Beach, California, and the responses to it—particularly from within the established hip-hop industry—illustrates the growing national perception of Los Angeles rap artists and members of their growing fan base as "gangstas" and "thugs." As if to

confirm these increasingly popular ideas, the 1988 debut album from Los Angeles hip-hop group N.W.A. proclaimed that they were “the gang called Niggaz Wit Attitude,” thereby helping to coin the term “gangsta rap.” The final chapter before the conclusion explores the N.W.A. phenomenon, the ways in which the group situated itself within the Los Angeles culture of violence, and how its rapid rise as a hip-hop super group reflected upon the city it claimed, the law enforcement officials it mocked, and, eventually, the national trends it exploited.

In concert with an examination of Los Angeles in the post-Black Power era, the history of the region’s gangsta rap phenomenon proves not only to be multi-layered but also sheds light on the maturation of hip-hop music more generally, its enduring popularity, and the controversies that both mar and strengthen its reception. In some ways, this narrative parallels the story of rap’s birth in the South Bronx, though with some critical deviations, especially in terms of the Los Angeles gang landscape and the uniquely tense relationship between black youths and the police. Like the 1965 riots in Watts, what appears to be an unexpected and inexplicable outburst from the ghettos of Los Angeles, was actually the result of many years of political, social, and economic transformations. In the case of Los Angeles hip-hop, the question is not simply why gangsta rap emerged when it did, but why did it become the cultural standard-bearer?

CHAPTER TWO

“Walking Bombs”: The Los Angeles Police Department and the 1979 Eula Love Incident

“They were both standing there emptying their guns on her.” On January 3, 1979, Hazel Blue, a resident of South Orchard Avenue in the South Central region of Los Angeles, watched as two Los Angeles Police Department patrolmen fired twelve shots, killing her neighbor, thirty-nine-year-old Eula Love. The officers, Lloyd O’Callaghan and Edward Hopson, confronted Love on the walkway in front of her three-bedroom yellow stucco home with their guns drawn. O’Callaghan, white, and Hopson, black, ordered the mother of three to drop her weapon, an eleven-inch boning knife. Love refused. “When the first shot hit her I thought that was it,” Blue recalled, “and after that it was just a nightmare.”¹

Earlier that day, an employee for the Southern California Gas Company had arrived at Eula Love’s residence with a “collect or shut-off order.” Recently widowed, unemployed, and depending entirely on her deceased husband’s monthly Social Security stipends of \$680 for her mortgage, groceries, utilities, and incidentals, Love had fallen behind in her payments to the gas company. Serviceman John Ramirez had instructions to switch off the gas at Love’s residence at 11926 South Orchard Avenue if he was unable to collect \$22.09, the minimum amount required to maintain service on a delinquent account. When no one responded at the front door, Ramirez walked to the side of the house to access the gas valve. According to a neighbor, Love then came to a window to warn the serviceman to leave her property. Ramirez, however, ignored Love’s demands and proceeded to reach under the house. Love emerged from the front door, picked up a long-handled garden shovel, approached Ramirez, and swung twice striking him in the arm. Ramirez ran back to his truck and returned to the base station where he reported the incident to police.²

The Southern California Gas Company dispatched two more employees to South Orchard Avenue a few hours later. Aware of the attack on Ramirez, the servicemen called police from a nearby pay phone to request protection. Ordered to wait for officers to arrive before confronting Love, the servicemen parked down the block and remained in their work truck. Meanwhile, Love and her twelve-year-old daughter Tammy returned home from Boy’s Market, a nearby store that offered check-cashing services. A friend, also at the market that day, recalled seeing Love with both a Social Security check and the gas bill. Upon turning down Orchard, Tammy spotted the gas company vehicle. According to the workmen, Love warned them against attempting to turn off her gas service and yelled obscenities while frantically digging around in her purse. She returned to the house, snatched up something from the kitchen, and told her fifteen-year-old

¹ John Mitchell and Doug Shuit, “Eulia Love: Anatomy of a Fatal Shooting,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1979.

² *Ibid.*

daughter Shelia that the servicemen refused to take payment. When the patrolmen arrived, Love was poised on her front porch gripping a large boning knife.³

Exactly what happened next is unclear. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, speaking on behalf of Officers O’Callaghan and Hopson, told reporters that when the two policemen emerged from their patrol car, they observed Love “flailing her knife” with “froth coming out of her mouth.” He said she yelled, “You’re not going to come down to my house and shut off my gas, motherfucking son of a bitch.”⁴ Both officers drew their service weapons and ordered Love to drop her knife, but she ignored their demands and turned back toward the house. When the officers followed her up the walkway, Gates explained, Love turned, raising the knife above her head. Hopson shouted, “Don’t do it, lady; don’t do it,” and both officers, fearing that the woman aimed to throw the serrated kitchen knife at O’Callaghan, fired. Gates stressed that Love died because “she decided to solve her problem with a knife. That’s why it happened.”⁵ A lawyer for the officers described the events similarly in a letter to the Deputy District Attorney and characterized the incident as “unfortunate” in that “a person refuse[d] to obey the lawful demand of a police officer and attempt[ed] to bury a knife in his chest.”⁶

Others disputed the official account of the shooting. Two eyewitnesses, including neighbor Hazel Blue, recalled seeing the white police officer knock something from Love’s hand as she headed back toward the house. “They both bent down to pick something up,” Blue recalled. Love retrieved the item, got back to her feet, and raised her arm. It was at that point that Love was “shot down cold blooded.” Shelia Love said that her mother was on her knees when the shots came, and testimony from one gas company employee present that afternoon seemed to corroborate that account. “She was on her knees when she came up with the knife in an upward motion,” he stated. “She never got up. She was down on her knees all the time. When the first shot was fired, she just fell back.” Other witnesses, including Love’s youngest daughter, claimed that Love was unarmed and retreating backward when O’Callaghan and Hopson began shooting.⁷

Both patrolmen refused to speak to prosecutors, invoking their Fifth Amendment rights, but in testimony collected for the official police report each said they acted in self-defense. They claimed that Love held the knife by the tip of its blade and managed to fling it at O’Callaghan, who stood five feet away. The weapon, which they said was in the air as they opened fire, landed sixty-eight feet from where Love’s body collapsed. No other witness accounts agreed with this version of events. The district attorney, in fact, interviewed two witnesses who charged that the black officer “fooled” with the knife after the shooting—an extremely serious allegation implying Hopson tampered with evidence in an attempt to conceal wrongdoing. *Jet* published an additional account by one neighbor who claimed that one of the officers kicked the knife across the street after Love

³ Ibid.

⁴ Daryl F. Gates, *Chief: My Life in the LAPD* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 222.

⁵ Doug Shuit, “Gates Pins Police Shootings on Crime,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1979.

⁶ Mitchell and Shuit, “Eulia Love: Anatomy of a Fatal Shooting.”

⁷ Ibid.

had collapsed.⁸ The department's crime lab found neither Hopson's nor O'Callaghan's nor Love's fingerprints on the knife's blade.⁹

Among residents of South Central Los Angeles, one fact was indisputable: a mother and neighbor was dead, shot eight times by uniformed police officers. Reports and rumors of the killing spread quickly, stoking anger, frustration, and fear among communities all too familiar with police abuse. "They're talking about the shooting," South Central resident Marion Singleton said of his neighbors, "and they just can't forget it. But the fear thing is stronger, too. People are afraid nothing will be done about it."¹⁰ In the days and weeks following the incident, members of Eula Love's South Los Angeles community crowded into City Council meetings to express their outrage and demand recompense for Love's two orphaned daughters. Many spoke publically of their own confrontations with violent and verbally abusive police who too often rode into their communities with guns blazing.¹¹ Freddie Wright, a postman who served Love's South Central neighborhood, collected signatures to petition Los Angeles City Hall to press for a grand jury investigation.¹²

African-American political and religious leaders delivered indictments of what they viewed as institutional arrogance. State Senator Diane Watson called for "checks and balances," noting that "for too long, the police have felt they were above the law [and] have never been made accountable for their actions." Democratic State Assemblywoman Maxine Waters, a vocal critic of police strip-searches and chokehold tactics—maneuvers used most brazenly against African-American men—stated, "The police are trained to be tough with blacks, and because of that they come into our communities thinking that all blacks carry guns and knives."¹³ The city's most prominent African-American ministers spoke to the press proclaiming that the Eula Love case was "bigger than Love's death." Reverend Milton. M. Merriweather, an outspoken critic of the Los Angeles Police Department, called for indemnity from City Hall and warned of mass uprisings if Officers Hopson and O'Callaghan were not held accountable for their actions. As a sampling of such demonstrations, leaders helped organize an anti-police rally following Love's funeral on January 13.¹⁴

⁸ "Controversy Brews In Shooting of L.A. Woman," *Jet*, February 1, 1979, 31.

⁹ Claire Spiegel, "Probe of Love Shooting—a Question of Credibility," *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1979.

¹⁰ Claire Spiegel, "Bullets Also Shattered Lives of 3 Daughters," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1979.

¹¹ Chief Daryl Gates called the black community's charges of racism unfounded. To prove this he repeatedly noted, as if an all too obvious point, that a black officer, patrolman Edward Hopson, was involved in the incident. Gates, *Chief*, 224; Mitchell and Shuit, "Eulia Love: Anatomy of a Fatal Shooting."

¹² "Controversy Brews In Shooting of L.A. Woman."

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sandy Banks, "New Cynicism: Watts: Many Churches but How Helpful," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1980; L.C. Fortenberry, "Love Death Draws Concern," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 18, 1979.

Compounding pressure applied by the black community, the press held the feet of Police Chief Daryl Gates, the Los Angeles district attorney, and Mayor Tom Bradley to the fire. The *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* featured several major pieces covering the January 3 incident. Its evocative and lengthy front-page narratives, printed in the days immediately following the shooting, framed Eula Love as a pathetic widow desperate to keep her two young daughters warm and fed during an unusually bitter winter; as both Southern California Gas and the Los Angeles Police Department encroached on her home, she feared the worst and grabbed a kitchen knife. Under stirring headlines, including “The \$22.09 Gas Bill Tragedy,” the paper focused on the most sensational details, particularly the haste with which the police officers drew their weapons and the number of shots fired. To make matters worse for Chief Gates, *Herald-Examiner* editorials, time and time again, boldly railed against unlawful police behavior. The press’s indictments led Gates to make veiled threats against the paper. “Maybe you can get away with this kind of journalism in New York,” he warned *Herald-Examiner* editors, “but you can’t in Los Angeles.”¹⁵ The *Herald-Examiner*’s coverage, meanwhile, helped stir doubt among South Central residents that investigations into police misconduct would be unbiased and that punishments would be harsh or, at the very least, appropriate.

The *Los Angeles Times*, unlike the *Herald-Examiner*, was late in reporting the LAPD shooting. The city’s most widely read paper offered no more than a single paragraph on the morning after Love’s death and then an equally brief story following her funeral. Staff claimed they had become desensitized to the crimes and misfortunes that seemed to occur regularly in South Los Angeles.¹⁶ *Los Angeles Times* editor Mark

¹⁵ James G. Bellows, *The Last Editor: How I Saved The New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times from Dullness and Complacency* (Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002), 235.

¹⁶ The borders of the various sections of Los Angeles—the “Eastside,” “Westside,” and “South Central” Los Angeles—have shifted many times since the tremendous influx of migrants, most notably African-American, during the 1940s. According to historian Anthony Macias in *Mexican-American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), the term “Eastside” initially denoted the region east of the Los Angeles River including several neighborhoods populated by a heterogeneous mix of working-class families, with the majority being Mexican-American residents. There is some disagreement among city officials, the popular media, and Los Angeles residents of varying generations regarding the title that best represents the neighborhoods of Los Angeles lying just south of downtown. For those African-American residents who lived along Central Avenue during its musical heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, this center of black entrepreneurship was “The Eastside,” and not “South Central,” as it became popularly known after the 1950s, nor “South Los Angeles,” its official name since 2003. For more on regional semantics, see Clara Bryant, et al., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1998). The borders of the South Central region have expanded significantly since the 1940s to incorporate Watts and Compton to the south. After the Supreme Court struck down housing covenants in 1948, upwardly mobile black families gradually pushed the western border of “South Central” block by block, from Central Avenue in the 1940s, to Avalon Boulevard, Main Street, Figueroa Street, and, most recently, to Western Avenue. The area called the “Westside” or “West Los Angeles,” then, has shrunken somewhat. The affluent and predominantly white region of the city is framed by Hollywood Boulevard to the north, Venice Boulevard to the south, and Western Avenue to the east.

Murphy explained, “You see so many tragedies every day, especially in your minority communities, that any sense of urgency in your mind becomes diminished. Then you become blasé about what’s really a compelling story.”¹⁷ The paper acted on the notion that, at the very least, interest in the story among its readership—predominantly white and middle-class—was minimal. Murphy and staff gambled on the story quickly expiring as so many headlines about inner-city violence in the 1970s did.

The drama and controversy surrounding this fatal shooting in the predominantly African-American neighborhood in the south end of the city only escalated in the months that followed. The *Herald-Examiner* and its relentless reporting on police excesses helped stoke the flames of indignation locally, but when *Esquire* magazine got ahold of the story in March of 1979, Eula Love and the abuses of the Los Angeles Police Department became national news. In its feature article, *Esquire* shamed the *Los Angeles Times* for failing to cover the story comprehensively.¹⁸ The *Los Angeles Times* responded, dispatching a team of reporters to cover the case, and in April, it printed three separate pieces, including an extensive biography of Love complete with statements from neighbors, friends, and family members. For the story, reporters traveled to Love’s hometown in Varnado, Louisiana. There they questioned residents, including the mayor, about race relations in the rural town. According to the article, which was sentimentally entitled “Eulia [sic] Mae Love’s California Adventure Ended in Depression and Police Bullets,” the mayor—who was white—said he remembered Love from her childhood. The article continued, “Asked about the shooting [the mayor] said, ‘Seems to me one or two shots would have been sufficient... I mean, you know, to disable her.’”¹⁹

The *Los Angeles Times*, following the lead of the *Herald-Examiner* and *Esquire*, questioned whether the police department protected and served all regions of the city with equal care and civility. It reminded its readers that the chilling shooting of Eula Love was in no way the first incident in which Los Angeles police had hastily unloaded multiple gun rounds killing or critically wounding a suspect from one of the city’s racial minority groups. Confirming charges from black and Chicano community leaders that excessive use of violence plagued the police ranks, the paper listed several other recent cases under investigation by the district attorney. Just two months prior to the Eula Love incident, Reyes Martinez, a 43-year-old Mexican-American man suspected of theft, was discovered unconscious on the floor of his jail cell at the LAPD precinct in Van Nuys. Suffering from a fractured skull and a large laceration on the back of his head, Martinez was taken to the hospital where he died the next day. Officers on duty that night claimed he simply fell from his bunk. On January 19, less than a week after Love’s funeral, a patrolman shot an unarmed black Angeleno mistaken for a robbery suspect. The officer claimed that the victim, nineteen-year-old James H. Richardson, had pulled a shiny object from his pocket. The object was not in fact a gun, as the officer had initially assumed, but a wad of foil. The young man died from multiple gunshot wounds. The following week, three plainclothes officers unloaded their weapons on forty-two-year-old African-American gas station attendant Cornelius Tatum because they mistook him for a burglar. It was Tatum’s first day on the job at the station on Vermont Avenue in South Central

¹⁷ David Shaw, “2 Big Stories that the *Times* Muffed,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1979.

¹⁸ *Esquire* cited in Shaw, “2 Big Stories that the *Times* Muffed.”

¹⁹ Claire Spiegel and Janet Clayton, “Eulia [sic] Mae Love’s California Adventure Ended in Depression and Police Bullets,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1979.

Los Angeles, and he armed himself due to threats of robberies in the area. The officers, working undercover for the department's gang unit, said that when they identified themselves as policemen, Tatum aimed his shotgun at them, which witnesses disputed. The victim, shot eleven times, suffered permanent paralysis from the waist down.²⁰ The implication underpinning each of these reports in the press was that some system of checks and balances would be necessary to curtail such rampant use of excessive force. The LAPD and Police Chief Daryl Gates were compelled by public pressure to take the lead in initiating this kind of change.

According to the Los Angeles Police Department, efforts to determine whether Patrolmen Edward Hopson and Lloyd O'Callaghan would be criminally liable for using deadly force against Eula Love were in fact thorough. The County District Attorney's Office and Mayor Bradley affirmed Police Chief Daryl Gates's claims that his department adhered to protocol; a homicide team arrived on the scene "within minutes" of the shooting and both officers were motored to police headquarters to be questioned separately. Police officials notified the district attorney within forty-eight hours of the incident and, though the District Attorney's Office delayed work on the case for a week, the police department managed an exhaustive internal investigation.²¹ Gates vigorously defended his department's response and lashed out at both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Herald-Examiner* for manipulating public opinion—"wringing out every single drop, every tear that they can"—in the coverage of the shooting. Cases like the Love incident were "inevitable" in South Los Angeles, a region plagued by crime and gang-related violence. "In that kind of climate," Gates reasoned, "you are going to have police violence."²²

Gates's defense of his department, he knew, was poor justification for the rash of police shootings in South Los Angeles in January, all within the first year of his tenure as police chief. He was keen on noting to the press that from the outset he had been denied the resources he needed to lower crime rates and, in turn, to prevent the related police conduct perceived by the public as excessively aggressive.²³ With the passage in 1978 of Proposition 13, a tax-limitation initiative that required all locally proposed property tax increases to receive two-thirds approval, California cities became hamstrung in attempts to tap the revenue generated from rising property values to fund additional police, fire, and paramedical services, as well as public schools and infrastructure improvements. Los Angeles, with some of the highest paid police officers in the world, was particularly crippled in its efforts to increase the budget of its police department to the degree necessary for significant staff gains.²⁴ Gates was vocally frustrated by his inability to expand his force, especially in light of the fact that other major metropolitan areas with

²⁰ Bill Farr, "3 L.A. Policemen Charged in Shooting at Gas Station," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1980.

²¹ In 1977, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office established a 72-hour grace period for police to notify the district attorney of shootings. Chief Gates points out that the department notified the district attorney the day immediately following the incident.

²² Doug Shuit, "Gates Pins Police Shootings on Crime," *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1979.

²³ Gates, *Chief*, 208.

²⁴ Average annual wages and benefits for a Los Angeles patrolman with at least five years experience was \$30,000 in 1980. Robert Lindsey, "Los Angeles Police Find Image of Efficiency Fades," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1980.

comparable populations boasted much higher law enforcement numbers. While Los Angeles staffed just 6000 officers to cover 470 square miles, the Philadelphia Police Department, for instance, reached its peak size in 1979, with more than 8,500 officers to cover just 370 square miles. New York City, with a population three times the size of Los Angeles, staffed five times as many officers. Chicago's police force claimed 13,000 members, more than double that of the LAPD, for a region less than half the size.²⁵ Gates claimed his officers, overworked and underappreciated, risked far more than did policemen in any other region of the country. Under such circumstances, Gates wondered why "people keep crying out for something different to happen in this organization."²⁶

On April 17, 1978, after three months of investigation, District Attorney John Van de Kamp announced that police officers Hopson and O'Callaghan would not be prosecuted for the shooting death of Eula Love. The killing, his office concluded, was in "self-defense," and evidence proved that the officers' decision to unload their weapons on a woman wielding a kitchen knife was not "the aggravated, reckless and grossly negligent act condemned by statute and case law." Essential to the district attorney's decision was a deposition provided by the pathologist for the county coroner; ballistics data demonstrated that Love was not on the ground when any of the bullets struck her and that the fatal bullet—the one that penetrated her chest—was the last to enter her body.²⁷ This evidence, coupled with selected eyewitness accounts, discredited testimony supplied by both Love daughters and one of the two Southern California Gas Company employees present that day. Van de Kamp also noted that he would not prosecute on the lesser charge of using excessive force "mainly because it is impossible to recreate the point when the danger to the officers ended."²⁸ Gates immediately hailed the decision and added that his department would not implement disciplinary action of any kind against "surrogate victims" Hopson and O'Callaghan.²⁹

"It's just racism," charged Al Mason, one of Love's neighbors. "You kill a Negro and they don't do anything about it." Love's friend and eyewitness Hazel Blue lamented, "I couldn't believe it."³⁰ Reverend Merriweather and Assemblywoman Waters echoed the fury emanating from South Los Angeles and questioned the legitimacy of the district attorney's evidence clearing the officers. Joyce Fiske, president of the Southern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), joined Waters in calling for the establishment of a citizen-controlled institution with the power to conduct its own independent investigations of such matters. Fiske spoke on behalf of minority community leaders citywide at a news conference in the days following the district attorney's announcement. "We feel that as of now there is nobody in Los Angeles that is adequately investigating the grievances and complaints that are brought by people who

²⁵ "Los Angeles Police; Not So Angelic," *The Economist* (U.S. Edition), June 18, 1983.

²⁶ Mitchell and Shuit "Eulia Love: Anatomy of a Fatal Shooting."

²⁷ Bill Farr, "DA Won't Prosecute Two Officers in Eulia Love Killing," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1979.

²⁸ Bill Farr, "No Prosecution in Police Killing of Eulia Love," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1979.

²⁹ Shuit, "Gates Pins Police Shootings on Crime."

³⁰ Doug Shuit, "Calls for Police Review Board Renewed," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1979.

believe they are suffering discriminatory law enforcement or police abuse.” She concluded, “It makes no sense for the police to police themselves.”³¹

In the aftermath of the district attorney’s report, accusations of misconduct came not only from outside the department but also from within the agency. Much to the dismay of many inside the LAPD, Deputy Chief Marshall Anderson told reporters that he believed his colleagues Hopson and O’Callaghan had used “faulty judgment and poor tactics by placing themselves in a position that necessitated the use of deadly force.”³² Anderson, who commanded the five South Central police divisions, exposed rifts within the police department, which was a revelation to the many stalwarts on the force who had rallied behind their fellow patrolmen. The fallout from the district attorney’s decision also reached the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, the civic body responsible for overseeing the police department. Board member Reva Tooley commented that there was something “fundamentally wrong” with law enforcement policies that led to the shooting death of a woman armed with a kitchen knife and “a system which then goes on to judge her death as acceptable.”³³

Additional critics of the work conducted by the district attorney’s office surfaced. Some with a nuanced understanding of the intimate working relationship between the LAPD and the city district attorney noted that criminal investigations originating in and delivered by the police department comprised the bulk of the district attorney’s caseload; any officer indicted for misconduct, in other words, was likely to have worked closely with the district attorney on at least one occasion. The implication was that familiarity begat bias.

The manner in which the district attorney conducted the Love investigation was seemingly rushed and, in a number of ways, flawed. For testimony from Eula Love’s twelve-year-old daughter Tammy, the district attorney relied upon a statement signed by the young girl during her three-hour stay at the station. He used the statement, which was written by police staff, to discredit conflicting information she offered later in a telephone interview. The Love family’s lawyer lambasted the district attorney for accepting evidence collected “on police turf.”³⁴ Additional details from the investigation emerged, further obscuring the validity of the data upon which the district attorney based his findings. He delegated, for instance, two white men—Terry Green, a prosecutor, and Tim Farmer, a former police officer—to question each of sixty witnesses, most of them black. Eyewitness Hazel Blue found Farmer to be pleasant enough, though she recalled that at one point during her interview he revealed his background in law enforcement. His comment to her, that “I know, because I was once a policeman,” was, she felt, conspicuously defensive.³⁵

Green and Farmer confirmed observations in the official police report that the versions of events offered by citizen witnesses varied so widely and conflicted so often that most eyewitness accounts had to be discredited. Two neighbors told the district attorney’s investigators that Officer Hopson handled the knife after shots were fired and Love had collapsed. One witness recanted his testimony soon after for unknown reasons,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Doug Shuit, “L.A. Deputy Chief Hits Love Slaying,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1979.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Spiegel, “Probe of Love Shooting.”

³⁵ Ibid.

claiming he never saw a knife, and the district attorney discredited the other witness for his use of the term “fooling” in describing Hopson’s actions. Green and Farmer stated in their report, “[The witness] was unable to explain exactly what he meant... he couldn’t break it down—where was he fooling with the knife? What does ‘fooling’ mean? We couldn’t do anything with it.”³⁶ The district attorney’s office refused to release transcripts of witness interviews, which could have shed light on alleged discrepancies or miscommunication. The agency, in refusing to release transcripts of witness interviews and failing to explain reasons for extreme inconsistencies, only warranted further complaints.

Mayor Tom Bradley, well into his second term, offered his own assessment of the results of the district attorney’s investigation. He carefully noted his disapproval in a public statement. “There is widespread feeling—which I share—that the shooting might have been avoided.”³⁷ He was right. A citywide poll conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in late April revealed that a majority of blacks disapproved of the manner in which the Los Angeles police did their jobs. This result represented a significant turnabout from responses collected just eighteen months earlier, which showed a 54% police approval rating among African Americans. Eight out of ten African Americans interviewed in April were critical of the way the Eula Love incident was handled, and 60% believed officers were more verbally and physically aggressive when dealing with blacks. Latinos polled expressed similar views, with two-thirds citing the Love shooting as an act of police brutality and 40% agreeing that blacks bore the brunt of abuse.

The April survey also indicated that most whites in the region held a positive opinion of the police after the Love shooting, and letters to the *Los Angeles Times* written by residents of predominantly white, affluent sections of Los Angeles County seemed to reinforce those findings. Ronald Clem from Diamond Bar, a suburban region just east of West Covina, wrote in response to an editorial detailing the life of Eula Love and her tragic end. “Why haven’t I heard anyone abhor the attack by [sic] Eulia Love on an unarmed gas company [sic] employe?” Clem argued that violence beget violence and that Love might be alive “if she had not assaulted a gas company [sic] employe with a shovel, if she had dropped her weapon upon request of the officers, and if she had not assaulted a Los Angeles police officer with an 11-inch knife!”³⁸ Some from the outlying suburbs surrounding the county offered their own perspectives on the contentious events underlying the *Los Angeles Times* poll. Although these populations were not included in the survey, letters originating from Kern County, San Bernardino, and Orange echoed the pro-police language offered by some suburban Angelenos. Deborah Martin from Upland asked, “Why is it that the media seem so thirsty for the blood of those holding jobs that I’m sure few others have the stamina, guts and intelligence for?”³⁹ Another reader chastised *Los Angeles Times* editors for printing a two-page biography of “the suspect,” who was “just one of many armed suspects” that police officers confront each day. This reader, a Bakersfield resident, was particularly incensed that the paper had shown compassion for Love yet buried the story of a shooting in the Watts-area Nickerson Gardens Public Housing Project that left one police officer in critical condition and

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Shuit, “L.A. Deputy Chief Hits Love Slaying.”

³⁸ “Letters to the *Times*,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1979.

³⁹ Ibid.

another dead. “Your article,” the letter continued, “almost appeared to eulogize Mrs. Love and attempted to find justification in her actions.”⁴⁰

Though some in Los Angeles, and, it appeared, many on the outskirts, were dismayed and even disgusted by what seemed to be a media campaign to frame Eula Love as a martyr, among the Los Angeles population as a whole, support for law enforcement had dropped and doubt in the force had risen sharply.⁴¹ This was a significant problem for Los Angeles police and city leaders alike. Perhaps in a token effort to appease such an obviously dissatisfied populace, the mayor presented a meager challenge to the police chief’s administration. He suggested that the Los Angeles Police Commission, a five-member board appointed by the mayor, review police policies and procedures.⁴² Bradley’s gesture did little to acknowledge the sense of urgency within the Los Angeles inner city for reform. He further drew the ire of the black community when, in May, he granted medals of valor to seven LAPD police officers and then, in September, announced his full support for Chief Gates amid demands from prominent black leaders for the Chief’s resignation. Mayor Bradley cautioned Gates’s critics, noting that forced resignation would only increase discord between the police department and the community. One black minister asked in an interview in the *Los Angeles Times* whether Mayor Bradley indeed had an “LAPD mentality.”⁴³

African Americans in South Los Angeles had good reason to believe that, with the election of Bradley, the first black mayor of Los Angeles and the first African American elected mayor of a major metropolitan area in the West, City Hall would make the scrutiny of police-minority relations a top priority and reform would be imminent. The son of Texas sharecroppers, Bradley had been raised under an oppressive southern labor system in which African-American farmers toiled on white-owned land, rented white-owned equipment, were often subject to price points set by white store owners, found they were at the mercy of local and state laws that benefitted whites, and lived each day under the threat of violence meant to limit black advancement. Like some two million southern African Americans who migrated north and west to fulfill desires to build a better, more prosperous life for themselves and their children—one removed from the barriers of forced accommodation and terror—Bradley’s family chose to leave the Jim Crow South behind.

⁴⁰ “Letters to the *Times*,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1979.

⁴¹ The *Los Angeles Times* conducted two separate polls of police approval in Los Angeles, one among African Americans and another of the city’s entire population. Participants were defined as “black,” “white,” or “Hispanic.” Whites, who were most likely to approve of the Los Angeles Department, expressed greater uncertainty about police misconduct than this group had in 1977. It is also notable that the evidence of rising disapproval offered by the *Times* refuted an LAPD survey that showed a staggering 97% of residents approved of police conduct and services. Chief Gates ultimately conceded that the discrepancies could be attributed to the manner in which the poll was administered: participants were selected from a pool of those who had called the police department for help. George Skelton, “Public Taking Dimmer View of L.A. Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1979.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Medals of Valor Given to Seven L.A. Policemen,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1979.

Rather than head to the North to a city like Chicago, St. Louis, or Cleveland, the family in 1924 followed lesser-worn paths to the Pacific Coast, which before World War II had been treaded mainly by a few thousand migrants from regions in and around southeast Texas and Louisiana. Bradley shared common bonds with many black southerners who had first laid claim to the Central Avenue district, the vibrant center of the Los Angeles African-American community with its black churches, including the First African Methodist Episcopal, self-help organizations like the Sojourner Truth Industrial Club, headquarters for the local black press, most notably Charlotta Bass's *California Eagle*, and regional chapters of the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The district also housed small black-owned establishments such as restaurants and theaters, as well as large businesses including the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company and the four-story Hotel Dunbar, which hosted beloved celebrities including Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Ralph Bunche, and W.E.B. DuBois.⁴⁴ In part because he grew up in Los Angeles in the 1920s, when pleasant weather, decent wages, integrated schools, inexpensive housing, opportunities for economic independence, and relative racial tolerance fueled the conception of the Southern California city as the "Promised Land," Tom Bradley epitomized the lore of Los Angeles for many of its black residents.⁴⁵

Bradley also served as an example of the rewards of academic, professional, and political ambition. He made something of a habit of surmounting color barriers in his pursuits. As one of a small, elite group of African-American students at the University of California, Los Angeles, he emerged as a track star and captain in what had been an exclusively white college team sport. Following graduation, Bradley earned a position on the Los Angeles Police force and rose quickly through the predominantly white ranks to earn the title of lieutenant, the highest position to which a black patrolman could aspire through the 1960s.⁴⁶ Told that because of his race he would never be promoted to the rank of captain, Bradley left the police department, earned a law degree, and trained his sights on politics. In 1963, he, Gilbert Lindsay, and Billy G. Mills ran successful campaigns for positions on the Los Angeles City Council, and together they became the first black members to integrate that institution. By the time Bradley chose to challenge incumbent mayor Samuel Yorty, he was well prepared for the obstacles and conceivable rewards that lay ahead.

With 42% of the vote, Tom Bradley handily defeated twelve candidates in the 1969 Democratic Los Angeles mayoral primary. With 26% of the vote, conservative

⁴⁴ For a record of celebrity guests at the Hotel Dunbar, see Austin Scott, "Postscript: Hotel Dunbar Has Room for Much Improvement but Lacks Money," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 1980.

⁴⁵ For a detailed history of pre-World War II black migration to Los Angeles, see Douglas Flamming, *Bound For Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ The Los Angeles Police Department did not promote a black lieutenant to the rank of captain until 1969, when Lt. Homer Floyd Broome, Jr. earned the position. Frome earned the rank of commander in 1975, becoming the first black officer on the force to rise above the rank of captain. For more on Homer Broome, see Jason Felch, "LAPD's first black commander," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 2007.

Democrat Yorty finished second. In the campaign for the run-off election, Yorty tapped into racial anxieties among voters for whom the Watts Riots were an all too recent memory. He charged Bradley with making “a very racist appeal in the Negro area” for votes, and he implied that the ascension of thugs and militants would be inevitable within a black administration.⁴⁷ Yorty suggested that Richard Hatcher, the recently elected mayor of Gary, Indiana (and the first black mayor in the state) employed local street gangs to threaten City Council members who opposed his agenda. Just days before polls opened in Los Angeles, Yorty stated in a news conference, “Now you can imagine what would happen here if we had a group of militants descend on our council supporting something for Mr. Bradley, if he should be elected.”⁴⁸ Bradley blasted Yorty for exploiting the region’s racial tensions, and for engaging in “gutter politics,” all the while managing to secure the support of high-ranking Democratic leaders, including Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy.⁴⁹ In response to Bradley’s national endorsements, Yorty commented, “My theory is that they wouldn’t be so anxious to elect that particular person if they had to live under him if he were elected. They’re safe.”⁵⁰ Yorty won another term as mayor, earning 53% of the vote.

In 1973, the two men faced off once again in another brutal, racially charged campaign. Rather than simply inferring that Bradley maintained radical ties, Mayor Yorty drew direct links between his black opponent and Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton, charging that, like Newton, Bradley was “a radical through and through” and vigorously “anti-police.” Newton had, in fact, offered Bradley an official endorsement. It was also a widely known fact that Bradley had charged the Los Angeles Police Department, his former employer, with racial discrimination for refusing to promote black lieutenants. As a City Councilman, he wrangled publically with Police Chief William Parker, particularly in cases of alleged police abuse.⁵¹ Bradley, thus, had some difficulty dodging the mayor’s accusations. Yorty’s race-baiting tactics, however, failed to stir voters’ fears as they had four years prior. This was largely because in their first face off in 1969, Bradley was an unknown political figure, and Yorty was able to manipulate the uncertainty surrounding the black mayoral candidate. “When *this* election started, I was known by 95 percent of the people—so it was a considerably different situation,” Bradley noted of the 1973 campaign. “Sam Yorty simply mis-read the people when he thought that the racial attacks would work again. This time, it backfired on him—and it was a beautiful thing to watch.”⁵² In a concerted effort to beat Yorty in his own game, Bradley tied the increasingly Republican-leaning mayor to corruption in Washington under the Richard Nixon administration. “I’m confident that as they watch Watergate,” Bradley said of Los Angeles voters, “they’ll make the connection between

⁴⁷ “Negro City Council Member Tops Yorty in Mayor Race,” *Eugene Register-Guard*, April 2, 1969, 4A.

⁴⁸ “Los Angeles Mayoral Election: Terry Brinkwater Reports,” *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, TV News Series, directed by Arthur Bloom (originally aired May 19, 1969; CBS News Productions, 1969), Online Video. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnDjQ1QbWho>>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Art Berman and Erwin Baker, “Police Report on Grudt Shooting Released,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1965.

⁵² B.J. Mason, “Tom Bradley: New Mayor of Los Angeles,” *Ebony*, July 1973, 133-134.

that and Sam Yorty.”⁵³ With the help of a get-out-the-vote campaign directed toward minority communities, which even included an episode of the widely popular *Jackson 5ive* cartoon featuring a young Michael Jackson elected as mayor of Los Angeles, Bradley succeed in unseating Yorty and becoming the first black mayor of a major city west of the Mississippi.⁵⁴

In a speech following his swearing-in ceremony, Mayor Tom Bradley announced to Los Angeles citizens, “Your rejection of those issues that were irrelevant to the campaign, your rejection of the appeals to racial prejudice will serve as an historic monument to the political process in this country.”⁵⁵ In a city in which African Americans made up less than 18% of the population (and comprised just 15% of the city’s registered voters), Bradley’s victory signaled the creation of multiracial coalitions in Los Angeles, particularly among Los Angeles blacks, Jews, and Mexican Americans, groups long underrepresented in local politics and excluded from municipal leadership roles.⁵⁶ More significantly, his win revealed that Los Angeles voters no longer mandated the conservative reign of Mayor Sam Yorty, who blocked the city’s access to federal anti-poverty funds available under President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation. Bradley’s success also seemed to indicate that voters no longer rubber-stamped Yorty’s biggest ally, Police Chief William Parker, a man generally loathed by Los Angeles blacks and the target of much hostility during the Watts Riots. Bradley’s political rise seemed to represent a critical shift in popular opinion away from older conservative ideals that had, throughout the 1960s, revealed a lack of sympathy for the plight of African Americans in the inner city.

A survey conducted by political scientists David Sears and John McConahay suggested that African Americans viewed the 1965 Watts Riots as a turning point in black-white relations, believing that it marked the beginning of a new era of white consciousness of minority issues.⁵⁷ The election of Mayor Tom Bradley only seemed to reinforce that. Less than a decade after the most violent race riot in the city’s history—a reaction, in large part, to rampant police brutality and the effective complicity of city leaders—Los Angeles voters chose as their chief municipal executive a southern-born, South Central local who was both intimately linked to the black community and who

⁵³ “Los Angeles Mayoral Election: Terry Brinkwater Reports,” *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, TV News Series, directed by Arthur Bloom (originally aired May 29, 1973; CBS News Productions, 1973), Online Video,

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Val48Xn8UrY&feature=relmfu>>.

⁵⁴ The episode, which served as a public service announcement about the power of the vote, aired days before the primary election. “Groove to the Chief,” *Jackson 5ive*, TV Series (originally aired September 32, 1972; ABC, Rankin/Bass and Motown Productions, 1972), DVD.

⁵⁵ “Inauguration of Tom Bradley: Tom Brokaw Reports,” *NBC Nightly News*, TV News Series (originally aired June 31, 1973; NBC News Productions, 1973), Online Video, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Val48Xn8UrY&feature=relmfu>>.

⁵⁶ “Tom Bradley: New Mayor of Los Angeles.”

⁵⁷ David O. Sears and John B. McConahay. *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot* (Boston: Houghton, MifflinCompany, 1973), cited in Raphe Sonenshein, “Biracial Coalition Politics in Los Angeles,” *PS*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1986): 584.

possessed some insight into the machinery of the Los Angeles Police Department. “There are a number of things I want to do in terms of reorganizing the way in which the city is run,” he told *Ebony* in the months following his election. Even Sam Yorty acknowledged the extent to which the new mayor might transform Los Angeles, noting that, “The change, if it takes place, will be a radical one.”⁵⁸ Los Angeles was ripe for renewal, and if anyone could generate hope for substantive reform, it was Tom Bradley.

“Because Bradley is a black man,” *Ebony* surmised, “that fact alone will make his task more difficult—if only because other blacks will expect more.”⁵⁹ It explained to its readers that because Los Angeles employed a city council form of government, the mayor’s power was limited; his appointments and proposals were all subject to the approval of the Los Angeles City Council, much like the president’s agenda had to be sanctioned by congress. Bradley, however, assured his constituents that they need not temper their expectations of his administration. In promising his black supporters that he would prioritize the search for solutions to “the major worries affecting blacks,” including unemployment, failing schools, and social marginalization, he emphasized that “the prestige of the office alone gives me more than enough leverage to do the job effectively.”⁶⁰

Bradley was also adamant that his number one priority would be to tackle the crime problem affecting the city. Despite the mayor’s political clashes with Police Chief Daryl Gates (who was appointed in the final days Mayor Sam Yorty’s administration), he frequently padded the police department budget. He also supported Gates’s efforts to put more officers on the streets, aided in the engineering of aggressive anti-gang programs, and pushed for mandatory jail sentences for all violent offenders. “When I was a police patrol officer,” Bradley told the black press, “I never dreamed that the day would come when people didn’t feel safe in their home or on the job. Unfortunately, that day has come.”⁶¹

It was true. By the 1970s, Los Angeles residents began to fret that crime, particularly related to the proliferation of violent street gangs, might disrupt their lives. Bradley, however, overstated this problem while neglecting to acknowledge that, for his black constituents, the true menace was not crime but those granted the authority—and lethal arms—to fight it. Abuse of police power, a leading concern among Los Angeles blacks, and an increasingly distressing issue for minority communities throughout the country, was not a new problem. Many, including federal officials, considered it not only the catalyst for the Watts Riots, but also one of the most fundamental factors contributing to racial unrest in the late 1960s. A decade prior to Bradley’s election, an issue of *Muhammad Speaks* in describing a violent confrontation between black Muslims and two white detectives employed by a South Central Los Angeles Safeway supermarket, cited a foreboding report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights that concluded, “Negroes are the victims of (police) brutality far more, proportionately, than any other

⁵⁸ “Tom Bradley: New Mayor of Los Angeles.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 137.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*; the black press helped nurture optimism about Bradley’s potential. For instance, *Jet* magazine placed his image on the cover of its June 21, 1973 issue next to the caption, “New Los Angeles Mayor Charts City’s Future.”

⁶¹ “Do Black Mayors Make a Difference?” *Ebony*, August 1984, 82.

group in American society.”⁶² Three years following the Watts Riots, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders offered a similarly frank assessment of the animosity festering between minority communities and urban police departments nationwide: “Almost invariably the incident that ignites disorder arises from police action. Harlem, Watts, Newark and Detroit—all the major outbursts of recent years—were precipitated by routine arrests of Negroes for minor offenses by white police.... To many Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes.”⁶³

The one incident that should have shaped Bradley’s mayoral priorities and might have crystallized his perspectives on the relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and the city’s African-American residents occurred just months before the riots in Watts. On February 24, 1965, LAPD patrolmen shot and killed John S. Grudt. The 55-year-old African-American carpenter allegedly struck two officers with his vehicle after a high-speed pursuit. The coroner’s report, which relied heavily on police testimony, ruled the killing a justifiable homicide. Details of the case, however, surfaced in the weeks following the incident and led some, including then City Councilman Bradley, to question the findings. Grudt’s family told the press that the victim had no police record and noted that he likely did not stop because he failed to recognize the authority of the plainclothes officers in their unmarked vehicle. His failure to follow orders resulted in a police pursuit that ended near 22nd Street and Western Avenue, blocks from the University of Southern California campus. Three additional police vehicles arrived as one officer unloaded his weapon, killing Grudt. Each patrolman on the scene testified that the fatal shots were fired immediately after Grudt rammed his car into one of the officers who approached on foot, but an eyewitness—a passing motorist—told the *Los Angeles Times* that the officer stood “5 to 10 feet to the side of (Grudt’s) car when he fired. I don’t see how he could have been brushed by the car.” The coroner’s report included a note about the motorist’s statement but concluded that the testimony “corroborates in part the statement of the officers at the scene.”⁶⁴ The Police Commission refused to release the full report, only fueling suspicions of a cover-up.

The Los Angeles City Council voted against further investigation into Grudt’s death, affirming that the incident was an open-and-shut case. Then-Councilman Bradley, however, dissented, representing the only member to vote in favor of reopening the investigation. He rebuked the police department, charging that, “every effort is being

⁶² *Muhammad Speaks*, May 1962, cited in “K of C Against Police Review Board Here,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1960.

⁶³ Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1968), 93; the fatal shooting of James Powell, a 15-year-old black boy, in Yorkville, New York in July 1964, serves as one of the most illustrative examples of the “incidents” noted by the President’s Commission. Powell had been shot by white patrolman James Gilligan, who was off-duty at the time and who claimed the boy lunged at him with a knife after he identified himself as a cop. Gilligan was cleared by the police department of any wrongdoing. Rioting broke out in Harlem following the boy’s funeral. Violent confrontations between the NYPD and rioters left at least one black man dead, and hundreds injured, some of them bystanders and most of them African-American. R.W. Apple Jr., “Violence Flares Again in Harlem; Restraint Urged,” *New York Times*, July 20 1964.

