

**DON'T JUDGE A MAN BY THE COLOR OF HIS RAG: THE REALITY AND  
RESISTANCE OF GANGSTA RAP AMONG LOS ANGELES GANG MEMBERS**

A Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis shares interactive, performative stories regarding the intersection of gang culture and gangsta rap music. For a total of twenty-one days in a nine month span, I conducted ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews with sixteen former gang members and gangsta rap artists. While there I encountered, rode around, and hung with countless gang members belonging to both Crips and Bloods in South Central, Long Beach, Compton, and Inglewood. Although focusing on historic influences, this thesis travels through the present and positions itself as a future, utopic plot. The time period discussed in the thesis, 1986-1996, coincides with the first wave of gangsta rap and the years of active gangbanging and/or music training for these men. In the time discussed, the narratives and interviews have collectively shared one story: music was used to resist oppression while also reinforcing the oppressed mindset. By categorizing gangsta rap as a dystopian performative, I provide insight on the reality of music through reception and resistance of the LA Black Community.

Through my journey to Los Angeles, I discovered that the reality of the music is deeper than the subculture; instead, it is planted in the larger community. Gangsta rap disrupted the ignorance of society and the ignored concerns of the Black community. It demanded attention and addressed Black oppression. Specifically, the time period encountered entrenched hardship built upon police tactics and the drug trade.

## **DEDICATION**

To those who opened their lives, their hearts, and their rides for this gangsta journey to be told.

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## CHAPTER I

### EMBARKING INTO THE UNKNOWN<sup>1</sup>

“This is a journey into sound. A journey which, along the way, will bring to you a new color, new dimension, new value.”- Eric B. & Rakim<sup>2</sup>

The gangster music journey told in this thesis covers two time periods (May of 2013 and December-January of 2013-2014), when I traveled to Los Angeles, California to examine the intricate connections between gang culture and its music. As a gang researcher and hip-hop fiend, I was troubled by the lack of studies focusing on gang members’ experiences through gangsta rap, specifically during its inception period. I was intrigued by how gang members and gangsta rap artists themselves feel about this subgenre. Is the music a direct, relative portrayal to their actual environment and living situation? Noticing the disparate gap of information from the “horse’s mouth,” I set out on a journey to find out for myself.

I was once who I now desire to change. The reason why studying and understanding this specific Black subculture is important because I want to transform the perception of those who think gang members are nothing but terrorists who damage communities; criminals who steal, kill, and destroy. In fact, this research began when I planned to conduct a comparative analysis on Black street gangs and Black Greek letter organizations during a summer research program at the University of California-Los Angeles. The Summer Humanities Institute, sponsored by the Ralph J. Bunche Center of

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<sup>1</sup> I developed the style and format of the introduction from Cindy Garcia’s *Salsa Crossings*

<sup>2</sup> “Paid In Full-Seven Minutes of Madness”- Eric B. & Rakim



African-American Studies, changed my life. While there, my views and perceptions of Black street gangs transformed from pure ignorance and fear to knowledge and understanding. I concluded the summer research program by writing a research paper on reasons why Black men join street gangs in Los Angeles and Chicago rather than the comparative analysis I had planned.

Two years later in the spring semester of my graduate school career, I received a Communication Department grant to pursue my research on the gang culture and rap music in LA. The grant provided enough funding for travel to Los Angeles, a rental car, and few days of hotel accommodation. My first research trip lasted ten days (May, 16-26), so I eventually stayed with a family friend. Kym Burris and her daughter, Mya, lived in a two bedroom apartment in Inglewood, California. Although most nights ended with exhaustion, sleeping on the couch at the Inglewood apartment, most days were filled with excursions in my white Toyota Yaris with one missing hubcap, bumping only one album in the CD changer: Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city*.

The majority of the trip was spent in South Central, Los Angeles, but the cities discussed and traveled throughout this thesis include Inglewood, Compton, and Long Beach. In 2009, city officials renamed South Central to South, Los Angeles. My study, however, will continue to refer to this section as the former because of its cultural context and because reference is still popularly used (Cureton, 2008). The area dubbed South Central once derived its name from the "city's earliest black neighborhoods on South Central Avenue" (Hunt, 2010, p. 6). South Central's population and racial make-

up represented “half a million Black (40%), and Mexican/Latino (58%)” (Cureton, 2008, p. 1).

South Central is separated into two parts: the Eastside and Westside. The demographic split began on Main Street, on West 41st Street and East 41st Street (Phillips, 1999; Chapple, 2010). Although both were predominantly Black sections of LA, there was a further divide between class structures. The Eastside was known to be the poorer of the two with desolate, dirty streets and homes in need of upkeep, while the Westside of South Central was known for its affluent, beautiful landscape and prosperous people. As a whole South Central encompassed the boundaries of “Lynwood, Rosewood, Hawthorne, Carson, Gardena, Florence, Watts (i.e. Hacienda Village, Imperial Courts, Jordan Downs, and Nickerson Garden projects), and residential areas bordering Century, Crenshaw, and Martin Luther King Boulevards” (Cureton, 2008, p. 1).

According to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, the Compton racial makeup included 206,343 Hispanic residents and 83,196 African-American residents, the Inglewood population consisted of 192,909 Hispanic residents and 112,047 African-Americans residents, and Long Beach was composed of 227,317 Hispanic residents and 71,671 African American residents (United States Census Bureau, “2010 census interactive population map”). Although the Black census seemed small compared to its minority counterpart, “The County of Los Angeles boasted the second largest black population in the nation in 2007, nearly a million people, this population represented a relatively small, 9.5 percent of the county’s overall population,” and “By end of the first

decade of the 2000s, the Crenshaw/Leimert Park Village community was the largest resettlement community of African Americans in Los Angeles” (Hunt, 2010, p.14; Chapple, 2010, p. 60). With an excessive amount of Black Americans living in the Los Angeles area and being the second largest Black population in the U.S., they were still a vast minority compared to other racial makeups in the community. Clearly, there were important demographic issues I had to consider when entering this environment.