⁶⁴ Berman and Baker, “Police Report on Grudt Shooting Release.”

made to sweep this under the rug,” and he challenged Chief William Parker to review the “moral and legal justification” of police shooting policies.⁶⁵ In the spring of 1965, Bradley appeared to be aware of the anger related to law enforcement iniquities stirring among the city’s African Americans. If he worried about the impending consequences of such umbrage, his fears would have been substantiated when, months later, flames engulfed South Los Angeles amid the riots sparked by a police traffic stop not unlike the one that led to Grudt’s death. If that had not been enough evidence of an acute problem, the violent clashes between police forces and black communities in cities including Chicago, Miami, Akron, and York, Pennsylvania might have convinced Bradley, once mayor, that the issue was a malignant one.⁶⁶

Bradley’s response to the Eula Love case became a litmus test for his commitment to protecting the civil rights of Los Angeles blacks. The results indicated that the mayor had neither the power nor the inclination to wrest control from Police Chief Daryl Gates, to mandate changes in law enforcement policy, or to subpoena members of the Los Angeles Police Department in order to ensure the safety of his minority constituents. Bradley failed to meet what, ultimately, may have been unreasonable expectations. In the context of the election of African-American mayors in many of the nation’s large cities, including Coleman Young who took the office in Detroit in 1974, New Orleans’ mayor Ernest Morial elected in 1977, and Richard Arrington who became Birmingham’s first black mayor in 1979, *Ebony* asked “Do Black Mayors Make a Difference?” It noted that by his third term as mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley had built a reputation for avoiding confrontation. The magazine offered a caveat that though “many Black voters expect [Black mayors] to make swift and dramatic changes,” white mayors had been “stumped” by the exact same problems.⁶⁷

Despite such reasoning, the mayor’s black constituents cast their complaints. “Mayor Bradley must be dead,” South Central resident Marion Singleton surmised. “I don’t see how a mayor—a black man—could allow a police force to bully people around like they do here.”⁶⁸ John McKnight, a Watts area resident, indicted city leaders for simply abandoning those living in the housing projects, condemning them to exist in a war zone in which their most dangerous enemies were often police officers. “I don’t care how minor the crime, [the police] come in here in force as though somebody had shot up a whole number of people,” McKnight, an appliance deliveryman supporting his family of seven, complained. “They think a black man’s always dangerous until he’s handcuffed and laying on the ground.”⁶⁹ McKnight issued a warning: “The way things are

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ “9 Die in Police-Negro Clashes,” *Jet*, August 22, 1968.

⁶⁷ “Do Black Mayors Make a Difference?”

⁶⁸ Claire Spiegel, “Bullets Also Shattered Lives of 3 Daughters,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1979.

⁶⁹ Michael Seiler, “Nickerson Gardens—a View From a Black-and White,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1979.

going...there's going to be some sort of confrontation and innocent people are going to get hurt around here."⁷⁰

McKnight's forecast, given in October, was not remarkable in that the Nickerson Gardens alone had been mired in law enforcement-related violence in the summer months. On August 31, a seventeen-year-old boy was shot and wounded by officers on patrol in the housing project. Police claimed he pointed a gun at them. One week later, a 40-year-old male resident was shot and wounded when officers interceded in a domestic dispute. The suspect allegedly pulled a gun, though no weapon was found at the scene. Then, in November, a shooting confrontation between 21-year-old Gregory Benford and two LAPD left Benford in critical condition and one patrolman badly injured. Some eyewitnesses claimed that the officer shot Benford as he attempted to surrender. Others said Benford was handcuffed lying face down on the ground when shots were fired. Both officers reported that Benford refused to drop his weapon and managed to fire a single shot, damaging one patrolman's hand so badly that it was eventually amputated. The uninjured officer then shot Benford, who had turned to run, striking him in the back.⁷¹

With violence like this affecting their everyday lives, black Angelenos had good reason to believe they were under siege and that their mayor, a man who had once criticized police procedures on behalf of civilians and had provoked municipal and law enforcement leaders alike, had forsaken them. Citizens trusted that the time was right to seek answers, yet again, from within rather than rely on those institutions that had, time and time again, proved unreliable and even antagonistic.

The botched investigation of Eula Love's death served as a catalyst for local black leaders, most prominently ministers and small business owners, to join forces with a coalition of the city's most influential civil rights organizations, including the Los Angeles chapters of the ACLU and the NAACP, in a campaign to lay the foundation for the creation of an independent, citizen-run review board. This was not a new idea. These groups resurrected proposals originally introduced in 1960 amid growing concerns about Chief William Parker's increasingly racialized war against street gangs. The proposal, modeled on a citizen review board in Philadelphia, came under fire, with city, union, police, and religious officials calling foul. The Los Angeles City Council denounced the campaign led by the ACLU, the NAACP, and "several Latin or Spanish groups," and said that any attempt by citizens groups to set parameters for the activities of the police "would only benefit the dope peddlers, gangsters and other criminals within our society."⁷² The ACLU struggled to counter accusations made by the Fire and Police Protective League that they were promoting a "revolutionary tribunal" or a "junta."⁷³ The Los Angeles Police Department launched its own nationwide campaign against the establishment of police review boards, dispatching members to cities, including Detroit,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Jerry Belcher and Tim Waters, "Police Critical of TV Newsmen's Report," *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1979.

⁷² "Backers of Police Quiz Board Hit," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1960.

⁷³ Gene Hunter, "Police, Fire League Hits at Proposed Review Board," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1960.

Minneapolis, and Cincinnati, where citizens rights groups vied for the creation of similar boards. LAPD representatives in 1960 warned fellow municipal authorities that the review boards would further “destroy public confidence in the police departments” and ultimately “benefit the Communist cause.”⁷⁴ The Los Angeles council of the Knights of Columbus also exploited public fears of the red menace in issuing a public warning to the mayor and the City Council that review boards would “enable any anti-American group, such as the Communist Party, to harass the Police Department to the point where its efforts would be turned away from the field of law enforcement and directed to needlessly defending itself before this kangaroo court.”⁷⁵

After the indictments came assurances that resources had long existed for citizens who felt they were the victims of unequal law enforcement. In 1962, Chief Parker testified to the California State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights that citizens were free to report police misconduct to the Bureau of Internal Affairs. Other police officials and the Los Angeles press joined Parker in stressing the fact that procedures were already in place for the filing of citizen complaints; the Police Commission, the city district attorney, and the FBI served that end. Representatives for pro-board groups argued that citizens were too often intimidated by these agencies and, in fact, charges of police brutality had been used as evidence to incriminate victims. A blue-ribbon committee of nine citizens, each appointed by the County Human Relations Commission to review the efficiency of such procedures, ignored these allegations and affirmed Parker. As an alternative solution, it requested that, rather than demand a board to review complaints of police misconduct, minority group leaders encourage youths to pursue work on the police force. Law enforcement agencies were also advised to invest in the recruitment of black and Latino youths.⁷⁶

When, by December 1964, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had joined the crusade against citizen review boards, it appeared to many that efforts to improve citizen-police relations by empowering civilians had failed. The fight to mold that which Eason Monroe, the executive director of the Southern California branch of the ACLU, had called “a safety valve” for growing tensions between minority communities in Los Angeles and law enforcement, had been crushed.⁷⁷ Eight months later, Los Angeles was in flames.

The Watts Riots prompted Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and NAACP director Roy Wilkins to renew calls for the establishment of independent civilian-controlled police review boards to prevent further violence.⁷⁸ Their cries, however, were to no avail.

⁷⁴ George Garrigues, “L.A. Officer Heads Nationwide Police War on Review Boards,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1960.

⁷⁵ “K of C Against Police Review Board Here,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1960; Mayor Samuel Yorty, who took office in 1961, engaged in his own brand of red-baiting, contending in a *Times* editorial that the police review board concept is “one big local hope of the Communists.” Samuel Yorty, “Mayor Yorty,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1962.

⁷⁶ “Group Sees No Need of Board to Check Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 1964.

⁷⁷ Eason Monroe, “ACLU Warns of Tensions,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1962.

⁷⁸ In the months following the Watts Riots, national civil rights leaders King and Wilkins struggled to offer solutions to African Americans in Los Angeles. King condemned the rioting for being out of step with his nonviolent civil rights movement and even endorsed the police response, but to prevent further destruction in the city he called for the formation of a civilian review board. In 1966, Wilkins echoed King in his assessment of the riots, and suggested that the

The McCone Commission, which was charged with investigating the underlying causes of the riots, considered the issue but ultimately accepted Police Commission President John Ferrero's testimony that his institution had long fulfilled the role of the board and responded fairly to accusations of "misconduct and neglect." Mayor Sam Yorty, in his second term during the riots, remained a forceful opponent of the creation of the review board. He posited that the concept had been thrust upon the city by radical outsiders, an assumption easily confirmed by King's and Wilkins's public statements in the months following the riots. Though Tom Bradley unseated Yorty in 1973, he too proved to be an enemy of the boards. The campaign that had been set into motion in 1960, had all but dissolved.⁷⁹

In 1979, when Los Angeles civil rights organizations along with labor leaders and local community groups revived the citizen review board movement in response to the district attorney's announcement that Officers O'Callaghan and Hopson would not be prosecuted for the fatal shooting of South Central widow Eula Love, the obstacles that lay ahead were recognizable. Leaders adjusted tactics and explored new strategies to challenge the authorities of what some began to refer to as a "police state."⁸⁰ Rather than pressure the police department, as groups representing Puerto Ricans and African Americans in New York City had done with little success, and rather than lobby Mayor Bradley or the City Council to deal with widespread police misconduct, the Los Angeles review board coalition—larger and more diverse in 1979 than it had ever been—focused its efforts on the 1980 election.⁸¹ The Campaign for a Citizens' Police Review Board (CCPRB) included dozens of labor, political, and civil rights groups, such as early board activists from the ACLU, the NAACP, and the Mexican-American Citizens Committee, as well as new allies from the Coalition Against Police Abuse, the Campaign for Economic Democracy, the Feminist Women's Health Center, La Raza Legal Alliance, and La Raza Unida Party. Maneuvering around municipal authority, the CCPRB announced it would collect at least 150,000 signatures to place an initiative on the 1980 ballot to amend the Los Angeles city charter and allow for the creation of a tax-payer supported board. "The gathering storm of protest about the Love affair," *The Economist*

plan could prevent rioting in urban centers throughout the nation. See Wilkins's statement in Roy Wilkins, "Police Review Board Idea Is Very Well Worth Trying," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1966.

⁷⁹ California Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, *Violence in the City: An End or a Beginning?: A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots* (Sacramento: Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1965); Bill Boyarsky, "Who Polices the Police? L.A. Controversy," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1979.

⁸⁰ "Los Angeles: The Love Affair," *The Economist*, June 14, 1980.

⁸¹ In 1950, a coalition of over a dozen organizations formed the Permanent Coordination Committee on Police and Minority Groups to lobby the New York City mayor to deal with growing "police misconduct in their relations with Puerto Ricans and Negroes specifically." In response, the New York City Police installed a civilian review board within the department. Citizen complaints were investigated and judged by board members—often police deputies—selected by the NYPD. When, in 1965, Mayor John Lindsay attempted to pressure the department to appoint citizens to the board, the Patrolman's Benevolent Association managed to collect enough signatures to place a measure on the 1966 ballot barring civilian appointments. The measure passed by a wide margin. For more on this, see Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York, 2001), 155-188.

reported, “has led to the first small steps to check the enormous power of the Los Angeles police.”⁸²

The Campaign failed. Deep divisions within the CCPRB grew over disputes regarding the organizational details of the proposed review board, including its planned budget, salaries for appointees, and the need for administrative staff. Some withdrew their support and altogether abandoned the drive to collect signatures, leaving the fractured CCPRB weakened and ultimately unable to get the initiative on the ballot. Shortly after the summer deadline for qualifying the initiative, the ACLU-affiliated Citizens’ Commission on Police Repression released copies of police documents that suggested undercover police officers had infiltrated the Campaign, inciting conflict. The Commission also alleged that disguised detectives from the LAPD Public Disorders Intelligence Unit, while monitoring the Campaign’s activities, had stolen signatures. “What the documents show,” spokesman Jeff Cohen said, “is that if you criticize the police, they put you under surveillance.”⁸³ Police Chief Daryl Gates called the accusations “garbage.”⁸⁴ Whether or not the evidence did in fact corroborate charges of sabotage, the Campaign lost its battle with the police department. Armed with a \$1 million public relations campaign to improve its image, the Los Angeles Police Department emerged from the tumultuous events of 1979 and 1980 with renewed strength.

The killing of Eula Love and the ultimate decision by the Los Angeles District Attorney to rule out prosecution of the officers who shot her disappointed many yet surprised few in South Los Angeles. African Americans in the city had long been aware of the fact that the Los Angeles Police Department had engaged in acts of “serious misconduct” and that black Angelenos were disproportionately the victims of police abuse and, increasingly, police shootings. The fatal shooting of a middle-aged widow in her home and in the presence of her two young daughters, however, became much more than a chilling tragedy that drew the wrath of friends, family, and neighbors. It was a sensational story, morbidly fascinating in all of its details, that elicited attention from the national press. For those outside of the city, the incident and its aftermath sparked debate about discriminatory law enforcement practices and the deeply troubled relationship between inner city minority communities and the people charged with protecting them.

Backlash from the shooting negatively affected public confidence in the LAPD, while it also reinvigorated the department’s leaders in their quest to control popular opinion and stifle criticism by any means necessary. The botched investigation of Love’s death triggered a virulent battle between the press and Chief Daryl Gates. It deepened the political divide between Gates and Mayor Tom Bradley and exposed weaknesses inherent in the office of the Los Angeles mayor. Most significantly, the failure of municipal leadership to force police department reform and to take additional steps to defuse what one back city councilman referred to as “walking bombs” spurred civil rights, labor,

⁸² “Los Angeles: The Love Affair.”

⁸³ Lindsey, “Los Angeles Police Find Image of Efficiency Fades.”

⁸⁴ David Johnston and Joel Sappell, “Police Spying Data Was Channeled to Top Brass,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1982.

feminist, African-American, and Chicano organizations to launch the largest and most vigorous campaign for an independent citizens' police review board yet seen in the United States.⁸⁵ The Campaign for a Citizens' Police Review Board, like its predecessors in the ACLU and the NAACP, provided a model for grassroots democratic strategies to wrest some measure of control from LAPD leadership and to offer a refuge for those who felt victimized by law enforcement. Public pathos inspired by Love's story, national scrutiny of the LAPD, negative public opinion of the department, controversy surrounding Chief Daryl Gates's reign, and the establishment of similar review boards in Philadelphia and New York City provided the unified front with momentum in its drive for change. On a local level, the 1979 shooting of Eula Love invigorated a movement for social change. Yet, in stark contrast to the tragic events of the Civil Rights Movement that became catalysts for national action, such as the 1955 lynching of Emmitt Till in Mississippi and the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, the Love case produced no noticeable results, temporary or otherwise. When the campaign to balance the power of the LAPD failed amid rumors of infighting and sabotage, it appeared that in Los Angeles the promise of tried-and-true movement strategies for change had truly expired.

The events of 1979 and 1980 ultimately demonstrated the vast, impenetrable authority of the Los Angeles Police Department, which had become increasingly the most notorious law enforcement agency in the nation. The black community, without an official, voter-mandated citizens' police review board, remained watchful and continued to talk about police abuse. Some from a younger, bolder generation, however—a generation aggressively targeted by police in the midst of the spread of street gangs throughout South Los Angeles—began considering a new kind of public arena for challenging the authority of the LAPD. From the communities of South Central Los Angeles, young people hardened by the increasingly pervasive culture of street gangs, frustrated by the violent behavior of those meant “to protect and to serve,” and influenced by new sounds of funk, electro, and hip-hop would create the foundation for their own, homegrown modes of “police review.”

⁸⁵ Councilman Robert Ferrell, leader of the City Council's black caucus, quoted in Sid Bernstein, “Tighten Up or Else, Police Told,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1979.

CHAPTER THREE

“Everybody’s Gangbanging”: The Growth of Los Angeles Gangs in the Post-Watts Riots Era

Robert Lee was thirteen when a Los Angeles patrol officer threatened to kill him. In 1969, Lee and his friends were cruising in the Vermont Harbor area just west of the Harbor Freeway when police pulled them over. As the officers questioned the passengers “about some stuff that we didn’t even know about,” Lee began laughing. This angered one patrolman who demanded silence from the boy. Admittedly prone to giggling when police were near, Lee continued to chuckle. In response, the officer shoved his shotgun in Lee’s mouth and said, “Smile now, nigger.”¹

Robert “General” Lee, one of the founders of the L.A. Brims, an early incarnation of the Los Angeles Bloods street gang, had learned to be wary of the Los Angeles Police Department years before that day in 1969. Four years prior, he remembered strolling near West Slauson Avenue when he heard police sirens and spotted smoke from the fires blazing in Watts. At home, his mother and a television news broadcast informed him that “there’s a riot going on.” Rather than heed his mother’s warnings to stay inside, Lee left the house to participate in the uprising. “I went out there and started breaking into jewelry stores and liquor stores, looting, drinking, and throwing Molotov cocktails at everything I could see.”² Nine years old at the time, Lee recalled that throughout the days of the 1965 Watts Riots, police were targeting even the “young brothers,” shooting to kill, and “blowing their heads off.”³

For those youths barely old enough to remember the Civil Rights Movement and too young to understand the economic and social circumstances that turned cities outside of the Jim Crow South, including Los Angeles, into tinder boxes, the Watts Riots were pivotal. The six-day uprising illustrated for them the battle lines that existed inside the Los Angeles inner city between the police and black residents, particularly black youths. Robert Lee identified the police department as “the biggest gang,” a rival crew that aimed to strike fear in the hearts of young men and that targeted those he considered family within his own gang organization.⁴ “I remember when fifty of us would be on the corner,” Lee recalled, “one police car would pull up, and everybody would leave. When the devil pulled up, brothers that didn’t even do a thing were breaking their legs, tearing their pants, and jumping over cars to run away.”⁵

These young men sired the street organizations that would ultimately become the most notorious gangs in the country, the Bloods and the Crips. They did so within the context of a worsening relationship between law enforcement agencies and the black communities police were tasked to serve. Borne of these tensions, South Los Angeles

¹ Yusuf Jah and Sister Shah-Keyah, *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Tell the Story of America’s Youth in the Crossfire* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 135.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁵ Ibid., 132.

street gangs were undergirded by an acute awareness of the particular antipathy directed toward them.

The gangs that emerged in the years following the 1965 Watts Riots were part and parcel of a long tradition of youth-led street federations that alarmed authorities and citizens alike in Los Angeles. In 1942, during World War II, the national press helped stoke widespread paranoia that young Mexican “terror groups” in Los Angeles, such as the 38th Street boys and the Mateo Bombers gang, had become puppets of Nazi agents, tasked by the Axis enemy to sow unrest inside the United States. Such yellow journalism in 1942 and 1943, paired with reports of petty thefts, assaults, and sexual harassment committed by young “gangsters,” fueled tensions between white servicemen and Mexican youths who regularly intermingled within Los Angeles-area nightclubs. Conflicts culminated with the June 1943 riots, which convinced some of a shadowy enemy influence on the World War II home front and others of the inherently barbarous nature of dark-complexioned zoot-suited teens. For many of those targeted by Anglo groups in the summer of 1943—that is, not only Mexican Americans but also members of the region’s black, Filipino, and Japanese communities—the riots highlighted the sting of racial bigotry in the American West and forecasted a hardening crusade against juvenile crime in the city of Los Angeles.⁶

A decade after the war’s end, despite a brief drop in juvenile crime rates thanks to relentless, and sometimes illegal, anti-gang operations conducted by Los Angeles Police Chief William Worton, youth gang membership swelled and gang-related assaults on the community increased. In the 1950s, as gang warfare, a nuisance seemingly confined to the county’s Mexican barrios, particularly the Lincoln, Brooklyn, and Boyle Heights regions, began to spill westward, Angelenos grew increasingly fearful of the young “terrorists” among them.⁷ In 1953, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Bob Will, in his six-part series outlining the growing threat of gang violence, warned his readers that teenagers have become “a threat to every man, woman or child who walks the streets after dark.”⁸

By the early 1960s, Los Angeles had become host to a growing web of well-established and increasingly well-funded gang organizations. Mexican Americans still dominated the city’s gang networks, but L.A.’s African-American youths, predominantly disenfranchised, unemployed, and isolated, began forming their own street cliques. Neighborhood-based organizations, like the Slausons, Avenues, Businessmen, Rabble Rousers, Gladiators, Farmers, Blood Alleys, and the Hat Gang, formed, according to members, to defend their communities and to protect one another. As one former Blood

⁶ For more on World War II-era Mexican-American youth culture, see Anthony Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); *Times* reporter Art Berman called riot participants “hoodlums” and the scene in Watts as a “surging sea of hatred”; “Eight Men Slain; Guard Moves In,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1965; “Gangs Warned ‘Kid Gloves Off!’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1942.

⁷ “30 Young Airmen Held in Terrorist Gang Raid,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1954.

⁸ For more on early police anti-gang operations, see William Dunn, *The Gangs of Los Angeles* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2007); Bob Will, “5000 L.A. Hoodlums Belong to Violence-Dealing Gangs,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1953.

recalled, these early incarnations of black youth gangs filled the void left by poor schools, inadequate job training, and a dearth of youth employment opportunities. Struggling under the same circumstances of urban decay that gave rise to the 1960s urban riots, these teens “had nothing to do but rebel.”⁹ Robert “General” Lee, a child protégé of the Rabble Rousers in the early 1960s, noted that rebellion for these early gangs came in the form of civil disobedience, petty theft, and, sometimes, physical violence. With bricks, bottles, baseball bats, bumper jacks, and knives, rival groups fought over territory, resources, and women.¹⁰

Many of these youths, already labeled “gang members” by the Los Angeles Police Department, joined in the six-day Watts Riots. Robert Lee noted that many South Los Angeles neighborhood cliques set aside their rivalries and united around the riots. “Everybody came together,” he said. “It was a Black thing.” The participation of law-breaking youngsters, who had already been cited by the police and the press as irredeemable miscreants, impacted public perceptions of the events that August. Witnesses referred to rioters as “hoodlums,” while the *Los Angeles Times* called for an end to the “terrorism,” “anarchy,” and “mob violence” that, it warned, would likely become a scene of “mass murder.”¹¹

The Watts Riots did not become that. Gang-related violence, in fact, fell in Los Angeles in the years immediately following the summer of 1965, and previously warring gangs, at least for a time, suspended their hostilities or disbanded altogether.¹² In 1966, newly minted youth programs in South Central Los Angeles began attracting young people from within communities claimed by early street troupes. A city run Teen Post program, funded by President Lyndon Johnson’s Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, sponsored extramural sports, training in self-defense, and talent showcases. Young men like Robert Lee, who were coming of age at the time, relished the wholesome activities. “Everything was about fun back then.”¹³

The fragile peace among those affiliated with the city’s various neighborhood gangs, however, was short-lived. With the expanding war in Vietnam and rollbacks on President Johnson’s War on Poverty programs, a host of federally funded programs benefitting inner-city youth disappeared. In addition to the dismantling of the Neighborhood Youth Corps and the de-funding of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act and Job Corps, the much beloved South Central Teen Post shuttered its doors.¹⁴ For some young people intent on preserving these social outlets, the resurrection of gang organizations proved an attractive solution. Close-knit youth gangs promised to

⁹ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹¹ Charles Hillinger, “Burning Buildings Symbolize Spirit of Hate Underlying Violent Rioting” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1965; “Anarchy Must End,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1965.

¹² Eric H. Monkkonon, “Homicide in Los Angeles, 1827-2002,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Autumn, 2005): 167-183.

¹³ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 123; General Accounting Office of the United States, *Review of the Community Action Program in the Los Angeles Area Under the Economic Opportunity Act: A Report to the Congress on the Office of Economic Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1968), 11, 42-43.

¹⁴ Jack Jones, “Director of Teen Post Program Hits Fund Cut,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1967.

replicate the camaraderie that had been nourished by the Teen Post programs. Jimel “Godfather” Barnes, a founder of the Los Angeles Crips, said that he and co-founder Raymond Washington believed their association had the potential to “unite the youngsters and get all the brothers to come together and get more into a positive Black situation.” Reportedly with the guidance of Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, a leader in the Los Angeles Black Panther Party and a South Central native, they imagined members “involved in sports: football, boxing, things like that.”¹⁵

Others, exposed at a young age to “the militant thing” through local chapters of the Black Panther Party, the United Slaves, and the Nation of Islam, imagined a new crop of black organizations that would follow in the path of those who “walked that walk” and “went gun to gun with the police.”¹⁶ Black Panther Minister of Defense Huey Newton, a prominent icon of black militancy who practiced armed self-defense and organized patrols of the police, offered L.A. Brims founder Robert Lee a seductive model for “protecting the hood.”¹⁷ The Black Panthers, Lee noted, “showed us that we didn’t have to be run over.”¹⁸ The architects of most post-Watts Riots gangs, in fact, took cues from the rhetoric and symbolism of Black Power organizations when christening their own associations; early titles included the Community Revolution In Progress (CRIPS), the Powerful Intellectual Radical Unit of Soldiers (PIRUS), and the Brim Blood Army.¹⁹

The general aims of the organizations that young men like Washington, Barnes, and Lee helped develop were quite different, however, from those of their Black Power era predecessors. Rather than fomenting political revolution, promoting black separatism, or championing race pride, the founders of the earliest Bloods and Crips crews focused more narrowly on providing peers with the benefits of a family: protection, loyalty, financial resources, and the guidance and discipline of authority figures.²⁰ One former member emphasized “the camaraderie, and the brotherhood, the extension of that love” felt by those who made up the first cohorts of the Crips and Bloods. It was, as another member described, about “holding your own neighborhood so nobody can come into

¹⁵ Raymond Washington credits Carter with being an early creator of the Crips in the wake of FBI attacks on the Los Angeles Black Panther Organization. Few Crips confirm this. The gang was officially formed in 1969, and, although Carter was killed in January of that year, it is possible that the Panther leader played a role in the conception of the Crips. Steven R. Cureton, *Hoover Crips: When Cripin’ Becomes a Way of Life* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008); Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 152.

¹⁶ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁹ Among current and former gang members, accounts about the founding of the CRIPS, PIRUS, and BRIMS vary, and members disagree most about gang acronyms. Each gang moniker—but particularly the Crips—has gone through a number of metamorphoses. For instance, Crips founder Barnes remembers the acronym as a play on the idiom “cradle to the grave, C-RIP, may you rest in peace” or a version of CRYPT. Others explain Crip as a variation on Crib, an early nickname for a gang made up largely of very young members, “babies,” of the pre-Watts Avenues gang. All testimonies reviewed agree that gang labels were fluid, changing to meet the needs and goals of members. For more, see Cureton, *Hoover Crips* and Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*.

²⁰ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 126-127.

your neighborhood and try to take the bread out of your mouth.”²¹ With these community-centered principles, post-Watts Riots gang leaders plainly rejected key fixtures of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, especially what they perceived as fixed hierarchies, prophets, and figureheads. “We’re not trying to be Farrakhan, we’re not trying to be Malcolm X, we’re not trying to be Martin Luther King,” Big Phil from the Westside Harlem 30’s, a Crips set, explained. “There can’t be one man calling the shots, because that will not work out here. This is South Central L.A., and it’s full of generals,” he stressed. “Every man in this city has leadership potential.”²²

Bruno, an original member of the Six-Four Brims, recalled his initial attraction to the Bloods confederation. Members were “tough,” they exuded “coolness,” and they asserted themselves as role models. Pervasive as “the leaders of the neighborhood,” Bruno joined as soon as the gang considered him old enough and worthy.²³ Another young Blood named “Twilight”, a member of the Circle City Piru set, described a similar infatuation with the idea of the gang. Growing up, Twilight carefully studied the moves of the “OGs,” the original gangsters, who commanded his block of Watts and regularly “got over on the police.” He was, he explained, “conditioned” as a child “to be a Blood.”²⁴ Leibo, an early member of the Crips, was similarly impressed by what he daily observed as a young boy. Like others in his cohort, he remembered “the strength in the unity of the brothers,” which drew him into the ranks by the age of twelve.²⁵

Members of varied gangs also reminisced about the material gains and the local notoriety that came with induction. Big Phil of the Westside Harlem 30’s noted that “back then,” young men coveted a role in the Crips “because you were a celebrity.”²⁶ T. Rodgers, the founder of the Los Angeles branch of the Black Peace Stone Nation, agreed that the frills of gang membership were enticing. “We’d ride around in limousines,” he noted, adding that “tailor-made suits” and “custom jewelry” were just a few of the many luxuries he flaunted. Rodgers underscored the extreme indulgences enjoyed by even the youngest gang members. “I had my first car when I was twelve,” he emphasized. “I had all of my leather coats made [with] leather hats to match the coats.”²⁷

Equally as alluring as the conspicuous comforts and the vainglory was, as T. Rodgers explained, “the promise of self-worth and self-pride.”²⁸ While the earliest incarnations of the post-Watts Riots gangs stressed community-mindedness, leaders also encouraged a culture of individualism and self-reliance. These values arose out of a contracting Los Angeles economy that disproportionately affected black youths. Economically and socially marginalized young people adopted “bootstraps” principles in

²¹ Winifred Reed, Scott Decker, eds. *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research* (National Institute of Justice, 2002), 47.

²² Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

part because of evaporating job opportunities and scarce civic and federal resources, but also because of growing scorn for public institutions increasingly associated with predominantly white symbols of power. “Take the white society,” one young gang member complained:

They just keep you poor by giving you bad schooling, giving you no skills, paying you low wages, and then not lettin’ you live in certain areas. You see they get the good things in life because they get profits from paying you low. And then when you do get some money, they don’t let you live in any area but the one they say you can live in, which is not where the better houses are—you know, the bigger and cleaner houses. So most of the big things in life they keep for themselves and then the scraps they let us niggers and spics fight [for]. So all the brothers know, if you don’t belong to an organization at least some of the time, you just a sittin’ duck for their organizations.²⁹

Suspicious of government assistance programs and eager to avoid the stigmas attached to welfare, gang associations offered a path to dignity and responsibility through a living wage and leadership opportunities. Work and promotion, gang leaders promised, could be procured on the group’s own terms and outside of the confines of mainstream society with its predominantly white employers and managers. Big Phil, who joined the Crips at the age of ten, noted that membership often grew because “brothers want things to do, but they do not want to work for somebody else, they want to work for themselves.” Explaining that recruits viewed themselves as “strong generals, warriors, soldiers, born leaders” who opposed “somebody else calling the shots,” he pointed to a dearth in real dignifying job opportunities for young black men. “Can you see a strong general soldier in McDonald’s?”³⁰ The gang network bolstered the self-confidence of its chronically unemployed recruits by affording them a financial buffer against extreme poverty. For many, it was, in this way, a family. “I started feeling like it was my last name,” Q-Bone explained of his association with the Five-Duce Broadway Crips. “Instead of using the slavery name, I felt like this was my name. I choose my own name in America.”³¹

Dedicated to the gang “family” and the neighborhoods in which each set reigned, leaders sought strength in numbers and were committed to rapidly expanding the ranks. Crips founder Raymond Washington imagined an organization, like the Black Panthers, with branches not just in Los Angeles but also throughout the nation and, perhaps, the world. An early slogan conceived by Washington—“Crips will never die, they’ll multiply”—reflected the leader’s vision of an organization that would, through vigorous recruitment efforts and effective product branding, become “worldwide.” Bearing witness to the rapid demise of clarion Black Power legions of the 1960s, Washington vowed that his organization would thrive “from generation to generation.”³² Washington and his

²⁹ Martín Sánchez Jankowski, *Islands in the Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 85.

³⁰ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

³² *Ibid.*, 151-152.

fellow sires could identify success in this mission after only a few years engaged in proliferation efforts. The gangs, particularly the Crips, expanded rapidly between 1970 and 1975, with each parent organization branching off into subsets typically arranged by neighborhoods—for instance, West Side, East Side, Avalon Garden, Compton, Hoover, Inglewood, and East Side Crips—and then sub-divided by numbered streets—43rd Street, Eleven Deuce Hoovers, and the Rollin 60s Neighborhood.³³

During its inaugural years, young recruits adjusted to the expanding infrastructure of the Crips, embracing responsibility and indulging in the perks of membership. “Duck” from the Eleven Deuce Hoovers Crips reminisced about this period in the early 1970s, the gang’s “heyday,” when young men developed pride in “growing up in it.” With a thirst for both independence and guidance, Duck and his peers reveled in an organization with a chain of command that provided each. “Everybody played their role,” he explained, noting that gang leaders encouraged loyalty to the gang “flag” by treating members as a body politic. For these reasons, participation in the gang was akin to belonging to “a big beautiful neighborhood,” “the strongest force that existed in the community,” and, as Duck emphasized, a “religion.”³⁴

The forebears of post-Watts Riots street gangs were wildly successful in growing and fortifying their organizations within Los Angeles during the early 1970s. According to urban police department officials and juvenile outreach groups, Los Angeles by 1976 was home to more gang members than any other urban center in the country. The city was home to fifty percent more members than estimates for New York City, the metropolis with the second highest gang population in the nation. The statistics uncovered by a United States Department of Justice investigation revealed that while juvenile street gangs were proliferating in Southern California, they were in decline in all other parts of the country. Gang-related thefts, gun violence, and homicides were also on the rise in Los Angeles. From 1972 to 1976, the Department of Justice reported, killings directly linked to gang turf wars in Los Angeles had not only increased steadily but proportionately outpaced membership growth; L.A. gangs were growing, and growing more murderous.³⁵

Even the earliest incarnations of the Crips and Bloods relied upon illicit and often violent activity, including strong-arm theft and drug trafficking. In the early 1970s, Hoover Crips gained infamy for stealing leather coats and cash, often from their more affluent neighbors to the west, both black and white. As East Side neighborhood cliques and West Side sets increasingly targeted one another, retaliatory assaults, often with bystander victims, grew more frequent. Thefts increased, remembered one former Crip, just as guns became more readily available. As a result of the escalating tensions among rival gangs, he said, “We started building up an arsenal.”³⁶

³³ For more on the sub-divisions of the Los Angeles Crips, particularly the Hoover Crips, see Cureton, *Hoover Crips*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ *Violence By Youth Gangs And Youth Groups*, 70.

³⁶ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 45, 50, 53, 54, 122.

A “rash” of shootings blamed on juveniles plagued South Central Los Angeles in 1972. Members of the Crips, the black press reported, were terrorizing members of the community. On buses, for instance, gang gunmen carried out “revenge shootings,” targeting rivals who happened to be passengers on the city vehicles and, in some cases, assaulting those citizens who dared to confront the youths for making trouble.³⁷ “School grounds have become battlefields,” the black press also reported. In response to the death of a 17-year old, gunned down on the Jefferson High School campus in the fall of 1972, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* warned of a gang “invasion” of the region’s public schools. School officials, the paper noted, were compelled to require student ID cards and to use scarce resources for security cameras and fences in order to keep the invaders out.³⁸

The problem that began as a “rash” of gang-killings in 1972 metastasized in the following years. Bus shootings, alarmingly frequent during this period, became only one category within the new brutal trend of “drive-by shootings,” in which assailants carried out attacks on city vehicles, private homes, and public gatherings from passing cars, often with sawed-off hunting rifles, cheap to obtain and modified to be more easily concealed. The black press warned of “roving gangs on rampage” in Compton and Inglewood who proved bold and “wild” in their battles with one another.³⁹ A *Los Angeles Sentinel* editorial in the fall of 1974 struggled to make sense of the “young hoodlums” who “continue to attack and murder” in South Los Angeles. “They have not just killed each other,” the *Sentinel* reminded readers, “they have taken the lives of innocent citizens as well. For this, there is no justification.”⁴⁰

Original members of both the Bloods and Crips agreed that confrontations escalated in the early- to mid-1970s. “That’s when the war started,” Robert Lee noted. Grudge killings became commonplace, with revenge meted out for murder and for the memory of murder. “It just got bigger and bigger and bigger,” Lee said, “and it got way out of control.”⁴¹ By the mid-1970s, scattered gang associations, including the Brims, Bounty Hunters, Athens Park Gang, Bishops, and Pirus, began to ally in defense of a swiftly expanding and increasingly aggressive Crips enterprise. This new alliance, the Bloods, formed one of the largest active gang confederations in Southern California, second only to the Crips.⁴² In 1976, the Bloods and the Crips together claimed more gang members than all gangs combined in New York City, the only other American urban center with a comparable juvenile gang problem during the decade.

The numbers alone, as officials studying inner-city youth discovered, did not indicate the full scope of L.A.’s emerging gang crisis. A 1975 report published by the

³⁷ “Gang Members Blamed For Two Bus Shootings,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 12, 1972, A8.

³⁸ “Student Shot at Jefferson,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 21, 1972, A1; “Gun Violence Increasing on School Campuses,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 30, 1972, A1.

³⁹ “Roving Gangs on Rampage,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 26, 1973, A1; “Three Shootings; Girl, 12, Hit: Girl Victim of Teenage Shooting,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 27, 1973, A1; Stanley Williford, “Juvenile Crime: A Bleak Portrait,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 4, 1974; “Police Arrest 5 Youths,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 24, 1974, A1; Mays Andrews, “Youths Arrested for Shotgun Gang Murder,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 12, 1974, A1.

⁴⁰ “Editorial: Change or Perish,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 28, 1974, A6.

⁴¹ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 123.

⁴² See James Diego Vigil, *A Rainbow of Gangs: Street Cultures in the Mega-City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

U.S. Department of Justice found that among inner-city schools in Los Angeles, “all of them have large gang populations [and] gangs have completely taken over individual classrooms,” claiming them as territory. Informants revealed that inside elementary, junior-high, and senior-high school classrooms, fights and physical assaults were inescapable. The intimidation and extortion of “non-gang” students was rampant. Gang graffiti was ubiquitous. Teachers, the report noted, “[are] powerless,” and school administrators were forced to hire private security personnel to protect staff and students.⁴³

In 1977, the Los Angeles Police Department successfully lobbied the federal government for help. The agency’s administrators accepted a one-year grant to create a special investigative unit—the first of its kind for Los Angeles—to focus exclusively on gangs and gang-related crime. The Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) was tasked to deal specifically with the expanding black gangs in South Los Angeles. Initially founded as the Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums (TRASH) unit, then renamed in response to complaints from civic leaders about the disparaging acronym, CRASH officers were expected to achieve “total suppression” of the most “hard-core” street gangs operating within Los Angeles, including the ubiquitous networks of Crips and Bloods spreading beyond the borders of South Central.

To tackle these goals, CRASH deputies used any means necessary to collect information on suspected gang members, their activities and their associates, and the communities within which they functioned. Officers implemented the tactic of “jamming,” random traffic stops that include frisking and questioning suspects for data. Routine use of this procedure offered frequent opportunities for the LAPD to gather intelligence, including names and pseudonyms, and the parameters of gang turf. Arrests for unpaid tickets, traffic violations, or possession of illicit substances offered CRASH investigators special occasion to populate gang suspect files with vehicle registration details, interview transcripts, tattoo descriptions, and photographs.⁴⁴

Shortly after the Los Angeles Police Department formed its gang task force, the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department followed suit, launching its own version of CRASH. Originally conceived in 1976, the Operation Safe Streets (OSS) employed CRASH-inspired tactics to curb gang activity in its jurisdiction, including “jamming” and arrests for minor crimes like loitering and cursing in public. By January 1979, undergirded by a newly minted Hardcore Gang Division of the office of the Los Angeles District Attorney, the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department advanced a highly coordinated campaign “to remove the shooters from the streets.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Walter B. Miller Center for Criminal Justice Harvard Law School and the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Violence By Youth Gangs And Youth Groups As A Crime Problem In Major American Cities* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Justice, 1975), 19, 46-47.

⁴⁴ David Freed, “Policing Gangs: Case of Contrasting Styles Strides Made by Sheriff’s Department Cast a Pall on Methods Used by the L.A. Police Department,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1986.

⁴⁵ United States Senate, Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Gang Violence and Control: Ninety-eighth Congress, First Session on Gang Violence and Control in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Areas With a View to What Might Be Done by the*

Amid the disturbing rise in grisly gang-related encounters in public spaces, including the highly unpredictable bane of drive-by shootings, many in the crime-heavy communities of South Los Angeles welcomed increased police presence in the 1970s. The investment of police resources into a war against gangs came as a relief to civic leaders, business owners, community advocates, parents, and residents alike. This embrace came despite a historically contemptuous relationship between black Angelenos and the Los Angeles Police Department that had included armed and organized resistance to police harassment as well as efforts to reform the agency through protest and political action. The black press described this unexpected position as a choice between two evils, with gang youth being the more dangerous of the two. Even in the years prior to the establishment of CRASH and OSS, many accepted that, just as gangs had made casualties of bystanders in their wars with one another, the city's war on gangs could similarly result in some unintended—albeit, suspect—victims. In one high-profile case in 1974, for instance, a white LAPD officer fatally shot a young black man accused of burglary. When news surfaced that the officer, after killing the teen, planted a gun on the victim in an effort to frame him for armed robbery to justify the homicide, the black press responded in support of the police.⁴⁶ The death of the teen, however tragic, failed to move editors of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, who called for law enforcement to continue to intervene with all due force. Eradicate juvenile gangs from the African-American communities of Los Angeles, the paper implored, “while there is still a community for which to fight.” In light of increasing gang activity, the 1974 police shooting death was decidedly beside the point: “The youthful criminals must be treated as the murderers and felons they have shown themselves to be.”⁴⁷

Once CRASH began implementing its new, more aggressive gang suppression stratagem, cases like these of police-youth confrontations became more commonplace. Leaders of the gang-inhabited black communities in South Central, Compton, Inglewood, and Watts remained apprehensive yet tolerant of police aggression against young people. Black youths on the other hand, both those wedded to and disengaged from local gang sets, complained of perpetual police maltreatment, profiling, surveillance, and verbal and physical harassment. In 1977, Bryon Frazier, a 19-year-old son of a retired policewoman, charged LAPD officers with interrogating him at gunpoint. After disembarking a bus, police blocked Frazier's path and ordered him to identify himself, explain where he had been, and where he was headed. Asked about a scar on his chest, Frazier said he had no such mark. When commanded to remove his clothing to prove his statement, Frazier noted that one officer had a .45 caliber automatic weapon trained at the young man's chest. Frightened, Frazier begged the officer not to shoot, to which the armed deputy responded by firing a warning shot and ordering Frazier to flee. “The frightened youth,” the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported, “explained that the officers laughed and then told him to start running and that he should not stop until he got home, or they would take him to jail.”⁴⁸ Months after Byron Frazier's testimony about the “weird shooting by police,”

Federal Government, February 9, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 5.

⁴⁶ L.C. Fortenberry, “Love Furor Escalates,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 1, 1979, A1.

⁴⁷ “Editorial: Change or Perish,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 28, 1974, A6.