### **The Travel Toolkit**

The first person I met who guided this gangsta ride was Tremont. Tremont was 5’9,” mocha brown with light golden brown eyes. At 46, Tremont exuded confidence and youthfulness. His personality was filled with goodness and compassion, but was coupled with a dangerous past: he was a Crip. Not only was Tremont a Crip, but he embodied a family lineage of past generation Crips. Tremont’s uncles, Michael and Dennis Johnson, were founders and leaders of the Harlem Rollin’ 30s, a Crip set on the Westside of South Central. I met Tremont while at a non-profit organization called 2nd Call. The next day I was cruising with Tremont through his neighborhood, listening to 2Pac and his rap group Thug Life. We stopped on the street between Leighton Ave. and Western Ave., where there is a small shopping space surrounded by a barbershop, tattoo parlor, and a Belizean restaurant. Right across the street was the Martin Luther King Jr. Park and to the right of it, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary school. In this small shopping area, Tremont introduced me to those who were either working the stores or milling around as patrons. But they all belonged to the neighborhood. Regardless of their

position, this was a place to gather for camaraderie and fellowship among the younger and older gangsters.

With Tremont to my left, I initiated a conversation with those around about the early hip-hop scene in LA and its connection to the gang culture. At first, no one wanted to speak. They were close-lipped and suspicious. The only sight that gave both parties—myself and seven older gang members—comfort was Tremont’s presence. He was relaxed and confident. Under his influence, I opened up. I told them about my research and the reason why I was in Los Angeles. The once guarded gang members soon became engaged and expressed their feelings on the hip-hop and gang culture. One of those gang members was Indugu.

Indugu arrived during a lively discussion on the street curb, wearing all blue with a polo shirt, True Religion jeans, and vans shoes. He was well-known in the community not only because of his hood affiliation, but also due to his son’s stardom. He was the father of the R&B/Pop singer Omarion, and while his son claimed a public persona, Indugu chose to remain private. Like the others, it took Indugu awhile to warm to my intrusive welcome. I wanted them to feel comfortable with my presence and view me as non-threatening to their livelihood, even if I had to barge into their lives to do so. Out of everyone in the semi-circle discussion, Indugu and I established a connection. I later saw him again and thus, Indugu became my second tour guide.

On Saturday May 18<sup>th</sup> I was invited to help Tremont feed the homeless at King Park on 39<sup>th</sup> and Western, across the street from the shopping area we had met before. I arrived around 11:00 in the morning and waited with Tremont for the M.V.P., Men with

Vision seeking Purpose, team to come with pizza and chicken. While sitting on the park bench, I surveyed the people who gathered on this beautiful, sunny weekend. The park was filled with all ages, from little kids running in the grass and on the playground to older homeless individuals walking aimlessly around with bodies worn with sorrow. An older homeless man with crazy, wild hair yelled across the park, "I like your hair!" He said it once more and I realize he was talking to me. I smiled and slowly looked away. Across from where I sat was a group of Black male teenagers sitting on the top of a bench table who appeared in an excited discussion of their own. Not long after sitting, Indugu walked into the park and began to talk to Tremont and me. He was hungry and about to walk down the street for some soul food breakfast. Now comfortable, he asked if I wanted to tag along for a hearty conversation. Since I had yet to eat anything, I too was slightly starved. I also wanted to get to know Indugu better and M.V.P. had yet to arrive, so I joined him. Indugu and I told Tremont we would be back before stopping by Jack's.

Jack's Family Restaurant was across the street from the park, but further down the block. Indugu and I walked down to King Blvd and Leighton Ave.; inside, were greeted with soulful music crooning from the speakers and Black art adorned the walls. Indugu and I sat at the counter and I noticed his attire and appearance once more. He was again dressed in light blue with jewelry pieces placed selectively across his fingers, wrists, and earlobes. He was clean-shaven with gray sprinkled throughout his hair and beard. His silver squared wire framed glasses completed his look. Indugu also spoke

with a hip lingo and multiple times I had to decipher the meaning in my mind or, if I was completely confused, outright ask for a clear understanding.

Indugu was approaching 44 and alert. During our breakfast of biscuits, grits, eggs, and bacon, he explained to me the demographics of the area and its people. After the delicious home-styled meal, we went outside and strolled down the street, stopping to greet the many faces Indugu knew in the community. Half an hour later, we returned to the park to find Tremont playing chess with someone connected to the organization, but no food in sight. I hugged Indugu goodbye and spent the remainder of the day with Tremont as he drove me around the city and its familiar landmarks.

Ironically, the person who connected me to this gang environment was the last person I actually saw during my trip. Without Daryl Stanford, I would not have known Tremont or Indugu. In hindsight, this was probably best. With Daryl out of town when I arrived, my access was more organic and natural. Instead of being directed, my options expanded to other opportunities. Daryl was once a Rollin' 20s Blood and now founder of 2nd Call, a non-profit grassroots organization aimed to assist the community in violence reduction and human development programs. Its purpose was to provide services to proven offenders who were cast as social underclass with no means of economic mobility and those who were considered beyond redemption. Primarily, the organization's community outreach was done at several churches and schools in the area. On Thursday, I attended the 2nd Call meeting with hopes of getting to know a familiar face before I left.

Three days after my initial entrance in this environment, I met Daryl at his apartment in West Adams. We then hopped in his green Dodge Caravan and grubbed at Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles off of Manchester Blvd. Daryl, 50 years old, was light-skinned with light brown eyes. Bald with a graying goatee, he spoke with articulation and authority. After eating fried chicken and cinnamon waffles, he drove me around Compton and showed specific streets and their gang affiliation. Over the course of ten days, my time was spent with at least one of these three men—Darryl, Indugu, and Tremont—who guided me, shielded me, and introduced me to others in the community. I concluded my first trip having formed a bond with Tremont, Indugu, and Daryl; I continued to cultivate these relationships with monthly check-ins via phone, email, and text messages. Eight months later, I was back in Los Angeles and ready to grow those connections in multiple directions.

### *Cruising With the Homies*

On December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013, I returned to Los Angeles for the second time that year. Oh, how I missed this place, the people who made up this place. At LAX, Lena, my sorority sister, picked me up from the airport and we were off. Unlike in May when I rented a car, this trip was going to be different. I had no car. How was I going to get around and conduct interviews with both Crips and Bloods without this basic necessity? Choosing to opt out on personal transportation and depending on the community for mobility was no accident, but a strategic decision. This decision was influenced by both methodological and financial considerations: First, I wanted every single moment to count; I wanted to cherish the memories in between the moments, to have a dependency

on this community, and as such understand on a deeper, rooted level of lived experiences. In other words, I wanted to do some “deep” hanging out (Madison, 2012). The second and most pressing reason for this decision was that I could not afford a rental car. Unlike the previous trip in May, when I was funded through grant money, all expenses for this trip were paid from my own pocket. I had a strong desire to return and finish what I had started.

For eleven days, I stayed with my sorority sister Lena. Lena lived in a beautiful, calm neighborhood near The University of Southern California. Her home, a one story house with four other roommates, had a spacious kitchen and living space. Before leaving for LA, Lena told me on the phone, “I live in a pretty cool area. There’s only a bunch of old Mexicans who used to be gangsters.” Once I arrived, I invited Lena to attend a breakfast hosted by non-profit organizations dedicated to eliminating violence in the community. The non-profits typically are spear-headed by those directly affected by violence, from former gang members to mothers and relatives of those killed. After the program ended, Lena and I were talking to a former gang member in which he asked her the area she stayed in. “Aw, you live in the ‘hood,” he stated. Lena was bewildered. She could not believe it. Her street was peaceful and just, without remnants of gang violence present. Unbeknownst to Lena, she also lived in the Rollin’ 20s neighborhood. A Blood area.

*Don’t Judge a Man by the Color of his Rag: The Reality and Resistance of Gangsta Rap among LA Gang Members*, covers the twenty-one days I lived in Los Angeles and conducted ethnographic work on gangs and rap music. However, the



twenty-one days span over a nine month period, with majority of the interviews completed in December and January. From the rapport I built with my three “gangsta guides,” Daryl, Tremont, and Indugu in the nine-month hiatus, a snowball effect of meetings and interactions with other gang members and gangsta rap artists occurred. After my departure, I completed five more phone interviews from the confines of my College Station apartment. In total, a collection of twenty stories were shared and now live within these pages. More specifically, eight gang bangers and eight gangsta rap artists, who were active during the time period of 1986-1996, shared their social and economic experiences living in this environment.

Los Angeles still represents “America’s gang capital of the world with an estimated 199-213 Crip sets, compared to 75-85 Blood sets” (Cureton, 2008, p.1). This statistic is further reflected in the rap world. As stated previously, this study focuses on gangbangers, not simply gang members. Gangbangers are those who actively participate in showing allegiance to their set by robbing, stealing, and killing enemies, whereas gang members represent their neighborhood whenever questioned or tested but rarely “put in work” for the ‘hood. Cureton (2008) furthers this statement in his study of Hoover Crips, explaining, “Gang members don’t necessarily participate in street crime and violence (put in work or bang) for the benefit of the gang, nor are they expected to. If they live in the hood, and promote their gang affiliation through “limited” gang activity, they are still relatively accepted by gang bangers...” (p. 24). Crips and Bloods from South Central, Gardena, Inglewood, and Compton are epitomized in this ethnography.

## **The Roadmap to Gangsta Paradise:**

### **Critical Ethnography, Indigenous Ethnographer, and the In-between**

In the ethnography that follows, I show the interconnectedness between Crips and Bloods gang members and gangsta rap music in and around Los Angeles County. Although the subculture is infused with both male and female gang members, this thesis focuses on Black males; this is because the subculture and subgenre are recognized as predominantly male spaces of resistant performance. With this, ethnography is a method used to study a culture by being immersed in the environment and with a critical lens, focus on uncovering practices of domination and control. Since ethnography requires “ground work,” meaning the modes in which to record and reflect on the day-to-day processes of those in the environment, one must be aware of the influence and effect being in the culture will produce and to also take into account one’s positionality (Madison, 2012; Conquergood, 2013). To extend this idea, “Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2012, p. 5). This type of work requires commitment to and compassion for human equality, moving beyond the “what is” to “what it could be” (Madison, 2010, p. 5). Therefore, I do not wish to just focus on the present, but also consider suggest reform for the future.

In this study, I am positioned as a native ethnographer using Bryant Alexander’s framework of a researcher with dual membership of a cultural space. I investigate the Black culture of South Central, Compton, Long Beach, and Inglewood and in doing so share a connection to this environment. Alexander explains that an indigenous

ethnographer is “both the cultural community that [she] reports on and the cultural communities that [she] reports to” (Alexander, 2003, p. 139). This means claiming a position of inside knowledge that only cultural members belonging to a community share, while simultaneously inhabiting an outsider researcher view. This causes a connection, but also a separation. As an indigenous ethnographer, I am constantly conscious of the cultural community I represent. Like Alexander, I battle with accurately denoting cultural experiences into meaning. I struggle with the ever-present barrier of language and experience. It is a constant tug-of-war to explain cultural performances in words. As Alexander (2003) states, “The slippage often occurs within my own desire to represent without reducing culture” (p.140).

Another position that aligns with indigenous ethnography is Victor Turner’s paradigm of liminal space, the “betwixt and between.” Turner explains how this is a space of reflexivity, where the self is ever so present of itself and the community it represents. Barbara Myerhoff, quoted in Turner (1980) says, “Cultural performances are reflexive in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves” (p. 75). I experience this liminal space of cultural engagement at different intersections when representing this environment. One, as previously described, is being of the culture without being from the culture: I am of the Black culture, but am not from Los Angeles. I have an insider and outsider position, a participant and observer outlook.

My ethnographic approach is also informed by Cindy Garcia’s (2013) feminist ethnography. Feminist ethnography stands where the “body of the ethnographer disappears in the text, only to emerge as a voice that is omniscient and authoritative”

(Garcia, 2013, p. xx). It is as Behar (1996) suggests in her reflective moment as a feminist ethnographer:

Who is this woman who is writing about others, making others vulnerable? What does she want from others? What do the others want from her? The feminist in me wanted to know. What kind of fulfillment does she get-or not get-from the power she has? The novelist in me wanted to know: What, as she blithely goes about the privilege of doing research, is the story she isn't willing to tell? (p.21)

The researcher using feminist ethnography therefore compels the reader based on emotions and empathy. As a female investigating the two-fold intersection of the street gangs and gangsta rap music subcultures in a male-dominated environment, I am aware of how emotion and empathy are typically ignored within these representations.