⁴⁸ “Youth Relates Ordeal of Weird ‘Shooting’ by Police,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 24, 1977, A1.

police officers shot 18-year-old David Lee McCulloch in the back. According to witnesses, the black youth was leaving the scene of a drag race in the Westmont region of South Los Angeles. Police fired after McCulloch defied orders to pull over and exit his vehicle.⁴⁹

Crips founder Jimel Barnes related a series of approximate encounters during this period in which he claimed he was treated “just like I wasn’t human.” The target of frequent traffic stops, Barnes remembered the “game” officers played: “They’d pull a throwaway gun out of their boot, put a bullet in the chamber, and say, ‘Watch this.’ Put it to my head and burn the trigger.”⁵⁰ A young boy when he moved with his family from Dallas, Texas in the 1970s, Twilight, a Blood, discovered a police department engaged in criminal acts equally as heinous as those of his own Piru crew. He blamed officers for instigating rivalries by stealing gang possessions, spreading rumors, and writing incriminating graffiti in gang-controlled territory.⁵¹ T. Rodgers of the L.A. Black Peace Stone Nation described similar acts of impropriety. CRASH and OSS officers, he said, presented young black men in their custody with three choices: a thorough beating, abandonment in rival gang territory, or a booking in county jail. Reflecting on the patterns of harassment, and inspired by the recent history of Black Panther militancy in his community, Rodgers rhymed: “*Bring on your elephant guns / Bring on the helicopters to block out the sun / And rat-a-tat-tat will be the only sound / And I’ll be spreading the blues around / Bring it on / I’m not afraid of dying.*”⁵²

The fatal police shooting of Eula Mae Love in January of 1979 seemed to corroborate charges leveled by black youths that law enforcement agents were regularly abusing their authority within the communities of South Los Angeles. The collective outrage that followed also appeared to provide black youths, increasingly under the thumb of CRASH and OSS, with the promise of a concerted community effort to establish checks on the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department. In the months following the police shooting incident, in which 39-year-old Eula Love, armed with a kitchen knife, was shot eight times by two patrolmen, black citizens decried the problem of police abuse in their communities. In order to highlight the fact that Love’s wrongful death was not, in fact, an anomaly, black Angelenos, young and old, told community leaders, the press, city councilmembers, and one another about their own demoralizing and often frightening encounters with the police. “Meetings, demonstrations, rallies and clandestine rap sessions,” the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported, “have bristled with chatter about the incident.”⁵³ Love’s South Central neighbors joined with representatives of the NAACP, the National Human Rights Coalition (NHRC), and the Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA) to pressure Los Angeles City Hall to hold a grand jury investigation into the case. South Central civic leaders, with the support of state legislators, publically criticized Police Chief Daryl Gates and his agency’s discriminatory policies, which more often than not targeted their constituents.⁵⁴ African-

⁴⁹ “Police Shooting Disputed,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 16, 1977, A11.

⁵⁰ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 159-160.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 308, 329.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 209, 228-289.

⁵³ L.C. Fortenberry, “Love Death Draws Concern,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 18, 1979, A1.

⁵⁴ Fortenberry, “Love Furor Escalates”; “Controversy Brews In Shooting of L.A. Woman,” *Jet*, 1 February 1, 1979, 31.

American ministers organized a demonstration in front of the Southeast Police station following Love's funeral services at the Macedonia Baptist Church. To further impress on the public that the case was "bigger than Love's death," these church spokesmen warned that mass uprisings would result from inattention to the abuses rampant in the city's law enforcement agencies.⁵⁵ Paul Hudson, president of the Los Angeles branch of the NAACP, agreed, noting, "I think that this very well may be the straw that breaks the camel's back."⁵⁶

In the wake of the Love killing, state assemblywoman Maxine Waters lamented that police violence against black victims was "not unusual" while the black press proclaimed, "We have lost too many of our citizens at the hands of police officers and it must come to an immediate end."⁵⁷ Then, as if corroborating these charges, another shooting left a South-Central resident fighting for his life. In May 1979, fifteen-year-old Carlos Washington was shot while fleeing officers who suspected him of stealing a car. The boy, unarmed and scaling a fence when hit, represented the twenty-third person shot by Los Angeles police in a four-month period. This incident in particular, however, created a stir among the residents of Washington's South Central neighborhood who described the young teen as an innocent with "outstanding characteristics," a "typical junior high student" who followed the rules and generally steered clear of "trouble."⁵⁸

In response to the May shooting and to the exoneration of criminal charges against officers in the death of Eula Love, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* conducted its own investigation into the culture of violence and bigotry inside the Los Angeles Police Department. Glen Wood, a former LAPD officer, revealed to reporters a tone of racial discrimination that pervaded police training, police policies, and police practices out in the field. Wood, who was white, noted the frequent use of "nigger" among his fellow officers, and he described a hyper-masculine culture in which his co-workers frequently bragged about "kicking ass" and firing one's gun at a suspect. While riding along with a fellow patrolman in a South Central neighborhood, Wood said that his partner honed in on a black resident washing his car and ordered the man to go inside, saying, "Get out of the street, nigger, you don't own it yet." On another occasion, a fellow patrolman pulled alongside a car full of black youths, windows down and bass-heavy music playing loudly. According to Wood, the officer yelled, "Turn that f----- jungle-bunny music down, nigger. Everybody don't want to hear that s---."⁵⁹

From 1979 to 1980, a growing chorus of South Los Angeles voices called for grassroots action to check the power of the city's law enforcement agencies, including citizen police review boards. Despite this, the primary targets of the police—young men who fit the street gang profile—continued to earn little empathy from within the black

⁵⁵ "Editorial -- Their Rightful Place," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 5, 1979, A6; Fortenberry, "Love Death Draws Concern"; Sandy Banks, "New Cynicism: Watts: Many Churches but How Helpful," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1980.

⁵⁶ "Love Whitewash Incites Outrage: Police Killing Upheld," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 19, 1979, A1.

⁵⁷ Ibid; "Editorial -- Justice: L.A. Style," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 26, 1979, A1.

⁵⁸ Ed Davis, "Cop Shooting in Valley Feeds Fire: Youth Near Death," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 3, 1979, A1.

⁵⁹ Cassandra Smith, "Should Civilians Be Allowed to Police the Police?: Part II of a Series," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 13, 1979, A8.

community. In November 1980, LAPD officers shot two young robbery suspects during a holdup. The incident, rather than stirring more concern about overtly aggressive police procedures, served instead as a reminder of the ever-expanding problem of gang-related crime. In an editorial entitled “‘Freeze’ Means: Stop All Action,” the *Los Angeles Sentinel* declared, “We the community residents are up in arms about the hoodlums running rampage in our community making it unsafe for our women, children and businesses.” The paper argued that the shooting, in this case, was justified and perhaps even too mild a response. “We the community residents will not tolerate shootings like Eula Love,” it proclaimed, “but if these hoodlums and thugs are committing crimes, don’t give them an even break.”⁶⁰

Despite the steadfast commitment of city and police officials to dedicate resources and manpower to anti-gang campaigns, and despite the black community’s advocacy for those campaigns, gangs multiplied. As the 1970s came to a close, gang membership continued to dwarf numbers recorded for comparable metropolitan areas. Between 1979 and 1981, violent crime blamed on gang turf wars and drug trafficking doubled. Deep cuts to funding for social welfare programs in the first year of the Ronald Reagan administration exacerbated the problem. As a result of new federal cuts instituted in 1981, some 4500 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) workers in Los Angeles were laid off, including many employees of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Los Angeles area school lunch programs, community health care services, and the Basic Education Opportunity Grant, which had provided needed assistance to the very communities spawning gang organizations, vanished. The Reagan administration eliminated some \$600 million in funding allotted for youth job training programs and drastically reduced unemployment benefits, trimming the time allotted for payments by thirteen weeks. These cuts further diminished the livelihood of those already disproportionately affected by the layoffs that came with the deindustrialization of the inner city. More importantly for those attentive to the rise in juvenile crime, the changes slashed resources that might have stemmed the tide of gang recruitment. John Mack, the president of the Los Angeles Urban League referred to the federal cutbacks as a “potential time bomb that may be triggered by frustrated, unemployed and hopeless youth.”⁶¹

The debut of rock cocaine—“crack”—in 1983 proved to be the fuse. As law enforcement officials knew for several years, Los Angeles had become a hub for the North American cocaine trade. In the early 1980s, wholesale product flooded the market, making crack, a highly addictive form of cocaine, cheap and accessible. Gangs that dealt in illegal drugs, as most in Los Angeles since the late 1960s did, expanded to meet the new demand for both powder cocaine and crack rock. “I would say that things got worse when [crack] cocaine hit the streets in ’83,” Crips member Leibo recalled, “because prior to that all the brothers that were slangin’ were selling ‘water,’ ‘Sherman,’ angel dust, PCP.”⁶² The spread of drug-trafficking networks stemming from hostile gang

⁶⁰ Saleem Ibrahim, “‘Freeze’ Means: Stop All Action,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 27, 1980, A5.

⁶¹ “CETA Cuts Swell,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 19, 1981, A9; Norman Hill, “Is Reagan Attacking the Working Poor?,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 7, 1981, A5; Nick Brown, “Local Citizens Oppose Budget Cuts,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 26, 1981, A2.

⁶² Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 183.

associations meant new, more violent campaigns to corner the market and battles to protect ever-growing, and overlapping, distribution areas. Since the end of the 1960s, South Los Angeles street gangs had been advancing, and they had been growing more dangerous, but the drug wars materializing in the early 1980s compounded an already unwieldy problem.

The crack cocaine phenomenon was not specific to Los Angeles. The potent and popular drug offered lucrative opportunities for the young and unemployable in cities across America, particularly urban centers like New York City debilitated by deindustrialization and truncated federal and state budgets. “Fuck waiting for the city to pass out summer jobs,” Brooklyn native Shawn “Jay Z” Carter remembered of the era. “I wasn’t even a teenager yet and suddenly everyone I knew had pocket money. And better.”⁶³ California, however, monopolized the trade. Cocaine distribution networks in Los Angeles benefitted, first, from the city’s proximity to supply chains south of the border and, second, from demand emanating from Hollywood. Indulgence in illegal drugs had been commonplace among members of the film industry since the 1920s, but such excess, as the *New York Times* reported, “ballooned” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within Hollywood circles, including directors, actors, stagehands, camera operators, and technicians, illicit drugs were “used openly, as if old taboos had evaporated.” Actor Billy Crystal quipped in the early 1980s, “When it snows in California, half of the Californians are out snorting in their driveways.”⁶⁴

The tremendous demand for powder cocaine in Los Angeles during this period undergirded the rapid dissemination of freebase in the following years. By 1983, trafficking in crack cocaine transformed small drug-dealing outfits into enterprises that increasingly relied upon gang collaboration. The deputy chief of the Los Angeles Police Department testified in 1983 that the amalgamation of gang wars and crack-related crimes, like burglaries and aggravated assaults, had become a scourge: “People can’t go to the store, people can’t enjoy parks.”⁶⁵ Media coverage of reported “gang-related” homicides in the months leading up to the 1984 Summer Olympic Games intensified pressures on Los Angeles law enforcement officials to clean up the streets in anticipation of the arrivals of athletes, spectators, celebrities, political figures, and the international press.⁶⁶ It reinforced LAPD Chief Daryl Gates’ fervent dedication to expanding the scope of special task forces like CRASH and sharpening the department’s attacks on violent juveniles as a solution to the city’s gang crisis.⁶⁷ Under the media spotlight and obsessed with protecting his reputation as the top official of the most powerful law enforcement agency in the nation, Gates condoned increased aggression in the field. He vigorously defended his officers accused of abuse of authority and even homicide, citing

⁶³ Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York, Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 13.

⁶⁴ Robert Lindsey, “Pervasive Use of Cocaine is Reported in Hollywood,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1982.

⁶⁵ *Gang Violence and Control*, 10.

⁶⁶ “1984 Summer Olympics,” Official Website of the Los Angeles Police Department, <http://www.lapdonline.org/history_of_the_lapd/content_basic_view/1130>, accessed July 28, 2011.

⁶⁷ David Freed, “Policing Gangs: Case of Contrasting Styles Strides Made by Sheriff’s Dept. Cast a Pall on Methods Used by the L.A. Police Dept.,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1986.

the “war” on gangs as justification for extreme, get-tough measures.⁶⁸ Despite widely covered reports of increased police aggression on Gates’s watch, Los Angeles voters judged his department favorably throughout the early 1980s, supplying the Chief with the fodder he needed to pursue an even tougher crime-fighting agenda.⁶⁹

Just a few years after the Eula Love shooting had inspired a campaign within South Los Angeles to counter police misconduct, community leaders from gang-heavy regions of the city were encouraging full cooperation with law enforcement authorities, to “stand behind” the Los Angeles Police Department.⁷⁰ The once vociferous cries about abuse of authority and the unyielding demands for community-centered solutions to crime gave way to pleas for tougher police measures and more police deployment in neighborhoods where citizens were increasingly frustrated by the effects of gang-related crime on their day-to-day lives, their businesses, their home values, their schools, and the lives of their children. The about-face came not without reservations. Some remained unenthusiastic about cooperating with police, while others worried about the inevitable repercussions.⁷¹ Voices of apprehension, however, gave way to those who warned against disunity and, worse, complacency.⁷² When civic reports suggested that police officials reduced the number of officers assigned to South Central Los Angeles after the close of the 1984 Summer Olympics Games, black community leaders complained. They clamored for more patrols and, in addition, the establishment of curfews to curb the illicit activities of juveniles [Fig. 1].⁷³ “There was a time when Black people said there were too many police officers in this community,” a *Los Angeles Sentinel* editorial cautioned. “But the simple facts of the matter are that only the criminals who wish for their crimes to go undetected are saying there are too many police officers in South Central Los Angeles.”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ “L.A. declares war on gangs,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), November 22, 1984; Jack Katz, “If Police Call It Gang Crime That Doesn’t Make It True,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 1989.

⁶⁹ Incidents include the Eula Love killing in 1979 and an especially notorious shooting of a black woman late in pregnancy who subsequently lost her child. “Los Angeles Police; Not So Angelic,” *The Economist*, June 18, 1983, 26.

⁷⁰ “EDITORIAL – March on Crime,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 1, 1984, A6.

⁷¹ *Gang Violence and Control*, 3.

⁷² “EDITORIAL – March on Crime.”

⁷³ “EDITORIAL – A Fighting Chance,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 23, 1984, A6; “Compton Battles Crimes,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 6, 1984, A1.

⁷⁴ “EDITORIAL – A Critical Situation; Police Deployment in South Central LA,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 7, 1984, A6.



Fig. 1: “Inadequate Task Force,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 23, 1984.

South Los Angeles appeared, through the early 1980s, to epitomize the suburban American Dream. Blocks in South Central, Compton, Inglewood, and Watts were lined with single-story homes, many of them with large picture windows, manicured lawns, trimmed shrubs, shade trees, and wide driveways displaying one or even two cars. “When one goes through the various neighborhoods associated with gangs there,” one sociologist observed in the mid-1980s, “one does not get the impression that one is going through a poverty-stricken area.”⁷⁵ From these quaint blocks of Los Angeles, right on the heels of the turbulent sixties, amid the rising tide of inner-city poverty, and in the vacuum created by Reagan-era budget cuts, emerged some of the most prolific and violent street gangs. Civil Rights organizer Tom Hayden, somewhat baffled by the developments in post-Watts Riots Los Angeles, referred to these youths as “riders on the storm.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Jankowski, *Islands in the Street*, 9.

⁷⁶ Tom Hayden, *Street Wars: Gangs and the Future of Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 1.

By the end of 1984, city officials estimated that Los Angeles County housed some four hundred separate gangs with a combined total membership of more than fifty thousand. That amounted to an increase of as many as twenty thousand members in a one-year period, and included over two hundred gangs that were active on school campuses within the Los Angeles Unified School District.⁷⁷ Fierce loyalty to individual sets, commitment to self-preservation, and the growing drug trade fueled turf wars and provided incentives for recruitment near homes, in schools, and at social gatherings. To complicate matters, investigators discovered that California gangs, unlike their East Coast counterparts, were organized to accommodate not a few high-level captains but, instead, a complex and extensive networks of leaders. Membership swelled in Los Angeles in part because neighborhood sets absorbed both “affiliates” and “associates.” These ancillary members enjoyed the advantages of gang protection as well as the social benefits of fellowship, yet they avoided the drug running and violent crime typically tasked to “bangers.” The result was a widely dispersed and loosely organized confederation of gangs that ultimately frustrated the efforts of law enforcement agencies to accurately identify and prosecute gang members. Some officials called for the broad criminalization of gang membership; others admitted the growing challenges to divide the guilty from the innocent. “We’re not their enemy,” one member of the Five-Duce Broadway Crips explained, noting how deeply embedded into the fabric of Los Angeles life gangs had become by the 1980s. “Every officer probably has a family member that’s in a gang.”⁷⁸

A boy when he moved to South Los Angeles in the early 1970s, Tracy “Ice T” Marrow became fast acclimated to the culture of gangs that defined the contours of his new stomping ground. As a young teen, Marrow became a Crip “associate,” cultivating a relationship with the organization that exerted the most influence over his school, Crenshaw High. “I had to connect with them and roll with whatever was rolling,” he recalled.⁷⁹ The Crips offered Marrow sanctuary from other hostile cliques, but more importantly for the aspiring poet, the gang’s social gatherings provided him with a supportive environment for his creative exploits, that is, “Crip rhymes,” the precursors to his gangster-inspired raps:

*Strollin’ through the city in the middle of the night
Niggas on my left and niggas on my right
Yellin’ “C-C-C-Crip” to every nigga I see
If you bad enough come fuck with me*

*I seen another nigga I said “Crip” again
He said, “Fuck a Crip nigga—this is Brim!”
So we pulled out the Roscoe
Roscoe said, “crack”
I looked again, nigga was shootin’ back*

⁷⁷ Von Jones, “The Life and Times of a Gang Leader,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 21, 1985, A1; *Gang Violence and Control*, 3.

⁷⁸ Jah and Shah-Keyah, *Uprising*, 300.

⁷⁹ Brain Coleman, ed., *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (New York: Random House, 2005), 233.

*So we fell to the ground aiming for his head
One more shot, nigga was dead
Walked over to him, took his gun
Spit in his face and began to run*

*So if you see another nigga laying dead in the street
In a puddle of blood from his head to his feet
I hope this time all you niggas get hip
That it's fuck a Brim, nigga—
This is West Side Crip!⁸⁰*

Affiliated in the late 1970s with the Crips and known as one of Los Angeles's few aspiring rappers, Tracy "Ice T" Marrow had a privileged view of the city's flourishing gang networks as well as its youth music landscape. Despite a unique electro-funk scene piloted by a small group of local disc jockeys and supported by Crips and Bloods, "hip-hop culture," he noted, did not yet exist in the West Coast. "Hip-hop started in New York. They had graffiti artists, breakdancers." Marrow emphasized the vast differences that existed in the late 1970s and early 1980s between the two regions: "We didn't have any of that, we had gangs."⁸¹

Arriving in Los Angeles in 1984 from his hometown of Queens, New York, Lawrence "DJ Muggs" Muggerud similarly noted some of the most obvious distinctions between the two cities. As a budding record producer, he recognized that inner-city youths in the West Coast reveled not in the slow, rap-driven beats that defined New York hip-hop, but instead preferred the up-tempo, funk sounds of a genre of music referred to by locals as "electro." The thing that struck him the most, however, was the pervasiveness of gangs, who represented the performers, promoters, fans, and financiers within that music scene. "It was a huge culture shock," Muggerud observed. Even in contrast to the gritty hip-hop culture developing in New York's Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn boroughs, he found the setting for Los Angeles urban music developments to be distinctly treacherous. In L.A., he said, "everybody's gangbanging."⁸²

⁸⁰ Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption – From South Central to Hollywood* (New York: One World/Random House, 2011), 51.

⁸¹ Brian Cross, ed., *It's Not About A Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1994), 183.

⁸² Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 121.

CHAPTER FOUR

“We Knew the Streets”: Electro-Rap, Gangs, and Early Los Angeles Hip-Hop

Sporting a graffiti-embellished denim vest, a white fur muff cinched with a studded black leather bracelet, a black peaked police cap, a pair of dark shades, and an earring dangling from his left lobe, Tracy “Ice T” Marrow delivered his first on-screen rap performance:

*So listen party people with the ear to the street,
The college professor and the social elite,
To the fly young guys and the pretty girls,
Ice T is gonna tell ya 'bout the hip-hop world.¹*

As the master of ceremonies at The Radio, an all-ages nightclub popular among Los Angeles poppers, lockers, and breakers, Marrow provided director Topper Carew with an ostentatious and well-connected tour guide for *Breakin' and Enterin'*, a documentary about the city's budding hip-hop scene.

The film featured establishing shots of flickering headlights slogging past neon signage and of palm trees towering above manicured lawns, images typical of Hollywood's portrayals of the surrounding metropolis. Cameras captured young performers not only inside The Radio, but also before crowds along Hollywood Boulevard and inside a palatial dance studio, complete with waxed hardwood floors and ballet bars. In sunny Venice Beach, amidst roller-skating locals, weightlifters, and curious tourists, breakers flaunted top-rocks, power moves, and freezes—moves that were, according to New York b-boy Suga Pop, introduced by East Coast transplants like himself. Influenced by South Bronx pioneers, he explained to viewers that he “brought breaking” to California: “I was like the first one doing it.” On lawns and sidewalks, Southern California street dance collectives, like the Blue City Crew (Carson) and the Little Dominoes (South Los Angeles), executed their own signature pop-lock routines as well as acrobatic breaking maneuvers. In color-coordinated outfits, these groups appeared to pay tribute to '70s rhythm & blues ensembles like The Spinners, The Originals, and The Temptations. In residential garages and on private driveways lined with trimmed hedges, dancers offered step-by-step tutorials and insight into the local hip-hop culture. “Like they say now... instead of fighting, we gonna take it to the floor and dance,” said one Blue City Crew dancer and former gang member of the local impact of New York b-boy philosophies. Sitting below a graffiti mural and flanked by his fellow poppers, he noted, “That's what we believe, too.”

Heralding the ubiquitous nature of 1980s hip-hop culture, the film highlighted a handful of local street dance celebrities, including Ana “Lollipop” Sánchez and Bruno “Poppin' Taco” Falcon, a duo who would later perform on network television's *The*

¹ *Breakin' 'N' Enterin.'* documentary, directed by Topper Carew (Rainbow T.V. Works, 1983), Online Video, <<http://www.alluc.org/movies/watch-breakin-n-enterin-1983-online/300988.html>>.

Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and in the long-running ABC sitcom *Benson*. Adolfo “Shabba-Doo” Quinones and Michael “Boogaloo Shrimp” Chambers, two more prominent fixtures at The Radio, would provide choreography and on-screen flare for music videos including Lionel Richie’s 1983 chart topper “All Night Long,” Chaka Khan’s 1984 hit “I Feel For You,” and “Stop the Madness,” an anti-drug public service announcement that premiered in 1986 and featuring First Lady Nancy Reagan. With Ice T, each of these young dancers would be handpicked to star in two Hollywood remakes of the original *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’* documentary, *Breakdance: The Movie* and its sequel *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo*.

Ice T’s appearances as the host for dance battles at The Radio permeated the documentary. His fast-paced staccato rhymes drew attention to the scenes inside the nightclub, which included “aerosol art,” b-boy circles, and DJs scratching over electro-funk beats.² He embraced his role in the film as a hip-hop pundit, describing for viewers the culture’s “four elements” and its potential to be a peace-making force:

*So when you listen to the records by your radio DJ,
Or listen to the rappers on the records that they play,
Or check out the graffiti turning ghettos into art,
And watch the kids who dance on the street and in the park,
I hope it’s time you realize hip-hoppin’ is the way
To find true peace in city streets in this cold world today.*³

By providing rhymes and dance demonstrations, and by helping viewers navigate the rudimentary terrain of “hip-hoppin’,” Ice T became one of the earliest on-screen spokespersons for the Los Angeles rap scene, lauding, in particular, its social and civic merits. He imagined himself a cultural diplomat who understood that rap was “direct communication with the people.” The hip-hop “movement,” he said, by motivating the city’s youth to learn an instrument or to put paint to canvas, would counteract the increasingly pervasive influence of gangs, drugs, and the criminal lifestyle. “In a big city like Los Angeles, there’s so many negative things for kids to get into,” but, he said, by “rapping or scratching records,” even young gang members “might break away and come over to us.”⁴

Simple and instructional messages about music and urban diplomacy had replaced in Ice T’s repertoire the vividly violent Crip rhymes that he had recited to neighborhood gang members and street hustlers in earlier years. “I’m just a dude who can talk to the beat of the music,” he noted in *Breakin’*, “but if [kids] want to be like me, instead of be like the guy who goes and holds up a liquor store, I’m all for it.”⁵ He adopted his lyrical themes and his reflections in the film from a set of principles promoted by South Bronx DJ Afrika Bambaataa. Bambaataa envisioned hip-hop as a post-Disco art “movement” that would inspire creative collaboration among dancers, musicians, poets, painters, and

² Graffiti artists adopted the terms “aerosol art” and “spray-can art” in the 1980s to counter perceptions of their work as purely criminal. For more on this terminology, see the film *Bombing L.A.*, documentary, directed by Gary Glaser (Glaser Productions, 1991), VHS.

³ *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

art aficionados from disparate racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. According to Bambaataa, a former Bronx River Projects gang member, this all-encompassing grassroots front was especially significant because “the music and the kind of dancing that evolved from it became a replacement for gang-fighting as a major source of activity in the South Bronx.”⁶ Like Bambaataa, Ice T presented himself as a young man who had abandoned his criminal lifestyle and had embraced the romantic notion that the burgeoning hip-hop movement could save his city’s ghettos.

* * *

Contextually, *Breakin’* was all about Los Angeles, but its stars—particularly emcee Ice T and his troupe of b-boys, graffiti artists, and DJs who touted the “four elements” of hip-hop and donned voguish punk-pop regalia—reflected what had become recognizable as East Coast hip-hop chic; against an idyllic California backdrop, *Breakin’* revealed a movement that thoroughly mimicked its New York predecessor in style and tone. The documentary effectively captured the electric “pop-lock” phenomenon, which was uniquely West Coast in origin, but it, nevertheless, relied heavily upon comparisons to East Coast street dance trends.

Director Topper Carew attempted to showcase Los Angeles’s vibrant inner-city youth culture by taking cues from early East Coast hip-hop investors like punk princess Debbie “Blondie” Harry. In New York, Blondie became the most well-known and effective promoter of the evolving rap music scene, featuring hip-hop performers in her music videos and using her clout to prop up young groups like the Funky Four Plus One More, who with her help secured a highly coveted spot as musical guest on a spring 1981 episode of the nationally broadcast *Saturday Night Live*.⁷ Together, Blondie and her rap interlocutors, DJ Afrika Bambaataa and Brooklyn graffiti artist and emcee Fab Five Freddy, epitomized the developing bonds between New York City’s predominantly white downtown punk music scene and the largely black and Latino hip-hop subculture, then a ghetto-propelled party circuit fronted by a handful of DJs and dancers. With the patronage of Blondie and the advocacy of hip-hop’s leading men, proprietors of trendy uptown music venues were willing to experiment by hosting rap performances, even if it meant attracting a younger, poorer, darker-complexioned clientele.

There was no direct equivalent to Blondie in Los Angeles, yet the scenes that she sponsored in New York influenced the booking decisions made by proprietors of popular discos in California. In 1982 and 1983, recent New York transplant Matt Robinson arranged events for the “art school” crowds at Hollywood’s Rhythm Lounge basing his choices on his deep enthusiasm for the hip-hop showcases he had attended at

⁶ Liam Lacey, “Bronx deejay raps on ‘hip-hop culture,’” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, April 18, 1984.

⁷ “Debbie Harry and Funky 4 + 1 More,” *Saturday Night Live*, TV Series, directed by Lorne Michaels (Season 6, Episode 10, originally aired February 14, 1981; NBC Studios, 1981), Online Video, <
http://www.myvideo.de/watch/4877961/Funky_4_1_Thats_The_Joint_On_Saturday_Night_Live
>.

Manhattan's The Roxy.⁸ Scottish-born punk-rock aficionado Brendan Mullen, who scouted talent for another popular Hollywood nightspot called Club Lingerie, helped cultivate an avant-garde, hybrid music scene in Los Angeles not unlike the one sponsored by Blondie, Fab Five Freddy, and Bambaataa. His shows, including one in 1983 billed as the "South Bronx Rap Party," featured both New York-based hip-hop acts like Bambaataa, DJ Afrika Islam, and members of the Bronx b-boy outfit, the Rock Steady Crew, as well as cutting-edge California rock bands like Black Flag, Jane's Addiction, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.⁹ According to Chili Peppers co-founder and bassist Michael "Flea" Balzary, Mullen's Club Lingerie events represented "an exciting cross-cultural punk scene that embraced all races, genders, sexual orientations and any manner of deviant."¹⁰

Los Angeles also had The Radio, which was the playhouse-cum-disco featured prominently in *Breakin' 'N' Enterin'*. The all-ages, after-hours establishment was run by Alex Jordanov, a Russian-French immigrant who tapped his New York connections to fill his event calendars. Chris "The Glove" Taylor, a DJ who delivered sound equipment to the club, said Jordanov aimed to make his club "a piece of the East Coast hip hop scene" by inviting artists like DJ Derek "Grandmixer D.ST" Showard (who in 1982 collaborated with Herbie Hancock on Hancock's groundbreaking jazz-funk record "Rockit") and the Queens-based rap trio Run-DMC.¹¹ In providing New York hip-hop acts with some of their first West Coast performance opportunities, Jordanov "was way ahead of the curve," explained Ice T.¹² "I was at the Radio Club a couple of times when it was first blowing up and it was a madhouse!" noted musician Dupont Randolph-Gray, who produced several tracks for the *Breakin'* soundtrack. "It was so fresh to have MC's up on stage rapping," he remembered, "and it was the ultimate dancers club."¹³

The Radio was patronized primarily by young white clubgoers and "industry people" who were, like their New York counterparts, no longer driven by disco formulas but instead intrigued by the new cutting-edge sounds of rap. Seeking to be part of the excitement, they were loyal to the downtown establishment. Frequent guest DJ Afrika Islam recalled, "Radio was like a breakin' club with industry people coolin'; the trendy crowd used to hang out there."¹⁴ Brooklyn-born Henry "DJ Hen Gee" Garcia observed that inside Jordanov's club "a lot of white people from Europe" mingled night after night with "people from the hood."¹⁵

⁸ Brian Cross, ed., *It's Not About A Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1994), 174.

⁹ Richard Cromelin, "Street Art at Lingerie; L.A. Takes the Rap From N.Y. Movement," *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1983.

¹⁰ Flea, "Brendan Mullen," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2009.

¹¹ Chris the Glove Taylor, interview by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, July 2004, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/interviews.html>>, accessed August 1, 2011.

¹² Brian Coleman, *Check The Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (Random House: New York, 2005), 235.

¹³ Dupont Randolph-Gray, interview by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, May 2006, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/artists/dupont.html>>, accessed June 25, 2011.

¹⁴ Cross, *It's Not About A Salary*, 159.

¹⁵ Henry "Hen Gee" Garcia, interview by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, June 2006, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/interviews.html>>, accessed June 2, 2011.

For some skeptics, Los Angeles hip-hop culture was really a diluted version of the grittier, more innovative New York rap scene. The East Coast curiosity called “hip-hop music,” as *Los Angeles Times* music journalist Al Martinez quipped, “spread to L.A. and was eventually adopted by apple-cheeked Beverly Hills teens who rapped in the air-conditioned comfort of their Porsche Targas.”¹⁶ The final scenes in *Breakin’* illustrated this when cameras captured a pair of platinum blonds in pastel party dresses, who, appearing at ease surrounded by graffiti murals and an eclectic mix of people, beamed, “It’s fun to try out new clubs and stuff.” Another young woman and her companion admitted in the film that they kept their trips to the nightclub a secret from their friends in the residential suburbs of Arcadia and Pasadena. “We come down [to The Radio] because we like the music here,” they confessed. “Here it’s a different crowd.”¹⁷

The blending of middle- and upper-class youths with society’s outcasts represented the kind of diversity and cultural experimentation that Afrika Bambaataa, who touted “peace, love and unity and having fun,” had hoped to nurture throughout the world.¹⁸ For Bambaataa, hip-hop was modern counterpart to the sixties-era marriage between rock and soul. “I was trying to get that same audience like Sly and the Family Stone had,” he said. Hip-hop was designed in the same fashion, to “grab that Black and white audience and bridge the gap.”¹⁹ The music preferred by dancers in Los Angeles “hip-hop” clubs in the early 1980s—that is, uptempo, electro-funk productions inspired as much by American artists like Funkadelic, Prince, and Morris Day and the Time as by English musician Gary Numan and the German collective Kraftwerk—may have lacked, as music critics noted, the edge of more emcee-centered tracks from East Coast rap artists like Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Melle Mel.²⁰ As Ice T’s closing rhymes in *Breakin’* suggested, however, hip-hop “culture” in the West was developing in line with Bambaataa’s sublime vision: “Let’s dance not fight and all unite / Just turn the box up loud / To the funky beat on any street / You’ll find a hip-hop crowd.”²¹

* * *

“I’ll tell you the truth,” Ice T would confess years later about his performance in *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’*, “I was really fakin’ it.”²² His rhymes, like the occasional vocals that punctuated the film’s soundtrack, served to highlight the dance performances and inform the viewer about the local talents popping, strobing, and gliding across the screen.

¹⁶ Al Martinez, “Hip-Hoppin’ With Afrika and Ice T,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1985.

¹⁷ *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’*.

¹⁸ Catherine Lemery, “What does hip hop mean to you?” *The McGill Tribune*, October 25, 2004.

¹⁹ Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn eds., *Yes, Yes, Y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 309.

²⁰ Los Angeles DJ Greg “Egyptian Lover” Broussard, one of the most prominent DJs in the local mobile party circuit in the early 1980s, produced several of the tracks that gave life to the scenes in *Breakin’*. Egyptian Lover admits that at the time of filming he was as influenced by Prince’s sexually explicit lyrics and erotic musical embellishments on albums like *Dirty Mind* (1980) and *Controversy* (1981) as he was by the pop star’s eccentric and androgynous look. Egyptian Lover, interview, West Coast Pioneers, January 2006, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/artists/egyptian-lover.html>>, accessed May 23, 2011.

²¹ *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’*.

²² Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 182.

Beyond showcasing a handful of up-and-coming West Coast pop-lock pioneers, however, the film misrepresented the maturation of Los Angeles hip-hop. It presented a façade that masked a more archaic, self-conscious, and even provincial youth subculture. “They brought me in there because I was the only rapper that they could find,” Ice T said of his own role.²³ As some of its young stars would later admit, *Breakin’* failed to pinpoint many of the regional idiosyncrasies of the Los Angeles hip-hop scene and missed the fact that, by the early 1980s, most of its California practitioners were already resisting the New York mold, both ideologically and musically.

Rap was, to be sure, becoming a backdrop to the Los Angeles street scene as it had been in the New York boroughs east of Manhattan. There were some indications, beyond anecdotes selected by filmmakers, that the early Los Angeles hip-hop landscape was at least superficially comparable to its New York cousin. By the early 1980s, signs hinted that inner-city environments in the context of economic recession and post-Watts Riots era disillusionment might spawn similar kinds of sophisticated street subcultures. Post-Great Society reforms had eroded poor black and Chicano neighborhoods in Los Angeles as they had in the predominantly African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino regions of New York that had been recognized for spawning hip-hop. Under the Jimmy Carter Administration, wages declined sharply, inflation rose, unemployment rates, especially for youths, soared, and broad union-busting policies of deregulation gave industry a boost to the detriment of labor. President Jimmy Carter appeared on television chiding Americans for failing to define themselves “by what one does” but instead “by what one owns,” while working people, particularly those relying upon traditional blue-collar jobs, struggled to make ends meet.²⁴

President Carter’s successor Ronald Reagan extended the administrations policies of industry deregulation and federal cuts to domestic programs that ultimately favored the very wealthy. President Reagan promised to free government from the shackles of “special interests,” which he defined not as corporations and big banks, but as unions, minorities, and others who wanted the government to tackle social and economic inequalities. Emphasizing a “color-blind” approach to governing, he opposed affirmative action programs and limited funding for civil rights enforcement. Coupled with fewer regulatory restraints on industry and the resulting shift of production overseas to low-cost, labor-rich regions of the world, federal cuts forced hundreds of thousands of workers, particularly black and Latino workers who had only recently won greater rights in the skilled industrial workforce, into unemployment. Tightening the stranglehold on America’s poor, the Reagan administration reduced funding for social welfare programs, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and subsidies for school-lunches and youth job training. Federal assistance for the working poor and programs that helped provide childcare for those who could not afford it were eliminated entirely. The concerted efforts by Democratic and Republican leaders to stimulate the economy by slashing taxes, cutting welfare programs, and shrinking federal regulations on business

²³ “Interview with Ice T,” *Behind the Beat*, TV Series (originally aired in 1988; BBC Pebble Mill, 1988), Online Video, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hLucHu2vDQ>>, accessed June 5, 2011.

²⁴ Jimmy Carter, “Crisis of Confidence: Energy and National Goals,” July 15, 1979, in Daniel Horowitz, *Jimmy Carter and the Energy Crisis of the 1970s: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2005).

came at a high cost to low-income communities. The consequences of these policies were particularly devastating to minorities in the inner city—in places like the Bronx, South Los Angeles, and East Los Angeles—who were already bearing the brunt of the recession of the 1970s and the early 1980s.

In California, the plight of those living in low-income neighborhoods became especially acute in the aftermath of the voter tax revolt of 1978. Proposition 13, the tax-limitation initiative passed that year by an overwhelming majority of California voters, reduced property tax rates on homes, businesses, and farms by nearly 60% and required two-thirds voter approval for any new taxes to be levied at the state or the local level. As a result, revenues used by local agencies to improve roads and parks, to fund schools and libraries, and to maintain fire, paramedic, and police services evaporated. In Los Angeles County in the early 1980s, proposals to levy new property taxes to help expand public services failed; the county's population continued to expand rapidly, yet it could not collect the funds necessary to accommodate growth. This meant that those already confined to the poorest neighborhoods by low wages, unemployment, and discrimination saw public schools deteriorate and municipal services become increasingly scarce and unreliable.²⁵ “When things started changing in the ‘hood,” Long Beach native Calvin “Snoop Dogg” Broadus remembered, “none of us could exactly put our finger on the why and what for of it all. It just seemed like one day the people around you were full of hope, expecting something better from life and waiting on that eventuality. And the next day, those same people gave up their hope, didn’t expect anything to ever be any different from what it was, and stopped waiting for a change to come.”²⁶

Young minorities on each coast, contending with revenue-deprived schools, heightened discrimination, and declining job opportunities, utilized what resources they had to capitalize on the new music trends attracting record label talent scouts, celebrity investors, and filmmakers. On the East Coast, young rappers became early stars, buoyed by record label support and the international spotlight. In the West, it was the pop-lockers and DJs who dominated the scene, and it was the hood that sustained it.

* * *

The 1983 *Breakin’* documentary hinted, whether intentionally or not, that its key figures were linked to the gang underworld. Ice T repudiated the criminal lifestyle in front of the camera, while an earring dangled from his left ear. The style of adornment, adopted by the Los Angeles Crips, signaled his affiliation with the gang and betrayed his act.²⁷ He represented himself on screen as a positive role model offering an alternative to

²⁵ For more on the effects of 1970s and 1980s federal policies on Los Angeles, see Davis, *City of Quartz*.

²⁶ Snoop Dogg with Davin Seay, *Tha Doggfather: The Times, Trials, and Hardcore Truths of Snoop Dogg* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1999), 35.

²⁷ Los Angeles Crips are best known for wearing the color blue, but throughout the 1980s members also signified their association with the gang in more subtle ways, including hanging a blue bandana from the left back pocket of their pants and piercing their left ear. Bloods wore red and wore these accessories on the right. See Steven R. Cureton, *Hoover Crips: When Cripin’ Becomes a Way of Life* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2008) and Yusuf Jah

“the guy who goes and holds up a liquor store,” but off screen Ice T lived the life of a stick-up kid. A known outlaw in the streets of South Central, he was “always trying to get paid. From the minute we woke up, we were constantly scheming to rob someplace.”²⁸ He was, as he admitted, “running with some serious criminals,” and for a brief period he even sold cocaine.²⁹ As the master of ceremonies on the stage of The Radio, he flaunted the expensive jewelry, pristine top-of-the-line footwear, and designer clothing brands like Gucci and Fendi that he had either boosted from posh clothiers or purchased with the proceeds from drug sales. “We had all the jewelry, the fly shoes, the expensive rides parked out front,” he says of his days as host at The Radio. He and the “black hustler friends” he invited to the nightclub “had all the entrapments of stardom already.”³⁰

Although admittedly not a “frontline soldier” who could wield power within the gang or instill fear in any enemy set, Ice T was considered by South Central Crips to be an “affiliate,” an ancillary member of the increasingly notorious organization. Selecting to go to Crenshaw High School, the public school within a few blocks of his middle-class neighborhood, rather than participate in the city’s school busing program, young Ice T found himself enmeshed in what was rapidly proving to be the beginning of a new era of youth gang activity. Due to the exodus of white families and widespread refusal to comply with busing orders, the student populations of many of the district’s public high schools, including those in affluent and predominantly African-American sections of the city, were made up of the children of poor and working-class households from ghettos east of the Harbor Freeway.³¹ South Los Angeles Crips controlled many of the neighborhoods assigned to Crenshaw High, so many of Ice T’s classmates belonged to or were somehow associated with the gang’s sets. There existed no “neutral” territory in South Central neighborhoods, he noted, because “everyone’s forced under the jurisdiction of the gangs.”³² Seeking sanctuary among these cliques, he assessed which could provide him with the greatest protection, and he ultimately cultivated a relationship with “the kids from the Avenues, the flatter area of L.A., the more dangerous area.”³³ He found that young people from diverse backgrounds, whether residing or sojourning in these parts, had little choice but to choose a side in ever-expanding gang rivalries. “You might show up in South Central a clean-cut, square kid—like I did—but before you know it, you got the blue or red bandanna folded up perfectly in your left or right back pocket.”³⁴

This was the case for many of those involved in the popping and locking street scene that defined early Los Angeles hip-hop. It was, as *Breakin’* illustrated, an ethnically and racially diverse subculture, dominated by African-American and Chicano youth but

and Sister Shah-Keyah, *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Tell the Story of America’s Youth in the Crossfire* (New York: Scribner, 1995).

²⁸ Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption – From South Central to Hollywood* (New York: One World/Random House, 2011), 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54, 75-76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ “School Busing Controversy in Southern California: Terry Drinkwater Reports,” *CBS Evening News*, TV News Series (originally aired September 14, 1970; CBS News Productions, 1970); “The Failure of Mandatory Busing in Los Angeles: Terry Drinkwater Reports,” *CBS Evening News*, TV News Series (originally aired October 22, 1980; CBS News Productions, 1980).

³² Ice T, *Ice*, 22.

³³ Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 233.