However, these are the very issues I use to ground my research. What power do I have and what I have conceded? What vulnerable secrets I dare not share? I am not only “betwixt and between” the gender binaries that make-up these subgroups, but also the way in which I write to employ emotion.

With emotion comes advocacy and the ethical imperative to show what I have “seen, heard, learned, felt, and done in the field;” thus, I have a commitment to invoke a “response-ability” in others (Madison, 2010, p. 10). It is my responsibility to not only bring awareness to a subculture, but to also embody an emotion that rallies for action. In other words:

To be an advocate is to feel a responsibility to exhort and appeal on behalf of another or for another's cause with the hope that still others gain the ability to

respond to your advocacy agenda...being an advocate is to actively assist in the struggles of others; or (and) it is earning the tactics, symbols, and everyday forms of resistance which the sub-altern *enact* but in which they “do not speak” in order that they may provide platforms from which their struggles can be known and heard (Madison, 2010, p. 11).

As an advocate, my position does not end when the book closes. Instead, I continuously see the struggle, hear the cries, and feel the disappointment of the today. But I also see the strength, hear the pride, and feel the determination for a different tomorrow.

Like anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996), I move beyond the stance of witnessing in my writing. Performative-witnessing “is to be engaged and committed body-to-body in the field. It is a politics of the body deeply in action with Others” (Madison, 2010, p. 25). I merge the boundaries of participant and observer; as such I recognize my vulnerable position both as female and as researcher. My place “betwixt and between” participant and observer is constantly contested, negotiated. I ask myself the same questions Behar (1996) heeds:

In the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake, or even say, when horror looms apparently more gently in memories that won't recede and so come pouring forth in the late-night quiet of a kitchen, as a storyteller opens [his] heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? (p. 2)

Above all, my commitment is to those who have shared their space of heartache and agony, to those who have allowed me into their present world, and to those who have driven me to the point of no return. Ethnography “is about embarking on just such a voyage through a long tunnel” (Behar, 1996, p.2). I cannot pinpoint where the tunnel will end, but I know there is no turning back.

These stories are told in motion that is in constant travel. As hooks explains, “To travel, I must always move through fear, confront terror” (hooks, 1992, p. 174). To further explain, “It helps to be able to link this individual experience to the collective journeying of black people, to the Middle Passage, to the mass migration of southern black folks to northern cities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 174). In actuality, the past move of migration is where *this* story begins.

Thus, this is where I depart. During my ethnographic research in Los Angeles I found that the social and economic frustrations and fantasies of gangsta rap were first realities on the streets of LA. Everyone was affected by police authority and crack cocaine. Crips and Bloods were all the same. In my quest for difference, I discovered the most defining, defiant color was Black. These were our Black men. So reader beware: this thesis presents strong language and graphic content. This ethnography isn’t for the soft-hearted (Behar, 1996, p.24). I suggest you fasten your seatbelt. Enjoy the ride.

### **Unknown Territory: The Los Angeles Terrain**

Ding. “Ladies and Gentleman welcome to Los Angeles. Please remain seated with seatbelts fastened until the Captain turns off the fasten seatbelt sign, at that time be

careful opening overhead bins, items may have shifted during the flight and could easily fall out. If you are connecting... ”. On May 16, 2013, I am seated near the window listening to the flight attendant announce our safe landing and drone on about connecting flights. Her voice fades into the background as I contemplate the purpose of this trip and the terrain I am headed into. I have arrived in Los Angeles, the city of angels, and while I am blessed to have this opportunity, I am also anxious and apprehensive. Am I sure this is the right method for this research project?

A month prior, I was doubtful the trip would even transpire. I did not know anyone connected to the Black Los Angeles gang culture; I did not know where to begin. Although my older sister and uncle both offered to contact people they knew in Los Angeles, I was leery to accept their assistance because their connections were in law enforcement. How was I going to be perceived by gang members if I went through the police? But, that is exactly what happened as the trip deadline loomed close and I still had no access. I broke down and called my uncle. I told him how hesitant I was to contact his old college teammate at the University of Nebraska due to his current job as an LAPD police officer, but I was in serious need of some help. In hindsight, this was the best decision I have made.

During the first conversation with Mr. Hendley Hawkins, I felt excitement but also nerves. Finally, someone in Los Angeles who may help my research endeavors, but I uncertainly wondered if using a cop was the right method to gaining gang members’ trust. However after our first phone conversation, Mr. Hawkins had put me at ease. He reminded me of my uncle: laid-back and calm. Before long, I knew I could depend on

him. Soon, he put me in contact with a former member of the Rollin' 20s Bloods in South Central LA. I was ecstatic with this news; after months of frustration and anticipation, I exhaled a deep sigh of relief. However, this feeling did not last long. Mr. Hawkins, worried for my safety, said I should conduct the interviews in one of conference rooms at the police station. "Oh, okay," I said rather dejectedly. I thought cynically to myself, "Great. No one will ever talk to me if I ask to meet me at the police station." I understood Mr. Hawkins concerns, but how could I possibly to get to know someone in a place historically known for its discriminatory practices, structural racism, and excessive brutality to those who look like me?

True to Mr. Hawkins' word, a couple of days later I was on the phone with Darryl Stanford, a former Blood who has been on gang-related documentaries such as *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* and *Gangland* episodes. Darryl has also created a 501(c) non-profit aimed to assist his community with violence reduction and human development programs. We talked for close to an hour and discussed my research. He was on board and wanted to help. I felt blessed to finally have a way in. We then conversed roughly once a week leading up to my research trip. During one of the last conversations prior to my trip Mr. Stanford asked me, "Can you do me a favor?" I replied curiously, "What's that Mr. Stanford?" "Can you stop calling me Mr. Stanford? No one calls me that. I'm D." I heard a twinge of laughter like this has been quite amusing to him. I laughed myself, "Sure, uh D."



There was a level of familiarity he was beginning to have with me and at the moment, I wondered what lay ahead. I finally had access, but was I ready to go solo? Was I truly trained to endure what might come my way studying Black street gangs, Crips and Bloods, where it all began? What about me being a woman, a *Black* woman conducting this research? As I landed in L.A., I reflected on my entrance into this environment and all these questions swirled in my head with no available answers. I guessed only time would tell as I claimed my baggage and headed toward the street.

### **At the Intersection of Gangsta Street and Music Lane**

This thesis covers the intersection between the hip-hop subgenre gangsta rap and the Black Los Angeles gang subculture formed by the Crips and Bloods. Termed by Darnell Hunt (2010), Black Los Angeles is “a unique urban space in which people of African descent—who both struggle with and celebrate the meanings associated with “blackness” in America—have developed and continue to develop a sense of community” (p. 3). Within this space, gangsta rap is used as a tool of expression for urban Black youth, particularly males who are surrounded by or involved in the Crips and Bloods in the Los Angeles area. A crucial component to understanding the dynamics between the Crips and Bloods sets is suggested by John Hagedorn: To study their music: “where it came from, what it represents, why they like it, and what potential it can tap” (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 94). I extend Hagedorn’s argument and ask, how do gang bangers/ members and their surrounding community partake in and receive gangsta rap music? More specifically, I posit that if the music was used to resist Black oppression, then the

elements and economics of the Black subculture have directly influenced the creation and progression of the hip-hop subgenre, gangsta rap.

The connection between Los Angeles gang culture and gangsta rap, the area of study has been under-researched, particularly with regard to analyzing and understanding the gang culture through music. Music is rarely used to understand the gang subculture. This lack of research continues in the area of criminology and general gang studies where “the lack of social science analysis of gangsta rap is a consequence of criminology’s systemic deracializing of both gangs and culture” (Hagedorn, 2008, p. 85). Because current research does fail to address gangsta rap as a way to understand gang members’ economic situations, experiences, and emotions, there is a missing component in both sociological and communication literature.

The time period investigated in this thesis [1986-1996] documents the social/economic moments discussed in gangsta rap music through its interpretive community: gang members and gangsta rap artists. One area that has been vastly overlooked is viewing Crips and Bloods as both consumers and producers of music and as such, as music critics. Furthermore, gangsta rap acts as a public performance of Black masculinity and youthful resistance. This particular subgenre was birthed out of social and economic elements relating to the Black community and when used for pedagogical purposes, can bring forth enlightenment on urban, marginalized subcultures and its larger community.

## **Down Dystopian Road: The Theoretical Approach to Gangsta Rap**

The discussion of gangsta rap presented in this thesis explores its emergence aligned with a particular social and historic moment for the LA Black community. To understand the context of gang culture and its larger society, a multitude of representational voices are presented. These recounted voices add to the fields of both communication and performance studies. In the following section, I will discuss how my framework was developed and how this paradigm influences the interconnectedness of the LA gang culture and gangsta rap.

### *Dystopian*

I theorize gangsta rap as dystopian performative, primarily focusing on Black experience and “collective memory, history and present social struggles” (Melo, 2007, p.8). To theorize Black experience is to “seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys, are possible” (hooks, 1992, p. 172). Instead of what Carla Melo (2007) calls collective memory as a way of remembrance, I will invoke what phenomenologist Harvey Young (2010) calls critical memory, “the act of reflecting upon and sharing recollections of embodied black experience” (p.18). Gangsta rap not only embodies the social and historic struggles in the Black body but also and continuously creates resistance through the reflection of memory. To extend, Michel Foucault “posits memory as a site of resistance” (hooks, 1992, p.174). With this, I am compelled to contemplate how all music exists in memory and memory exists in music (Behar, 1996).

The origin of utopia comes from the meaning “no place,” and signifies a space of hopeful imaginary into the horizons, a moment of reconfiguration of the world for something different and better (Melo, 2007; Dolan, 2001). Quoted in Dolan (2001), Lyman Sargent states, “Utopias are generally oppositional, reflecting, at the minimum, frustrations with things as they are and the desire for a better life” (p. 457). Whereas utopia encompasses optimism for a brighter outcome, dystopia describes dislocation and despair and seeking a space for survival (Nnodim, 2008). Melo (2007) explains that dystopian performance represents both displacement and hope concomitantly. Interestingly, Dragan Klaic (1991) asserts, “dystopian drama is in fact utopian: it involves utopian ambitions while describing their total collapse” (p. 3). It is where a space is designated to express dissatisfaction while also searching for solutions. Rita Nnodim (2008) adds, “Urban spaces are not only ingrained in the conceptualizations of self. The people...create habitats of meaning and negotiate their own existence-sometimes with tragic or tragicomic and at other times with hope-enhancing results” (p. 330). Simply put, dystopian is about the daily frustrations, and a space of utopic imagery for the future.

#### *Performative and Predictive Perspective*

To highlight the dystopian drama of gangsta rap, I present this thesis as a play, or rather a performative encounter of the future. Adapted from Dragan Klaic (1991) *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*, I use the dystopian performative as “both the future of the ideology that controls consciousness in the present and the image of the future as an ideologically determined product” (p. 4).

“Dystopia conveys the withering away from utopia, its gradual abandonment or reversal...an unexpected and aborted outcome of utopian strivings, a mismatched result of utopian efforts” (Klaic, 1991, p. 3). Gangsta rap reflects dystopian downfalls as much as it does a utopic universe. It not only portrays the dangers of LA, but also instances of upward mobility in the community. Added to dystopia is the notion that performative “disrupts or interrupts these repetitions to open up possibilities for alternative actions and behaviors...and is effectively active as a performance event (Madison, 2010, p. 49). As Jose Estaban Munoz quoted in Madison (2010) explains, the performative are “blueprints of a world not quite here” (p. 49). In other words, the dystopian performative presented is of an intimate discussion not yet of fruition. It is a hopeful view into the future.