³⁴ Ice T, *Ice*, 22.

including Japanese, Filipino, Samoan, Vietnamese, and white performers. Greek-American popper Wavomatic revealed, however, that most of the performers and loyal followers were either members of various Crip or Blood gang sets or were somehow involved in criminal enterprises, including drug trafficking. Most scene regulars were “gangstas,” he explains. “If they weren’t bangin’, they were robbing, and if they weren’t robbing and stealing, they were dealing, and if they weren’t dealing, they were smoking.”³⁵ Samoan b-boy Suga Pop discovered that because “rival gangs, rival territories, rival groups” participated, the Los Angeles hip-hop dance scene was inevitably “real violent.” In such a competitive atmosphere, he said, fights were endemic and “friends die.”³⁶

Popular depictions of the early Los Angeles hip-hop scene flirted with the more titillating aspects of the region’s minority youth subcultures, including the presence of rough criminal types, yet they failed to penetrate the social gatherings that truly defined this world—that is, events organized by local mobile DJ companies. These elite groups of entrepreneurial disc jockeys hosted small house parties and school functions and promoted dances at larger venues, including convention centers, dancehalls, and skating rinks. It was these events, and not the showcases hosted by tony Hollywood nightclubs, preferred by the city’s trendsetting street troupes.

* * *

“We knew the streets,” boasted Roger Clayton, founder and frontman for Uncle Jamm’s Army, the region’s seminal mobile DJ outfit.³⁷ Clayton cut his teeth promoting and playing records for small house parties in the early 1970s, and he broadened the scope of his musical awareness working in sales for small record shops in Watts, Compton, and Long Beach. By the late 1970s, he had the expertise, the reputation, and the hardware to found the West Coast’s first significant mobile DJ sound system. Named as an homage to Funkadelic’s 1979 album *Uncle Jam Wants You*, Clayton’s Uncle Jamm’s Army was designed not simply to provide services for private parties and public events, but to be the preeminent disc jockey company in the West. He assembled an exclusive team of DJs, promotional aides, security guards, and able-bodied helpers. With an impressive haul of pro audio equipment, including a dozen hulking Cerwin Vega speakers, twelve power amplifiers, and four turntables, along with theatrical gimmicks like costumes and fog machines, he quickly became the leading event organizer in Southern California. *Los Angeles Times* music writer Don Snowden wrote in the early years of the Army’s reign, “It’s the combination of [Clayton’s] onstage confidence bordering on cockiness and his business savvy in dealing with the black teenage market that has made [sic] Uncle Jam a major force.”³⁸

³⁵ Wavomatic, interview, West Coast Poppin, June 2, 2009, <<http://westcoastpoppin.com/popping-history/interview-with-wavomatic>>, accessed June 20, 2011.

³⁶ *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’*.

³⁷ Roger Clayton, interview by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, September 2006, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/interviews.html>>, accessed June 10, 2011.

³⁸ Don Snowden, “Uncle Jam’s Army: Mobile Disco Dances To a Different Beat,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1983.

In rented venues like the Hotel Biltmore and the Pasadena Civic Center, Clayton managed to attract hundreds, often filling the dancehalls to capacity. Events at much larger venues, like the Los Angeles Convention Center, the Sports Center, and the Hollywood Palladium, drew thousands—staggering numbers for a grassroots party promotion operation. No mobile disc jockey outfit from the period had the cachet enjoyed by the Army, which, along with its own large-scale events, earned the privilege of hosting grand, corporate-sponsored concerts featuring major label hip-hop acts like Grand Master Melle Mel, as well as heavy-hitters from the rhythm & blues and funk charts, including Cameo, Lakeside, Midnight Star, and Gladys Knight and the Pips.³⁹

The Army's staggering success inspired others, further driving a developing post-Disco urban dance scene. Clayton had developed a shrewd business model. He covered overhead costs for professional photo shoots for the group, glossy promotional posters, commercial shorts for airing on local black radio, postcards mailed to attendees from previous parties, security services, and wages for his hired talent; then, any profits earned were his alone. At the height of the Army's popularity, the average fee for entry into a UJA party was eight dollars. With attendance often topping several thousand, Clayton's business netted him a small fortune. This was notable in the context of the weight of declining wages and rising unemployment felt among Clayton's peers, who found inspiration in his achievements. His success encouraged others to study sound amplification and turntable technology, to raid their parents' record shelves of James Brown, Earth Wind and Fire, Marvin Gaye, One Way, and P-Funk albums, and to invest in their own copies of current crowd-pleasing singles from their own favorites, including Morris Day and the Time, Prince, Zapp, Whodini, Maze, Art of Noise, and Kraftwerk.

Unsatisfied with his minimum wage job at Fox Hills Mall in Culver City, Greg "G Bone" Everett decided to spend his paychecks on records and sound equipment to build his own mobile DJ organization, the Music Masters. In an effort to compete with Uncle Jamm's Army, the Music Masters initially kept prices low, charging a mere sixty dollars for its services for private events. Covering overhead costs was difficult and "we were basically not really makin' any money," G-Bone explained.⁴⁰ As a result, the Music Masters joined forces with two small competing DJ businesses, the Knights of the Turntable and Ultra Wave Productions, in order to more effectively compete with the Army and become a "big thing."⁴¹ Roger Clayton's former partner Alonzo "Grand Master Lonzo" Williams had the unique advantage of learned directly from the Army master until the partners separated over money disputes. "I was luggin' equipment and he was collecting money every night, so there was an imbalance," Williams said. In response to the split, Williams gathered talent from his Compton neighborhood and founded Disco Construction. With fellow members Marquette "Cli-N-Tel" Hawkins, Antoine "Yella" Carraby, and Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, he renamed his company the

³⁹ In May 1984, Uncle Jamm's Army promoted a benefit concert for Jesse Jackson, which featured Lakeside, Cheryl Lynn, and Shalamar, as well as performances from UJA. Later that year, the DJ outfit hosted the "1984 Music Festival," which was sponsored by Coca-Cola and featured New York rapper Melle Mel, Gladys Night and the Pips, Cameo, Nona Hendryx, Lakeside, and Midnight Star. "Display Ad 380," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1984, L71; "Today's Highlights," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1984, E2.

⁴⁰ Cross, *It's Not About A Salary*, 162-163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

World Class Wreckin Cru. Seeking to compete with UJA and advance his own business interests, Lonzo also opened an all-ages nightclub on South Avalon Boulevard in Compton called Eve's After Dark and established the Kru-Cut record label exclusively for the Wreckin Cru's music.⁴²

Clayton and the Uncle Jamm's Army also made deep impressions on out-of-towners, like Texas-based radio programmer Greg Mack, who relocated to Los Angeles in the early 1980s to bolster his career in broadcasting. "When I first moved to L.A. in 1983," Mack said, "I was shocked that a promoter could fill the L.A. Sports Arena with 8000 people for a 'dance.' No artists, just DJs." Mack sought to partner with the DJ mogul when he began his stint as music director for KDAY AM 1580, a black-owned low-frequency station in Los Angeles that was beginning to fashion its programming for the city's young minorities, the very same groups that frequented UJA events. Mack understood that the Army had a monopoly on party promotion in the city and that Clayton himself kept afoot of ever-changing tastes in South Los Angeles and, better than anyone else, "knew the streets."⁴³ Clayton once boasted, "We set trends, and one thing we've always done is break a lot of records before the radio stations."⁴⁴ He, however, ultimately rejected Mack's offer to collaborate, declaring, "We don't need radio," which only motivated the Texas DJ to develop his own promotional side-project. Mack organized the Mixmasters, and "a rivalry began."⁴⁵ The group, which was sponsored by KDAY AM and included on its talent roster World Class Wreckin Cru members Dr. Dre and DJ Yella, hosted parties for teens at the city's two largest skating rinks, World on Wheels on Venice Boulevard and Skateland USA in Compton.

The competition among mobile DJ enterprises in and around Los Angeles stimulated the already thriving electro scene. It encouraged innovation among DJs, influenced local radio programming, and even attracted the attention of talent managers and record promoters from the East Coast. The Uncle Jamm's Army, by the early 1980s, had become such a potent cultural force in the West Coast that Sugar Hill Records representatives hand-delivered complimentary copies of their latest product to Clayton. Run-DMC's manager Russell Simmons solicited both Clayton and Mack for performance opportunities in Los Angeles hoping to expose his up-and-coming rap artists to as many potential West Coast fans as possible.⁴⁶

The flourishing Los Angeles mobile DJ party scene piqued the interests of the second generation of hip-hop artists who were less interested in and less dependent upon the genre's early white celebrity patrons. Party promotions companies offered Los Angeles area youth, especially black youth from South Los Angeles, an appealing alternative to even the most alluring nightspots on the Westside and downtown. These clubs often selectively excluded teens based on appearances, denying entry to those who were assumed to be gang members; management arbitrarily enforced dress codes, citing

⁴² Ibid., 121.

⁴³ Ibid., 155; Roger Clayton, *West Coast Pioneers*.

⁴⁴ Snowden, "Uncle Jam's Army."

⁴⁵ Dan Charnas, "Hip-Hop Pioneer Rodger 'Uncle Jamm' Clayton Dies," *The Urban Daily*, October 11, 2010.

⁴⁶ Though reluctant to hire an unseasoned East Coast rap act, Clayton agreed. Run-DMC's appearance at the Uncle Jamm's Army event, according to Clayton, helped boost West Coast sales of Run-DMC's debut single "It's Like That"; Roger Clayton, *West Coast Pioneers*.

security concerns. Many venues also limited under-age functions because they created a liability for club proprietors who held liquor licenses. Dry events also failed to bring in the kind of revenue that the average drinking-age event did. Even when venues like Club Lingerie, the Los Angeles Roxy, and the Palace hosted hip-hop showcases, they tended to cater to rap audiences that one *Los Angeles Times* entertainment reporter wrote were “primarily composed of older, white rock critics.”⁴⁷ The Radio, represented in the *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’* documentary as a space custom-made for young, predominantly black and Chicano people from the city’s core, was in actuality a venue in which well-connected music industry leaders were its most loyal patrons. Afrika Islam, a young New York DJ who moved to Los Angeles shortly after the filming, remarked that out-of-town, “trendy crowds,” including his own Bronx-based Zulu Nation crew, frequented this spot regularly.⁴⁸

In the early 1980s, intrepid young men like Roger Clayton, Lonzo Williams, and Greg Mack filled the void left by Hollywood hotspots out of touch with the city’s minority youths. Disco Construction and World Class Wreckin Cru founder Lonzo Williams noted that events sponsored by mobile DJ crews were vital to the social lives of young African Americans in Los Angeles. “There were no clubs in the city that provided entertainment that catered to them,” so entrance to mobile events was a must. “If you missed a dance or a mobile affair, God knows how long it would be before another one came around.”⁴⁹ Egyptian Lover, the most well-known of the Uncle Jamm’s Army DJs, suggested that mobile parties were better attended than showcases at private clubs like The Radio simply because “our total show is better.”⁵⁰ Roger Clayton claimed that if party promotion organizations did not engineer their own dances, young people from the city’s ghettos would have few recreational outlets. “We feel we do a great service keeping a lot of people off the street,” he said.⁵¹

“Everyone” wanted to attend UJA parties, Egyptian Lover explained, because the music offered, the girls in attendance, and the opportunities to simply relax were as much of a draw to young gang members, pimps, and drug dealers as they were for their law-abiding classmates, friends, and neighbors. “A lot of people were doing their dirt—selling, banging, seeing their homies get killed,” says scene regular Mark Luv of his fellow partygoers. Most young people in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, he continues, were saddled with the day-to-day challenges to “survive the Reagan era” while also confronting the growing threats related to neighborhood turf wars. “People got jumped on the bus over shoelaces and jewelry or the wrong color Kangol,” Luv said, explaining that UJA parties offered everyone “a break in their lives.”⁵² Clayton took credit for giving ghetto youths “somewhere to go where they can forget they don’t have a job or that their parents aren’t working” and to “get away from gangs and those bad elements.”⁵³

⁴⁷ Kristine McKenna, “Taking the Rap in L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1983.

⁴⁸ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 159.

⁴⁹ Don Snowden, “In Search of the Black Belt,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1983.

⁵⁰ Snowden, “Uncle Jamm’s Army.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Donnell Alexander, “Do Rappers Dream of Electro-Beats?” *Los Angeles City Beat*, July 28, 2005.

⁵³ Snowden, “Uncle Jamm’s Army.”

Keeping kids “off the street,” as Clayton promised, required welcoming patrons from all neighborhoods, including those blocks known as haunts for the city’s most violent street gangs and drug runners. The fact was, as poppers Wavomatic and Suga Pop noted, the vast majority of the scene’s most talented dance crews—that is, those considered local celebrities and therefore essential to the character of the mobile party circuit—were, at the very least, gang affiliated. Many claimed specific sets and brought their hostilities to the dances. With warring cliques often under one roof, mobile DJ parties were invited “hardcore nefariousness,” as one entertainment reporter stated.⁵⁴ Violence was endemic in a party scene inextricably tied to the rapidly growing culture of gangs, gang-related posturing, and the spread of crack cocaine. For event planners, performers, and partygoers alike, this often created significant challenges.

Chris “The Glove” Taylor, a DJ who performed frequently for the Army, recalled “more gangsters” than any other sort of partygoer in attendance at UJA events.⁵⁵ Others found that Clayton’s events were “notorious for gangbangers going crazy.” Gun-carrying gang members, those referred to from within the ranks as “bangers,” were a “prevalent” part of the Los Angeles mobile DJ hip-hop scene according to members of the Knights of the Turntables. It was common, they said, to leave a gathering following gun shots and with patrons fleeing, “running all over the place.”⁵⁶ Egyptian Lover admitted that physical brawls frequently marred the Army’s otherwise positive party atmosphere.⁵⁷ One UJA partygoer admitted that he expected to encounter fights at each and every affair, and was only optimistic that those involved would be swiftly expelled so he and his friends could enjoy the remainder of the night.⁵⁸ In an attempt to pinpoint the key difference between this scene and its East Coast counterpart, New York DJ Henry “Hen Gee” Garcia defined the electro tracks preferred by partygoers in Los Angeles as “gangbanging music.” He emphasized, “We didn’t have gangbanging music in New York.”⁵⁹

For each Uncle Jamm’s Army event, Clayton spent extravagantly on security and other “uniformed personnel” to eject troublemakers and to conduct “high-visibility patrols through the center of the dancing throng to guard against retaliatory attacks.”⁶⁰ The performing DJ was also instructed to make wise record selections to distract the crowd from the chaos. Ultrawave Productions, the self-proclaimed kings of the city’s Westside party scene, experimented with similar tactics to counter the threat of party crashers, including the Rollin’ 60s Crips, one of the largest Crip sets in Southern California. In a move that actually mirrored some dress code policies set by Hollywood nightclubs, Ultrawave event planners denied entrance to patrons carrying beepers,

⁵⁴ Alexander, “Do Rappers Dream of Electro-Beats?”

⁵⁵ Chris the Glove Taylor, by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, July 2004, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/interviews.html>>, accessed August 1, 2011.

⁵⁶ Lil Rockin G and Madmixer RMG (Knights of the Turntables), interview by Stefan Schuetze, West Coast Pioneers, June 2005, <<http://westcoastpioneers.com/interviews.html>>, accessed August 1, 2011.

⁵⁷ Egyptian Lover, interview by Chad Kiser, DUBCNN, August 2008, <<http://www.dubcnn.com/interviews/egyptianlover>>, accessed July 4, 2011.

⁵⁸ Alexander, “Do Rappers Dream of Electro-Beats?”

⁵⁹ Henry “Hen Gee” Garcia, West Coast Pioneers.

⁶⁰ Snowden, “Uncle Jamm’s Army.”

donning baseball caps, large gold rope chains, or khaki pants, a clothing item traditionally associated with Mexican gangs but adopted in the 1970s by black street cliques. DJ G-Bone claimed that the crew's hired security forces managed to bar troublemakers most of the time, though "I had ulcers behind that shit." He scoffed at the notion that Ultrawave arbitrarily discriminated against some, but ultimately admitted that the group did. "Not that we didn't want dealers to dance," he clarified, "but we didn't want it in our scene."⁶¹

The most dangerous events were those held at the city's two most popular skating rinks, World on Wheels and Skateland USA. These venues served as key battling grounds for young dancers and, perhaps because of that, became the stomping grounds for both the Crips and the Bloods. Although, as Los Angeles emcee Mikah Nine observed, bangers often remained "under cover checkin' it out, skating and playing video games," the rinks became widely known as gang territory.⁶² The Bloods gang had claimed as its territory the popular Skateland USA, located in the heart of Compton, while the World on Wheels, nestled on Venice Boulevard, attracted Crips. Both skating rinks, by the mid 1980s, had become notoriously treacherous, but—largely due to the influence of Greg Mack's Mixmasters—the two venues had also become the nexus of musical innovation for the city's growing hip-hop fan base. It was in spaces like these, where musicians became hustlers and hustlers became musicians, that Los Angeles rappers explored their musical personas, and that hip-hop grew to be associated with violence.

* * *

Few Los Angeles rappers existed before the mid-1980s, and virtually none of them used the platform of DJ battles and rap showcases to preach to crowds, promote the "four elements," or deliver directives about positive living. This was an illusion that Ice T successfully conjured before the cameras in *Breakin' 'N' Enterin'*. Rappers were seldom the true masters of ceremonies at private functions and were rarely invited to control the microphone at Los Angeles mobile DJ events. From the late 1970s through the first half of the 1980s, in fact, Los Angeles rappers—the few that had emerged—played a rigidly limited role or were shunned altogether at events organized by the city's homegrown disc jockeys. In Los Angeles, the regional version of "hip-hop" provided little room for what New York rap artist William "Rakim" Griffin, Jr. would later refer to as the "microphone fiend."⁶³ DJ performers were fiercely committed to pleasing dancers; they understood the floor performers' sensibilities and orchestrated sets with their needs in mind.⁶⁴ "The LA music scene was more of a dancers' culture," songwriter and DJ Dupont Randolph-Gray emphasized, noting that his own music created during this period was "heavily

⁶¹ Cross, *It's Not About A Salary*, 165.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 291.

⁶³ Eric B. & Rakim, "Microphone Fiend"/"Beats For the Listeners," Single (MCA, 1988), Vinyl, 12".

⁶⁴ DJ Roger Clayton, the founder Los Angeles' earliest and most successful mobile disc jockey outfits Uncle Jamm's Army, referred to himself and his fellow DJs as "programmers," a term that, for him, illustrated the fellowship (and rivalry) between the mobile DJ and the radio jock. Snowden, "Uncle Jam's Army"; Roger Clayton, *West Coast Pioneers*.

inspired” by dancers, not rappers.⁶⁵ Most popular among these crowds were electro-funk tracks that utilized modern technology, such as synthesizers and vocoders, featured rapid-fire bass lines, and pulsating drum patterns. This music rarely incorporated rap, and when vocals broke through the uptempo melodies, they were usually sparse and electronically manipulated. The production was designed to serve as a backdrop to compliment the animatronic maneuvers, including waves, pops, tuts, puppet walks, and backslides, performed by mobile DJ event regulars.⁶⁶

Months after appearing with Ice T on the stage of The Radio in *Breakin'*, Egyptian Lover dismissed rapping as “boring.” He and his Uncle Jamm’s Army business partners carefully planned event line-ups, featuring rappers for “no more than two minutes a night because they interfere with the energy level.” The “music,” at these dances, he said, “[spoke] for itself.”⁶⁷ In other words, rap was a distraction, at best. DJ Mark Luv, a frequent attendee at Uncle Jamm’s Army events discovered that these priorities meant even the up-and-coming East Coast hip-hop group Run-DMC, who by 1983 had two Top 20 hit rap singles on the Billboard R&B charts (“It’s Like That” and “Hard Times”/“Jam Master Jay”), did not initially find a warm reception in the West.⁶⁸ “We were so on our own stuff, we didn’t give it up for them,” Luv recalled. With their mid-tempo rhymes, “they were breaking up our dance time. If you weren’t doing something 120 beats per minute, we weren’t tryin’ to feel you.”⁶⁹

Though Ice T frequently attended Uncle Jamm’s Army functions, his early rap aspirations remained tied to The Radio, the nightclub that had helped make him a star among local white thrill-seekers, documentarians, and East Coast rap celebrities. Audiences at The Radio, “not only knew my song, they knew it word-for-fucking-word.”⁷⁰ The adoration and the potential for exposure kept him returning night after night to refine his microphone skills and rub elbows with young celebrity performers, including Madonna, a green, up-and-coming, new wave singer who dropped in on occasion. As Ice T would admit later, however, his work at The Radio left him conflicted and ultimately faced with his own hoax. “I was out here stealin’ and gangbangin’, and pimpin’ women, and hangin’ out with drug dealers,” he revealed, “then I’d go into a club dressed like a breakdancer and tryin’ to rap.”⁷¹ Inside he disavowed his gang relationships in order to conform to “four element” hip-hop ideologies; outside he depended upon those illicit alliances, so much so that he ultimately chose to pursue a direction in his music that would make him a hero not of the rising international pop scene but of Los Angeles ghettos.

Ice T’s first record was “The Coldest Rap,” a mid-tempo rap tune released for Los Angeles’s Saturn Records in 1983, the same year *Breakin’ ‘N’ Enterin’* debuted in the United States. The independently run Saturn Records label had also produced Los Angeles emcee Captain Rapp’s “Bad Times (I Can’t Stand It)” (1983), a similar electro-

⁶⁵ Dupont Randolph-Gray, *West Coast Pioneers*.

⁶⁶ The backslide maneuver was popularized as the “moonwalk” in 1983 by Michael Jackson, a student of Los Angeles poppers, including Bruno “Poppin’ Taco” Falcon.

⁶⁷ Snowden, “Uncle Jam’s Army.”

⁶⁸ “Chart Beat,” *Billboard Magazine*, March 28, 1998, 78.

⁶⁹ Alexander, “Do Rappers Dream of Electro-Beats?”

⁷⁰ Ice T, *Ice*, 73.

⁷¹ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 183.

rap track featuring layers of synthesized instrumentation. Both productions tapped the sounds that had been most popular among Los Angeles electro-hop audiences and replicated the early rap styles of Sugar Hill Records artists like Melle Mel and Busy Bee.⁷² Despite the fact that each record featured Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, a song-writing duo who had worked with chart-topping acts like Prince, S.O.S. Band, and Klymaxx, each record flopped.

Part of the problem was that by the end of 1983, popping and locking, the dance craze that had driven the electro genre of early West Coast rap music, had all but expired as a fad. By the time nationally broadcast television shows like “What’s Happening,” and “Soul Train” showcased the moves of West Coast pop-locking stars like Jazzy J, Rerun, and the Electric Boogaloos, and by the time Michael Jackson introduced to American television audiences a rudimentary popping move called the “moonwalk,” Los Angeles street dancers had moved on.⁷³ Though Hollywood filmmakers, television producers, and pop-music celebrities were only beginning to discover—and to exploit—these styles, trend-setters of the Los Angeles scene, including KDAY radio programmer Greg Mack and mobile DJ Greg “G-Bone” Everett, had concluded that popping, locking, and b-boying was simply “old out here.”⁷⁴

Each track also suffered lyrically. As a nod to the success of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s hit single “The Message,” Captain Rapp delivered a relentlessly brooding song about life’s struggles. “You better wake up to what’s going down,” he prefaced, launching into six minutes of rapid-fire rhymes in which he attempted to cover the gamut of world crises. He addressed unemployment, welfare, gang violence, drug use, AIDS, failing schools, child abuse, abortion, natural disaster, nuclear war, terrorism, homicide, suicide, and even Americans “dying in El Salvador.” Rapp asked listeners to consider, “*Bad Times, these are for real / Bad Times is what you and I feel.*” It was exactly the kind of self-reflective, lyrically dense vocal track rejected by Los Angeles mobile DJs and partygoers alike.⁷⁵

Ice T’s “The Coldest Rap,” on the other hand, avoided soliciting serious contemplation. It was, substantively, a record meant to entertain listeners and celebrate the emcee’s prowess:

*’Cause I’m a player, the best alive,
I prefer fast money to a nine-to-five.
From the womb to the tomb I run my game,
’Cause I’m as cold as ice and I show no shame.*⁷⁶

⁷² Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” Single (Sugar Hill, 1982), Vinyl, 12”; Grandmaster Melle Mel, “White Lines (Don’t Do It),” Single (Sugar Hill, 1983), Vinyl, 12”; Busy Bee, “Making Cash Money,” Single (Sugar Hill, 1982), Vinyl, 12”.

⁷³ Mr. Wiggles, interview, West Coast Poppin’, June 6, 2009, <<http://www.westcoastpoppin.com/popping-history/interview-with-mrwiggles>>, accessed June 24, 2011

⁷⁴ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 162.

⁷⁵ Captain Rapp, “Bad Times (I Can’t Stand It),” Single (Saturn Records, 1983), Vinyl, 12”.

⁷⁶ Ice T, “The Coldest Rap”/”Cold Wind-Madness,” Single (Saturn Records, 1983), Vinyl, 12”.

His delivery—raw yet measured—strayed markedly from his prior on-screen performances. Rather than limiting himself to typical “four element” rhyme play and loose allusions to “unity” and “peace,” he explored his identity as “a player.” His lyrics, in fact, explicitly referenced gunplay (“*had a sawed-off shotgun*”) and his hustler lifestyle (“*a turned up collar, a turned up hat... I stole that*”). Honest and titillating, the track had the potential to strike a chord with Los Angeles youths, but radio refused to play it and, in verse, Ice T managed to alienate the very scene bosses he depended upon for exposure: “*I’m tired of these DJs goin’ around / talkin’ ‘bout how they hold down the town.*”⁷⁷

Despite Ice T’s early commercial failures with records like “The Coldest Rap” and similar follow-ups including “Reckless” (1984) and “Killers” (1984), he proved he was evolving along with the Los Angeles hip-hop scene. In each of his records, he revealed a desire to make waves locally by choosing bolder, more cutting-edge musical production and lyrical themes. “Killers,” released as the B-side to the electro-rap standard “Body Rock,” was one particularly risqué example. It was, fundamentally, a moral tale of the ghetto not unlike Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” (1982) and Run-DMC’s “Hard Times” (1983), yet Ice T’s subjects were distinctively pathetic. The men and women in his lyrics were demoralized victims of circumstance transformed into villains, and killers: a Vietnam veteran—“*living proof*” that “*unemployment hurts*”—took out his frustrations by shooting pedestrians from atop a building, the young wife of a wealthy older man was “*sad but content*” when her husband has “*an unexpected accident*,” and a talented graduate of the police academy unravels when “*Three weeks on the beat, his weak nerves crack / And he fires four warning shots into a kid’s back.*” In a song representing some of the dear fears of those living in Reagan’s America, Ice T painted a picture of desperation:

*A young man loses his only job,
Too proud to hustle, too honest to rob.
He goes to tell his family and his wife,
But an argument breaks out, she grabs a knife.
Tempers escalate to a total rage,
Shots burst out from a loaded twelve-gauge.
They call it mass murder, suicide,
But somebody tell me why the kids had to die.*

*KILLERS! These are the killers.
KILLERS! The coldhearted killers.
KILLERS! Bloodthirsty killers.
KILLERS! Beware of the killers!*⁷⁸

Like a hard rock frontman shouting at his audience, Ice T growled a chorus that reminded listeners of the evil existing all around them. Matched with gunshot sound effects, the record might have sparked the kind of controversy that would mint rap stars in later years. The song, however, became a burlesque following Ice T’s performance of it in

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ice T, “Killers” / “Body Rock,” Single, (Electro, 1985), Vinyl, 12”.

Rappin', a campy, low-budget hip-hop musical starring Mario Van Peebles.⁷⁹ The track never caught on in the local hip-hop party scene. Likely because of its relatively sparse and mid-tempo production, mobile DJs in Los Angeles ignored it altogether.

Ice T's 1986 release "Dog'n the Wax" was more successfully brazen. Brandishing terms considered obscene by the FCC, including "nine," "uzi," "body bag," "fag," and "homicide," he earned a place on radio programmers' no-play lists. Though uniquely provocative for the time, his style—the forceful, staccato delivery of braggadocio battle rhymes—replicated the kind of flow patented by East Coast rap stars including Run-DMC and LL Cool J:

*You're a five dollar boy and I'm a million dollar man,
You're a sucker MC, and you're my fan.
You try to bite lines, but rhymes are mine,
You're a sucker MC in a pair of Calvin Kleins.*
(Run-DMC, "Sucker MCs")

*Terrorizing my neighbors with the heavy bass,
I keep suckas in fear by the look on my face.
My radio's bad from the Boulevard,
I'm a hip-hop gangster and my name is Todd.*
(LL Cool J, "I Can't Live Without My Radio")

*Kickin up no mercy for the fact you're brave,
I just bury your butt, then I spit on your grave.
Laugh at your family as they stand and cry,
Cold smack your mother all in the eye.*
(Ice T, "Dog'n The Wax")⁸⁰

Brash and comical, Ice T's verses were a nod to the work of New York chart toppers as well as foul-mouthed comedians Richard Pryor and Rudy Ray "Dolemite" Moore. The track entertained but, because it nearly parroted an East Coast swagger, it failed to resonate locally with a scene increasingly ambivalent about New York rap. "6 In Tha Morning," the flipside of the "Dog'n The Wax" single, was a more remarkable offering from the Los Angeles hip-hop artist. The track utilized sparse, beat-heavy production, familiar to fans of commercially successful Def Jam Records. Characterized, however, by lower-frequency 808 drums and Ice T's leisurely narrative, it was notably distinctive.

"6 In Tha Morning" was not the first of its kind; it, in fact, borrowed from the work of a little-known Philadelphia rapper, Jesse "Schoolly D" Weaver. Ice T first heard Schoolly D's "P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?)" (1985) at a nightclub in Santa Monica, where he was entranced by the track's thunderous bass line and slow, cryptic rhymes. "It sounded like you were high, the way the beats were echoing, and his whole delivery was

⁷⁹ *Rappin'*, directed by Joel Silberg (1985; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2003), DVD.

⁸⁰ Run-D.M.C., "It's Like That" / "Sucker M.C.'s," Single (Profile Records, 1983), Vinyl, 12"; LL Cool J, "I Can Give You More" / "I Can't Live Without My Radio," Single (Def Jam Recordings, 1985), Vinyl, 12"; Ice T, "Dog'n The Wax (Ya Don't Quit-Part II)" / "6 In The Mornin'," Single (Techno Hop Records, 1986), Vinyl, 12".

so crazy.”⁸¹ Had it not been for the raw, nefarious verses that followed, the song’s chorus might have sounded routine—another rap braggart’s anthem:

*P.S.K., we’re makin’ that green,
People always say, “What the hell does that mean?”
P for the people who can’t understand
How one homeboy became a man.
S for the way you scream and shout,
One by one I’m knockin’ you out.
K for the way my DJ cuttin’,
Other MCs, man, they ain’t sayin’ nothing.’*⁸²

Despite what the chorus suggested, P.S.K. was an acronym not for a rap clique but for the Park Side Killers, one of the Philadelphia’s most feared gang organizations. Schoolly D’s rhymes were inspired by life in the inner city, but unlike tracks that were similarly street conscious—Melle Mel’s “The Message” (1981), Toddy Tee’s “Batterram” (1985), and Ice T’s early recordings, for instance—no rap recording artist had dealt so explicitly with the brand of violence associated with gang banging:

*Got to the place, and who did I see?
A sucker-ass nigga tryin’ to sound like me.
Put my pistol up against his head,
I said, “Sucker-ass nigga, I should shoot you dead.”
A thought ran across my educated mind,
Said, “Man, Schoolly D ain’t don’ no time.”
Grabbed the microphone and I started to talk,
Sucker-ass nigga, man, he started to walk.”*⁸³

The record transformed Ice T, who was still experimenting awkwardly with his musical persona. In “P.S.K.,” the young, up-and-coming Los Angeles emcee found a voice to emulate.

Stories of crime and desolation in America’s ghettos had been common poetic devices in rap music since 1982, when Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” offered “a blueprint,” as Ice T noted, for young black emcees.⁸⁴ The single jumped to the top of the *Billboard* Hot Black Singles chart with its infectious hook, “Don’t push me, ‘cause I’m close to the edge.” It seduced listeners while alluding to black dreams deferred and the eruptions that might result. On the heels of Melle Mel, a slough of hip-hop artists sought to capitalize on a new, more provocative trend in songwriting. Many years before Schoolly D recorded “P.S.K.,” these artists played with the term “gangster,” explored the outlaw character, and tested the boundaries of obscenity. New York graffiti writer and rapper Rammellzee referred to himself as the

⁸¹ Ice T, *Ice*, 90.

⁸² Schoolly D, “P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?)”/“Gucci Time,” Single (Schoolly-D Records, 1985), Vinyl, 12”.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Ice T, *Ice*, 92.

“gangster prankster” in his 1983 single “Beat Bop.”⁸⁵ Def Jam Recording artist LL Cool J assumed the title of “hip-hop gangster” in his 1985 hit single “I Can’t Live Without My Radio.”⁸⁶

A number of rap records produced in the early 1980s also tapped into the swelling drug culture in the United States, directly addressing the effects of cocaine and rock-cocaine on black inner-city communities. Following early success with “Christmas Rappin’” (1979) and “The Breaks” (1980), Harlem hip-hop heavyweight Kurtis Blow recorded “8 Million Stories,” a popular track from his fifth album *Ego Trip* (1984). With suspenseful piano riffs, a grinding electric guitar solo, and a guest appearance by Run-DMC, “8 Million Stories” dramatized the toll that drug dealing took on the lives of city dwellers: “*He lost his car, his house, his kids, his wife / and base and cocaine made him lose his life.*”⁸⁷ Equally vexing were the ominous lines throughout the 1983 release from The Rake. “*You gotta meet the punk on the battle front / Gotta beat the punk, street justice,*” the chorus declared. The Rake described a “working man” victimized by “street punks,” who attacked his children, raped his wife, and plundered his tenement apartment. When the justice system failed him, and “*those punks were free to walk,*” he chose to seek another mode of revenge: “*street justice.*”⁸⁸

Some stories of criminal jaunts were more light-hearted, as in the case of The Fat Boys “Jailhouse Rap” (1984). In the group’s absurd tale, Prince Markie D, having a case of late night hunger, deployed a 12-gauge rifle to break into a pizza parlor. Because his partner refused to pay the bill after a binge at Burger King, both wind up “*in jail, without the bail / in jail, because we fail[ed].*” A comical lamentation, Prince rapped, “*I lost my freedom when I heard the door slamma / And now I’m breakin’ rocks with a big hamma-hamma.*”⁸⁹ Brooklyn-based group Divine Sounds offered a G-rated parable with “What People Do For Money” (1984). A choral ensemble introduced rhymes—strikingly similar in style and tone to Run-DMC’s widely popular 1983 debut single “It’s Like That”—about the monetary risks involved with straying from the straight and narrow: “*You took a try and now I’m sorry / You lost all your money in Three Card Molly!*”⁹⁰

In the West Coast, budding rappers also took cues from the early ghetto tales of Melle Mel, Kurtis Blow, and Run DMC. Todd “Toddy Tee” Howard, a Compton DJ-cum-MC, recorded colorful parodies of New York rap staples including UTFO’s “Roxanne, Roxanne” (“Rockman, Rockman”) and Whodini’s “The Freaks Come Out At Night,” (“The Clucks Come Out At Night”).⁹¹ His cassette mix tapes, homemade and locally distributed, included “Batterram” a production that would help mint him as the father of Los Angeles gangsta rap. The track, its title referring to the armored vehicle used in Los Angeles Police Department S.W.A.T. operations, criticized Police Chief Daryl Gates and Mayor Tom Bradley, but it also mocked “Mister Rockman” and blamed him for inviting the wrath of the police to otherwise law-abiding communities of South

⁸⁵ Rammelzee vs. K-Rob, “Beat Bop,” Single (Profile, 1983), Vinyl, 12”.

⁸⁶ LL Cool J, “I Can Give You More” / “I Can’t Live Without My Radio.”

⁸⁷ Kurtis Blow, “8 Million Stories,” Single (Polygram Records/Mercury, 1984), Vinyl, 12”.

⁸⁸ The Rake, “Street Justice,” Single (Profile, 1983), Vinyl, 12”.

⁸⁹ Fat Boys, “Jail House Rap,” Single (Sutra Records, 1984), Vinyl, 12”.

⁹⁰ Divine Sounds, “What People Do For Money,” Single (Specific Records, 1984), Vinyl, 12”.

⁹¹ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 210.

Los Angeles.⁹² Toddy Tee's "Batterram," with its direct references to the drug trade and police misconduct, anticipated the future of Los Angeles gangsta rap, yet its emphasis on the virtues of lawfulness had become, by 1985, commonplace in hip-hop.

In Northern California, Oakland rapper Todd "Too \$hort" Shaw explored related subjects, but with subtle distinctions. His 1985 "Girl (Cocaine)" was an ode to his hometown of Oakland, the "City of Dope," and a sharp commentary about drug use. Unlike "Batterram," however, he delivered a lesson about the effects of dope on one's hustle rather than on one's community:

*The big coke man ain't too cool
He smokes more than all you fools.
He's gotta lotta dope, but not a lot of bank
A brand new car with a empty tank.
Pretty white smoke all in his chest
And that '84 Benz, repossessed.*⁹³

With bass-heavy production and his relaxed, signature flow, Too \$hort won loyal fans throughout the Bay Area. By the early 1980s, he had already managed to create a small rap empire in Northern California by distributing his records much in the way drug traffickers spread product, that is, hand-to-hand and by word-of-mouth. In this way, his earliest rhymes about the street hustle read as purely autobiographical and, therefore, authentic—a quality that, in following years, would become increasingly key to the reception of rap recording artists.

Genuine, first-hand references to gangs, however, simply did not exist on record before Schoolly D's "P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?)" By the mid 1980s, the only other notable allusion to what was quickly becoming an epidemic in major cities all across the country appeared in Michael Jackson's pop hit "Beat It" (1982). The single, a soulful rock track featuring Eddie Van Halen on electric guitar, handled the violence of street confrontations with a clear message to "*Run, you better do what you can / Don't wanna see no blood, don't be a macho man.*"⁹⁴ In the song's elaborately produced music video, Jackson chose to further illustrate his tale with a knife fight between warring gangs, and with the help of Los Angeles Police Department's gang task force he recruited "real deal" Crips and Bloods to fill these roles. Director Bob Giraldi found Jackson's concept to be "insane," and remarked that the mood on the video set "was volatile—no question about it—and scary."⁹⁵ A naïve endeavor, perhaps, but the end product featured the first significant portrayal of black street gangs in pop music. Michael Jackson's "Beat It" topped the charts several years before tape decks in South Los Angeles blasted Toddy Tee's "Batterram" mix tape, before kids in Southern California caught wind of Northern California's kingpin Too \$hort, and before DJs added Schoolly D's "P.S.K. (What Does

⁹² Toddy Tee, "Batterram," Single (Evejim Records, 1985), Vinyl, 12".

⁹³ Too Short, "Girl (Cocaine)"/"Shorttrapp," Single (75 Girls Records and Tapes, 1985), Vinyl, 12".

⁹⁴ Michael Jackson, "Beat It," *Thriller*, Album (Epic, 1982), Vinyl, LP.

⁹⁵ Kevin Ritchie, "Beat It," *Boards Magazine*, July 7, 2009, <<http://www.boardsmag.com/articles/online/20090707/giraldibeatit.html>>, accessed July 10, 2011.

It Mean?)” into their event record rotations. Still, as authentic as Michael Jackson had intended his gang warfare fable to be, it failed to register for young street conscious rap fans in Los Angeles. For gang-affiliated young men like Ice T, “Beat It” was limp and completely out of touch with the rules of engagement in the inner city.

Schoolly D’s “P.S.K.” was everything tracks like “The Message,” “Batterram,” and “Beat It” were not. It bore, in fact, an uncanny resemblance to the rhymes Ice T had written as odes to his Crip brethren. “*Rollin’ to a party on a Saturday night / I left this pad down and out for a fight,*” Ice T had written from the perspective of a gang “banger,” continuing, “*On the way to the party I was scrapin’ and hoppin’ / ‘Cause I knew by the end of the night there was gonna be some poppin’.*” With the party in full swing, the protagonist in Ice T’s narrative noted, “*Niggas broke out in a God damn rage / I even think I seen a sawed-off gauge,*” and he ultimately “*broke out with the chrome plated 357.*”⁹⁶ Similarly, Schoolly D referenced the thrills and benefits of hustling (“*All about makin’ that cash money*”). Without couching his rhymes as a moral tale, he spoke boastfully of gunplay (“*Copped my pistols, jumped in the ride*”) and drug use (“*Copped some brew, some J, some coke / Tell you now, brother, this ain’t no joke*”). For Ice T, the Philadelphia rapper artfully communicated in impressive detail the conflicts he and his South Los Angeles friends knew all too well. He gave credit where he felt credit was due: “*Nobody had dared make anything that violent yet.*”⁹⁷

Ice T, however, had only just begun to play with these more personal anecdotes in his music. Steeped in both the trendy uptown hip-hop scene as well as the downtown hustler lifestyle, he had not yet figured out how to tell his story in both frank and nuanced ways. He had to determine how he would manage to entertain and provoke hip-hop crowds with street truths while also protecting those involved in the criminal life and avoiding charges of snitching. “I’d been warned by other hustlers, the boys in my crew,” he said of his desire to record more autobiographical lyrics. Schoolly D provided him with a model for “rap[ping] about the reality of crime without getting too specific.”⁹⁸ The Philadelphia rapper’s stories, in this way, reminded Ice T of the slick Iceberg Slim novellas seared into his boyhood memory—playful, vulgar, provocative, and, even when fictionalized, palpably authentic. The budding local hip-hop star concluded that “P.S.K.” was the sort of street anthem he wanted to record.

* * *

Ice T’s DJ and producer Afrika Islam first came to the West Coast as Afrika Bambaataa’s thirteen-year-old protégé on the 1980 Soul Sonic Force concert tour. With the blessings of Bambaataa, his musical guardian and namesake, Islam ultimately relocated to Los Angeles to work on the sets of several b-boy inspired movies, including *Breakin’ II: Electric Boogaloo* (1984). Filming on location at downtown Los Angeles’s The Radio, Islam met Ice T, the venue’s master of ceremonies and fellow hip-hop film star. Bambaataa, who offered the introduction, gave Ice T an endorsement. “He’s a down brother,” he said of the rapper.⁹⁹ Cloaked in Bambaataa’s cultural nationalist ideologies,

⁹⁶ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 181-182.

⁹⁷ Ice T, *Ice*, 92.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹⁹ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 161.