A present look into the potential is a predictive perspective. The predictive perspective shifts between time periods, from the present to the future, while blending dystopia and utopia outcomes (Klaic, 1991). However its utopic position, “or admonitory gesture, a provoking and shocking rendering of what our future might turn out to be,” there are large sociological, communication concerns to using this viewpoint (Klaic, 1991, p.7). Taking a perspective on an event that has yet to exist can cause misunderstanding and disregard as realities constantly change or become a complete blunder of the environment. Klaic (1991) cautions the predictive perspective, “There is some risk of built-in obsolescence in both utopian and dystopian [performatives] as their critical power loses relevance with the altered social reality to which they initially referred, and as their prophetic formulae turn out to be a clear miss” (p.7). Gangsta rap

as dystopian performative is not a prophecy, but merely a reflective conversation long overdue. Moving forward, I theorize gangsta rap as a dystopian performative using David Morley's paradigm of reception studies and resistance theory. This framework not only categorizes a way to engage and understand gangsta rap music, but also applies to other alternative subgenres in American music. The following section will explain the infrastructure of reception studies.

### *Reception Theory*

Reception is a tool used to account for audience differences when receiving messages in the media. In its short historical framework, reception theory addresses aspects left out in earlier mass communication theories. Beginning in the 1930s and 40s when mass communication as a discipline began to form, its analyses highlighted the relationship between the media and its audience. Since that time, theories have been developed in an attempt to explain audience participation levels while receiving messages; however, until reception studies, little emphasis was placed on actual audience members' responses (Morley, 1992). This intersection of cultural studies and mass communication highlights the components that were left out in earlier media theories such as "uses and gratifications" and "cultural industry," which targeted viewers/listeners as passive audience members who use the media to satisfy personal beliefs and needs; for the latter, media merely functioned to reify dominant cultural ideologies (Machor & Goldstein, 2001).

After much criticism of earlier approaches to audience studies, reception was re-theorized to account for an active audience, a model that considers the identity and

identification of a person in relation to how he or she will engage with and perceive a message. This means rather than classifying the audience as one monolithic group in which all use media for the same purpose, reception views external influences such as culture, economics, and political ideologies (Machor & Goldstein, 2001). Reception studies have been used over time to analyze individuals' understanding of messages received through the media.

In the book, *Television, Audience, and Cultural Studies*, David Morley (1992) conducts an audience analysis through a cultural studies perspective. In order to account for the cultural studies component, Morley (1992) uses a sociological mode of analysis in which the cultural background is considered when discussing how messages are received. His research concerns “the everyday experience of reading newspapers, or watching television programmes, and the question of what we make of those messages, how we interpret the messages that we consume through media” (p. 76). In his analysis of the television program, *Nationwide*, Morley is interested in discovering how one's background affects the way he or she engages in media interactions and encodes/decodes a particular message, which necessarily involves culture.

Subcultures define the meaning system of a group of people within a social structure and work to collectively make meaning of the environment through its contradictory shared social space (Morley, 1993, p. 79). Dick Hebdige (1979) refers to subcultures as “the expressive forms and rituals” of minority groups (p. 2). Subcultures are defiant, create “noise,” and disrupt everyday life sequence; they are also made up by their representation in the media (Hebdige, 1979, p. 90). Hebdige believes that

subcultures are in fact oppositional through the use of style. A style refers to the ways in which “opposing definitions clash,” with a dramatic, contemptuous force (Hebidge, 1979, p.3). For example, gang members and Black youth belong to a subculture that uses gangsta rap as a counteractive social space, which creates style. In addition to style, Morley (1993) calls attention to an interpretive framework that takes into account the socio-economic and shared cultural meanings used to interpret a given message. This study focuses on a message immersed in beats and rhymes, which create their own distinct style.

Bruno Nettl (2004) describes musical ethnography as a way to view and discuss firsthand the intersection of music and culture. The researcher interprets the interconnectedness of music meaning and subculture for a larger audience, while not violating or skewing the culture’s own perspective (Nettl, 2004). My purpose is to relate how gangsta rap is an intricate expression for those surrounded or involved in the LA Black gang environment. I will show the relationship between music and culture through rhetorical listening and interpretive community.

#### *Rhetorical Listening and Interpretive Community*

Krista Ratcliffe (2005) defines rhetorical listening within the fields of rhetoric and composition studies as a means of accounting for the intersecting identifications of gender and whiteness in the public sphere. Rhetorical listening is used, “as a trope for interpretive invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct...it signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges” (p. 1). In order to fully engage and understand the meaning behind gangsta rap, one has to be open



to receive the message and listen with a conduct that depends not on one's understanding, but on the context in which the message is produced. Hence, being able to learn the context begins with knowing the interpretive community; for this I depend on Jacqueline Bobo and *Black Women as Cultural Readers*.

In her book, Bobo (1995) discusses how Black women have long fought for the need to transform and reconstruct the ways in which Black women are portrayed and represented in the media. One way to counteract the dominant portrayals and critiques of Black women in literature and film is to view them through the lens of an interpretive community, one that is vastly ignored and overlooked when discussing and critiquing these cultural works: the voice of Black women (Bobo, 1995). In her study, Bobo (1995) defines interpretive community as composed of three groups: Black female cultural producers ("black women have taken on the task of creating images of themselves different from those continually reproduced in traditional works"), Black women as critics, ("the voice to those who are usually never considered in any analysis of cultural works"), and lastly, Black women as the audience (Bobo, 1995, p.45).

The framework used for the interpretive community in this study must be adapted to Black men, acknowledging gender differences and separate experiences. The framing of Black men in this country is largely problematic and as bell hooks (1992) asserts, "Acting in complicity with the *status quo*, many black people have passively absorbed narrow representations of black masculinity, perpetuated stereotypes, myths, and offered one-dimensional accounts" (p.89). In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) charts the representation of Black masculinity from Africa

to Western civilization and shows that although Black males are denied full benefits of manhood within white norms, they are still judge and criticized on this narrow criteria. In contemporary settings, Black masculinity is no longer defined by power and providing for his family, but is instead phallogentric. This means that black masculinity is defined differently and “what the male does with his penis becomes a greater and certainly a more accessible way to assert masculine status...rooted in physical domination and sexual possession of women could be accessible to all men, even unemployed black men” (hooks, 1992, p. 94). Manhood is therefore reduced to misogyny.