Afrika Islam admired Ice T, who had touted the vitality of each of the four elements of hip-hop and seemed committed to unifying rap fans from coast to coast under the umbrella of artistic expression and community service. The Los Angeles rapper also appeared to possess trade secrets. “Islam befriended me because I had a lot of money,” Ice T remembered. “I was a hustler so [he] was like ‘how the hell you ain’t got no record but you got a Porsche and you got all this jewelry?’”¹⁰⁰ The two quickly developed a partnership, which benefitted both; Islam discovered a relatively raw talent to channel his record production ambitions, while Ice T found a well-connected New York DJ who was green, eager, and willing to help him gain national exposure. Although Islam provided Ice T with a connection to hip-hop’s Bronx pioneers, the fruits of their working relationship—most notably, Ice T’s debut album *Rhyme Pays* (1987)—would depart from those East Coast roots as Ice T withdrew from his self-fabricated role as cheerleader for the hip-hop “movement.” In the opening track from the duo’s debut album *Rhyme Pays* (1987), Ice T delivered a menacing monologue over a sample from Mike Oldfield’s “Tubular Bells” (best known as the theme to the 1973 film *The Exorcist*), setting the tone for the rest of the record: “*Became a young gangster in the streets of L.A. / Lost connection with his true roots far away / But no matter the job or crime / He never lost his hard-core obsession to rhyme.*”¹⁰¹

It was, however, “6 In The Mornin’,” the B-Side selection from the album’s first single, that set the tone for the future of Los Angeles rap. The track proved that if Ice T was a “down brother” as Bambaataa had labeled him, it was not because he had participated in the trendy, Manhattan-certified and Hollywood-duplicated culture of hip-hop.¹⁰² It was because he understood and claimed to speak for the hustlers, the dealers, the pimps, the gang members, and the criminals who made up his Los Angeles. It was also because these young people would embrace Ice T as one of their own. “That song turned out to be my identity,” he admitted. In recognizing the street approval garnered from his recreation of Schoolly D’s gang tale, and seeing the potential for profit, Ice T focused on representing the ghetto underworld. “Fuck it, if that’s what muthafuckas want I can do that,” he said. “To me my life was so involved in that drama every day, it was easy.”¹⁰³

The partnership between Ice T and Afrika Islam, though seemingly incongruous, would make for one of the most successful music-making teams in the early years of American rap. Together, this team would lay the groundwork for a new, more provocative, and exceedingly lucrative era of hip-hop. Key to this was the way in which Ice T manipulated an East Coast genre of music, a genre initially snubbed by black tastemakers in the West, into something that was undeniably Southern Californian. In this way, he followed the lead of West Coast artists like Egyptian Lover of the Uncle Jamm’s Army and Lonzo of The World Class Wreckin Cru by embracing what was unique about Los Angeles inner-city youth culture. Ice T and his predecessors proved that Los Angeles rap artists had to rouse their own communities before earning fans outside of the insular worlds of trendy nightspots and New York inspired b-boy battles; they had to

¹⁰⁰ “Interview with Ice T,” *Behind The Beat*.

¹⁰¹ Ice T, *Rhyme Pays*, Album (Sire, 1987), Vinyl, LP.

¹⁰² Ice T, “Dog’N The Wax (Ya Don’t Quit-Part II)” / “6 In The Mornin,’” Single (Techno Hop Records, 1986), Vinyl, 12”.

¹⁰³ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 184.

carve out a distinctive regional sound in order to gain a foothold in the commercial recording industry.

Ice T's "6 In the Morning" was both an acknowledgment and a glorification of the gang lifestyle which had become increasingly associated with the particular problems of Los Angeles. The track, however, arose from a transformative Los Angeles hip-hop scene that, even in its earliest stage, was patronized by the city's most marginal characters, including gang members, those who associated with those networks, and those who avoided the gang lifestyle but accepted it as part of their world. It grew from the very same economic and social circumstances that birthed the Crips, the Bloods, the crack epidemic, CRASH, and the OSS. The city's early hip-hop practitioners, including Roger Clayton, Greg Mack, Lonzo Williams, Toddy Tee, and Ice T, depended upon and embraced the ghetto underworld as much as they struggled to reign it in. In discovering its own voice, consequently, the Los Angeles hip-hop scene would have to grapple with the challenges presented both by those who had defined its character and by the nemeses of these groups.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Ya Better Bring a Gun’: Run-DMC and the 1986 Long Beach Riot”

On a hot Sunday evening in August 1986, a riot broke out during a rap concert in Long Beach, California. The trouble began inside the 14,500-seat Long Beach Arena as concertgoers waited to see headlining group Run-DMC. Verbal sparring episodes and scuffles between members of rival Los Angeles street gangs in attendance triggered widespread mayhem, which ultimately left over forty people injured, dozens hospitalized, and at least one person shot.¹ “I’d never seen anything like it,” eighteen-year-old Elaine Austin explained. “The gangs were just running all over the place causing havoc.”² Concertgoer Chris Baker told reporters the next day, “I’ve been to more than 100 concerts and I’ve never been scared for my life before, but I was last night.”³

In what the *Los Angeles Times* referred to as a “rap riot,” young men and a few women—most of them black, according to the press—swung bottles, chairs, wooden sticks, pieces of metal, and, in at least one instance, a fire extinguisher, striking targets as well as bystanders.⁴ Witnesses identified most of the assailants as gang members who either attacked enemies or took advantage of the chaos to strip other concertgoers of their valuables. “Chino,” a self-identified member of the Los Angeles Bloods gang who admitted he became caught up in the fray, said, “I knew there was going to be trouble, there had to be.” An eighteen-year-old identifying himself as “Mafia Dick” explained of rivalries existing between the various Los Angeles area street organizations and their sets, “We don’t get along outside, so we’re not going to get along inside, and when you put all these groups together, you’re lookin’ for trouble.”⁵

All those invested in the success of the event made attempts to quell the violence. Borrowing tactics used by the city’s mobile DJ crews to control rowdy crowds, arena officials had the bright house lights turned on, concert promoters quieted the music and stalled the stage show, and on-stage talent—in this case, the opening act, Whodini—implored audience members to cool off. These efforts, however, backfired, as extra light only aided those seeking out their targets, and artist pleas, along with a reprieve from the thunderous bass thumps, only refocused the crowd’s attention on the pandemonium. “There was a bunch of kids, gang members,” Run-DMC front man Joseph “Reverend Run” Simmons told a reporter, “and wherever they walked the crowd would move out of

¹ Eric Hubler, “Rap Repercussions?; Concert Violence Haunts Run-DMC Tour,” *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1986.

² George Ramos, “30 Injured at Long Beach Concert; L.A. Show Off,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1986.

³ George Ramos, “40 Hurt at Long Beach Concert; Palladium Drops ‘Rap’ Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1986.

⁴ Hubler, “Rap Repercussions?”

⁵ George Ramos, “‘Rap’ Musicians’ Concert Is Canceled at Palladium After Long Beach Fights,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1986; Ed Kiersh, “Beating the Rap: Run-DMC Want to Be Heroes, Not Hell Raisers,” *Rolling Stone*, December 4, 1986.

their way. They just took over.”⁶ Fellow band member Jason “Jam Master Jay” Mizell compared the roving gangs in the arena to “a herd of elephants, stamping a crowd of ants.” He further described what sounded like a scene from director Walter Hill’s 1979 thriller *The Warriors*, an apocalyptic film about vengeful street factions: “300 people walking as one, chanting, screaming the names of their gangs... Fifty people walking in dressed the same, with bandannas on their heads... It was crazy.”⁷

For over four hours, before police responded to calls for help, arena security forces failed to control the bedlam.⁸ When the Long Beach Police Department and members of the Los Angeles Police Department’s gang task force CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) finally intervened, officers donning riot gear surrounded the arena, removing thousands of people from the venue and rounding up dozens of suspects for arrest. As KDAY radio programmer Greg Mack fled the venue, he noted LAPD helicopters hovering above, a swarm of Long Beach Police cars, and concertgoers “leaving all covered with blood.”⁹ The concert, one of the last on Run-DMC’s “Raising Hell” tour, came to an abrupt end well before the trio took the stage.

Long Beach Police Chief Charles Ussery labeled the incident a “major riot” in which the Long Beach Arena sustained thousands of dollars in property damages, dozens of people were arrested, and at least forty were injured, three critically. “We did not expect a riot,” Ussery’s lieutenant Kenneth Sehack remarked. “There was no information to lead us to believe one would occur.” The police department had, in fact, responded just two months prior to emergency calls at another sold-out show at the Long Beach Arena. In June, four concertgoers at an Ozzy Osbourne heavy-metal showcase leapt from a balcony onto the crowd below, leaving one dead and three hospitalized for serious injuries. The department made arrests for drug use and possession that night, but assessed the violence as “not unusual” for a concert event of that size and that it certainly could not have been deemed a riot.¹⁰ The very different classification of the August events meant that, for law enforcement and city officials, rap appeared to attract to its jurisdictions a menacing bunch, a rabble spilling over from the concrete jungles to the north.

News of the youth music melee spread quickly. The national press latched onto the story, in many cases offering sensationalized coverage reminiscent of recent reporting on the Ozzy Osbourne concert death and related court battles over links between heavy-metal music and teenage suicide.¹¹ The story also had all the trappings of another infamous California concert: the 1969 Altamont Speedway Free Festival, a rock concert

⁶ “Violence silences rap group,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1986.

⁷ *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill, (1979; Paramount Pictures, 2001), DVD; Patrick Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1986.

⁸ “42 Are Hurt as Gang Fighting Breaks Up California Concert,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1986.

⁹ Daryl Kelley, “Council Asks How Riot Hit, How It Can Avoid Reply,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1986; Brian Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1994), 156-157.

¹⁰ Bob Schwartz, “1 Dead, 3 Hurt in Violence at Rock Concerts,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1986.

¹¹ Patrick Goldstein, “Is Heavy Metal a Loaded Gun Aimed at Its Fans?” *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1986.

remembered for disorder, violent crime, property damage, and a homicide blamed on the state's most notorious motorcycle gang, the Hells Angels. As in the case of the Altamont Festival, the chief concern of law enforcement was assignment of blame. The Long Beach Police Department pinned responsibility for the August rap riot, first, on the failure of Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates to contain a metastasizing situation in his city. Then Long Beach authorities faulted the ineffectiveness of pre-concert security screenings to identify suspected gang members—many of them originating from Los Angeles and not Long Beach, and therefore unknown to Arena security staff—by their clothing or other obvious markers of gang affiliation. On the national stage, many amplified an increasingly popular conclusion about liability: live rock and rap performances tended to attract people with a penchant for destructive behavior. In direct response to the Long Beach incident, Tipper Gore, co-founder of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), charged that “angry, disillusioned, unloved kids united behind heavy-metal or rap music, and the music says it’s OK to beat people up.”¹²

Much to the dismay of Run-DMC, who were at the center of the media hubbub, the mainstream press was particularly quick to implicate rap music as the root cause of the violence in Long Beach. The group and its management fervently disagreed that they or their music were to blame, even in spite of a record of public disorder in other cities on their “Raising Hell” tour. Comparing tour stops in New York and Detroit, “Raising Hell” tour promoter Jeff Sharp pointed his finger at the unique problems plaguing Los Angeles County. “When you have a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden [in New York City] and only 24 arrests, that’s not a problem. That’s reality. We had some arrests in Detroit too. But everything’s relative,” he explained. “I’ve been in this business 11 years and I’ve never seen anything like [what happened in Long Beach].”¹³ Run-DMC’s publicist Bill Adler agreed with the distinction. “There’s a gang problem in Los Angeles. That’s what’s going on, and they chose our event as a place to go to war against each other.” He argued that “warring gangs” were solely responsible for the riot, noting that trouble occurred because these uncommonly explosive groups “don’t know how to behave in close quarters.”¹⁴

In no other city on their sixty-four-date tour, which included sell-out shows at top concert venues and sports arenas in major cities throughout the United States, had Run-DMC encountered the kind of trouble that ultimately erupted in Long Beach. Police in New York, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Atlanta reported no more than “some bizarre conduct” following the group’s appearances. In June, for instance, Pittsburgh police cited a group of youths on misdemeanor charges of vandalism and disturbing the peace following a Run-DMC show in the area. In July, the New York Police Department took eighteen people into custody for robberies several hours after a “Raising Hell” show at Madison Square Garden.¹⁵ In the single most sensational incident prior to August, a lone gunman shot into a crowd exiting a Run-DMC concert at Atlanta’s Omni Arena. No

¹² Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bill Adler, interview, Planet Ill, January 2010, accessed April 30, 2012, <<http://planetill.com/2010/01/bill-adler-def-communicator/>>.

¹⁵ Daryl Kelley, “Council Asks How Riot Hit, How It Can Avoid Replay,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 1986.

one was seriously injured, and Atlanta city officials considered it to be an unfortunate fluke, albeit a frightening one.¹⁶

In each of these earlier cases, lawlessness had occurred after one of the group's concert events and outside of the performance venue, sometimes many hours later and several miles from the site. In each instance, as Run-DMC emphasized, the press merely speculated about connections between rap concerts and urban crime. Such allegations prompted the group's front man Joseph "Reverend Run" Simmons to charge the press with cultural and racial bias:

All of us rappers get a raw deal by the newspapers ...Just because it's black people, they think we ain't got nothing to do except bust somebody's head open. That's bull. Rap music and rappers are about making people—especially young people—feel good about themselves. Because most older people and almost all white people don't understand it, they got to down it. I just wish they'd chill out and stop hassling us.¹⁷

The Fat Boys, another up-and-coming New York rap trio, agreed. Front man Damon "Kool-Rock-Ski" Wimbley complained to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, "Every time there's a rap concert and there's violence, they try to say it's the music. They try to give rap a bad name. They tried to do the same thing with heavy metal."¹⁸ Los Angeles DJ and promoter Roger Clayton, a driving force in the city's hip-hop party circuit and an early West Coast advocate for Run-DMC, also indicted "them," that is, the popular press. Refuting those like the PMRC, who claimed that rap functioned to perpetrate violence, Clayton submitted it was "a very positive force" that encouraged youths to "stay in school and stay off drugs." He acquiesced to the fact that "it is street music" that "appeal[s] to the masses." As a result, he said, "you're always going to have a few fools" tarnishing the reputation of what might otherwise be considered "good for kids." He argued, "That doesn't make the music bad."¹⁹

Unlike prior "Raising Hell" tour dates, the Long Beach incident did not, in fact, appear to impact the surrounding community; there were no major reports that evening of vandalism, robberies, or violent crimes in neighborhoods or business districts near the venue site. But because the Long Beach melee was confined to the Arena and its parking lots, all property destruction, injuries, and arrests were assessed as a clear outcome of the event. In other words, the performance venue was the site of the tumult and, therefore, audience members could be clearly implicated as the perpetrators. The Long Beach incident, then, provided the press, and, in turn, the general public, with indisputable evidence of a direct link between rap music events and violent crime, igniting new, more acute fears of the burgeoning music genre and, in Los Angeles, of its young, predominantly black fans.

¹⁶ "Security to Be Beefed Up for RUN-DMC Concert Sat," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 21, 1986.

¹⁷ Bill Adler, *Tougher Than Leather: The Rise of Run-DMC* (Consafos Press: Los Angeles, 1987), 172.

¹⁸ Sheena Lester, "Fat Boys: Eating Up the Industry," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 27, 1987.

¹⁹ Goldstein, "Can Rap Survive Gang War?"

For Run-DMC—then, hip-hop’s only platinum-selling group and mainstream spokesmen for the genre—the events in Long Beach meant a new, more unwieldy task to defend rap as “feel good” music.²⁰ This would prove a particularly awkward challenge for the trio, whose latest album and national tour were entitled “Raising Hell.” It would prove a significant test for the group, who had a chart-topping single that reflected on economic woes and warned listeners about “*Hard times spreading just like the flu/Watch out homeboy, don’t let it catch you.*”²¹ Run-DMC, protective of its reputation and its record sales, distanced itself from the Southern California rap scene and vowed to stay far from Los Angeles County until police and local authorities could boast some progress in efforts to purge the region of youth gangs and the thuggery associated with them.²² With every opportunity, the group reminded the press that in Long Beach, “scumbags,” “roaches,” and “gremlins” sabotaged their concert. Their manager Russell Simmons told the *Los Angeles Times*, “These gangs stand for everything that rap music is against.” Countering media characterizations of rap audiences as prone to destruction and violence, Simmons argued, “These weren’t our fans.”²³ Despite these efforts to exonerate themselves, the so-called “rap riot” in Long Beach would haunt Run-DMC through the next year, forcing the group, again and again, to deny the extent to which their music and their concerts promoted disorder, aggression, and worse. In engaging in this debate about the relationship between rap and violence, the New York trio repudiated, even ridiculed, Los Angeles gangs and those associated with them, thereby revealing a significant rift between the leaders of the hip-hop mainstream and those that buoyed the growing West Coast hip-hop scene.

Few outside of Los Angeles, including Run-DMC, recognized that, by the mid-1980s, the region’s budding hip-hop culture depended heavily upon these increasingly dangerous street organizations. Driving this hip-hop scene were the South Los Angeles mobile DJ party networks rather than live stage shows like the ones on which Run-DMC had based its success. The mobile DJ party promotions crews, with their communities of dancers, DJs, security guards, and partygoers, were so potent a force in Southern California that the viability of hip-hop performers in the area, throughout the early 1980s, depended upon their blessing.²⁴ Because this scene was squarely based in the neighborhoods of South Los Angeles—the most socio-economically depressed portion of the city and the heart of young, criminal networks like the Crips and the Bloods—most participants were gang members, gang “affiliates,” or, at the very least, marked as “gang-related” by outsiders because they lived within communities that housed these groups. “If you’re from a ghetto area, everybody has a partner that’s gang-affiliated,” one member of the Pueblo Bloods explained. “That makes you labeled too.”²⁵ These were hustlers, pimps, and drug dealers, as well as those who managed to avoid criminal activity but still accepted it, usually with little choice, as part of their lives. In other words, it was the gang

²⁰ Hubler, “Rap Repercussions?”; Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 172.

²¹ Run-DMC, “Hard Times,” *Run-DMC*, Album (Profile/Artista, 1983), Vinyl, LP.

²² “42 Are Hurt as Gang Fighting Breaks Up California Concert.”

²³ Ramos, “‘Rap’ Musicians’ Concert Is Canceled at Palladium After Long Beach Fights”; Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?”

²⁴ Don Snowden, “In Search of the Black Belt,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1983.

²⁵ Yusef Jah and Sister Shah’Keyah, *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Tell The Story of America’s Youth in the Crossfire* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 259.

lifestyle—its language, its turf, its nefariousness, and its enemies in law enforcement—that had begun to define this emerging youth music culture in California and, more importantly, those forces that guarded its gates.

Rapper Ice T, a Crenshaw resident and self-identified Crip “associate,” was an early fixture of the Los Angeles hip-hop scene. He fancied himself a rap innovator who withdrew from older forms of braggadocio in the music. “It was no longer about taking somebody out on the mic,” he explained of mid-1980s L.A. rap, “it was taking someone out, period.”²⁶ On his 1986 release “6 In The Mornin’,” he imagined the kind of public violence that ultimately played out in Long Beach. He rapped:

*Out with my crew, some punks got loud
Shotgun blasts echoed through the crowd
Six punks hit, two punks died
All casualties applied to their side.*²⁷

Around this time, a young Ice Cube, not yet part of Niggaz Wit Attitude (N.W.A.), but then a member of South Central’s Cru’ in Action (C.I.A.), heralded in rhyme the coming of “*Hardcore L.A., not like the past.*”²⁸ Compton-born DJ Toddy Tee gained local fame for his self-produced *Batteram* rap mixtape. The title track described in detail the Los Angeles Police Department’s six-ton armored vehicle used in the city’s expanded war on drugs in South Los Angeles.²⁹ Rapper King Tee, also from Compton, warned would-be visitors to his city to “*Run!*” Whether in Crenshaw, Watts, or Compton, he rhymed, “*You better bring a gun.*”³⁰ By the mid-1980s, before the debut of gangsta rap pioneers N.W.A., the association between music culture and inner-city violence, which was often directly related to gang culture, had become key to the ways in which homegrown rap production, lyrical themes, and trends were developing in Los Angeles. So, when in 1986, Run-DMC—the most commercially successful rap artists of the time—announced that they would have “nothing to do with this rampaging stuff” and would, thus, cancel all future Los Angeles performances, the group effectively disowned what had become the definitive force of the rising West Coast rap scene.³¹

The 1986 Long Beach Arena riot confounded Run-DMC and its management. It even surprised city authorities across the nation who had been recently rankled by youth crime and what they perceived as music-inspired rebellion. But the events in 1986 also reminded observers that the Los Angeles region had, in its recent past, played host to other violent uprisings more volatile than similar outbreaks in the East. In 1965, for instance, following the five-day Watts Riots, a New Jersey journalist said Los Angeles

²⁶ Ice T, “Forward” in Jah and Shah’Keyah, *Uprising*, 10.

²⁷ Ice T, “Dog ‘N The Wax (Ya Don’t Quit – Part II)”/ “6 In The Mornin’,” Single (Techno Hop Records, 1986), Vinyl, 12”.

²⁸ C.I.A., “Jus 4 The Cash \$,” *The C.I.A. E.P.*, EP (Kru-Cut Records, 1987). Vinyl, 12”.

²⁹ Toddy Tee, “Batteram,” Single (original self-produced cassette-tape format, 1985; Evejim Records, 1985), Vinyl, 12”.

³⁰ King Tee, “The Coolest”/“Ya Better Bring a Gun,” Single (Techno Hop Records, 1987), Vinyl, 12”.

³¹ Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?”

made the 1964 Harlem riots “look like a quiet Sunday school picnic.”³² Remarks like these mirrored the kinds of comparisons the press made in 1986 between the Long Beach incident and concerts in other cities. By the mid-1980s, Los Angeles, still grappling with the legacy of the Watts Riots, saw the rapid proliferation of aggressive street gangs and, relatedly, the swelling underground market in rock cocaine. Just as the Watts Riots in 1965 had exposed the country during the civil rights movement to the urban crisis developing out West, the Long Beach riot played a major role in exposing the American public to the gang wars in Los Angeles that were rooted in poverty and unemployment, the failure of the Black Power Movement, and the enormous demand for crack in the early 1980s.

Los Angeles by the mid-1980s continued to be popularly known for its idyllic California beaches, the glamour of “Hollywood-land,” and the space afforded by suburban sprawl. But, because of these growing problems, it had also earned the label, the “murder capital of the U.S.”³³ In the context of an unnerving rise in street gang-related homicides and the growth of the North American crack trade, the “rap riot” in Long Beach evoked images of Los Angeles as a bastion of volatility, a region that bred in the 1980s a new “thirst for violence” and “raw, animal connection to... aggression.”³⁴ Like the 1965 Watts Riots, the Long Beach riot, filtered through the press, stoked fears of more widespread rebellion. It exposed growing links, proven and perceived, between rap and violence in Los Angeles. The coverage of the violence at the 1986 Run-DMC concert, in fact, suggested ways in which popular music might actually exacerbate the crisis developing in the Los Angeles inner city.

Run-DMC, whether they approved of it or not, represented for many Los Angeles hip-hop fans “heroes of the street.”³⁵ Self-consciously young and urban, the group produced a rugged version of rap stripped of the disco and funk samples characteristic of the first incarnation of New York hip-hop and relying more heavily on minimalist drum patterns and hard-rock guitar solos. In bold, aggressive rhymes, they explored varied themes of black life in Ronald Reagan’s America, from educational empowerment (“*Since Kindergarten I acquired the knowledge / And after the twelfth grade I went straight to college*”) to the looming threat of illegal drugs in their communities (“*We are not thugs—we don’t use drugs—but you assume—on your own / They offer coke—and lots of dope—but we just leave it alone*”).³⁶ They rapped about economic woes (“*Bills*

³² Larry Hall, “Negro Visitor Reports,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1965; Bob Will, “Youthful Gangs Active in All Parts of City for Many Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1953.

³³ “L.A. declares war on gangs,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), November 22, 1984.

³⁴ *And You Don’t Stop: 30 Years of Hip Hop*, directed by Richard Lowe and Dana Heinz Perry (2004; Bring the Noise LLC, 2004), TV Broadcast.

³⁵ Patrick Goldstein, “Pop Eye: Life is a Rap-sody to California Impresario,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1986.

³⁶ Run-DMC, “Sucker M.C.’s (Krush-Groove 1),” *Run-DMC*, Album (Profile Records, 1984), Vinyl, LP; Run-DMC, “It’s Tricky,” *Raising Hell*, Album (Profile Records, 1986), Vinyl, LP. Referring to the verse in “It’s Tricky” referencing drugs, the group’s publicist Bill Adler remarked that it “came in handy... when conservative critics, focusing on the group’s tough

rise higher every day / We receive much lower pay”) as well as conspicuous consumption (“I got a big long Caddy not like a Seville / And written right on the side it reads ‘Dressed to Kill’”) and sexual conquest (“I met this little girlie, her hair was kinda curly / Went to her house and bust her out, I had to leave real early”); their lyrical themes also included community advocacy (“We like to stomp out pimps with diamond rings / We slay all suckers who perpetrate / And lay down the good law from state to state”) and racial uplift (“The world’s full of hate, discrimination, and sin / People judgin’ other people by the color of skin / I’ll attack this matter in my own way / Man, I ain’t no slave, I ain’t bailin’ no hay”).³⁷ Critics labeled their music “harsh” and “political,” and the popular media associated it with Black Power.³⁸ The themes that provided fodder for the censorship battles waged by the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) and even comic relief for popular American sitcoms like *The Jeffersons*, helped redirect Los Angeles hip-hop artists toward a grittier, more introspective course.

Los Angeles rap fans were slow to embrace Run-DMC. The group had, through its manager Russell Simmons, nurtured a relationship with Roger Clayton, founder of the Uncle Jamm’s Army, the city’s premier party promotions company and the heart of the L.A. hip-hop scene in the early 1980s. Occasionally, Clayton allowed the New York trio to perform songs between DJ sets. The group, typically receiving little or no pay for these guest appearances, did not always find Los Angeles crowds to be engaged with or even receptive to their music. The Queens-based crew often had better luck with Greg Mack, music programmer for the region’s sole hip-hop radio show on KDAY-AM, and the station’s Mixmaster DJs, including future N.W.A. members Dr. Dre and DJ Yella.³⁹ Through live performances on KDAY, under the auspices of its most trusted hip-hop authorities, Run-DMC stood a better chance of broadening their Los Angeles fan base. Despite struggling to gain a foothold in the West Coast, Run-DMC eventually managed to become a staple of a young, self-consciously insular music scene.

The appeal of Run-DMC in Los Angeles spread as regional mobile, radio, and nightclub DJs, in response to shifting demand, began to favor hard-edged, narrative driven rap over the lyrically sparse electro-rap dance productions popular earlier in the decade. The newer sound married bare bones, funk-inspired production with Los Angeles

image but neglecting to listen to music’s lyrics, insisted that Run-DMC’s music incited kids to violence.” Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 155-156.

³⁷ Run-DMC, “It’s Like That,” *Run-DMC*; Run-DMC, “Sucker M.C.’s (Krush-Groove 1)”;
Run-DMC, “It’s Tricky”; Run-DMC, “My Adidas,” *Raising Hell*; Run-DMC, “Proud To Be Black,”
Raising Hell.

³⁸ As Bill Adler remembered, this association was best epitomized by a 1984 episode of *The Jeffersons*. In “My Guy, George,” George Jefferson managed a struggling black female gospel quartet. He booked The Satin Sisters (played by the singing group Sister Sledge), mistakenly, at a predominantly white country and western bar in New Jersey. The group performed a cover of Run-DMC’s “It’s Like That,” finishing with their fists in the air. The crowd expressed outrage and George, in an attempt to remedy the situation, begged the bar’s manager for more stage time. The group, allowed to perform once more, sings “We Are Family.” Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 82-83; “My Guy, George,” *The Jeffersons*, TV Series, directed by Oz Scott (originally aired March 4, 1984; Universal City: Universal Studios, 1984), Online Video, <http://www.ovguide.com/tv_season/the-jeffersons-season-10-77792>; Connie Johnson, “Rap Goes Mainstream at Universal Amphitheatre,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1986.

³⁹ Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 20.

street tales. Two scene trendsetters best epitomized this shift. First, KDAY-AM DJ (and World Class Wreckin Cru member) Dr. Dre prided himself on selecting for his broadcasts mold-breaking records, including the Fat Boys, the Beastie Boys, LL Cool J, Salt-N-Pepa, Lisa Lisa & Cult Jam, Daddy Freddy, and local artists Rodney O & Joe Cooley.⁴⁰ Boasting the innovative choices of his most popular mix DJ, KDAY-AM program director Greg Mack referred to the station as “the Hitbreakers: we break the hits.”⁴¹ Second, Compton’s Toddy Tee tapped into tastes in transition when he recorded his rap mixtape *Batteram*, released in 1985. The title track from *Batteram*, which was produced by funk musician Leon Haywood, described the LAPD’s six-ton armored vehicle used in its expanded war on drugs in South Los Angeles. The popularity in Los Angeles of the homemade rap tape, particularly its title track, was so stunning, in fact, that Epic Records rereleased “Batteram” as a 12” single later that year.⁴²

As with Toddy Tee in the microenvironment of Los Angeles, the emerging popularity of Run-DMC in the national mainstream, dramatically bolstered by the premier in 1984 of rap music videos on MTV, represented a significant break from older lyrical themes and production molds in hip-hop.⁴³ It pointed to a regenerative stage in the music, one that promised stylistic and substantive changes that would better reflect street sensibilities. For many linked to the first wave of New York hip-hop, including artists like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5, the Funky 4+1, and the Cold Crush Brothers, the rise of Run-DMC marked the “end of the era.”⁴⁴ Veteran DJ and MC Curtis “Grandmaster Caz” Fisher noted that the new crew from Queens distinguished themselves in two key ways. Fisher first explained that in their lyrics Run-DMC spoke of drugs, “hustling,” and the luxuries—Cadillacs, champagne, and caviar—of street labor. Second, he said, they rejected the “leather outfits with fur shit hanging off,” styles popular with hip-hop ensembles in the late 1970s and early 1980s; instead, the Run-DMC donned basic street wear: jeans, t-shirts, and baseball caps.⁴⁵ As Los Angeles DJ Lonzo recalled, Run-DMC made quite an impression on the members of his own group, the World Class Wreckin’ Cru, who donned “hard but flashy” uniforms not unlike those worn by The Temptations. “They got on tennis shoes, no laces, some black Levi’s, with their hats turned around backwards,” Lonzo remembered. He noted that with Run-DMC’s rise in the mid-1980s, fashion trends for rap artists in Los Angeles quickly shifted away from lavish fits to street styles modeled by the Queens trio.⁴⁶

According to photographer Bill Adler, Run-DMC’s manager Russell Simmons sought to represent hip-hop “pure and uncut.” He refused to “water it down” or “whiten it

⁴⁰ Ibid., 155.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Toddy Tee, “Batteram”; Patricia Klein, “A Ram at Rest: These Are Quiet Times for LAPD’s ‘Battering’ Vehicle,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1986; Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary*, 146.

⁴³ MTV, notorious through the early 1980s for excluding black artists from its playlists, premiered Run-DMC’s video for “Rock Box” in 1984, the first rap track added to the rotation on the channel. John J. O’Connor, “MTV: A Success Story With a Curious Shortcoming,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1983; “Music: New Rock on a Red-Hot Roll,” *Time*, July 18, 1983; Anthony DeCurtis, “80’s,” *Rolling Stone*, November 15, 1990; Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 93.

⁴⁴ Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn eds., *Yes, Yes, Y’all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop’s First Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 328.

⁴⁵ Ibid; Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary*, 140.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 139-140.

up,” and believed wholeheartedly that because the members of Run-DMC were “authentic and true to themselves” they would enjoy mainstream success.⁴⁷ By 1986, Simmons’s predictions had been proven true. That summer, his group had already become veterans of the national tour circuit. From 1984 through the summer of 1986, Run-DMC filled to capacity concert arenas and sports centers throughout the country, including legendary venues like the Warfield Theater in San Francisco and the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles, along with the vast, modernized spaces of Oakland’s 15,000-seat Coliseum, the 20,000-seat Spectrum in Philadelphia, and the comparably sized Madison Square Garden arena in New York City. In addition, Run-DMC regularly supplemented an already grueling performance schedule by playing for enthusiastic, predominantly white “crossover” crowds in rock nightclubs including the Front Row Theater in Highland Heights, Ohio, the Inferno in Buffalo, New York, the Channel in Boston, and the Stardust Ballroom (alternatively known as the Mix Club) in Hollywood.⁴⁸ The August show at Long Beach Arena, then, represented just one sold-out date from the third year of Run-DMC’s highly lucrative annual tour, a venture that grossed over \$10 million in its first two years alone.⁴⁹

Run-DMC’s annual “Fresh Fest Tour,” of which the 1986 “Raising Hell Tour” was a part, was the first of its kind in rap music. No other hip-hop recording artist had yet garnered the volume of record sales or procured enough support on the national airwaves to justify, for label representation and management, a multi-city, multi-venue concert tour. Even hip-hop’s earliest star Afrika Bambaataa, an artist represented by black music’s leading independent record label, failed to register on American music charts until 1985, the year he appeared on a compilation album that also featured Run-DMC.⁵⁰ While Bambaataa and his group Soul Sonic Force boasted an international fan base through the 1980s, his shows in the United States were often described as lackluster. During the height of his hip-hop music career in the early 1980s, Bambaataa performed at small nightclubs like Hollywood’s Club Lingerie to unenthusiastic crowds made up primarily of “L.A. trendies” and “older, white rock critics.”⁵¹

Run-DMC, unlike its most prominent hip-hop predecessors, managed to achieve national fame. A younger generation of music fans, seeking to be thoroughly seduced by lyrical themes and captivated by delivery, embraced the group’s distinct brand of rap. Texas-based rapper Tracy “The D.O.C.” Curry admitted that he found Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” hip-hop’s first pop single and his first exposure to rap, unimpressive. In comparison, Run-DMC was a revelation to him. He remembered that in the group’s frontman Reverend Run, he saw himself. “Run had everything I had,” Curry said, “he had the same vocal styling, the same command in his voice.” Curry also noted the honesty in

⁴⁷ Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes, Yes, Y’all*, 329.

⁴⁸ Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 153.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 137, 153.

⁵⁰ Artists United Against Apartheid, *Sun City*, Album (EMI Manhattan Records, 1985), Vinyl, LP. The anti-apartheid compilation record included, along with Bambaataa and Run-DMC, Peter Gabriel, Ringo Starr, Miles Davis, Keith Richard, Gil Scott-Heron, and Melle Mel, among others.

⁵¹ Richard Cromelin, “Street Art at Lingerie; L.A. Takes the Rap From N.Y. Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1983; Kristine McKenna, “Taking the Rap in L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1983.

Reverend Run's delivery, something he sought to emulate in his own music. "Whatever the fuck he was saying," Curry explained, "he meant that shit."⁵²

For Brooklyn rap mogul Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, Run-DMC broadened what he believed to be the future of hip-hop. "From the first listen, Run-DMC felt harder than the Sugar Hill Gang or even Kool Moe Dee and other serious battle rappers of the time," he remembered. "Their voices were big, like their beats, but naturally slick, like hustlers'." The group's rock-inspired track "Sucker M.C.'s" was, for Carter, particularly provocative in what it seemed to forecast in the music. Run-DMC proved to the young Carter that hip-hop could have a "point of view" compatible with his own, "raw and aggressive, but also witty and slick." The Queens' MCs regularly paired hyperbole with authenticity, inspiring new lyrical conceptions of "the streets" and a marked attention to what Carter called "the details... about our aspirations and our crumb-snatching struggles, our specific, small realities (*chicken and collard greens*) and our living-color dreamscapes (*big long Caddy*)."⁵³ With Run-DMC's rise, aspiring rappers and their fans could be confident that the new music, as one British reviewer suggested, would "tell true tales about all kinds of crises, economic, social and personal."⁵⁴ Or, as Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter noted, it appeared that the new music "was going to be real."⁵⁵

In the aftermath of the Long Beach Arena debacle, top Los Angeles event promoter Brian Murphy offered a prediction: "I think it's going to be a while before we see another big rap show in this town."⁵⁶ He was right. Nearly a year would pass before Los Angeles County again hosted a major hip-hop act. Large-scale rap events scheduled in cities including New York City, New York, Raleigh, Atlanta, and Columbia, South Carolina were allowed to proceed, even with security concerns exacerbated by the August riot.⁵⁷ But that was not the case out West. The repercussions for touring rap groups in Southern California came swiftly. The day following the Long Beach event, in fact, officials at the Hollywood Palladium cancelled a sold-out concert featuring Run-DMC and a group of rising stars, The Beastie Boys, scheduled for that night.⁵⁸ A spokesperson for Long Beach Arena management announced in the same week that the venue would bar rap groups from performing on its premises because fans of the music exhibited "a propensity to create situations" that resulted in injuries and property damage.⁵⁹ In September, event organizers for the annual city-sponsored Los Angeles Street Scene scrambled to make a decision regarding Run-DMC, booked as one of the

⁵² The D.O.C., interview by Charlie Braxton, *Murder Dog*, murderdog.com, 2003, accessed February 10, 2012, <<http://murderdog.com/archives/2003/doc.html>>.

⁵³ Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 10.

⁵⁴ Richard Grabel, "Burn This Disco Out," *New Musical Express* (United Kingdom), May 1983, quoted in Adler, *Tougher Than Leather*, 94.

⁵⁵ Jay Z, *Decoded*, 9-10.

⁵⁶ Goldstein, "Can Rap Survive Gang War?"

⁵⁷ "Security to Be Beefed Up for RUN-DMC Concert Sat," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 21, 1986; "Run-DMC Member Shot; Suspect Sought," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 26, 1987.

⁵⁸ Ramos, "30 Injured at Long Beach Concert; L.A. Show Off."

⁵⁹ Ramos, "'Rap' Musicians' Concert Canceled."

festival's headliners. Initially, the Festival Committee, in conjunction with the Office of Public Safety, set strict parameters for the trio's stage show, requiring that the group use its performance as a vehicle to condemn gangs and drugs.⁶⁰ Run-DMC capitulated and even agreed to speak on the steps of City Hall about the ills of street violence and crack. The Committee ultimately, however, removed them from the event program.⁶¹

In an attempt to stem the tide of anxiety surrounding rap music, and Run-DMC's particular role in it, the group's handlers launched a public relations campaign. The campaign included a deluge of interviews with the press and the rebranding of the concert tour to convey the idea that they were engaging in "safe activity" rather than "raising hell."⁶² The image-boosting effort delivered the group back to Los Angeles, a city that had barred them from performing and that represented the home base for the group's new nemeses: street gangs. In Los Angeles, they became directly involved with an anti-gang crusade spurred by recent spikes in drug-trafficking, gang-related homicides, including drive-by shootings, and gang-related violence in public spaces. According to the Los Angeles Police Department gang enforcement division, gang violence by that time had increased nearly 23% from just one year prior, while homicides related to gang activity had increased 32% during that time.⁶³

Calling for "A Day of Peace," Run-DMC appeared on KDAY-AM radio along with officials from the city's Community Youth Gang Services Project (CYGS), boxer Paul Gonzalez, and singer Barry White, a former member of the Slausons, an early South Central street gang. The radio station, the first in the country to integrate an all-rap format into its programming, opened its phone lines to allow each of the participants to field calls from young people involved with street crime, those under pressure to join gangs or use drugs, parents of troubled youths, and other concerned members of the community. For two hours, the panel heard "frustration, fear, anger, helplessness" and the "grim portrait of Los Angeles-area neighborhoods gripped by gang violence, drug sales, staggering youth-unemployment and disintegrating families." CYGS offices reported a spike in calls for help and information from hundreds of young people from these neighborhoods, and it acknowledged that the broadcast, while not the solution to these growing problems, could be considered a "starting point."⁶⁴

Just two months prior, Run-DMC front man Reverend Run had been at the forefront of the media frenzy that fomented anxieties about gangs running amuck in Southern California and that berated local authorities for failing to keep a lid on the problem. He had reasoned that Los Angeles gang youth were irredeemable because, in an ironic choice of words, they refused to respect Run-DMC's "turf." Run boasted in the press that he could, singlehandedly, calm gangs in other cities by announcing on stage, "You don't come to fight here... I want respect." In the West, however, he concluded that

⁶⁰ Bob Baker, "Rap Group Hot Item in Street Scene Safety Talks," *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1986.

⁶¹ Robert Hilburn, "Run-DMC Says Its Ban Is a Bum Rap," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1986.

⁶² Victor Valle, "Some Anxiety Clouds Rap Concert Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1987.

⁶³ Edward J. Boyer, "Celebrities Use Airwaves to Take on Street Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1986.

⁶⁴ Boyer, "Celebrities Use Airwaves to Take on Street Violence."

gangs would refuse to “cross their hands over their chest and say, ‘OK, this is Run’s show. I won’t mess with anyone.’” Run-DMC’s Jam Master Jay was more succinct in his admonitions directed at the criminal outfits they had encountered in Los Angeles. He advised Crips and Bloods to “get their life together and grow up.”⁶⁵

Characterizations of Los Angeles gangs as more violent, more unpredictable, and more omnipresent than their counterparts in other deindustrialized American cities, appeared warranted. The California State Committee on Juvenile Crime estimated that in 1986, some five hundred individual street gangs with at least 40,000 members operated within the city.⁶⁶ According to the *Washington Post*, the estimated number of “hard-core gang members” in Los Angeles dramatically surpassed estimates in other major cities long considered to be breeding grounds for illicit street organizations.⁶⁷ The National School Safety Center reported in 1987 that gang membership in Los Angeles topped 70,000. The Center found that these figures dwarfed those from other cities known for marked gang activity; it counted barely 5,000 active members in New York and 10,000 in Chicago.⁶⁸

“With no sense of pride, we’re No. 1,” the Los Angeles District Attorney Ira Reiner told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1987. “We are the gang capital of the United States in terms of numbers, in terms of violence, in terms of its overall impact on the entire criminal justice system.”⁶⁹ District Attorney Reiner testified to the California State Committee on Juvenile Crime that, with such proliferation, “there are no safe enclaves any longer.”⁷⁰ In support of tougher legislation to curb juvenile gang violence, he emphasized:

[Gangs] are highly mobile and they are reaching out into every community. Every part of Los Angeles from Beverly Hills to Westwood to the fine communities out into the deep suburbs, there is strong, heavy—emphasis on the word “heavy”—gang activity... So, for those who feel that yes, the problems in the ghettos are serious and must be addressed, they ought also to understand that this is not a ghetto problem any longer. But when they step outside their door and they walk on the streets of their neighborhood 30 miles removed from the ghetto... Uzi machine guns have to be stuffed in their ear and their head blown off as well as if they were in the ghetto.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Goldstein, “Can Rap Survive Gang War?”

⁶⁶ California State Judiciary, *Interim Hearing on Juvenile Gang Violence, October 15, 1986* (Sacramento, CA: Joint Publications, 1987), 6.

⁶⁷ Matt Lait, “The Battle to Control 50,000 Gang Members on the Streets of Los Angeles,” *The Washington Post*, March 12, 1988, cited in United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crips and Bloods: Drug Gangs* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), in FBI Records: The Vault, <<http://vault.fbi.gov/gangs-extremist-groups>>, accessed November 1, 2011.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Victor Valle, “Some Anxiety Clouds Rap Concert Tonight,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1987.