A large component of my research adopts this framework of Black masculinity and views LA gang members as the interpretive community. Gang members are presented as consumers and music critics, while gangsta rap artists are viewed as producers of the music. Within each succeeding chapter, a position from the interpretive community is shown to understand gangsta rap music. Like D. Soyini Madison (2010), I view the interpretive community as intimate habitation where the following pages present gang bangers/members *in their own words*: “their analysis and descriptions are widely and variously woven throughout these pages by direct quotes and verbatim interviews” (p. 24). It is my desire not only to infuse my position as researcher—and with it, scholarly references—into the following discussions of gang culture and gangsta rap, but also to provide an opportunity for the community to explain this complex intersection.

Rhythm is important to this community and these intersections. D. Soyini Madison (1993) validates rhythm and sound when writing Black language. Quoted in Madison (1993), Jahn states “only rhythm gave the word its effective fullness,” which is a vital component to understanding Black vernacular (p. 216). For Black people, speech occurs in rhythm. This is especially true for this Black subculture. With the interpretive community, Crips and Bloods and gangsta rap artists, I use rhythm and sound to account for movement. I therefore wish to give the silenced a resounding voice.

### *Resistance*

Susan Seymour (2006) explains that resistance refers “to intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals” (p. 305). However, Black resistance is different. The opposition comes when deciding how to combat racism and white supremacy for all Black people (hooks, 1990, p.186). There is militancy in the way we resist struggle. hooks (1990) furthers this with a historical review of Black resistance:

Looking back at the history of black liberation struggle in the United States one can see that many glorious moments, when our plight was most recognized and transformed, when individuals black and white sacrificed-put their lives on the line in the quest for freedom and justice-happened because folks dared to be militant, to resist with passionate commitment (p.186).

It is in the continuous commitment, the repetitiveness of struggle, and the rebellious pursuit of justice that makes resistance strong. Based on this definition, Gangsta rap is

certainly defiant and oppositional to dominant norms. There is a militant position where this platform is used to discuss extreme, dangerous issues.

Gangsta rap is a resistant tactic used to subvert the strategies from authority. As de Certeau states, “The space of a tactic is the space of the other” (p.37). A tactic is a random strike of resistance that catches those with enforcing power off guard. It is the art of the weak (de Certeau, 19, p. 37). It is a style of resistance used to fight back. Members of the Black community must deal with the progression and advancement of the drug trade, police tensions, incarceration, and surveillance. These lived experiences have historically provided lyrical ammunition for West Coast rappers.

The next section of this chapter gives a social and historical review of Crips and Bloods, followed by the performative, social, and economic context of gangsta rap music (Chapter 2); Chapters 3 and 4 are presented as a dystopian performative play. The chapters present two Acts starring gang members and gangsta rap artists. Chapter 3 opens with gang members having a present discussion on their past social and economic experiences and its relation to gangsta rap. Likewise, Chapter 4 relays a current conversation with artists about their previous involvement with gangsta rap and its reflection on reality.

### **Access Granted**

I arrive at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call meeting, which is held at The Abundant Life Church on the corner of 35<sup>th</sup> Street and Normandie Ave. As I pull into the parking lot across the street from the church, I notice two teenage girls hanging outside and I am intrigued by their presence. Are they going to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call meeting as well or waiting for someone to

pick them up? It is 6:20 on a Thursday evening. Although the area encompasses college students who attend the University of Southern California, there is a community and culture here typically not represented in the realm of higher education. Only those who are aware of the street politics and who live here know that The Abundant Life Church is on the dividing street corner of two long time feuding gangs: The Harlem Rollin' 30s Crips and the Fruit Town Brims, a Blood gang. I am excited yet nervous of what and who awaits me in the church basement.

Thinking back to my last conversation with D, I recall that he will not join me this evening. Despite being away on a trip, D did not leave me stranded, but instructed me to seek out the facilitator (Big Joe) after the meeting's conclusion. I head down the stairs to the basement where the weekly sessions are held. Surprisingly, being in the basement of this church brings instant comfort. The room looks much like those at home, in my Black community. The people remind me of home; they are my people.

I walk in and notice the layout. To the left, there is a long 48" inch portable folding table with about twenty chairs neatly surrounding the table and another twenty randomly dispersed around. The chairs around the table are already filled and most of the seats close by are occupied as well. Black and Mexican men occupy the cushioned pads with small clusters of women sprinkled throughout. I find a seat towards the back of the second row of chairs. From where I sit, there is a clear view of everyone in the room. I also notice something I did not previously: the age group. It seems the ages range from seventeen to the mid-fifties. I look around and notice an interracial teenage couple; they seem to be the youngest here. Suddenly, I'm jolted into the present moment

when I hear the facilitator say, “Young lady in the back, what’s your name and tell us one word to describe how you feel right now.”

“Uh hi, my name is Cymone and... I’m just happy,” I stated with a smile from ear to ear that would not leave my face.

“And why are you happy, Cymone?”

“I am happy because I’m finally in Los Angeles, surrounded by good people, and just blessed to be with you guys this evening.”

With all eyes on me at the moment, they know I am an outsider; a person who has never been to the meetings before and they probably wonder why I am there. For some, it is required they participate under a court-ordered sentence. Today’s theme is centered on social skills and personality traits. The discussion is further broken into identifying the difference between introverts and extroverts, and the age at which human beings begin to adapt to their social environment. The conversation intrigues me because I have always considered myself both an introvert and extrovert, but have never vocalized this opinion in public. I want to hear what others think in the room regarding this topic. I discover some, like me, feel that they experience both introversion and extraversion at different moments in their life, while others are completely on one end of the spectrum or the other.

Not long after I take a seat, I see another man come down the basement stairs. I instantly recognize him as Mr. Hawkins. Although I appreciate seeing him, I groan inwardly. I have not yet met Mr. Hawkins in person, but I know it must be him because of the police uniform he wore. I think to myself, “Why is he wearing his uniform on his

day off?” Hawkins quickly takes a seat off to the side and out of sight from most of the participants. Despite his inconspicuous seat choice, I notice that his presence has an effect on the room: some embody tense positions and others make second glances his direction. They do not see another Black man enter the room, but a cop, an enemy. I breathe a sigh of gratitude for him choosing not to sit next to me; I did not want those same nervous looks and apprehensive body language directed at me. We make eye-contact and acknowledge each other with a nod; I turn my attention back to the present discussion.