⁷⁰ California State Judiciary, *Interim Hearing on Juvenile Gang Violence*, 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

While some city officials questioned the hyperbolic nature of the district attorney's warning, end-of-the-year reports did reveal that drug trafficking was on the rise, violent crimes were up significantly, and that those increases were not confined to South Los Angeles. Since 1985, homicides had risen nearly 13% in South Central Los Angeles and 22% citywide. As the Los Angeles Police Department reminded the public, the surge was not new. The city's anti-gang unit, the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH), and the county's Interagency Gang Task Force each reinforced these claims, reporting steep increases, beginning in 1984, in "gang-related homicides and incidents of violent criminal acts," including burglaries, aggravated assaults, and rape. Both placed blame squarely upon the introduction of crack cocaine in 1983 and the greater availability beginning in 1984 of high-tech weaponry, including 9-millimeter guns, M16 and AK-47 assault rifles, AR-15 semiautomatic weapons, Mac-10 and Uzi machine guns, and Uzi pistols.⁷²

Representatives of both the Bloods and the Crips acknowledged that "things got worse" when crack cocaine supplanted PCP as the drug of choice in the streets and, as a result of the profits generated by the new crack market, machine guns replaced both .22 long rifles and sawed-off (or short-barreled) shotguns.⁷³ One former Baby Crip remarked that crack was "the worst drug that ever hit the face of the earth," noting that the effect on his South Los Angeles was immediate and devastating. "It's just so addicting," he said, "like one hit is one too many, and a million hits is not enough."⁷⁴ One former member of the Brims, a subset of the Bloods, remembered that in the late 1970s, when challenged by an enemy set, "everybody had the same philosophy" about weapons. With just a few bullets worth of ammunition, a member would "shoot up in the air, and everybody would disperse." He noted that because of increased demand, greater supply, and surprising affordability after 1985, "you have youngsters out there spraying people with heavy artillery."⁷⁵

In the midst of these changes, public fear grew around media pronouncements that Los Angeles represented a modern Al Capone-era Chicago. Sensationalized publicity of "gangland style" killings, news of witnesses to these crimes assassinated for breaking the "code of silence," and reports of whole police forces intimidated, outnumbered, and out-gunned made for titillating copy. The news also exacerbated anxieties among Angelenos living within the war zones, many of who were interviewed by sociologists, public officials, representatives from community outreach programs like South Central's Community Youth Gang Services (CYGS), and by members of the press. One Watts resident, a World War II veteran, confessed to a reporter that he regularly slept with a

⁷² Mark Henry, "Getting the Gangs: Police Unit in the Northeast Valley Builds Rapport on Streets to Ease the Crime Rate," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1986; Los Angeles City Interagency Gang Task Force and Citywide Criminal Justice Coordination Committee, *Los Angeles County Interagency Gang Task Force Report on the State of Los Angeles Street Gangs* (Los Angeles: Citywide Criminal Justice Coordination, 1991); Bureau of Criminal Statistics, *Homicide in California, 1989* (Sacramento: Office of the Attorney General, 1990).

⁷³ Jah and Shah'Keyah, *Uprising*, 183.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

shotgun at the foot of his bed. He explained it was “safer on the beaches of Normandy than it is some days here.”⁷⁶ It was that bad.

For those who had paid close attention to these unsettling trends, the Long Beach Arena riot was inevitable, only exposing what had gone largely unnoticed outside South Los Angeles. CYGS regional director Leon Watkins and KDAY-AM music director Greg Mack, however, seized on the national publicity following the riot to refocus attention on community efforts to “Take on Street Violence.” Their October 1986 KDAY-AM broadcast, featuring major music and sports role models, including Run-DMC, was designed as a beacon, albeit one with low-wattage.⁷⁷ Hopes were high that the Echo Park station, with its young and loyal listening audience centered in South Los Angeles, would be “a starting point in stopping these drive-by shootings... this violence.”⁷⁸ Key to this promise was that, as Program Director Jack Patterson noted, the radio station was popularly known, and often vilified, for catering to gang members. The popular—and truth-based stereotype—of his station, Patterson explained, was that “only gang members listened... because we played all this gang music.”⁷⁹

In the midst of an image-boosting campaign and seizing on the KDAY broadcast as a bright spot and potential turning point in the post-riot publicity, Run, Jay, and DMC touted themselves as true champions of the Los Angeles ghettos, winners in a local endeavor to stimulate urban reform. “I feel good if I know I’ve helped some kids,” Reverend Run said following the KDAY “A Day of Peace” broadcast. “I think I helped a lot today because kids love us that much.”⁸⁰ News just weeks later of an alleged gang treaty seemed to validate Run’s claims. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, between 80 and 100 gangs were engaged in peace negotiations that promised to result, at the very least, in a temporary truce through the holiday season. Authors of the proposed “Our Peace Treaty,” who told the press that a full non-aggression pact was the ultimate goal, credited the KDAY “A Day of Peace” broadcast for inspiring diplomacy.⁸¹

Run-DMC proudly accepted praise for a community service job well done. It was an odd turn for a group of easterners that had worked tirelessly to disassociate themselves from the crisis out West. Although the trio used their New York City roots to remind the press that they were outsiders who “don’t have anything to do with what’s going on out [in Los Angeles],” they also claimed their Queens upbringing to profess rare insight into inner city problems.⁸² In this way they toyed with the notion of urban authenticity, already a prized trait in the world of hip-hop and one increasingly vital to mainstream

⁷⁶ Steven Churn, “‘Up With Hope! Down With Dope!’ Pushers’ Rule of Streets Challenged in South L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1986.

⁷⁷ Priority Records executive and Los Angeles resident Jerry Heller remembered that KDAY-AM, located in Echo Park, was notoriously low-wattage considering its popularity. “The signal would begin to drift a mere ten miles from the transmitter.” He quipped that it was known as the “single-station radio network with a signal that wavered in a high wind.” Jerry Heller and Gil Reavill, *Ruthless: A Memoir* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2006), 57-58.

⁷⁸ Boyer, “Celebrities Use Airwaves to Take on Street Violence.”

⁷⁹ Sean Ross, “KDAY L.A.’s Glory Days; Was Key in Urban Radio History,” *Billboard Magazine*, April 13, 1991.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Scott Harris, “‘We Agree to Stop Killing Each Other’ Gang Peace Treaties Being Negotiated,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1986.

⁸² “Rappers Deny Link to Killing,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 30, 1988.

success. Ignoring contradictions in their own sound bites and relying heavily on popular perceptions of their street credentials, the band believed they had emerged from a devastating public relations disaster as honored heroes in Los Angeles's war on gangs.

The proposed "Our Peace Treaty" in 1986 never materialized. Rather than a cease-fire, the South Los Angeles gangland war expanded and intensified. News reports touting the peace proposal triggered infighting within those organizations most responsible for drafting the treaty. Some who had been misrepresented by the press as Crip "leaders" were beaten, terrorized, and ostracized. Cliques seeking the limelight for bragging rights and to entice new recruits retaliated against their rival crews who managed to attract media attention during the peace treaty news cycles.⁸³ A sergeant of Inglewood's homicide division noted during this period, "a tremendous increase in violent gang assaults." He described, "A gang attack and a retaliation and a retaliation to the retaliation and it just goes back and forth."⁸⁴

More conspicuous, however, than the dethroning of individual gang members and related "acts of vengeance" was the sudden surge in one particularly alarming type of violent crime in 1987: the drive-by. Law enforcement agencies, until 1988, kept no separate count of these types of shooting incidents involving motor vehicles, but in 1987, the police and the press signaled the arrival of the "Drive-By Wars."⁸⁵ A string of drive-by slayings and freeway shootings left dozens of bystanders dead, including a fifteen-year old girl shot in front of her Compton home, a nine-year old boy shot while playing in a sandbox in a South Central playground, and a woman gunned down while walking down the aisle of Union Baptist Church in Watts.⁸⁶ City officials admitted that most homicides and even many so-called "drive-bys," including a rash of seemingly random freeway shootings in the summer months, were not necessarily gang or drug related. But the connection was implicit.⁸⁷

The year of the drive-by, tacitly blamed on aggravated gang rivalries and cocaine trafficking in South Los Angeles, concluded with yet another well-publicized gang battle at a rap event, this one in Hollywood. The hip-hop concert, one of the first held in the city since the 1986 Long Beach Arena riot, featured New York group UTFO. (UTFO was popular in Los Angeles largely because local rapper Toddy Tee repurposed its songs "Roxanne, Roxanne" and "Bite It" for his street stories, "Rockman, Rockman" and "L.A.

⁸³ Charisse Jones, "A Dirge of Discouragement; Mother of Youth Who Wrote Gang Peace Treaty Can't Afford Funeral," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1989; Charisse Jones, "'Do-Man's' Legacy Rites Finally Held for Ex-Gang Member Who Wrote Peace Treaty," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1989.

⁸⁴ Paul Feldman, "'Murder by Strangers': From Gang Gunfire to Freeway Shootings, L.A. County's 1987 Homicides Often Linked by Their Random Nature," *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 1987.

⁸⁵ Ralph Bailey, Jr., "Drive-By Wars Claim 8 Lives in 48 Hours," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 3, 1987.

⁸⁶ Feldman, "'Murder by Strangers'"; Ralph Bailey, Jr., "Drive-By Wars Claim 8 Lives in 48 Hours."

⁸⁷ "Southern California's Freeway Shootings," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1987.

Is a Jungle”). Despite expensive new safety measures, including airport metal detectors and heavily staffed security perimeters, along with attempts to deny entry to identifiable Bloods and Crips, representatives from at least eight Los Angeles gang sets made it inside, some with concealed weapons. Inside the Hollywood Palladium that night, fights raged and shots were fired. In covering the incident, the press tapped into the city’s “mood of paranoia” about “heavily armed” black youths “[who] spray bullets at anyone and everyone.” In that charged environment, it asked a seemingly rhetorical question: “Can rap music—with its aggressive, jackhammer rhythms and often hard-edged street imagery—be performed safely in Los Angeles?”⁸⁸

By the end of 1987, Los Angeles was no longer an anomaly; more cities identified challenges to stem the tide of inner-city gang activity in the context of live entertainment events. In the year since Run-DMC and the Long Beach riot had ignited popular anxiety about the connections between rap and gang activity, gang-related violence had halted hip-hop concerts inside venues in Manhattan, Queens, Philadelphia, and even New Haven, Connecticut.⁸⁹ But, largely because of the fallout from the Long Beach riot, the publicity surrounding Run-DMC’s anti-gang efforts in California, and the rash of drive-by “murder by strangers” that followed, the Los Angeles inner city in the late 1980s continued to be known for being a uniquely dangerous place. The city that boasted the most powerful police force in the country—an agency likened to the United States Marines—remained “the murder capital.”⁹⁰ Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates’ decade-long campaign to scrub the city of its young, mostly African-American, outlaw crews looked increasingly futile, and, as a result, the South Los Angeles ghettos became “worse than Beirut” in the popular imagination.⁹¹

By this time, Run-DMC had all but abandoned its peace-seeking mission in Los Angeles. Still barred from the region’s major performance venues, including the Long Beach Arena and the 18,000-seat Forum in Inglewood, and with their publicists continuously dogged in the West by media reminders of the August riot, the group refocused on its “Together Forever” tour.⁹² With a \$600,000 security budget, the new forty-city concert tour featuring the Beastie Boys promised to “restore rap’s image as a safe activity” following the “Raising Hell” debacle.⁹³ Members of both bands touted the international tour as cutting-edge for its pairing of a white rap group with a black group—“If we can get along, anybody can”—and urged fans to forget, as Beastie Boys rapper

⁸⁸ Valle, “Some Anxiety Clouds Rap Concert Tonight.”

⁸⁹ “Rap Concert Cancelled,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1987; “Man Killed at Rap Concert,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1987; Nick Ravo, “1 Killed, 5 Injured and 16 Arrested at Rap Concert,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1987.

⁹⁰ David Freed, “Gates Blames Drugs, Gangs for 4% Rise in L.A. Crime,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 1986.

⁹¹ Michael White, “Film of Los Angeles Gang Warfare Stirs Up a Feud,” *The Guardian* (London), April 12, 1988.

⁹² Valle, “Some Anxiety Clouds Rap Concert Tonight”; Robert Hilburn, “Groups’ Violence-Plagued Image Dogs Concerts in Northwest: Run-DMC and Beasties Subdued?” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1987.

⁹³ Stephen Holden, “The Pop Life; Two Rap Groups Plan Extensive Summer Tour,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1987; Valle, “Some Anxiety Clouds Rap Concert Tonight.”

M.C.A. emphasized, the “one isolated event” that represented “a problem in L.A.”⁹⁴ Much to their dismay, however, the press preferred to remember. In Seattle, Philadelphia, New York, and London, reporters interrogated the artists about associations between their music and gang-related violence. “We’re not these psychopaths that they talk about,” Beastie Boys member Ad Rock proclaimed on *CBS News Nightwatch*, visibly frustrated. “We’re good kids.”⁹⁵

That the press wanted to keep the spotlight fixed on Los Angeles and its uniquely nefarious subcultures served West Coast rap artists well. Prior to the 1986 “rap riot,” hip-hop music in the media was an exclusively East Coast phenomenon, with New York roots and New York sensibilities. Run-DMC’s sudden and extraordinary commercial success in the mid 1980s seemed only to corroborate the belief that hip-hop was born and, if it was in fact a passing fad, just might die in the Big Apple. The Long Beach stop on Run-DMC’s 1986 “Raising Hell” tour, however, triggered a significant sea change in the reception of the music, the attention paid to its practitioners and fans, and, most importantly, in opportunities available to the region’s fledgling hip-hop artists—young men like Ice T, King Tee, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre who had struggled to move out from Run-DMC’s mighty shadow. The more the Queens crew, along with its companion troupes, took pains to disassociate itself from Los Angeles, the greater the public’s fascination with those “problems” out West and the power of rap to provoke them.

From the mid-1980s through 1987, Los Angeles rap artists recorded music that foretold, in lyrical content and style, the coming of a distinctive rap genre that would reflect on and, in some cases, romanticize the city’s urban crisis. Without major label representation, however, Compton’s Cru’ in Action (C.I.A.) failed to resonate beyond the “Hardcore L.A.” it portrayed. Though C.I.A. declared “*Hip-Hop rhymes for the cash money*,” member Ice Cube admitted that he, “*Don’t get paid, but that’s alright / I got the riches of a king when I hold the mic*.” King Tee earned independent label representation and radio support for his single “The Coolest”/“Ya Better Bring A Gun,” but his vainglorious street stories reached few beyond the record’s local independent label distribution or KDAY-AM’s transmitter.

Only one prominent Los Angeles rap artist, Ice T, had secured major label support before 1988. Sire, a sublabel of Warner Brothers Records, helped Ice T’s debut album *Rhyme Pays* rank on the Billboard 200 chart for twenty-seven weeks straight. The record, however, failed to post sales high enough to earn Ice T the opportunity to break away from nightclub and private party circuits and to headline his own concert tour. In other words, even for the most successful of L.A.’s rap pioneers from the early to the mid-1980s, real commercial success remained elusive. Even local fans, these artists knew, were far less familiar with them than they were with New York group Run-DMC, the indisputable stars of the genre. Young Los Angeles talents, hungry for recognition, watched as hip-hop rapidly gained a foothold in the popular mainstream, earning lucrative corporate sponsorships with brands like Adidas and Sprite, Hollywood film

⁹⁴ “Beastie Boys and Run-DMC Discuss the ‘Together Forever Tour,’” *CBS News Nightwatch*, TV News Program (originally aired August 1987; CBS News Production, 1987), accessed May 17, 2012, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9gvxp_run-dmc-the-beastie-boys-interview_shortfilms>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

deals, and television exposure, particularly with MTV's decision to add rap music videos into its rotation.

The 1986 Long Beach "rap riot" and the media frenzy that followed, however, presented a window of opportunity for those who recognized the value of controversy and understood how to harness it. By the mid 1980s, hip-hop in Los Angeles, represented by DJs, rappers, event promoters, and consumers, was already significantly intertwined with the region's growing street gang problem. The city's young music scene enticed a broad spectrum of fans as it did in other cosmopolitan American cities. From its inception, however, many of Los Angeles's most beloved rap artists, hip-hop's most loyal fans, and the party circuit's most dependable financiers were gang "associates" or "affiliates." Some of those who did not claim to be tied to that criminal world still acknowledged some dependence upon it. As Egyptian Lover, the star of the city's most prominent mobile DJ party promotions outfit, admitted, "Gang warfare doesn't affect me but the crime does. Drug dealers sell drugs, buy cars with big speakers, and then buy my records."⁹⁶ These artists and entrepreneurs, then, functioned under the premise that Run-DMC's Reverend Run was wrong when he said of the warring L.A. gangs represented in Long Beach that night, "These weren't our fans."⁹⁷ Rap's core audience, at least in California, did in fact encompass gang members, gun-toting "bangers," drug dealers, hustlers, as well as law-abiding youths who lived among them in blighted communities of South Los Angeles. These groups socialized together, and in the wake of the Long Beach Riot, this proved key. The city's poor and working-class minority youths had, throughout the 1980s, been willing to sustain the uncelebrated regional hip-hop scene because its representatives did not require them to sacrifice their vices, compromise their allegiances, or disengage from reality. Thus, rather than posture as forces in a movement to stem the tide of youth crime, as Run-DMC had aimed to do, the most prominent Los Angeles rap artists remained tight-lipped about the "rap riot." Most resisted responding to press indictments of hip-hop music and no one proselytized; they knew better.

In the words of KDAY-AM's Program Director Greg Mack, the Long Beach "rap riot" was, in many ways, "the straw that broke the camel's back."⁹⁸ West Coast rappers could have taken the reigns from Run-DMC, assuming leadership in the effort to disassociate rap from the most charged themes of America's worsening urban crisis. Instead, the incident that threatened to ruin the careers of Reverend Run, Jam Master Jay, and DMC set the stage for the launch of those who would become popularly known as "gangsta rappers."

In June 1988, KDAY-AM broadcast the "Cease Fire For Life" forum, an event meant to address the increasing problem of gang-related shootings in Los Angeles.⁹⁹ Like

⁹⁶ Egyptian Lover, interview, West Coast Pioneers, January 2006,

<<http://westcoastpioneers.com/artists/egyptian-lover.html>>, accessed 23 May 2011.

⁹⁷ Ramos, "'Rap' Musicians' Concert Is Canceled at Palladium After Long Beach Fights"; Goldstein, "Can Rap Survive Gang War?"

⁹⁸ Cross, *It's Not About a Salary*, 156.

⁹⁹ T.W. McGarry, "Rap Master Trades Rapid-Fire Barbs With Gang Members," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1988.

the “A Day of Peace” program that aired two years prior, the “Cease Fire” broadcast featured leaders of a grassroots anti-gang campaign, including Community Youth Gang Services director Leon Watkins alongside rap trio Run-DMC.¹⁰⁰ Working in concert with South Los Angeles citizens associations and local politicians, Watkins and KDAY DJs promoted the show as part of a continuing effort to curb what was quickly becoming both a regional crisis and an international spectacle.¹⁰¹

The broadcast was an indirect response to the recent death of a young Asian-American woman named Karen Toshima, killed in gang crossfire while walking in Westwood. Black community leaders had expressed frustration in February, when Los Angeles officials, who had long ignored mounting gang-related homicide rates in the inner city, responded expeditiously to the death of Toshima in what appeared to be an isolated shooting in the affluent and mostly-white Westwood business district.¹⁰² In addition to increased police patrols in West Los Angeles, the city deployed an army of investigators and offered a \$25,000 reward to find Toshima’s killer.¹⁰³ Some in South Los Angeles charged City Council with racial bias and crude neglect, leveraging those accusations to demand proportional resources, including increased police protection for their own neighborhoods. The LAPD’s “Operation Hammer,” with its frenzied late-night raids and mass arrests of black youths, was not what most had in mind.¹⁰⁴

Facing continued civic indifference coupled with expanded police repression, anti-gang advocates in South Los Angeles took to the KDAY airwaves to once again plea for peace in the inner city. “Cease Fire” organizers planned to use the public forum to promote CYGS services for troubled youth, including drug rehabilitation, legal advice, and job opportunities with the organization. They hoped to encourage young gang members as well as citizens victimized by gang activity to call in and receive council from the panel.¹⁰⁵ As a way to attract teen listeners, KDAY program directors helped to recruit Run-DMC to play the most prominent role in the broadcast, to speak with listeners live on air from the Ujima Village housing project in Willowbrook. The choice made sense to organizers because, after all, the inclusion of the Queens trio in a 1986 KDAY “A Day of Peace” campaign to end Los Angeles gang wars had resulted in the promise of peace negotiations and a proposed treaty. Despite the fact that the treaty never materialized, the New York rappers counted it as a partial success, particularly as it

¹⁰⁰ Edward J. Boyer, “Celebrities Use Airwaves to Take on Street Violence,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1986.

¹⁰¹ Bob Baker, “Trio Hoping to Cure Some Urban Pains,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1988.

¹⁰² Stanley Robertson, “L.A. Confidential: Won’t Find Solutions in ‘Ugliness,’” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 11, 1988; Elaine Lafferty and Margaret B. Carlson, “The Price of Life in Los Angeles,” *Time*, February 22, 1988, accessed October 14, 2010,

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,966768,00.html>>; F. Finley McRae, “Citizens Demand LAPD Deployment,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 18, 1988.

¹⁰³ “Citing Recent Violence by Gangs, Los Angeles to Add 150 Officers,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1988; Robert Reinhold, “Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1988.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph Bailey, Jr., “City Declares War On Gangs: Sweeps Stop Gang Killings,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 10, 1988; “‘The Ram’ Returns To Duty,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 17, 1988.

¹⁰⁵ McGarry, “Rap Master Trades Rapid-Fire Barbs With Gang Members.”

related to their continued drive to battle negative media attention.¹⁰⁶ Broadcast organizers also viewed the show positively, clinging to its most useful vehicles of influence over youth, including hip-hop artists and their lyrics; in the two years since the 1986 radio forum, CYGS had printed and promoted the sale of t-shirts emblazoned with an image of a young man in gang attire paired with the words “You Be Illin’,” a Run-DMC lyric referencing feeble-minded behavior. The garments, with their public service message, ultimately became a promotional tie-in to the 1988 “Cease Fire” event.¹⁰⁷

The broadcast missed the mark. It failed to draw ex-gang members with redemption tales, young criminals seeking rehabilitation, or even fans hoping to speak with members of the nation’s most famous rap group. Much to the dismay of anti-gang activists involved in the event, the choice to invite Run-DMC backfired. Rather than bask in the affection of Los Angeles hip-hop fans, the New York emcees encountered hostility. Callers, many who self-identified as gang affiliates, sparred with the trio. Some questioned the rappers’ professed “street credentials,” while others suggested they had no business passing judgment on the gang lifestyle or the decisions that led one to it. The rappers responded with broad admonitions about the perils of “the fast lane” and implored “gang-bangers” to “live another life.” Jam Master Jay, the most obviously vexed member of the panel, frequently raised his voice. In one particularly tense moment, he attacked a gang-affiliated listener, labeling him “stupid” and asking rhetorically, “You want your mom to get shot?” The “Cease Fire” campaign, promoted as part of the solution to the gang crisis, ultimately devolved into a series of spats between callers and anti-gang panelists that left organizers and participants emotionally spent.¹⁰⁸

KDAY-AM representatives were, in part, responsible for the lukewarm, even belligerent, responses to their “Cease Fire” headlines. In the months leading up to the June broadcast, Run-DMC had lost its footing within the Los Angeles hip-hop scene, slipping out of the limelight and losing fans to new local rising stars. The group had fallen out of favor with many local tastemakers, most prominently KDAY-AM music programmer Greg Mack and his Mixmaster DJs, including Julio G, Hen Gee, and Tony G, who were increasingly seeking to showcase new artists from their own turf. Disc jockeys for the Echo Park radio station, which aimed its 50,000-watt signal toward downtown and South Central Los Angeles, often broadcast live from local high schools and roller-skating hangouts including World on Wheels and Compton’s Skateland.¹⁰⁹ KDAY Mixmasters gained important insight about music trends most relevant to the station’s core audience from these locations, which DJ Hen Gee characterized as gangland “killing fields.”¹¹⁰

KDAY’s DJs, years earlier, had helped expose Run-DMC to its South Los Angeles listeners, who were becoming avid rap fans and proving to be a key

¹⁰⁶ Scott Harris, “‘We Agree to Stop Killing Each Other’ Gang Peace Treaties Being Negotiated,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1986.

¹⁰⁷ Steve Harvey, “Only in L.A.; People and Events,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1988.

¹⁰⁸ McGarry, “Rap Master Trades Rapid-Fire Barbs With Gang Members.”

¹⁰⁹ Bob Pool, “Station’s Neighbors Rap Its Wrap-Around Sound,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1989.

¹¹⁰ Ben Westhoff, “KDAY, the Gangsta Rap Oldies Station, Breaks New Ground by Playing Music From the Bad Old Days,” *LA Weekly*, Aug 2, 2012, accessed August 2, 2012, <<http://www.laweekly.com/2012-08-02/music/kday-gangsta-rap-oldies/>>.

demographic within the city's growing hip-hop consumer base. In exchange for performing in promotional shows for the station, Program Director Greg Mack and his Mixmasters added the group's music into regular on-air rotation.¹¹¹ With the aid of the city's original hip-hop radio music programmers, Run-DMC earned the adoration of a new generation of Los Angeles hip-hop fans who had begun to favor hard-edged, narrative rap over melody-driven electro-rap dance productions. Run-DMC reigned in South Los Angeles for a time, with 1986, the year of the group's national sell-out "Raising Hell" concert tour, marking the peak of their popularity. The rappers became "heroes of the street" in Los Angeles, representing for many the heart of the inner city better than even local rap artists Ice T or Toddy Tee.¹¹²

In 1988, that all changed.

¹¹¹ Cross, *It's Not About A Salary*, 155; Westhoff, "KDAY, the Gangsta Rap Oldies Station, Breaks New Ground by Playing Music From the Bad Old Days."

¹¹² Patrick Goldstein, "Pop Eye: Life is a Rap-sody to California Impresario," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1986.

CHAPTER SIX

“The Gang Called Niggaz Wit Attitude”: N.W.A. and the Genesis of Gangsta Rap

When the year of the “Drive-By Wars” came to a close, Los Angeles County officials logged, for 1987 alone, nearly 400 gang-related killings.¹ Crime and homicide statistics, frequently cited by LAPD Police Chief Daryl Gates in his mission to secure federal funding for his war on drugs, continued to earn Los Angeles a reputation for playing host to the most savage and unpredictable gangs in the country. Before January 1988, however, the carnage seemed largely confined to the city’s predominantly black communities. Until then, most city leaders, citizens, and media outlets treated the gang crisis as noisome yet conveniently circumscribed to the ghettos of South Los Angeles by socio-economic and racial boundaries. Karen Toshima changed that.²

On the evening of January 30, 1988, Toshima, a young professional woman, was shot dead, killed by gang crossfire while strolling in the Westwood Village business district. Members of two warring sets of the Los Angeles Crips confronted one another there in that “glittering enclave of restaurants, shops and theaters,” the seat of affluent Westside Los Angeles bordered by Brentwood, Bel-Air, and Beverly Hills.³ The incident made front-page national news. Headlines proclaimed, “GANG VIOLENCE SHOCKS LOS ANGELES” and “GANGS INVADE YUPPIE HAVEN.” Press copy, often lurid in its details, declared what many white Angelenos had begun to fear: “The notorious gangs of Los Angeles are expanding their stock-in-trade of drugs and murder from its inner-city slums to smarter neighborhoods, and even to other cities.”⁴

The Los Angeles police, who participated in a “gang summit” called together in direct response to the shooting, predicted that 1988 would be “The Year of the Gang.”⁵ The assessment was a warning to white, suburban America; coverage of the Westwood Village shooting exposed the general public to an epidemic already known to residents of the predominantly black communities of South Los Angeles. Gang-related violence had marked neighborhoods from Vernon to Hyde Park since the 1970s, but the incident in the tony Westside business district came as a shock to city officials and residents alike. It sparked public outrage, revealing growing feelings of vulnerability among those who

¹ Ralph Bailey, Jr., “Drive-By Wars Claim 8 Lives in 48 Hours,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 3, 1987; “Local News in Brief: Summit Meeting on Gangs,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1988; Robert Reinhold, “In the Middle of L.A.’s Gang Wars,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1988.

² Bailey, Jr., “Drive-By Wars Claim 8 Lives in 48 Hours”; Robert Reinhold, “Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1988; Ivor Davis, “Gangs Invade Yuppie Haven: Violence in Los Angeles,” *The Times (London)*, February 8, 1988; Stanley Robertson, “L.A. Confidential: Won’t Find Solutions in ‘Ugliness,’” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 11, 1988, A6; Elaine Lafferty and Margaret B. Carlson, “The Price of Life in Los Angeles,” *Time*, February 22, 1988; John M. Glionna, “A Murder That Woke Up L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1998.

³ Lafferty and Carlson, “The Price of Life in Los Angeles.”

⁴ “Los Angeles Drug Gangs Spread Out Over the West,” Chris Reed, *The Guardian (London)*, February 20, 1988.

⁵ Glionna, “A Murder That Woke Up L.A.”

viewed themselves as sheltered from the increasing problems of gang activity, drug dealing, and murder that had plagued the inner city for nearly two decades.

City officials mobilized quickly. Within a week of the shooting, the Los Angeles City Council voted to increase patrols in Westwood threefold, approved the hiring of 150 new police officers, and increased annual funding for law enforcement to \$9.3 million. Westwood's councilman and mayoral candidate Zev Yaroslavsky proposed a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the capture of a suspect in Toshima's death.⁶ City Attorney James Hahn sought a court order to prevent black youths suspected of gang activity from congregating in public spaces and to bar those individuals from remaining "on the streets for more than five minutes."⁷ Like Los Angeles figureheads, the news media fixed on the law-and-order angle in the story, the kind increasingly popular among Americans during President Ronald Reagan's socially conservative tenure. The Associated Press relayed the most sensational details of the case—a young Asian-American architect out celebrating her career achievements was shot in the head, her American Dream shattered by a black gang member—and pinned much of the blame on weak law enforcement, describing an urban malady that Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates had failed to contain.⁸

Black Angelenos also responded to the Westwood shooting with a sense of urgency, but harnessed the story to make appeals for more police protection against gang violence in their own neighborhoods. The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, for instance, reported on Karen Toshima in order to remind readers of the dozens of innocent bystanders from the communities of South Central Los Angeles killed in the prior year by stray gang bullets. One editorial recalled the Vietnam War, noting that, Americans similarly ignored casualty numbers early in that conflict, when minorities were disproportionately drafted and killed.⁹ The homicide in West Los Angeles presented the local black press, as well as black political leaders, with the opportunity to draw attention to the crisis of violence and terror in the city's poor minority communities.¹⁰ With the help of citizens associations, like the South Central Organizing Committee and the United Neighborhoods Organization, these groups worked to lay bare a disturbing record of civic neglect and, in turn, to demand more effective police patrols in their neighborhoods in order to address these problems.¹¹

Los Angeles Police Chief Gates admitted that Toshima's death had become a public relations disaster for his force, and he acted swiftly to reassert his department's command of both the gang problem and the crack epidemic that compounded it.¹² In the week that followed the shooting, Gates announced that he would launch "Operation

⁶ "Citing Recent Violence by Gangs, Los Angeles to Add 150 Officers," *New York Times*, February 11, 1988; Reinhold, "Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles."

⁷ A Los Angeles Superior Court judge ultimately ruled City Attorney James Hahn's "vagrancy" proposals unconstitutional. Reinhold, "Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles."

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Robertson, "L.A. Confidential: Won't Find Solutions in 'Ugliness.'"

¹⁰ Lafferty and Carlson, "The Price of Life in Los Angeles."

¹¹ F. Finley McRae, "Citizens Demand LAPD Deployment," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 18, 1988, A1.

¹² Daryl F. Gates and Diane K. Shah, *Chief: My Life in the L.A.P.D.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 339.

Hammer” to “make war” on the “rotten little cowards” terrorizing his city. He assigned a thirty-member anti-gang unit to find Toshima’s killer and dramatically increased the number of detectives assigned to gang killings throughout the city. He also planned for a series of police sweeps in Crip- and Blood-controlled communities in South Los Angeles and resurrected the department’s militarized “battering ram” police vehicle for drug and gang house raids.¹³ Amid growing panic over a metastasizing youth crime problem, public opinion throughout Los Angeles favored Gates. Even in the predominantly black inner city, where Gates and the LAPD frequently drew ire for racial bigotry and encroachment on privacy, voices arose in support of tough police action, “hard-nosed measures,” “no mercy,” and “no half-stepping.”¹⁴ Mayor Tom Bradley, also a vocal critic of the Chief and his controversial policies, voiced his full support for “Operation Hammer” and its promise to “take these terrorists off the streets of Los Angeles.”¹⁵ Emboldened by widespread support and the early mass arrests carried out through the LAPD “Operation,” Gates elicited a stern warning to those involved in gang activity: “The hammer is coming down, and it’s going to come down harder and harder and harder.”¹⁶

The Los Angeles Police Department’s “Operation Hammer” was a plan to restrain both the real and perceived problems of juvenile gang crime in South Los Angeles. “Media coverage of gangs,” Gates said, “begat more acts of violence.” Each gang member, he complained, aspired to kill because he wanted to be in the news, to “be a star.” By stepping up anti-gang operations, “sending waves” of police officers into regions considered to be gang territory, apprehending as many suspected criminals as possible, and spreading fear of law enforcement, Gates aimed to eliminate that road to fame.¹⁷

The LAPD’s aggressive response to the Karen Toshima killing, paradoxically, certified that Los Angeles gangs were, indeed, spreading and that gang imagery was beginning to permeate pop culture, just as Chief Gates had feared. It would prove an ideal set of circumstances for a group of black youths—a group from South Central Los Angeles who called themselves “a gang” and who embraced their roles as police nemeses—to launch a music career. The group, which would name itself Niggaz Wit Attitude (N.W.A.), both employed and corroborated the notion that Los Angeles gangsters were becoming something of a national spectacle. As they ushered in a new phase in the development of hip-hop music, Niggaz Wit Attitude would claim to be the voice of those feared young men, the very young men that law enforcement officials labeled “angry harbingers of a new Watts riot.”¹⁸

¹³ Robert Reinhold, “Police Deployed To Curb Gangs in Los Angeles,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1988; Lafferty and Carlson, “The Price of Life in Los Angeles”; “‘The Ram’ Returns To Duty,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 17, 1988, A1.

¹⁴ Stanley G. Robertson, “L.A. Confidential: Hit ‘Em Again, Harder, Harder,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 24, 1988, A6.

¹⁵ Jay Mathews, “More Than 600 Arrested in Anti-Gang Sweep by Los Angeles Police,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1988, A3.

¹⁶ Ralph Bailey, Jr., “City Declares War On Gangs: Sweeps Stop Gang Killings,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 10, 1988, A1.

¹⁷ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, 339.

¹⁸ Bob Baker, “Cold Killers and Fearful Innocents,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1988.

In late 1987, a few months before gang violence in L.A.'s "yuppie haven" made headlines, KDAY-AM's program director Greg Mack got a hold of new song by a group of local talents. "The Boyz-N-The Hood," a promotional single produced by one of the station's former drive-time DJs, Dr. Dre, was simple, bass-heavy, and unmistakably hardcore. Compared to Run-DMC's rhymes about "Hard Times" and "Sucker M.C.s," "Boyz" sounded obscene. The graphic lyrics about gun-play and homicide—"Little did he know I had a loaded 12 gauge / One sucker dead, L.A. Times front page"—assault on women—"She started talkin' shit, wouldn't you know? / Reached back like a pimp and slapped the hoe"—a police scuffle—"Cat got beaten for resistin' arrest / He socked the pig in the head for rippin' his Guess"—and a jailhouse riot—"I went to get them out but there was no bail / The fellas start to riot in the county jail"—all delivered by an unknown MC with a high-pitched swagger, seemed to be a parody.¹⁹ Several major record labels, in fact, had passed on the track for just that reason, evaluating the stories as ludicrous and the music as unmarketable.²⁰ KDAY-AM, however, managed to get a hold of a copy recorded for Ruthless Records, a nascent independent label rumored to be owned by a former Compton drug dealer and the track's listed artist, Eazy E. "The Boyz-N-The Hood" became an instant hit among the station's listeners. "I put it on the air," Mack remembered. "Within 24 hours it was the most requested song."²¹

"Boyz" pushed all boundaries of what had been referred to loosely, since the emergence of Run-DMC, as "street rap." The record impressed Los Angeles hip-hop fans who had been drawn to Run-DMC's similarly bold brand of artistic rebellion but who had begun to find the New York group's body of work, and the members' uninformed diatribes about Los Angeles gangs, stale. Ruthless Records and its three main artists—songwriter O'Shea "Ice Cube" Jackson, producer Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, and emcee Eric "Eazy E" Wright—delivered a formula that was lyrically perverse and compositionally playful; Ice Cube's brash narrative and Eazy E's lazy, high-pitched delivery complimented Dr. Dre's layered production, with its thumping baseline from Whodini's "I'm a Ho" and a sample from the chorus of Jean Knight's "Mr. Big Stuff."²²

The track was intentionally provocative, the brainchild of three young entrepreneurs with aspirations to form a "hard-core all-star" hip-hop vanguard.²³ Eazy E, described as a "runty former dope dealer," viewed music as a more sensible pursuit than cocaine trafficking in Compton.²⁴ After losing his cousin and mentor in a drug-related shooting, Eazy E became intent on staking his claim in the music business. He used his illicit capital to launch his own independent enterprise. "I had a little money, I put my

¹⁹ Eazy E, "The Boyz-N-The Hood / L.A. Is The Place," Single (Ruthless/Macola, 1987), Vinyl, 12" Promo.

²⁰ Jerry Heller and Gil Reavill, *Ruthless: A Memoir* (New York: Simon Spotlight, 2006), 109-111.

²¹ Terry McDermott, "NWA: Straight Outta Compton," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2002.

²² Whodini, "I'm A Ho," *Back in Black*, Album (Jive, 1986), Vinyl, LP; Jean Knight, "Mr. Big Stuff," *Mr. Big Stuff*, Album (Stax, 1971), Vinyl, LP.

²³ *NWA: The World's Most Dangerous Group*, directed by Mark Ford (2008; VH1 Rock Docs, 2008), TV Broadcast.

²⁴ Mike Sager, "Cube," *Rolling Stone*, October 4, 1990, 78.

money to use, and I started a record company,” he boasted.²⁵ At the helm of Ruthless Records, Eazy E embraced music entertainment as a new kind of hustle and gangster-inspired rap as his most promising investment.²⁶ Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, two established local talents, proved ideal partners in Eazy E’s new venture. Through his years as a producer, a stage performer with Compton’s World Class Wreckin’ Cru, and a mix DJ for KDAY-AM, Dr. Dre had earned a reputation for introducing South Los Angeles hip-hop fans to “the new sound, the new style.”²⁷ He understood the idiosyncrasies of the Los Angeles black music scene and prided himself on staying one step ahead of the region’s most popular trends. With this insight, Dre scouted Ice Cube as a songwriter for Ruthless Records. The young MC had, as Dre remembered, an uncanny ability to craft verses that were, “totally street, totally dirty.”²⁸ With Ice Cube’s penchant for crowd-pleasing references to genitalia, guns, and girls, and his dedication to a “West Coast style” based on rhymes about Crenshaw and cars, the Los Angeles native seemed an appropriate fit.²⁹

“The Boyz-N-The Hood” became the trio’s first celebrated project and the primer for the success of their soon-to-be-named group, Niggaz Wit Attitude. As their chosen appellation would later illustrate, the new rap syndicate was committed to controversy and willing to flaunt it, believing in its rewards and dismissing its risks. “Boyz” tested this theory; if the song truly assaulted the senses, Eazy E trusted, it would be a sensation. He was right. The record became a local phenomenon, with requests for the track flooding KDAY-AM phone lines and limited pressings of the vinyl single selling furiously and exclusively in the street marketplace—in independent record stores, out of car trunks, and at the Radium swap meet in Torrance.³⁰ Even buyers for black-owned, independent music outlets in cities like New York, Memphis, and Cincinnati rushed to stock the record, ordering, in some cases, hundreds at a time.³¹ Memphis record distributor Johnny Phillips remembered, “As soon as we got ‘em, we sold ‘em.” The enthusiastic response to “Boyz,” Ice Cube explained, “told us we’d found our niche.”³²

KDAY’s DJ Julio G noted that, more than anything else, the lyrical innovation on “Boyz” was impossible to ignore. “The drug dealing and the murders,” he said, “nobody was doing it like that.”³³ Even the city’s white music industry figures savored the uniquely brazen narratives. Doug Young, a local record promoter treated to a preview of

²⁵ Ibid; *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

²⁶ Dennis Hunt, “The Rap Reality: Truth and Money; Compton’s N.W.A. catches fire with stark portraits of ghetto life,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1989; *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

²⁷ Jerry L. Barrow II, “The Big Reveal: Eminem & Dr. Dre,” *Vibe*, August 2, 2010, in Vibe.com, accessed February 13, 2012, <<http://www.vibe.com/posts/big-reveal-eminem-dr-dre-cover-vibes-juice-issue>>; Ronin Ro, “Dr. Dre: Moving Target,” *The Source*, November 1992, 40-42; K Murphy, “Full Clip: Ice Cube Breaks Down His Entire Catalog,” *Vibe*, October 8, 2010, in Vibe.com, accessed February 13, 2012, <<http://www.vibe.com/article/full-clip-ice-cube-breaks-down-his-entire-catalogue>>.

²⁸ Ro, “Dr. Dre: Moving Target,” 41.

²⁹ Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 67-68; for samples of Ice Cube’s earlier recorded rhymes, see C.I.A., *Cru’ In Action*, EP (Kru-Cut Records, 1987), Vinyl.

³⁰ Ro, “Dr. Dre: Moving Target,” 42.

³¹ Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 121.

³² McDermott, “NWA: Straight Outta Compton.”

³³ Ibid.

“Boyz” before its radio debut, was titillated by the profanity. Though his initial reaction was shock—“What the fuck is this?!”—he ultimately bought in, agreeing to help its creators move their product.³⁴ White talent manager Jerry Heller, who had also heard an early recording of the track, praised what he perceived as pure, honest rebellion. “No apologies, no excuses,” he described, “just the straight undistilled street telling me things I had never heard before.” It was, Heller noted, “the most important song that I had heard in over twenty-five years.”³⁵ Young black filmmaker John Singleton, a student then at University of Southern California and later the director of a film with a title inspired by the track, recognized that it was, however, more than the sensational subject matter and the virile production that made “The Boyz-N-The Hood” so seductive. Los Angeles inner-city kids, he said, recognized that it was a bold representation of their city, “where we’re from... what we’re about.” He remembered, “We loved it because it would give a voice to stuff that we knew about on the block.” Before “Boyz,” Singleton stressed, “we never heard [about our L.A.] in the music.”³⁶ The first effort from the street-wise South Los Angeles youths of Niggaz Wit Attitude would set the bar for “hard core hip-hop.” It would help the fledgling rap group rise to prominence in Los Angeles and portend the national popularity of West Coast “gangsta rap.”³⁷

Encouraged by the astonishing local success of “The Boyz-N-The Hood,” N.W.A. began work on their debut studio album in the summer of 1987. Dr. Dre took the reins in each recording session, coaching his emcees and engineering each track with the assistance of former World Class Wreckin’ Cru bandmate DJ Yella. Ice Cube, along with band members MC Ren and Arabian Prince, penned lyrics, often with input from Dre’s Texas protégé and ghostwriter The D.O.C. The group’s founder Eazy E bankrolled the whole operation, providing scant vocals and preferring to let others mold his product.

Although it did not include “Boyz,” the album employed the hit’s winning formula, matching explicit street raps with digital percussion, snippets of the inner-city soundscape, and an eclectic mix of funk, soul, and hip-hop samples. Dr. Dre’s instrumentation and pilfered portions of recordings by artists like James Brown, Sly & the Family Stone, William DeVaughn, the Pointer Sisters, and Kool Moe Dee provided the platform for accounts of turf wars, dope deals, drive-by shootings, police confrontations, and sexual conquest. It was not an entirely novel concept. Eazy E and Dr. Dre had each been inspired by their contemporaries, including New York’s Kool Moe Dee, Boogie Down Productions, Public Enemy, and Run-DMC, who had each helped pioneer a more provocative “street” sound that married modern ghetto themes with the black music of an earlier generation.³⁸ Unlike their predecessors, however, the members

³⁴ *Tha Westside*, Documentary, directed by Todd Williams (2002; Niche Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

³⁵ Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 63; McDermott, “NWA: Straight Outta Compton.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ekow Eshun, “The Rap Trap: Dr. Dre helped pioneer hardcore hip-hop,” *The Guardian* (London), May 27, 2000, 8.

³⁸ Eazy E, “The Boyz-N-The Hood / L.A. Is The Place”; for examples of early New York “street” rap, see Kool Moe Dee, *How Ya Like Me Now*, Album (Jive, 1987), Vinyl, LP; Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded*, Album (B-Boy Records, 1987), Vinyl, LP; Public Enemy, *Yo! Bum Rush The Show*, Album (Def Jam Recordings, 1987), Vinyl, LP; Run-D.M.C., *Run-D.M.C.*,

of N.W.A. envisioned themselves as “ghetto reporters,” presenting truths, they would later explain, to inform and provoke listeners. They hoped to stir controversy, as that appeared to pave the way for notoriety.³⁹

Hollywood laid the groundwork for them. In the spring of 1987, filmmaker Dennis Hopper broke ground on the production of his most ambitious project to date: *Colors*, a feature-length film about the gangs of Los Angeles. Known for his commitment to both realism and social commentary, the *Easy Rider* actor and director envisioned an unconventional drama that would explore the lives of both the Los Angeles Police and the gang members they pursued. These subjects, Hopper told the press, had either been ignored or misunderstood, and it was his intention to reveal their truths.⁴⁰

Authenticity was, thus, paramount for the experimental filmmaker in his mission to avoid tropes and stock characterizations in *Colors*. He insisted, for instance, on filming entirely on location in Los Angeles, in the heart of the city’s gang crisis where “these things are really happening.”⁴¹ With guidance from his cinematographer Haskell Wexler, who earned critical acclaim for his work on a documentary about the Vietnam My Lai veterans and for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the film crew scouted for gritty, sunlit urban settings miles from the Orion Pictures’ gated Hollywood sound stages. They selected parts of South and East Los Angeles that, as Hopper noted, “even the police won’t go into unless there’s a body lying there.”⁴² The film’s producer Robert Solo described the calculated risk involved in setting up shop in “the wild west.” The police, he said, ridiculed them and warned that their private security forces would provide little protection in the “streets of blood” from serious crime, even murder. “We went into neighborhoods which have never been shown before,” Solo reasoned. “But we wanted to show what it’s like to live there, what it looks like, what it feels like, how hard it is.”⁴³

Despite initial resistance from the police, Hopper managed to solicit the assistance of both the Los Angeles County Sheriff and the Police Department. He recruited experts from the County Sheriff’s Operation Safe Streets (OSS) gang investigation bureau and the LAPD’s Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) crime prevention unit to act as technical advisors on the film.⁴⁴ In the early weeks of production, the Police Department allowed the film’s two stars, Robert Duvall and Sean Penn, to

Album (Profile Records, 1984), Vinyl, LP; Run-D.M.C., *Raising Hell*, Album (Profile, 1986), Vinyl, LP.

³⁹ “Ice Cube/N.W.A./D.O.C.,” *Pump It Up*, TV Series, directed by Spencer Thornton (originally aired in 1989; FOX Television Productions, 1989), Online Video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFh4BW_V59M>; Hunt, “The Rap Reality: Truth and Money.”

⁴⁰ Reinhold, “Police Deployed To Curb Gangs in Los Angeles”; Michael Reese, “War on the Mean Streets,” *Newsweek*, April 18, 1988, 73A.

⁴¹ Bill Kelley, “‘Colors,’ Controversy & Hopper,” *Sun Sentinel*, April 17, 1988.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Streets of Blood,” *Courier-Mail*, April 30, 1988.

⁴⁴ *Colors*, directed by Dennis Hopper (1988; Orion Pictures, 2001), DVD; Kelley, “‘Colors,’ Controversy & Hopper”; “Gang Movie ‘Colors’ Will Trigger Violence,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 31, 1988, A1.

accompany officers during their patrols through Watts, Boyle Heights, and South Central. CRASH lent its moniker to the director, who envisioned his star characters as agents from that very unit. In addition, officials from both police agencies contributed statistics on gang membership and gang-related crimes—numbers featured in the opening credits in the film’s final cut.⁴⁵

Vexing local law enforcement agents who had pledged their support on *Colors*, Hopper also offered background roles to young men from the communities chosen for filming. Most of those people hired as extras were, according to both police and casting agents, known affiliates of the city’s most infamous gang organizations. “If I was shooting in a Crip area,” Hopper told the press, “I’d use Crips as extras. Shooting in a Blood area, I’d use Bloods.”⁴⁶ He further drafted the region’s most popularly known Crip affiliate, Ice T, to record the film’s title track. The major label rap artist, who claimed he empathized with the “gangsters” who “listen to my stuff,” vowed to deliver a “first-person gangbanging story” for the *Colors* soundtrack.⁴⁷ Law enforcement officials objected to these arrangements, viewing the paid roles for those linked to unlawful activity as incentives for criminal behavior. The filmmaker was irresponsibly relaying the message, according to one Sheriff’s Department commander, that “you can be a movie star if you’re a gang member!”⁴⁸

Hopper’s selection of “real gang members” rather than professional black actors was meant, in part, to earn the trust of those who guarded L.A.’s combat zones and, in turn, to ensure the safety of Hopper’s crew.⁴⁹ This commitment to “realism” sometimes backfired, threatening to endanger all of those on site, including the residents of the communities used as backdrops. As producer Robert Solo admitted, young men would cruise the filming locations, “shot-guns dangling out of their [car] windows, blowing their horns...to make sure that we knew whose territory we were in.”⁵⁰ The choice to feature Crips and Bloods, however, was chiefly aimed at supporting the truth claims implicit in *Colors*. “It’s an honest film,” Hopper asserted, intent on revealing to the public a problem rendered “invisible” by neglect and denial. “If people come out of the theater saying, ‘Hey, this isn’t really going on,’ they’re full of it.”⁵¹

Colors was scheduled for its nationwide debut in April 1988. For social critics and community activists alike, the timing was reprehensible. Courtland Milloy, an African-American columnist for the *Washington Post*, charged that *Colors* capitalized on growing white fears of “unruly Negroes,” a phobia encouraged by sensational press

⁴⁵ The opening credits of the film note, “The combined ant-gang force numbers 250 men and women. In the greater Los Angeles area there are over 600 street gangs with almost 70,000 members. Last year [1987] there were 387 gang-related killings.” Police officials serving as technical assistants corroborated these statistics. *Colors*.

⁴⁶ Kelley, “‘Colors,’ Controversy & Hopper.”

⁴⁷ Sheena Lester, “‘Colors’: Controversial Film Met With Protest,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 14, 1988, A3; Ice T and Douglas Century, *Ice: A Memoir of Gangster Life and Redemption-From South Central to Hollywood* (New York: One World Books, 2012), 107-108.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Hayes, “Link Between Gang Violence and Films?” *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1988.

⁴⁹ Alan Bell, “‘Colors’: Was This Film Necessary?” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 21, 1988, B8.

⁵⁰ “Streets of Blood”; Reese, “War on the Mean Streets.”

⁵¹ Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir*, 108-109; Kelley, “‘Colors,’ Controversy & Hopper.”

coverage of recent gang-related shootings in Los Angeles.⁵² Alan Bell of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* agreed. *Colors*, he conceded, exposed “a legitimate problem,” but would ultimately “convince a few more White people why they should be fearful of young Blacks carrying big radios.”⁵³ One seething editorial in the city’s black press accused Orion Pictures of planning the film’s premiere to exploit the sudden media fascination with real problems devastating poor urban black communities. “I’m wondering out loud,” Stanley Robinson of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* wrote, “if [*Colors*] would have been made if the subject matter had not been on the front pages of every newspaper in the U.S.”⁵⁴

Less than three months prior, a gang-related shooting in the posh, predominantly white Westwood district left a young woman dead and the city reeling from new, media-driven anxieties about violent black street gangs on the loose. In response, the Los Angeles Police Department, under its “Operation Hammer” banner, strengthened police patrols and reintroduced the armored “battering ram” police vehicle to assist in raids within some of the very neighborhoods that had been selected for Dennis Hopper’s film.⁵⁵ The spring release of *Colors* coincided with a series of “gang sweeps” that, according to Police Chief Daryl Gates, netted over one thousand known criminals and narcotics dealers, including hundreds of active gang members.⁵⁶ However, drive-by shootings, like the ones depicted in the movie’s opening scene, continued to claim lives inside South Los Angeles ghettos and threatened to reach communities long thought insulated from inner-city violence. “Once gang attacks were rare and concentrated in disadvantaged neighborhoods,” one LAPD detective explained. “Now, however, all areas of the city are in danger.” Under new pressure to explain what gang investigators labeled “a spreading plague,” Mayor Tom Bradley told his constituents that the police would “take back the streets from these hoodlums.”⁵⁷ Westwood’s councilman Zev Yaroslavsky was more cynical, lamenting that large swaths of Los Angeles had become “worse than Beirut.”⁵⁸

In light of the very public turn of events in Los Angeles, police authorities panicked about the release of “the gang movie.” Homicide investigators, treated to a private pre-release showing of *Colors*, were horrified. They predicted that the graphic violence, paired with the use of real gang handles and identifying colors, would embolden crews and lead to more bloodshed. Wes McBride, the president of the California Gang Investigator’s Association, agreed, portending new carnage in the streets and inside movie theaters. “We’ll be sorry that movie was ever made,” McBride warned. “It’s going to leave dead bodies from one end of this town to the other.”⁵⁹ Some pointed

⁵² Courtland Milloy, “Editorial: Profits Top Responsibility in Hollywood,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 1988, D3.

⁵³ Bell, “‘Colors’: Was This Film Necessary?”

⁵⁴ Stanley G. Robinson, “L.A. Confidential,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 28, 1988, A6.

⁵⁵ “‘The Ram’ Returns to Duty,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 17, 1988, A1; “1,000 Are Arrested by Police in Los Angeles Gang Sweep,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1988.

⁵⁶ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, 339.

⁵⁷ Daryl F. Gates and Robert K. Jackson, “The Street Gang Phenomenon,” *Western City*, April 1989, 5; Jay Mathews, “More Than 600 Arrested in Anti-Gang Sweep by Los Angeles Police,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1988.

⁵⁸ Reinhold, “Police Deployed to Curb Gangs in Los Angeles.”

⁵⁹ “Gang Movie ‘Colors’ Will Trigger Violence.”

to the violent precedent set by the film *The Warriors*. Released a decade earlier, the apocalyptic action flick about teenage gangs in New York had been blamed for mayhem near Los Angeles, including a stabbing death in an Oxnard shopping mall movie complex and a fatal shooting inside a drive-in theater in Palm Springs.⁶⁰ *Colors* director Dennis Hopper vehemently denied that his film would incite violence as *The Warriors* had. “That was a fictitious film that glorified gangs,” he argued. “I think [*Colors*] is educational, and I think it should wake up some people politically.”⁶¹

Civic leaders, however, prepared for the worst, citing the storm building around the 1988 “gang movie” release. “It could have a hell of an impact on something that’s already out of control,” one official told the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.⁶² Community Youth Gang Service (CYGS), the South Central organization that partnered with KDAY-AM radio in community outreach, protested both the timing of the film’s release and its realistic representations of gang rivalries, suggesting the possibility of dire consequences. One representative told the *New York Times*, “This movie is going to cause a war.”⁶³

Colors did not trigger a war. It created a sensation. The Orion Pictures production, originally released on 422 screens, grossed nearly \$7 million in its opening week alone. The sustained controversy swirling around the film’s untimely release, paired with Dennis Hopper’s unconventional production decisions, only bolstered ticket sales after the film’s opening weekend. By its third week, *Colors* screened on nearly 1,400 screens and reached number one in national box office tallies, easily defeating Warner Brothers blockbuster film *Beetlejuice*, which opened on four times as many screens.⁶⁴ By its tenth and final week in theaters, *Colors* had raked in over \$46 million in domestic ticket sales and ranked among Orion Pictures top three grossing films for the year.⁶⁵

Audiences throughout the country were thrilled. Moviegoers felt they had been offered a glimpse into life in the mean streets of Los Angeles, a viewpoint far removed from the true dangers of the urban warzone, yet, as one reviewer lauded, “genuinely three-dimensional and utterly enveloping.”⁶⁶ Although Hopper had insisted time and again that he had not produced a documentary, and although gang experts disputed many of the film’s details, patrons claimed that the movie provided them with rich insight into a crisis taking shape in one of California’s poorest urban centers. “All I can say is that I’m much more aware of what the residents of South Central L.A. go through on an everyday basis,” said a West Hollywood lawyer. “I feel for them, I really do.”⁶⁷ A New York moviegoer noted the “authenticity” of the film and the “painful, unavoidable implication

⁶⁰ *The Warriors*, directed by Walter Hill, (1979; Paramount Pictures, 2001), DVD; “Gang Film Draws Community Protest,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 22, 1979, A2; Megan Rosenfeld, “Violence in the Wake of ‘Warriors,’” *The Washington Post*, February 22, 1979, C1; “The ‘Warriors’ Body Count,” *Newsweek*, February 26, 1979, 54.

⁶¹ Ben Cheshire, “Film Stirs Fear of Gang Warfare; Banned,” *The Sun Herald (Sydney, Australia)*, April 10, 1988, 33.

⁶² “Gang Movie ‘Colors’ Will Trigger Violence.”

⁶³ Reinhold, “Police Deployed to Curb Gangs in Los Angeles.”

⁶⁴ John Voland, “Weekend Box Office: Colors’ Gives Orion a Big Boost,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1988; Lester, “‘Colors’ Gets Dismal Reviews From Public”; Milloy, “Editorial: Profits Top Responsibility in Hollywood.”

⁶⁵ Box Office Mojo, <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=colors.htm>>, accessed May 2, 2012.

⁶⁶ Janet Maslin, “Police vs. Street Gangs in Hopper’s ‘Colors,’” *New York Times*, April 15, 1988.

⁶⁷ Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir*, 108-109; Lester, “‘Colors’ Gets Dismal Reviews From Public.”

[that] nothing can stop the gang mentality from perpetuating itself.”⁶⁸ One entertainment writer summed up his response as “a profound sense of relief [that] you don’t live in Los Angeles.”⁶⁹

Dennis Hopper’s blockbuster hit also worked to sow in the popular imagination one central narrative: young gang members and police officers in Los Angeles are in a violent battle for survival, and the police are losing. Exactly which side represented the victim in the struggle, however, was unclear. The film’s screenplay treated most of its subjects—cop, citizen, and criminal, alike—as individuals challenged by complex social and economic ills. The tension between seasoned CRASH officer Bob Hodges and rookie Danny “Pac Man” McGavin was often the result of self-doubt and cynicism, byproducts of an outgunned gang suppression operation. Black community members pleaded for protection from local law enforcement while simultaneously protesting rampant police harassment. In a series of vignettes, gang members were portrayed not as fundamentally flawed, but as youths seeking to escape an environment that offered no refuge. In one scene, for instance, Clarence “High Top” Brown, an 18-year-old Blood jailed for dealing drugs, was severely beaten by fellow inmates while deputies looked on. The teen was summarily denied medical help and verbally tormented in the office of the captain. In another, gangsters mourned alongside distressed family members at a funeral in which a pastor scolded the young Bloods in attendance for their depravity. Some gang characters, to be sure, were depicted as inherently heinous, including “Rocket,” the mastermind behind both a drive-by shooting and the planned assassination of Officer Danny “Pac-Man” McGavin. But, in several cases, law enforcement authorities, including police and corrections officers, were represented as similarly trigger-happy, vengeful, and remorseless.⁷⁰

Promotion for the film also tangled representations of hero and villain, aggressor and victim. One British ad that referenced the signifying colors in the Crip versus Blood war played with the delineations of that conflict; Penn and Duvall appeared in hues of red and, below them, several of the film’s gang member characters were featured in blue tones. Another bill featured a row of black youths, all kneeling with their faces against a wall and their hands clasped behind their heads, police officers hovering above.⁷¹ The image replicated a frequent sighting in South Los Angeles that year during Police Chief Daryl Gates’ “Operation Hammer” raids, in which young minority men, most of them black, were rounded up and arrested on an assortment of charges, ranging from weapons possession to loitering. The sweeps had earned Gates more criticism than praise, with familiar charges of abuse of power again dogging his administration. Advertisements for *Colors* utilized the very stereotype of the overzealous, often racist, white cop that the Chief had managed to reinforce in years prior. “Operation Hammer” had become yet another caricature of overreaching LAPD tactics, and the *Colors* capitalized on it.

⁶⁸ Janet Maslin, “Police vs. Street Gangs in Hopper’s ‘Colors,’” *New York Times*, April 15, 1988.

⁶⁹ “Hopper is back in Favor,” *Courier-Mail (Australia)*, August 13, 1988.

⁷⁰ *Colors*.

⁷¹ UK Release *Colors* Movie Poster, Image (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, Inc., 1988), <<http://www.movieposter.com/poster/MPW-19329/Colors.html>>, accessed August 10, 2012; *Colors* Movie Poster, Image (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, Inc., 1988), <<http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3990062336/tt0094894>>, accessed August 3, 2012.

The *Colors* soundtrack record, another promotional device, elicited similarly mixed messages about the film's protagonists. The Warner Bros. Records release featured, nearly exclusively, rap—the music favored by black gang members represented in the film. The movie's screen score was far more varied; it paired police dialog with tracks by white country and pop singers, including Willie Nelson and John Cougar Mellencamp. Chicano youths on screen danced to doo-wop groups, including Rosie & the Originals and The Penguins. Black youths, however—in their vehicles, inside homes, on the block, and behind bars—listened to rap. Hip-hop, in Hopper's production, was not simply a piece of the urban sound scape; it was the anthem. In exhibiting this highly charged genre, the Warner Bros. soundtrack encouraged, at the very least, interest in gang culture as a novelty.⁷²

The *Colors* soundtrack was, in fact, a groundbreaking rap compilation that debuted young New York rap artists, including Big Daddy Kane, alongside Los Angeles-based talents, like rapper Ice T and producers DJ Muggs and Dr. Dre. The record, in drawing from Crenshaw, Compton, Queens, Long Island, and Brooklyn, reflected disparate views on life in the inner city. Brooklyn's Kane proclaimed his prowess as an MC in "Raw," using mildly hawkish analogies—"Here I am, R.A.W. / Terrorist, here to bring trouble to / Phony emcees"—and benign references to "chaos and mayhem" couched in lines about entertaining—"I come off hard with rhymes that are odd / I rip the microphone and leave it scarred / Never smoking or hittin or takin a sniff / Only crushin emcees that be tryin to riff." Upbeat tracks, including Salt-n-Pepa's "Let the Rhythm Run" and Roxanne Shante's "Go on, Girl" lent levity to the motion picture's otherwise dark soundtrack.⁷³

The bulk of the album, however, directly—and sometimes judiciously—invoked the film's most dominant themes: urban crime and poverty. In "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste," Queens rapper MC Shan offered a moral dictum—"You have to live life all nervous and worried / But joining a gang means you wanna be buried / It's either that or jail cause there's no other place / And a mind is a terrible thing to waste." Shan also chided gang members in language that corresponded to statements made by Vice President and 1988 presidential candidate George Bush linking urban crime to domestic terrorism—"Hang on the corner or on the stoop / Fighting people lookin' just like a terrorist group"⁷⁴ 7A3, a Los Angeles-based group, paired a sample from James Brown's "Papa Don't Take No Mess" with stanzas about teenage unemployment, despair in Ethiopia, and desperation felt by a breadwinning single mother. Eric B. and Rakim's street anthem "Paid in Full" linked memories of being a "stick-up kid" and dreams of "a 9 to 5" with "a master plan" to "get paid in full." Rakim utilized lyrical tropes in sharp contrast to 7A3's "Mad, Mad World" and MC Shan's "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste," avoiding parables and introducing the "hustler" to the film's music soundtrack.

⁷² *Colors*; Various, *Colors - Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Album (Warner Bros. Records, 1988), CD.

⁷³ *Colors - Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*.

⁷⁴ While campaigning in Los Angeles, candidate George Bush said, "Drug dealers are domestic terrorists, killing kids and cops, and they should be treated as such. I won't bargain with terrorists, and I won't bargain with drug dealers either." "Reagan and Bush Place New Stress on the Drug Issue," *New York Times*, May 19, 1988.

Crenshaw rapper Ice T penned the soundtrack's sole single "Colors," a first-person gangster exposé. Unlike Shan and 7A3, Ice T empathized with the young gang member, yet, like his fellow rappers, Ice T treated his gang subject as the misunderstood victim of a dysfunctional society. Ice T's character, like those in the film he promoted, spread terror—"I am a nightmare walking, psychopath talking / King of my jungle, just a gangster stalking"—while simultaneously soliciting pathos—"Tell me what have you left me, what have I got / Last night in cold blood my young brother got shot / My homeboy got jacked / My mother's on crack / My sister can't work cause her arms show tracks." In rhyme, Ice T posed as a disgraced ghetto innocent, echoing Hopper's maxims as if he were one of the film's stars: "My life is violent, but violence is life / Peace is a dream, reality is a knife." More than any other song on the record, "Colors" set the tone for the film and charged the imaginations of moviegoers and, as it turned out, a new generation of rap fans.

"What *Colors* did," Ice T explained, "is make people around the country aware that there was a serious gang scene in L.A."⁷⁵ As the rapper recognized while on tour performing his hit from the movie soundtrack, that awareness among young rap fans—particularly white fans—often translated into glorification. He recalled young white audience members across the country displaying the fabricated gang signs represented in the film. He witnessed fans performing the "Crip Walk," dance moves typically seen only within gang-populated neighborhoods in Los Angeles. At one performance in Memphis, Tennessee, he spotted a young man wearing a khaki t-shirt emblazoned with "COLORS," the film's title, beneath "ROLLIN' 60s CRIPS," the name of the most notorious subset of the L.A. gang.⁷⁶ The artist who rapped on the movie's title track "*The gangs of L.A. will never die / Just multiply*" marveled at the sudden pervasiveness of "gangsta chic" in white working- and middle-class quarters. He reflected, incredulously, on "some kid from a nice suburb with a mom, dad, dog, and two-car garage tying a bandanna around his head and claiming a set that's three thousand miles away from his house—you're in fuckin' Kentucky!"⁷⁷

Colors' impressive box-office performance and the chart-ranking success of the film's soundtrack in the spring of 1988, affirmed that gangster tales were, once again, in vogue and that black gangster narratives in particular, paired with real urban decay, were a rising stock in American popular culture. According to the police and the Associated Press, it was not, as it turned out, only errant bullets from ghetto gang wars threatening American suburbs; it was a growing fascination with the gang "mystique" that appeared to be "luring imitators from other ethnic groups," especially suburban white teenagers. "The Whites come to us," one member of the Los Angeles Crips revealed. "We get [white kids] wearing blue rags and talking Black."⁷⁸

As Los Angeles rapper Ice T confirmed, and rising Compton artists Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Eazy E would prove, the entertainment market within this environment became ripe for gangster truth tellers. It was prepared for those who, unlike director Dennis Hopper, could speak from experience, providing first-hand reports from the battlefronts in which they lived. In the summer of 1988, the members of the little-known

⁷⁵ Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir*, 109.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁷ *Colors - Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*; Ice T, *Ice: A Memoir*, 111.

⁷⁸ "Black Gangs Recruiting Whites," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 7, 1988.

Niggaz Wit Attitude prepared to debut their first album. Recorded one year prior, while Dennis Hopper was directing film shoots in South Central, *Straight Outta Compton* would take full advantage of the American public's burgeoning interest in the harsh world the group claimed to know all too well.

Straight Outta Compton was engineered with a Los Angeles audience in mind. The members of N.W.A., according to Ice Cube, initially dismissed their music's commercial potential, anticipating that it would never "see the light of day."⁷⁹ The record, as one listener would later quip, "involves heavy rotation of the word 'motherf***er,' without which the album would be considerably shorter."⁸⁰ N.W.A. instead committed to expanding their consumer base within the relatively insular Southern California rap music market. They took cues from the tremendous local enthusiasm for their debut single "The Boyz-N-The Hood" to craft a full-length record that would entertain their most "hardcore" fans and, perhaps, through the city's independent record buyers, net them enough to cover their \$8,000 recording budget. These were manageable goals for a troop that had separately entertained on the South Los Angeles hip-hop party circuit and on local radio, each learning the idiosyncrasies of the city's unique urban music scene. The only exception, Eazy E, who could boast no prior experience as a performer, carefully studied music market trends in Los Angeles. Concerned with his own investment in Ruthless Records, he aimed to help his fellow band members take full advantage of their individual notoriety in the region and, ultimately, to support them in developing a saleable product.⁸¹

With the album complete, Eazy E took the lead on promotions and distribution. The general consensus among the members of N.W.A. had been that the record was largely an exercise in narcissism; they had reveled in its composition and were optimistic that it would elevate them to preeminence in Los Angeles. Rather than aim for commercial exposure, most members of the group had hoped to buttress the modest fame they had earned among their peers in years prior. Eazy E, who fronted the bill for recording, was the only member who expressed larger goals for the project. He enlisted manager Jerry Heller to solicit his major label connections, to expose them to *Straight Outta Compton* and gauge response. Heller could not, as Eazy E expected, procure major label representation for the group. Most labels conclusively rejected N.W.A.'s debut, citing "hardcore rap" as a financial and legal liability with disastrous consequences. Capitol Records executive Joe Smith presented Heller with an offer to invest, but requested only to buy the "Ruthless Records" brand. Smith refused to risk adding N.W.A. to the Capitol roster, informing Heller that he was "crazy" for making the suggestion. Heller pled for him to listen, urging him to see the innovation in the music. "Joe, it's the Black Panthers," Heller stressed. "It's the fucking Rolling Stones." After sampling the group's demo, Smith expressed his disgust and refused Heller's offer. "What makes you

⁷⁹ Terry McDermott, "NWA: Straight Outta Compton," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2002.

⁸⁰ Andy Gill, "Record Reviews: Taking a Rap on the Knuckles," *The Independent*, September 8, 1989.

⁸¹ Ibid.

think anyone is going to buy this garbage?” he asked Heller. “Who’s going to listen? Tell me who is going to play it? No radio station in the world.”⁸²

Despite being rebuffed by the leaders in the commercial music industry, Eazy E discovered advantages to relying on his own homemade enterprise. He had asserted himself as chief of operations since launching Ruthless Records in the spring of 1987. He preferred to maintain authority at all levels of production and distribution, wishing to wield the kind of administrative power he had aspired to have as a small-time cocaine trafficker. His governance of Ruthless Records, in fact, became an outgrowth of his work as a drug dealer. He relied on his illicit past for practical, grassroots promotions strategies, often culling from his former Compton drug networks for aid in record distribution. He hired local gang members—“snipers”—to galvanize interest in N.W.A. by strategically distributing free cassette tape copies of “The Boyz-N-The Hood” to influential neighborhood “hustlers,” who would, in turn, spread word and stimulate demand for the group’s music.⁸³

Once “snipers” had helped to generate buzz, Eazy E spent generously on vinyl 12” copies of the group’s first single to foster interest in the full-length record. Like so many Los Angeles hip-hop artists with limited resources and no commercial record label support, he relied upon Macola Records for its low-cost vinyl pressing services. The Hollywood record distribution company served, throughout the 1980s, as the nerve center for the region’s urban music market. It helped to propel local artists, including Dr. Dre and his World Class Wreckin’ Cru, to local fame by recording, printing, and selling their music. Eazy E and his band mates knew that for a small cash payment, self-motivated rappers, singers, DJs, and engineers could purchase their own product. They depended on a steady supply of that stock, which they could parcel out to local vendors, including Los Angeles record dealer Steve Yano.⁸⁴

Yano rented a stall at the Torrance Radium, the largest swap meet in Southern California. There, with a set of turntables and a few loud speakers, he played the records he had for sale—everything from 1950s rhythm and blues to current rap. He attracted customers from Hawthorne, Gardena, Carson, Compton, Crenshaw, and South-Central Los Angeles, many of them local DJs who purchased the tracks that elicited the most enthusiastic responses from the swap meet crowds. Record promoters representing independent and major labels hoping to hawk their latest wares jockeyed for his attention. “I’m meeting these guys outside bowling alleys in parking lots at midnight,” Yano remembered. “It was like we were dealing drugs.”⁸⁵ The so-called “king of the swap meet music underground” had noted Dr. Dre’s popularity and that his recordings with the World Class Wreckin’ Cru and the mix tapes he made for KDAY-AM were remarkably popular with his customers. When Yano heard “The Boyz-N-The Hood,” he knew he had found his next bestseller. With the help of Macola Records, Yano proved critical to Eazy E’s Ruthless Records and enabled N.W.A. to quickly and affordably meet increasing buyer demand in Los Angeles.⁸⁶

⁸² Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 110-111.

⁸³ McDermott, “NWA: Straight Outta Compton.”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 121.

Independent representation empowered N.W.A. to devise its own promotional strategies, however unconventional. It also allowed the group to preserve the integrity of their lyrical content in final production and to exercise creative authority. Commercial rap was, according to Eazy E, marred with “preaching or messages,” but its young, black inner-city consumers, he observed, were adverse to these “fairy tales” and preferred “what they can identify with.” *Straight Outta Compton*, he believed, provided the unfiltered, “ugly” truths that best reflected the lives of ghetto youth but that were absent from current hip-hop. Eazy E trusted that, in Los Angeles, N.W.A. could effectively promote that “reality” to expand their local fan base and to sell the album.⁸⁷ The group discovered that this worked well among their peers, many who consumed the album not for its shock value but for its familiar, representative themes. “The stuff [N.W.A.] were talking about was just shit about guys that I grew up with,” remembered Lawrence “DJ Muggs” Muggs, a Los Angeles producer. Muggs recognized the tropes in *Straight Outta Compton*, noting that the album’s characters were illustrative of “guys in my neighborhood like Big Hub, Madman, Baldie. That was their lifestyle.” To his ears, Niggaz Wit Attitude was simply “gangbangers rappin’.”⁸⁸

The record also captured the attention of outsiders, including Canadian Bryan Turner, a thirty-something record promoter with his own nascent rap enterprise in Southern California. Turner’s Los Angeles-based Priority Records released primarily compilation albums, including hip-hop “greatest hits” collections featuring East Coast artists like Doug E. Fresh, the Fat Boys, and Run-D.M.C.⁸⁹ He struggled in the late 1980s, however, to maintain his retail clients, many of whom were convinced rap had become dated and were skeptical of the label’s investment in the genre. Turner flagrantly dismissed the naysayers and, in the late 1980s, worked to develop his artist roster under the premise that “everyone is into rap now, even 12-year-old white kids in Texas.”⁹⁰

Known for its core marketing strategy, utilizing flashy album cover artwork to encourage “impulse buying,” Priority was primed to adopt a new artist, or group of artists, who promised to rouse audiences with unabashed musical content and, more importantly for sales, a brazen image. Niggaz Wit Attitude had been offering just that, with its imposing brand name, its expletive-heavy lyrics about taboo topics, and its claim to represent, in style and attitude, the Los Angeles “gangsta.” Turner’s wager, ultimately, was that white youths, a burgeoning market for rap music, would be intrigued by the mystique of a crew of black outlaws.⁹¹ This cutting-edge “gangsta rap” was “some scary stuff [that] will scare some white people,” Turner remembered noting. He believed that the “scary stuff,” however, was the music’s strength.⁹² Bucking the trend of record label

⁸⁷ Hunt, “The Rap Reality”; McDermott, “NWA: Straight Outta Compton.”

⁸⁸ Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (New York: Random House, 2002), 124-125.

⁸⁹ For examples of Priority Records early hip-hop releases, see Various, *Power Rap*, Album (Priority Records, 1986), Cassette, and Various, *Rap The Beat*, Album (Priority Records, 1988), CD.

⁹⁰ Patrick Goldstein, “This Record Exec Takes the Rap—Gladly,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1986.

⁹¹ McDermott, “NWA: Straight Outta Compton.”

⁹² Neil Strauss, “The Secret Power in Big Rap; Bryan Turner Makes Rap Records but Escapes the Criticism,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1998.

repudiation, Turner offered to partner with Eazy E's Ruthless Records and distribute *Straight Outta Compton* for the band.

The alliance was fitting. Priority Records manufactured and distributed *Straight Outta Compton*, but it invested minimal money and manpower in marketing the record for broadcast radio and music television. Like Eazy E, Bryan Turner thought it a waste of resources to pitch an uncensored record to regulated outlets. Although exposure on urban radio and MTV proved essential to the success of other contemporary rap artists, including Run-DMC and rising pop superstars DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, N.W.A. and Priority agreed to rely instead on shock value to drum up interest. "We knew the value of language, especially profanity," Ice Cube said. "We weren't that sophisticated, but we knew the power it had."⁹³

The album's most profane song, its sole track with a censored title, thrust N.W.A. and *Straight Outta Compton* onto the national stage. "---- Tha Police" was a fictional courtroom drama in which each member of N.W.A. testified against the Los Angeles Police Department, on trial for abuse of power. Penned by Ice Cube and MC Ren, the track's tale was based on each member's personal experiences growing up "*brown and not the other color*." Playing the roles of prosecuting attorneys, Cube, Ren, and Eazy E described a litany of crimes, including harassment—"I'm tired of the muthafuckin jackin' / Sweatin' my gang while I'm chillin' in the shackin'" — excessive force—"They're scared of a nigga / so they mace me to blind me" —privacy violations—"Search a nigga down and grabbin' his nuts"—and racial profiling:

*Fuckin with me, 'cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product
Thinking every nigga is sellin' narcota'.*

Each prosecuting rapper concluded his presentation of the evidence with explicit retaliatory threats. Attorney Ice Cube announced he would "*swarm / On any muthafucka in a blue uniform*," predicting a "*bloodbath of cops dyin in L.A.*" MC Ren, the self-proclaimed "*sniper with a hell of a scope*" anticipated "*takin' out a cop or two*." Eazy E, the "*gangsta*" with "*flava*," described a drive-by shooting, "*And while I'm drivin' off laughin / This is what I'll say: Fuck the police!*" Dr. Dre, judge and jury, issued the verdict to the defendant in the song's final stanzas: "*The jury has found you guilty of being a redneck, white-bread, chicken-shit mutherfucker*."⁹⁴

"I just couldn't believe it," Priority's CEO Bryan Turner remembered thinking after the group played him the track. Even in the context of an album full of seemingly exaggerated material, the anecdotes about police malfeasance in "----Tha Police" sounded preposterous. "It never happened in my neighborhood," Turner reasoned, but he trusted "those were their experiences," and he promised to publish it despite its volatile

⁹³ McDermott, "NWA: Straight Outta Compton."

⁹⁴ N.W.A., "---- Tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton*, Album (Ruthless/Priority, 1988), Vinyl LP, Cassette, and CD.

content.⁹⁵ To white industry figures like Turner, the members of N.W.A. learned to explain how “the cops in L.A. fuck with people for no reason.” *Colors* and national coverage of Police Chief Daryl Gates’ “Operation Hammer” had exposed the general public to violent clashes between police and young minorities resulting from increased gang activity. As the rappers were often reminded, however, few outside the poor, black inner-city communities of Los Angeles understood that, for most young black men in L.A., the real enemy was not the gang in blue but the force in blue. The police “would fuck with me and the homies for just doing nothing,” Ice Cube remembered.⁹⁶ “Usually you don’t have no voice,” he explained, attempting to justify the vengefulness in “---- Tha Police.” “Nobody can hear you scream. Here was a way we...could take all that pain and frustration, put it on the song, and scream.”⁹⁷

Though never released as a single, “---- Tha Police” became *Straight Outta Compton*’s most celebrated track, particularly among the group’s Los Angeles fans. At the time *Straight Outta Compton* began rising on the charts, Chief Gates’ escalated the LAPD’s war on drugs, specifically targeting “gangland areas” in South Los Angeles with surprise nighttime raids. From July to October 1989, “Operation Hammer” gang sweeps netted over 1500 arrests, many of them for petty crimes and traffic citations.⁹⁸ Former officer Don Johnson, a black law enforcement agent from Hawthorne, testified in 1989 that Los Angeles police frequently profiled young black and Latino men, casting a wide net in the hopes of capturing guilty parties.⁹⁹ In that context, the militant tone in “---- Tha Police” was especially poignant for young minorities in the city’s inner city. “That was my freedom of speech,” one former Los Angeles gang member recalled, explaining that the lyrics were thoroughly relatable. “I know what it’s like,” he said, “I’ve been harassed by the police, I’ve been thrown down on the ground, and I had to hop fences.”¹⁰⁰ It spoke to young men of color like Louis “B-Real” “Freeze, who complained he felt daily oppressed by police while growing up in South Gate. “---- the Police” was cathartic, eventually inspiring the Latino rapper to express his distaste for “pigs” in his own music.¹⁰¹ Jerry “Kokane” Long, a Los Angeles rap artist later signed to Eazy E’s Ruthless Records, predicted that “---- Tha Police” had the potential to “revolutionize the whole [rap] game.”¹⁰²

What was most significant about the song was, as Eazy E’s business partner Jerry Heller explained, “it wasn’t the wail of the victim. It wasn’t a complaint. It was an arrogant dismissal of every hard-ass cop everywhere.”¹⁰³ It was a lyrical rebellion against

⁹⁵ Strauss, “The Secret Power in Big Rap.”

⁹⁶ Murphy, “Full Clip: Ice Cube Breaks Down His Entire Catalog.”

⁹⁷ *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

⁹⁸ “4 Killed, 16 Injured in Gang Violence in California,” *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1989; “Police Arrest Hundreds in L.A. Gangland Areas,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 1989; “Weekend Gang Sweep Results In 352 Arrests,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 24, 1989; “1000 People Arrested Over the Weekend,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1989.

⁹⁹ “Don Johnson: Police Reform Advocate,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 30, 1989.

¹⁰⁰ *Tha Westside*.

¹⁰¹ Coleman, *Check The Technique*, 127; Cypress Hill, “Pigs,” *Cypress Hill*, Album (Ruffhouse Records, 1991), Vinyl, LP.

¹⁰² *Tha Westside*.

¹⁰³ Heller and Reavill, *Ruthless*, 123.

law enforcement, prideful and bellicose in its tone. According to the FBI, it was also dangerous. In the summer of 1989, the federal agency issued a formal letter to Priority Records warning the group and its handlers to cease and desist. The missive, which represented the first time the FBI had taken an official position against a music artist, blamed N.W.A. for recent police deaths, saying the record encouraged “violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer.”¹⁰⁴

The official admonishment from the FBI might have threatened to derail N.W.A.’s campaign to promote *Straight Outta Compton* and to destroy both Priority and Ruthless Records. N.W.A., however, treated the resulting controversy as a rare opportunity for national exposure. They used the letter to their advantage, embellishing its content, and boasting that they were on the FBI’s “Most Wanted List,” which they trusted would only reaffirm their claims to being gangsters. The federal attention also rubber-stamped the band’s brand of artistic rebellion. “I’m seeing FBI agents on the news talking about N.W.A.,” Dre remembered. “That’s when I knew we had something.” Ice Cube agreed, reasoning, “When the FBI has your name, you know you’re doing work. You know you’re making a difference.”¹⁰⁵

Prior to the media firestorm surrounding N.W.A. in the summer of 1989, the group had secured few interviews in the press and even fewer television appearances. Most of the nation’s mainstream urban radio stations had categorically refused to play tracks from *Straight Outta Compton*, and cable television’s MTV had rejected the group’s “Straight Outta Compton” music video, citing violent imagery and explicit lyrical content.¹⁰⁶ Without the aid of radio or television, and with minimal exposure in music journalism, N.W.A. relied almost exclusively on street promotions and word of mouth to generate interest in their music. “---- the Police” and the angry FBI response to it turned the tide; the controversy around rap and censorship was good for business. It boosted sales and, more importantly, it made N.W.A. media darlings, attracting the attention of, for instance, *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone Magazine* and primetime television news outlets across the country.

N.W.A. learned quickly that provocation begat publicity. They utilized the national media platform to assert themselves as kings of “hardcore” rap and to further nourish their growing notoriety. Each member, now in the spotlight, reveled in questions about the acronym they chose as a moniker. Ice Cube explained in Fox Television’s “Pump It Up!” that they selected the name “Niggaz Wit Attitude” because “we wanted to scare a lot of people, start a little commotion, let the kids around [South Central Los Angeles] relate to it.”¹⁰⁷ It was a deliberate choice, Eazy E told *Spin*, to display “the ‘I don’t give a fuck’ attitude.”¹⁰⁸ In *Rolling Stone*, he ridiculed “the whole positive black thing.” By referencing the historically offensive epithet “nigger,” he said, the group aimed simply to “shock people.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Richard Harrington, “The FBI As Music Critic; Letter on Rap Record Seen as Intimidation,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1989.

¹⁰⁵ *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Harrington, “The Rap Jive From MTV,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1989, D7.

¹⁰⁷ “Ice Cube/D.O.C./N.W.A.”

¹⁰⁸ Mark Blackwell, “Niggaz4Dinner,” *Spin*, September 1991, 55.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Light, “Beating Up the Charts,” *Rolling Stone*, August 8, 1991, 65.

They succeeded. N.W.A. drew the ire of Tipper Gore, the president of the Parents Music Resource Center, who had lobbied for industry regulation of music deemed “sexually explicit, excessively violent, or [glorifies] the use of drugs and alcohol.”¹¹⁰ In an open letter to *The Washington Post*, Gore wrote that, “words like ‘bitch and ‘nigger’ are dangerous” and have the potential to glorify bigotry and incite violence.¹¹¹ In response, Eazy E said that N.W.A. employed words like “nigger” and “bitch” precisely because they were taboo. “I don’t like being told what I can and what I can’t say.”¹¹² Dr. Dre agreed, admitting that N.W.A.’s aim was to “piss people off.” He and his band mates, he said, grew fond of seeing “how far we can push the envelope.”¹¹³

The members also used the media platform created by the “---- Tha Police” polemic to prove that they were authentic Los Angeles gangstas and, therefore, first-hand witnesses to the storm brewing in their hometown. Preferring their own South Los Angeles haunts as sites for filming media appearances, each member took opportunities to illustrate why “the hardest stuff is coming out of this beautiful place.”¹¹⁴ They appeared in television interviews and for magazine photo shoots wielding assault rifles and shotguns and donning all black attire, including black sunglasses, black ball caps, and black Los Angeles Raiders gear. Eazy E commonly wore a bullet-proof vest, his characteristic accessory.¹¹⁵ Flagrantly borrowing from the Black Panther playbook, as had Los Angeles street gangs in the 1970s and 1980s, N.W.A. flaunted the image of the outlaw as part of a larger campaign to capture the attention of the nation.

“---- Tha Police,” the song Ice Cube labeled his “revenge fantasy,” ultimately propelled the second, and exceptionally fruitful, promotional effort for *Straight Outta Compton*.¹¹⁶ As Priority’s CEO Bryan Turner acknowledged, N.W.A.’s debut album was thoroughly audacious, from Ice Cube’s opening refrain—“*Straight Outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube / From the gang called Niggaz With Attitude*”—to the crude veneration of the “Dopeman”—“*Gold around his neck, a 14 K, has it / Bitches clockin’, on his dick, 24-7 / Plus he’s makin’ money, keep the base heads waiting / Rolls a six-four with the fresh-ass Dayton.*” “---- Tha Police,” however, was uniquely controversial, and it would prove to be a surprisingly useful tool in the group’s push for widespread exposure. More importantly, as N.W.A. gained national attention, it became the platform upon which the members based their “hardcore and dangerous” image. “That song,” Ice Cube explained later, was “the essence of what the group had become.”¹¹⁷

By the spring of 1989, N.W.A. had successfully staked its claim in “gangsta rap,” earning for its native Los Angeles precious cachet within hip-hop, a genre almost

¹¹⁰ United States Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, *Record Labeling*: Ninety-ninth Congress, First Session on Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records, September 19, 1985 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), 11.

¹¹¹ Tipper Gore, “Hate, Rape, and Rap,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 1990.

¹¹² Jerry Adler and Jennifer Foote, “The Rap Attitude,” *Newsweek*, March 19, 1990.

¹¹³ *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ “Episode 29,” *Yo! MTV Raps*, TV series, directors Ted Demme and Moses Edinborough (originally aired April 8, 1989; MTV Networks, 1989).

¹¹⁶ *NWA: The World’s Most Dangerous Group*.

¹¹⁷ Murphy, “Full Clip: Ice Cube Breaks Down His Entire Catalog.”

exclusively identified with New York. *Straight Outta Compton* continued to climb the charts, confounding critics and censors alike. As N.W.A. prepared to headline a fifty-city arena concert tour, one of the most popular American hip-hop events since Run-DMC's 1986 "Raising Hell" tour, music writers expressed enthusiasm. Many reviews of the group's debut alluded to the New York "hard core," which was described as flaccid in comparison to this new Los Angeles offering. "N.W.A.'s lyrics make [Boogie Down Productions] 'My 9mm Goes Bang' sound like a lullaby," wrote David Mills of *The Washington Times*.¹¹⁸ *Spin Magazine* Senior Editor John Leland offered his own appraisal of the hip-hop landscape in an article entitled, "Rap as Public Forum on Matters of Life and Death":

In New York rap, the gang member persona has lost some of its popularity. The criminal image, pioneered in Harlem over a decade by rappers like Spoonie Gee and Grandmaster Caz (whose name refers to the Casanova, a stickup crew), is becoming passé. Adopted by middle-class rappers like L.L. Cool J and the Beastie Boys, it has lost much of its meaning.¹¹⁹

Even rap connoisseurs loyal to the archetypal East Coast sound, were intrigued by N.W.A.'s cutting-edge approach to "street" music. Jay Z remembered that *Criminal Minded*, the 1987 debut from South Bronx-based Boogie Down Productions, and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, the explicitly militant offering from New York's Public Enemy, appropriated violence and drama in ways that spoke to some inner-city realities. He noted, however, that these seminal "gangster" records, despite being thrillingly rebellious, were also hostile to the average poor, ghetto youths struggling to make a living off his own cunning and, in many cases, crime. "The missing piece," Jay Z explained, "was the story of the hustler." *Straight Outta Compton* offered that. "It was clear they were ushering in a new movement."¹²⁰

There was evidence that N.W.A. had begun to transform not only the tone but also the business of rap music. Expanding upon the success of Dennis Hopper's *Colors*, *Straight Outta Compton* further popularized "gangster chic" and demonstrated its value as a marketing tool for up-and-coming rappers, particularly Los Angeles artists. King T, a Compton rapper signed to Joe Smith's Capitol Records and struggling to gain a foothold in the commercial rap market, exhibited several symbols of gang culture on the cover of his November 1988 release, *Act a Fool*. King T's lyrics showcased typical rap braggadocio and the occasional plea for "peace." The cover art, however, featured the artist with a 12-gauge shotgun at his side and sporting dark glasses, or "locs", and black slippers, or "house shoes," clothing items frequently associated with South Los Angeles gang fashion.¹²¹ Ice T, recognized in Los Angeles as an affiliate of the Crips gang, had spent the mid-eighties denouncing gang violence in Los Angeles, encouraging young people to repudiate the criminal lifestyle, and pleading for "Peace on the Streets" in

¹¹⁸ Mills, "Guns and Poses."

¹¹⁹ John Leland, "Recordings; Rap as Public Forum on Matters of Life and Death," *New York Times*, March 12, 1989.

¹²⁰ Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 10, 16.

¹²¹ King T, "The Coolest," *Act a Fool*, Album (Capitol Records, 1988), CD.

interviews with the press and in radio public service spots.¹²² However, for his sophomore album *Power*, released in the fall of 1988, he reclaimed the gangster identity he had only recently attempted to shed. He chose, for the album cover art, to appear draped all in blue and wielding a shotgun. He also selected provocative—if sometimes misleading—track titles, including “The Syndicate,” “Grand Larceny,” and “I’m Your Pusher.” In promotional ads for the record, appropriating a slang term for greatness, he claimed to be the “world’s biggest dope dealer.”¹²³ Lobbying for recognition as “the first rapping... gangster,” he boasted that the guns used as props in the album’s cover art were, in fact, his.¹²⁴

Although others tried to posture as pioneers of “gangsta rap,” N.W.A. had blazed the trail for what was becoming an infectious pop culture trend. Just as filmmaker Dennis Hopper had been accused of capitalizing on real inner-city crises with his box-office film *Colors*, so too were the members of Niggaz Wit Attitude charged with exploiting public fears. “The members of N.W.A. want you to fear and loathe them,” one critic complained, “all the better to sell [their merchandise].”¹²⁵ Unlike Hopper, however, the group embraced these indictments and flaunted their unethical business exploits. “Fuck the world!” Eazy told *Spin* magazine in response to questions about the group’s moral responsibility. “I wanna be a billionaire,” Ren declared.¹²⁶ Dr. Dre often stressed that his bandmates had no interest in delivering a specific message. The group’s “only responsibility,” he said, “is to make records, make money, and eat.”¹²⁷ Ice Cube agreed, noting that, “nobody can take care of me better than me.” Rap was his meal ticket, as he told *Rolling Stone*: “I want an apartment complex, muthafuckin’ shopping centers. I want all kind of shit...I could travel. Hire a muthafucka to have my headache.”¹²⁸

That Niggaz Wit Attitude were, in fact, profiting off a new, more offensive “rap attitude” angered many in the industry. Some were repulsed by what appeared to be the product of a lost generation of American youth with fewer skills and fewer moral values than their predecessors. An editorial in *Newsweek* concluded that gangsta rap epitomized the “culture of attitude,” which was nihilistic, “repulsive,” and “mostly empty of political content.”¹²⁹ Andre “Doctor Dré” Brown, host of *Yo! MTV Raps*, warned that N.W.A.’s music had the potential to rile “idiotic brothers out there.” He objected specifically to “--- - Tha Police,” the sole track that addressed institutionalized discrimination. “Instead of worrying so much about what the police are doing,” Brown suggested, “we need to be policing ourselves.”¹³⁰ Bill Adler, rap journalist and a former publicity manager for Run-DMC said that the “gangsta”-inspired rap phenomenon was “ugly.” Its appeal, he

¹²² Lester, “‘Colors’: Controversial Film Met With Protest.”

¹²³ Leland, “Recordings; Rap as Public Forum on Matters of Life and Death.”

¹²⁴ “Stone Cold Pimpin’: From L.A. Hustler to Worldwide Rap Star, Ice-T Gets the Power,” *Vibe*, August 2008, 95.

¹²⁵ Peter Howell, “Rappers’ nothing-is-sacred attitude sells,” *The Toronto Star*, July 6, 1991, F10.

¹²⁶ Blackwell, “Niggaz4Dinner.”

¹²⁷ Hunt, “The Rap Reality.”

¹²⁸ Sager, “Cube.”

¹²⁹ Adler and Foote, “The Rap Attitude.”

¹³⁰ Lisa Barrett, “The Politics of Rap; Artists and Activists Sound Off and Speak Up,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 24, 1991.

conceded, was in the “thrill of the forbidden,” and he predicted that, like rock and roll in the 1950s, its popularity—and the panic about its popularity—would only spread.¹³¹

In 1991, N.W.A. released its sophomore album *Efil4zaggin*. Like *Straight Outta Compton*, it defied the odds of the pop music industry. The group still lacked the production and promotional resources afforded by major label representation. They continued to rely upon Eazy E’s Ruthless Records for capital and the independent Los Angeles-based Priority Records for marketing and distribution. The group, in addition, was beginning to dissolve. Ice Cube, N.W.A.’s lead songwriter, defected over a contract dispute with Ruthless. The member credited as “The Nigga With Attitude” who defined the Niggaz Wit Attitude became the group’s primary competitor, debuting his first solo record, *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted*, nearly a year before the release of *Efil4zaggin*. Rumors of another feud brewing between Eazy E and Dr. Dre titillated the press and threatened to mar N.W.A.’s promotional efforts. News of infighting compounded the scathing reviews of the record’s X-rated content, its flagrant misogyny, allusions to rape, and glorification of homicide. With its controversial title—Niggaz4Life, spelled backward—and tracks like “To Kill a Hooker,” “Findum, Fuckum, & Flee,” and “One Less Bitch,” *Efil4zaggin* proved even more objectionable to distributors than *Straight Outta Compton*. Major record outlets in Canada and Europe refused to stock the album. In the United Kingdom, the government’s Obscene Publications Squad seized 24,000 copies of the record and effectively banned sales of the album in the country.¹³² In the United States, anti-pornography crusader Jack Thompson led a successful campaign to remove *Efil4zaggin* from all Musicland stores, and businesses throughout the country refused to stock it rather than risk criminal prosecution for selling material labeled “obscene” to minors.¹³³

Despite obstacles, N.W.A.’s *Efil4zaggin* was a commercial triumph. The record debuted on the Billboard Pop Album chart at #2, the highest debut for an album since Michael Jackson’s *Bad* and the top charting independent album in over a decade. Within just two weeks of its release, *Efil4zaggin* had reached #1 and earned platinum RIAA certification for selling over 1 million copies.¹³⁴ Anticipation and “strong word of mouth” drove sales. David Mays of *The Source* hip-hop journal reported that record distributors issued requests for “the new N.W.A.” months before the album’s scheduled release. The group’s reputation for stoking controversy, and the mystique of the “gangsta” that they had effectively advanced, proved key. As the group had learned from the fallout after *Straight Outta Compton*, indecency and dysfunction paired with negative press worked to bolster demand for their product. N.W.A. managed to harness a marketing strategy that had yet to be gainfully utilized in hip-hop. “How can some motherfuckers with a street

¹³¹ James T. Jones IV, “N.W.A.’s career gets a jolt from lyrics’ shock value,” *USA Today*, June 21, 1991, 4D.

¹³² Gil Griffin, “Strong Words From Ice-T and N.W.A.,” *The Washington Post*, June 12, 1991.

¹³³ Chris Morris, “Minnesota To Musicland: No N.W.A. Album to Minors,” *Billboard*, August 10, 1991.

¹³⁴ Paul Grein, “N.W.A. Album Charges Onto Chart at No.2,” *Billboard*, June 15, 1991; “The Billboard 200,” *Billboard*, July 6, 1991; Griffin, “Strong Words From Ice-T and N.W.A.”

record get Number One over motherfucking AC/DC, Paula Abdul,” Eazy asked rhetorically in *Rolling Stone*. DJ Yella responded plainly: “Now everybody’s buying [*Efil4zaggin*] just to see what the fuck is going on.”¹³⁵

In its infancy, Niggaz Wit Attitude had depended on black Los Angeles. They relied, more specifically, on those young Angelenos familiar both with the group’s members and with the kinds of themes explored in their lyrics. L.A.’s gangsta rappers, as Compton City Councilwoman Pat Moore acknowledged, grew up in the harsh inner-city. “Whether or not adults approve of their lyrics,” she told the region’s African-American press, “they are reaching our young people and are role models for them. Members of these groups have survived and are still alive and they have mastered the system better than we (as parents) have because they are talking about things that are real to our young people and they have their attention.”¹³⁶ With the help of the rising stock in “gangsta chic,” Priority Records, and, ultimately, the FBI, N.W.A. expanded its consumer base. By 1989, the group’s key demographic was concentrated not in the inner city but in the suburbs, where mostly affluent, white teenage boys bought their music. Buyers for national record chains Camelot and Kemp Mill noticed that, from 1989 through 1991, N.W.A. product sold best in suburban shopping malls and stores typically specializing in heavy metal and rock. Proprietors reported that they could not keep enough copies of *Straight Outta Compton* and *Efil4zaggin* in stock to meet the overwhelming demand. As an outgrowth of the Ronald Reagan Era, StreetSide record buyer Randy Davis noted, “rap is the rebellious music of the ‘90s.” Rap rebellion, it turned out, was also gold for the industry.¹³⁷ The South Los Angeles rappers that had been shunned by the commercial record industry ultimately helped to revitalize it, and they helped to make rap one of the most lucrative musical genres in the United States.

In an extremely rare social critique of an album’s content, *Billboard* magazine commented on the implications for N.W.A.’s crossover success with *Efil4zaggin*:

Some would say it is clear evidence of the acceptance of rap in the mainstream. Cool. But look at it this way: A lot of kids paying to hear a group of black gangstas call themselves “niggaz” not once but continuously throughout the album rife with images of violence and personal disrespect — that’s gotta be popular in the new racially charged era.¹³⁸

N.W.A., as *Billboard* charged, was producing something far more corrosive than even the anti-obscenity crusaders of the PMRC imagined. The debates over the group’s promotion of “gangsta chic,” misogyny, violence, and conspicuous—even illicit—consumption, ignored the fact that “gangsta rap” appeared to be encouraging race prejudice. N.W.A. and its successors stood accused of feeding Americans a set of toxic ideas about black

¹³⁵ Jones, “N.W.A.’s career gets a jolt from lyrics’ shock value”; Light, “Beating Up the Charts.”

¹³⁶ J. Andrea Penix-Smith, “2 Live Crew, Eazy E, NWA Set for Compton Rapfest,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 13, 1990, B10.

¹³⁷ Deborah Russell, “N.W.A. Displays A Winning Attitude; Stickered Album is Nation’s Top Seller,” *Billboard*, June 22, 1991, 7.

¹³⁸ Janine McAdams, “Low ‘Priority’: N.W.A.’s Chart-Topping Album; Violence, Misogyny Mar Un-Eazy-E ‘Efil4zaggin,’” *Billboard*, July 6, 1991, 23.

youth and the inner city that had only begun to take shape following the urban riots of the 1960s. Within “the new racially charged era,” N.W.A. threatened to crystalize the race-based conservatism of the 1980s. The group also offered anthems to those feared urban youths for violent resistance to institutional racism.

In the spring of 1989, anti-gang activist Leon Watkins fretted over the popularity of gangsta rap. The South Central community leader portended that “nothing good” would come of it. With the goal of selling a product, he said, N.W.A. was aggravating the “frustration” already crippling his city. The young men, he feared, were “taking advantage” of “a volatile situation.” Watkins suggested, however, that despite the public’s fears, it would not be the music that would “touch off something violent.” It would instead be another event, “like a shooting, that sets things off, and then the music becomes a battle cry.”¹³⁹ Two years later, in the fall of 1991, Ice Cube would offer a similar prediction about his Los Angeles, the city he had built a career representing: “Pretty soon, shit’s gonna blow up.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Steve Hochman, “Police Don’t Give Rappers Bad Rap,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1989.

¹⁴⁰ Ras Baraka, “Endangered Species,” *The Source*, September 1991, 34.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The Day the Niggaz Took Over”: A Conclusion

“Welcome to Beirut West.” On May 1, 1992, a National Guardsman offered a reporter this brief summary of the scene as he took up his position in South Central Los Angeles, the heart of the riot zone. After two days of widespread lawlessness in the city, some 4,500 Army and Marine Corps troops, *The Washington Times* reported, mobilized “as if they were responding to an international crisis in Panama or the Middle East.” For the first time since 1972, when President Richard Nixon ordered the military to respond to large anti-war demonstrations in Washington, D.C., the government deployed federal troops to subdue domestic civil unrest. The soldiers were fitted with fatigues, flak jackets, and helmets, armed with M-16 rifles and 9mm pistols, and they had at their disposal military Humvees, 10-ton trucks, and tanks. As part of the “Joint Task Force Los Angeles” operation, members of the Army and Marines joined FBI swat team officers, Border Patrol Response agents, California National Guardsmen, and Los Angeles police officers to bring an end to the riots.¹

The six-day Los Angeles Riots began as a backlash to the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers charged in the beating of twenty-five-year-old Rodney Glen King. The March 1991 incident, in which police debilitated King, leaving him with a broken ankle, a broken jaw, a shattered cheekbone, skull fractures, brain damage, multiple lacerations, and internal bleeding, was captured on home video and broadcast nationally. Transcripts of police communication, in which LAPD officials joked about King and boasted about the officers’ use of force, exacerbated the public outcry over the brutal beating.² The initial response was swift from local and state officials, including Mayor Tom Bradley and California lawmakers Maxine Waters and Don Edwards, who each called for indictments of the officers involved. In the days following the beating, the Southern California chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union launched a national campaign to oust Police Chief Daryl Gates, referring to Gates’ force as a “gang” in “blue uniforms.”³ The federal government responded in kind. With pressure from the Congressional Black Caucus, the Justice Department broadened its ongoing investigation of police violence in Los Angeles to include a review of reported cases of misconduct in law enforcement agencies throughout the nation. Congressman John Conyers of Michigan cited the investigation as key to uncovering “the systematic nature” of police brutality in the United States. “If we can’t protect citizens against the

¹ Rowan Scarborough, “Bush mobilizes 4,500 troops as backup for police,” *The Washington Times*, May 2, 1992.

² “Police joked about black’s beating Los Angeles officer’s message boasts of ‘big-time use of force,’” *The Toronto Star*, March 19, 1991.

³ Tim Kenworthy and Jill Walker, “Lawmakers Ask FBI to Probe Los Angeles Police for Brutality; Chief Gates Urged to Resign Over Beating of Black,” *The Washington Post*, March 13, 1991.

kind of videotaped violence that occurred in L.A. that night,” he warned, “we’re a nation in jeopardy.”⁴

Although municipal authorities were in a panic over national broadcasts of the beating, the videotaped proof of police abuse, paradoxically, assuaged concerns that the event would result in rioting. Although the 1965 Watts Riots had been sparked by a similar traffic stop involving a black male motorist, many believed that the video of the 1991 incident would guarantee justice. “Without the tape, the LAPD might have argued anything and been believed by a jury,” said a member of the district attorney’s investigatory team. “With the tape, it looks like the city might as well just start writing the check to King’s lawyers.”⁵ Many observers agreed that clear evidence of gross misconduct would net guilty verdicts in King’s case against the officers and, perhaps, federal legislation limiting law enforcement agencies’ use of force. As one complainant said in anticipation of this sea change, “We are blessed that this incident happened.”⁶ Others outright dismissed the notion that a second Watts Riots would occur, arguing that the current political environment inhibited such a reaction. Edward Lawson, a civil rights activist who testified in 1983 before the Supreme Court in a case against the San Diego Police, said a decade of conservative government had undermined black leadership and eliminated the channels of organized resistance. “There is nobody out there to rise up,” he said.⁷

On April 29, 1992, following weeks of highly publicized testimony in the case against the four LAPD officers charged in the beating of Rodney King, the trial jury returned not-guilty verdicts. Within an hour of the announcement, violent rioting had begun radiating from the Parker Center in downtown Los Angeles, and by the evening, much of the city was engulfed in flames and smoke. The Los Angeles Riots ultimately lasted six full days and left more than sixty people dead, thousands injured, and over \$1 billion worth of property destroyed. All told, the 1992 Riots lasted longer, were more widespread, more indiscriminately violent, and more thoroughly publicized than the Watts Riots in 1965.

Gangsta rappers, already associated with Los Angeles inner-city violence, were some of the first to broadcast their thoughts on the rage that fueled the riots. “I’m not saying I told you so,” Ice T said to the city’s black press, “but rappers have been reporting from the front for years.”⁸ While MTV aired folk-rocker Tom Petty’s music video plea for peace—“*If the powers that be / Let evil go free / You must understand / not to play into their hands!*”—MC Ren of N.W.A. celebrated those who participated in the

⁴ Jerry Seper, “Black Caucus wants action on alleged brutality in LA,” *The Washington Times*, March 13, 1991; John Yang and Jill Walker, “4 L.A. Officers Reported Indicted in Taped Beating; U.S. to Widen Probe of Alleged Police Brutality,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 1991; “U.S. widens probe of police violence,” *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), March 15, 1991.

⁵ Charles Leerhsen and Lynda Wright, “L.A.’s Violent New Video,” *Newsweek*, March 18, 1991.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Kolender v. Lawson*, 461 U.S. 352 (1983); “Beating video sparks rage; Los Angeles police force in disarray after assault televised,” *The Globe and Mail (Canada)*, March 7, 1991.

⁸ Carolyn Bingham, “City of the Stars Under Siege and Occupation,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 7, 1992, B3.

uprising as proud vigilantes.⁹ “If the riots hadn’t jumped off, that would have let people know it’s all right to destroy black males,” he explained. “Everybody looks at black people different now. Black people are no joke.”¹⁰ On his post-riot album *The Predator*, recorded in the midst of the crisis, Ice Cube declared, “*April 29th was Power to the People / And we might just see a sequel.*”¹¹

More than any other rap celebrity, Ice Cube claimed to have prophesized the 1992 uprising. “Anything you wanted to know about the riots was in the records before the riots.”¹² As he reminded listeners in a poignant, interview-style interlude on *The Predator*, he had cataloged ghetto grievances years before the riots, and he had, time and time again, provided listeners with portrayals of the vitriol brewing in places like South Central, Compton, and Inglewood. Ice Cube asserted that even his earliest records, including N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) and his first two solo records, *Amerikkka’s Most Wanted* (1990) and *Death Certificate* (1991), he had “given so many warnings on what’s gonna happen if we don’t get these things straight.”¹³ This was accurate. In *Straight Outta Compton*’s most popular—and controversial—track “F--- Tha Police,” he and each member of his group N.W.A. broadcast their indictments of the Los Angeles police, for crimes ranging from racial profiling and arrogance to physical harassment and homicide. They each also fantasized about meting out their brand of vigilante justice. Ice Cube rapped: “*Just ‘cause I’m from the CPT / Punk police are afraid of me! / A young nigga on the warpath / And when I’m finished, it’s gonna be a bloodbath.*”¹⁴

Two years later, on his debut solo album *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted*, the police again appeared as Ice Cube’s primary nemesis. In “Endangered Species (Tales From The Darkside),” the Inglewood rapper described law enforcement as the number one threat to young black men. Rapping over a sample from his celebrated “F--- Tha Police” verse, he explained:

*Since I’m young, they consider me the enemy
They kill ten of me to get the job correct
To serve, protect, and break a niggas neck
‘Cause I’m the one with the trunk of funk
And “Fuck The Police” in the tape deck.*¹⁵

⁹ Name of Tom Petty track; Phil McCombs and Megan Rosenfeld, “Putting the Riots on the Record,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 1992.

¹⁰ Sheila Rule, “Rappers Say the Riots Were No Surprise to Their Listeners,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1992.

¹¹ Ice Cube, “Wicked,” *The Predator*, Album (1992; Priority Records, 1992), Vinyl, LP.

¹² Ice Cube, “F--- ‘Em (Insert),” *The Predator*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ N.W.A., “F--- Tha Police,” *Straight Outta Compton*, Album (1988; Ruthless Records/Priority Records, 1988), Vinyl, LP.

¹⁵ A remix of “Endangered Species,” released shortly after the debut album, included a clip of an NBC Nightly News report with Tom Brokaw citing Los Angeles as the “gang capitol of the nation” and asking if “there’s anything that can be done about all of this.” Ice Cube, “Endangered Species (Tales From The Darkside),” *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted*, Album (1990; Priority Records, 1990), Vinyl, LP.

Death Certificate, released the following year, expanded upon these narratives. On tracks like “The Wrong Nigga to Fuck Wit,” “A Bird in the Hand,” and “I Wanna Kill Sam,” Ice Cube furnished context for his own malice by portraying a young black father who punched a clock “like a slave” yet still failed to make enough money for diapers and Similac or “decent shelter and the clothes on my back.”¹⁶ In his lyrics, he placed the blame for this kind of inner-city plight on political leaders—“Your plan against the ghetto backfired”—and national ideologies, more generally—“Fuck AmeriKKKa / still with the triple K.”¹⁷ His most explicit revenge fantasies, however, remained reserved for the LAPD and its chief, Daryl Gates:

*Break his spine like a jellyfish
Kick his ass ‘til I’m smellin’ shit
Off with the head, off with the head I say
And watch the devil start kickin’
Run around like a chicken
Grand Dragon finger lickin’
Yo, turn him over with a spatula
Now we got Kentucky Fried Cracker
Mess with the Cube, you get punked quick
Pig, ‘cause I’m the wrong nigga to fuck with!*¹⁸

Like many of his fellow gangsta rappers, Ice Cube took pride in his exhaustive predictions that “Armageddon is near.”¹⁹ Perhaps he had, in his music, provided motive for the insurrection. As he said, “The police really had carte blanche in our neighborhoods ‘til we did the song ‘F--- Tha Police.’”²⁰ Perhaps he had simply represented the volatile environment created by frustrations festering within the communities of South Los Angeles, particularly among young black men. Either way, the 1992 Los Angeles Riots granted him vindication.

Because gangsta rappers were so vocal in providing justification for the L.A. Riots, they became scapegoats for the violence, the looting, and the destruction. Many welcomed the blame and, in fact, took credit for providing the fuel for the “fire this time.”²¹ As the smoke cleared and the city’s recovery began, some rappers revived the rebellion in song, imagining even more anarchy and bloodshed. The *Get The Fist Movement*, an all-star rap partnership including Los Angeles artists King Tee, MC Eiht of Compton’s Most Wanted, B-Real of Cypress Hill, and members of Ice Cube’s protégés Da Lench Mob, offered a track in stark contrast to early “increase-the-peace” all-star rap

¹⁶ Ice Cube, “A Bird In The Hand,” *Death Certificate*, Album (1991; Priority Records, 1991), Vinyl, LP.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Ice Cube, “The Wrong Nigga To Fuck Wit,” *Death Certificate*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ice Cube, “F--- ‘Em (Insert),” *The Predator*.

²⁰ Courtney Garcia, “Ice Cube Reflects on how the LA riots changed rap,” *TheGrio*, April 29, 2012, <<http://thegrio.com/2012/04/29/ice-cube-reflects-on-how-the-la-riots-changed-rap/>>, accessed November 2, 2012.

²¹ Sheila Rule, “Rappers Say the Riots Were No Surprise to Their Listeners,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1992; Jimmie Briggs, “Pop Recordings,” *The Washington Post*, November 29, 1992.

anthems like “Self-Destruction” (1989) and “We’re All in the Same Gang” (1990).²² In “Get the Fist,” released in November 1992, each verse zealously rehashed the events of the spring. “*Get a taste of the heat / While I burn down the streets,*” King Tee began, referencing “*what they did to Rodney,*” and warning those “*skeezin’ on my race / I’m black and I’m proud to be lootin’ in your face.*” Compton’s Most Wanted MC Eihl most effectively provoked rap’s critics by suggesting, “*Not black-on-black, the other color gets beat / I guess it’s time for brothers to turn the page and / Let out some rage and bang a Caucasian.*”²³ Ice T also tapped into white fears about the widespread ramifications of black rebellion and, as the press deemed it, an inevitable “cultural invasion.” On his album *Home Invasion*, released in early 1993, he proclaimed to white America, “*I’m takin’ your kids’ brains, you ain’t gettin’ ‘em back.*”²⁴ In promotional interviews for the record, he was more explicit about the role rap played in the Los Angeles Riots and the aftermath: “White kids are being indoctrinated with the truth in black rage.”²⁵

No records released in the wake of the 1992 riots, however, were as musically and culturally impactful as the studio albums offered by gangsta rap patriarchs and former N.W.A. members Ice Cube and Dr. Dre. Ice Cube’s November 1992 offering, *The Predator*, was his most commercially successful recording, reaching the top spot on the *Billboard 200* album chart and netting three singles—“Wicked,” “Check Yo Self,” and “It Was A Good Day”—that each ranked in the *Billboard* Hot 100 and topped the *Billboard* Hot Rap Singles chart. The same themes that defined the riots pervaded *The Predator*: young black men fed up with generations of injustice, and white paranoia about that rage. Lyrically taunting the conventional villains of white supremacy, including the Ku Klux Klan, white political leaders, white juries, and the police, Ice Cube defined himself as “*the nigger with the big fat trigger,*” and asked, “*Will they do me like Malcolm?*”²⁶ Threatened with “genocide,” the Original Gangster became the aggressor, “stalking” his prey—“*I’m the O.G. and I bust back (Boom! Boom!) / Bust back (Boom! Boom!), peel a cap (Boom! Boom!)*”—and he reminded the tyrants all around him of the rage beneath their caricatures—“*Nappy head, nappy chest, nappy chin / Never seen with a happy grin.*”²⁷

As he had in his first two solo albums and in the work he did with N.W.A., Ice Cube explicitly engaged issues of black economic marginalization, incarceration, disenfranchisement, and racism. And he did not limit his militancy to his lyrics. Interludes included clips of news reports on the riots, excerpts from television interviews with contemporary Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and portions of a 1964 speech delivered by Malcolm X. In the album’s liner notes, Ice Cube invoked W.E.B. Du

²² Stop The Violence Movement, “Self Destruction,” Single (1989; Jive, 1989), Vinyl, 12”; The West Coast Rap All-Stars, “We’re All in the Same Gang,” Single (1990; Warner Bros. Records, 1990), Vinyl, 12”.

²³ Get The Fist Movement, “Get The Fist,” Single (1992; Mercury, 1992), Vinyl, 12”.

²⁴ Ice T, “Home Invasion,” *Home Invasion*, Album (1993; Rhyme \$yndicate Records and Priority Records, 1993), CD.

²⁵ Richard Harrington, “Ice-T and the Invasion of White Suburbia,” *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1993.

²⁶ Ice Cube, “Now I Gotta Wet ‘Cha,” *The Predator*; Ice Cube, “When Will They Shoot?” *The Predator*.

²⁷ Ibid; Ice Cube, “Wicked,” *The Predator*.

Bois' notion of African-American double consciousness, noting that he felt like "two people in the same body—one African, one American. I see myself through the eyes of Africa and I will continue to speak as an African. I will become an African American when America gives up oppression of my people."²⁸ His statements in the context of the riot aftermath, however, were most poignant in the tracks "We Had to Tear This Motherfucka Up" and "Who Got the Camera?" In each, he belabored the Rodney King beating, the trial, and the acquittals and then championed the rioters—"To get some respect we had to tear this mothafucka up"—wielding threats against the perpetrators of injustice all along the way—"Go to Simi Valley and surely / somebody knows the address of the jury / Pay a little visit, 'Who is it?' (Oh, it's Ice Cube) / Can I talk to the Grand Wizard? Then, boom!"²⁹ Begun before the riots and completed in the months following, Ice Cube's *The Predator* made clear the implications of the kind of institutionalized oppression exposed by the exoneration of the police assailants in the Rodney King case—"Who got my nine / Who got my nine / Y'all done did it this time / Who the fuck got my nine?"³⁰

Ice Cube ultimately benefitted from the commercial legitimacy granted to gangsta rappers following the riots. Before the uprising, *New York Times* music critic Jon Pareles noted, gangsta rappers were considered "pulp auteurs, exploiting America's appetite for violent entertainment while dropping enough local details or 'reality' to sound credible." Whether they were truly documentarians or not was up for debate—that is, until the L.A. Riots. "Amid the violence," Pareles said, "the rappers suddenly seemed like experts."³¹ An editorial in *The Washington Post* acknowledged that the riots shed new light on gangsta rap, clearly revealing now that "despair and diffuse rage continue to simmer in black communities." The *Post* affirmed Ice Cube's assertion that for young blacks like himself, the riots were a necessary vehicle—"kicking up dust is a must"—for drawing the attention of an American public that had historically dismissed or altogether ignored the plight of those living in the country's inner-city ghettos.³²

The provocative content of *The Predator* is particularly significant given its commercial success. The album debuted at number one on the *Billboard* Hot 200 pop music chart, and it was certified platinum within two months of its release. It was a controversial record, one bolstered by the sensational coverage of the riots in the months leading up to its release, but *The Predator* was also a thoroughly listenable record. Although the lyrical content earned it a Parental Advisory sticker, the music industry's mark of Cain in the early 1990s, its singles, featuring the production of Los Angeles-based DJ Pooh and DJ Muggs' recognizable samples from Wilson Pickett's "Mustang

²⁸ In 1903, Du Bois described an African-American "double consciousness" and a "two-ness" of living as "an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1989), 5; liner notes in Ice Cube, *The Predator*.

²⁹ Ice Cube, "We Had To Tear This Muthafucka Up," *The Predator*.

³⁰ "Nine" refers to the Glock 9mm pistol, a semi-automatic weapon. Ice Cube, "Who Got The Camera," *The Predator*.

³¹ Jon Pareles, "Rap After the Riot: Smoldering Rage and No Apologies," *New York Times*, December 13, 1992.

³² Jimmie Briggs, "Pop Recordings," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 1992; Ice Cube, "We Had to Tear This Motherfucka Up," *The Predator*.

Sally,” The Ohio Players’ “Funky Worm, and The Isley Brothers’ “Footsteps in the Dark,” had commercial radio appeal. Clean versions of “Wicked,” “Check Yo Self,” and “It Was A Good Day” helped expose Ice Cube to more diverse audiences and, in doing so, helped change the trajectory of rap music. N.W.A., by exploiting the nation’s growing fascination with the black ghetto, had begun the process of pivoting the music industry’s focus from New York hip-hop to Los Angeles rap. As Ice Cube boasted, “We [N.W.A.] was at a million records before the East Coast even liked us.”³³ However, funky, bass-heavy, commercially appealing production, paired with the global publicity generated by the 1992 Riots, provided Los Angeles rappers with far more exposure—and better record sales—than any explicit lyrics, fabricated controversies, or dramatic infighting had in the past.

For Ice Cube’s former N.W.A. band mate Andre “Dr. Dre” Young, that was particularly true. Like *The Predator*, much of Dr. Dre’s debut solo record *The Chronic* was recorded in the wake of the Los Angeles Riots. A Compton native born the same year as Rodney King, Dr. Dre used the work to comment on the uprising and its causes. In “The Day the Niggaz Took Over,” he paired verses describing the arson, shooting, and looting with excerpts from interviews with black Angelenos in South Central reacting to the acquittals—“If you ain’t down for the Africans here in the United States. . . Devil, you need to step your punk ass to the side and let us brothers and us Africans step in and start putting some foot in that ass!” On the tracks “Let Me Ride,” “Lil’ Ghetto Boy,” “A Nigga Witta Gun,” and “Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat,” familiar gangsta tales rooted in the tradition of Los Angeles rap gained new poignancy in the context of the images of roving gangs during national coverage of the riots. “I don’t know what kind of album *The Chronic* would have been without the riots,” said Kurupt, a Los Angeles-based rapper and guest on the record. “It was coming from the middle of it all, saying this is what happened. Not only did the streets feel it, Americans felt it. It was a blueprint and a map through the emotions and situations that transpired over those three days.”³⁴

The Chronic, however, diverged sharply from the tone of Ice Cube’s project. The title alone, a slang term for high-potency marijuana, signaled a contrasting perspective on a set of similar topics. While *The Predator* forced the audience to relive the events and, in doing so, to confront the forces of oppression as tirelessly as Ice Cube did himself, *The Chronic* provided for a more nuanced approach to memorializing the riots. Dr. Dre’s soul and funk samples, including selections from Parliament, the Ohio Players, Solomon Burke, Leon Haywood, Isaac Hayes, The Kay-Gees, Willie Hutch, and Bill Withers, paired with live instrumentation, booming bass lines, and the lyrical swagger of Dr. Dre and each of his guest MCs—particularly his young protégé Snoop Dogg—invited listeners to reflect, rage, escape, and, willfully, move on.

The attention generated by the Los Angeles Riots paired with Dr. Dre’s unique brand of G-Funk production made *The Chronic* an industry triumph. It peaked at number three on the *Billboard 200* and number one on the *Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop Albums* chart. The album’s three singles, “Nuthin But A ‘G’ Thang,” “Dre Day,” and “Let Me Ride,” were each ranked in the top ten on the *Billboard* singles charts. The album sold more than

³³ Marsha Mitchell, “The Predator Is Trespassing All Over the Industry,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 24, 1992, B5.

³⁴ Ernest Hardy and August Brown, “The L.A. Riots: 20 Years Later; Rhythm of the Street,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2012.

twice as many copies as Ice Cube's *The Predator* in its first months of release, and within just one year, *The Chronic* had been certified three times Platinum by the RIAA. The album was critically acclaimed in the 1990s, and even twenty years later, for Dr. Dre's funk-inspired production, the benchmark for many young hip-hop artists. Rapper and producer Kanye West remarked to *Rolling Stone* in 2005, "Do hip-hop producers hold Dr. Dre in high esteem? It's like asking a Christian if he believes Christ died for his sins."³⁵ *The Chronic* elevated Dr. Dre as a musician and made him a, if not *the*, captain of the industry. In turn, it helped launch the careers of a team of MCs, including Snoop Dogg, Warren G, Kurupt, That Nigga Daz, Nate Dogg, and eventually Tupac Shakur, who collectively established "West Coast" rap as the preeminent subdivision of hip-hop music. According to Brooklyn MC Talib Kweli, *The Chronic* forever altered the hip-hop landscape. After its release, he remembered, gangsta rap reigned supreme. "That was it, that's what everybody was listening to." Dr. Dre, he said, "smothered the game."³⁶

At the time N.W.A. debuted "gangsta rap" in 1988, hip-hop critics and fans alike regarded the music as an ugly distortion of a budding genre. For many of those within the nascent hip-hop music industry, it was the maniacal antithesis to a community-minded, socially conscious hip-hop "movement." In 1992, the indiscriminately violent nature of the Los Angeles Riots appeared to confirm that. Many years later, gangsta rap continues to be a contentious topic in hip-hop circles, among scholars, critics, and fans alike, particularly since the music has penetrated commercial markets. In an editorial commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Los Angeles Riots, the *Los Angeles Times* summarized the state of contemporary hip-hop. Rap had been "co-opted by the mainstream" and, thus, had "devolved into a very profitable self-parody while claiming to 'keep it real.'" Gangsta rap, the article noted, had summarily "dropped the subject of social ills in favor of bragging about bling."³⁷

In its very earliest incarnation, gangsta rap harnessed what was uniquely difficult about life in black Los Angeles during the Reagan Era—unemployment, deteriorating public housing, gang culture, crime, violence, crack addiction, and the pervasiveness of police harassment. DJ Yella, speaking on behalf of his group N.W.A., said, "We just talk about what we live through in the streets."³⁸ Rap artists also tapped aggressively into the American public's fascination with post-industrial ghetto life, often with both art and profit in mind. They were, after all, conscientiously entrepreneurs and entertainers. Rapper and industry mogul Jay Z, while he agreed with Public Enemy's front man Chuck

³⁵ Kanye West, "The Immortals - The Greatest Artists of All Time: Dr. Dre," *Rolling Stone*, April 21, 2005.

³⁶ "Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek Talk Dr. Dre, Detox, Gangsta Rap, Aftermath," *Hard Knock TV*, Online music news program (Posted on June 28, 2010; Hardknock.TV, 2010), Online video, <<http://hardknock.tv/talib-kweli-and-hi-tek-talk-dr-dre-detox-gangsta-rap-aftermath/>>, accessed June 30, 2011.

³⁷ Ernest Hardy and August Brown, "The L.A. Riots: 20 Years Later; Rhythm of the Street," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2012.

³⁸ Sheila Rule, "Rappers Say the Riots Were No Surprise to Their Listeners," *New York Times*, May 26, 1992, C13.

D who referred to hip-hop as “the CNN of the ghetto,” was sure to amend the definition. “Hip-hop would be as boring as the news if all MCs did was report. Rap is also entertainment—and art.”³⁹ Talib Kweli described the “gangster” in rap as selling “sex and violence,” but in such a way that one “could not help but respect it and like it.”⁴⁰ The genre of gangsta rap, then, represented a contradiction: a powerful vehicle for underclass empowerment and, simultaneously, a profit-fueled mission that perpetuated negative stereotypes of young black men. Following the Los Angeles Riots, the press both praised gangsta rappers for divulging the crises in urban American and blasted them for “exploiting America’s appetite for violent entertainment.”⁴¹ Gangster rappers, in fact, did both. They revealed the boundaries of the American Dream for poor urban communities and they helped extend the backlash to the Civil Rights Movement that had defined the 1970s and the 1980s.

Successive generations of rap artists—particularly commercial rap artists—have proven similarly complex, in part, because they have been more thoroughly tied stylistically, materially, and ideologically to Los Angeles gangsta rappers than they have been to the pioneers of the early South Bronx “hip-hop movement.” In other words, the conditions in the South Los Angeles ghettos of the post-Watts Riots era that gave rise to the gangsta genre continues to underpin much of modern hip-hop; without N.W.A., and most importantly Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, there would be no Tupac Shakur, no Snoop Dogg, no Notorious B.I.G., no Outkast, no Eminem, no Jay Z, no Lil Wayne, no Kanye West, no 2 Chainz, and no Kendrick Lamar. These connections are reflected in the critical reception of their work. Most commercial rap artists, that is, continue to be exalted as radical social critics while they are, at the same time, lambasted as modern-day minstrels. Most continue to dictate for themselves the scope of both roles as they navigate the waters of the industry as musicians and songwriters, and, increasingly, label executives and owners.

Hip-hop, in this very context, has developed into a global phenomenon, and one that, in twenty-first century America, has pervaded pop music as much as it has permeated pop culture. The history of gangsta rap, then, provides a new framework for understanding hip-hop’s broad influence over the American music industry, television and film, advertising, fashion and the English lexicon, and even national politics and global diplomacy.⁴² “I hate to say it ‘cause it’s gonna scare some of the people,” Dogg Pound member “Lil Pimpin” commented in 2002, “but rap music is really taking over the

³⁹ Jay Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010), 18.

⁴⁰ “Talib Kweli and Hi-Tek Talk Dr. Dre, Detox, Gangsta Rap, Aftermath.”

⁴¹ Jon Pareles, “Rap After the Riot: Smoldering Rage and No Apologies,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1992, H27.

⁴² During the 2008 Democratic presidential primary campaign, candidate Barack Obama referenced Jay Z’s hit single “Dirt Off Your Shoulders” at a North Carolina rally. Then, in the general campaign that summer, he praised rapper Lil Wayne as the standard bearer for talented rappers. Speaking to African-American youth at the event at Power Springs, Georgia, he said, “Maybe you are the next Lil Wayne, but probably not, in which case you need to stay in school.” Teresa Wiltz, “Obama Has Jay-Z on His iPod and the Moves to Prove It,” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2008; Karen Tumulty, “Obama Says This Hope Stuff Only Goes So Far,” *Time*, July 8, 2008.

world.”⁴³ On the one hand, the national—and ultimately international—dissemination of hip-hop, especially if it is rooted in the “gangsta” ethic, can be perceived as an alarming development, but on the other, it is one that even American political leaders admit is characteristic of the nation, for better or for worse, in a post-“American Century” era. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated during a diplomatic trip to Syria in 2010, “Hip-hop is America.”⁴⁴

⁴³ *Tha Westside*, directed by Todd Williams (2002; Niche Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

⁴⁴ Hishaam Aidi, “Leveraging Hip Hop in US Foreign Policy,” *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2011, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/10/2011103091018299924.html>>, accessed November 2, 2012.

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