There is a man standing to the left of me with a small pamphlet-like book in his hand. Big Joe proceeds to ask him his name and one word to describe his feelings. His name is Tremont and he feels blessed. Tremont mentions he has done some reflections on his past and its influences on his current conditions. His daughter and grandchild were killed while he was in prison and instead of retaliating, he wanted peace in the streets. He continues by describing what it is like to be physically displaced, to live with no kind of permanent location. But today, something has changed. Not too far from where he is currently staying, he saw a house for rent. While looking at the house, the landlord approached him and began a conversation. Tremont explained his situation to the man. Not only did the landlord suggest he can possibly help Tremont, but he also gifted Tremont a copy of a book that has inspired him, hence the book in Tremont’s hand. I can hear Tremont’s excitement for this new possibility, but while I am concentrating on his story, something else about Tremont captures my attention and I cannot look away. Something I can only recognize because of what I have seen in

documentaries and read in books on gangs. It is the subtleness of his stance, the way he shifts footing position while speaking. Tremont is a Crip. Or was a Crip during some point in his life. He stands with his left foot slightly perpendicular to his right foot, his posture is erect. In his excitement, he moves back and forth with a half step bounce. I want to talk to him. I want to see if my assumption is correct. Glancing over to Mr. Hawkins' seat, I notice that he has left. I had been so focused on Tremont that I did not even notice Mr. Hawkins' departure. I later receive a text he was called in for duty. "Ah, that explains the attire," I chuckle to myself.

After the meeting, I make a beeline for Big Joe. Big Joe is a former Bloodstone Villain, a gang representing 52<sup>nd</sup> Street to Central Ave. I go directly to him for instructions regarding whom I should speak with. By this point, most of the participants are gone, leaving just the other facilitators in the room (at first I had assumed they were participants). Tremont is one of them. I noticed earlier that he might have dual membership in the space when I saw him leave to make copies of the information sheet used in class. When I finally reach Big Joe, he unexpectedly reverses the roles and takes me by surprise. "Oh, you're the one D said will be here tonight," he states with recognition. "Well tell everyone why you are here. You can talk to anyone in this room." He has put me on the spot and now everyone is looking at *me*. I explain my research and the reason why I am here. "Who is your favorite gangsta rap artist?" asks one facilitator, who I later discover is Moe from the Bloodstone Villains.

"Past or present," I respond?

"Past."



“Ooo, that’s tough. Depends on the mood I’m in. 2Pac and Snoop.” I reflectively reply. This conversation occurred the first night I was in Los Angeles. Little did I know how my own response would change after observing and internalizing the intricate connections between an environment and its music.

This chapter explores the intersection between Crips and Bloods and gangsta rap by explaining their historic and social influences on one another and the larger Black community. First, I will give an historic account of the Crips and Bloods, followed by a review of the musical lineage and performative aspect of gangsta rap. The media and government officials are much to blame for the spread of Crips and Bloods and for the public’s ignorance and lack of understanding of the gangs’ economic and social strife (Alonso, 2010). Instead of knowledge, citizens are inflicted with fear from an upsurge of negative gang portrayal and crime-related news. This section attempts to bridge the awareness gap and give an historic and social context of what we now know as the Crips and Bloods.

### **“Chitty Chitty Bang Bang:” Ain’t Nuthin’ but a Crip Thing**

Raymond Washington is widely known as the founder of the Crip gang and, more specifically, the Crips on the Eastside of South Central. Fifteen-year-old Washington was too young to be a member of the Black Panther Party but was heavily influenced by Bunchy Carter who lived on the same street (Alonso, 2010). Washington, a student at Fremont High School, wanted to form a group with revolution and community protection in mind, inspired by admiration of the Panthers’ style (Alonso, 2010; Sloan, 2005; Davis, 1990). Angelo White, who is credited with advancing and

expanding the Crips on the Westside, can attest to this. In a personal interview he states, “We had a structure because [of] what we were doing. We were protecting our families, our neighborhoods, and our community. But mainly we had style; we had class and we had style.” Soon, the gang began to spread on the Westside of South Central LA and this is where Angelo “Barefoot Pookie” White, Stanley “Tookie” Williams, and Jamel Barnes are credited for its beginnings (Sloan, 2005; Alonso, 2010).

*Sidenote: An Interview with Barefoot Pookie*

*Angelo White now fifty-plus, is a 6’7”, dark chocolate complected, lean man. He has a deep baritone voice with a slight lisp. His speech is clear and comes at a slow rate. When I first see White he instantly reminds me of Snoop Dogg and I think, “How appropriate.” Snoop Dogg is a Rollin’ 20s Crip from Long Beach, California. The next thought that comes to mind is his appearance. Mr. Angelo White is clean. The two times I interact with White, he is dress impeccably. This reminds me of what the Crips pride themselves on: their style. In Compton, California at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call office off of North Long Beach Blvd., I sit down with Angelo White as he discusses the beginnings and his involvement with the Crips:*

*Cymone: So what happened in 1971?*

*Angelo: In 1971 that’s when the Crips actually blew up you know. And when Raymond Washington started in 1969, they were local Eastside you know. And on the Westside, we protected our neighborhoods. So we had three major neighborhoods, you know from the 100s to the 80s to the 60s. In 1971 we had a neighborhood gang.*

*Cymone: Yeah.*

*Angelo: We came together all of us was fighters. That's what we did, we fought.*

*Cymone: What was your gang affiliation and set?*

*Angelo: My gang affiliation, I was co-founder and the leader of a gang called the Smaks.*

*Cymone: The Smaks?*

*Angelo: Yeah, which was in the 100s.*

*Cymone: Okay...*

*Angelo: In the 100s neighborhood. That's where we started at and Raymond Washington, his legacy is chitty chitty bang bang, Crips don't die, they multiply. So uh when he started expanding you know the expansion came from the migration from the Eastside to the West. Mostly all the gangs come from the Eastside, there's the Slausons, the Avenues. The Avenues is what we, you know, they was the ones that we would land on from because Raymond Washington was part of the Avenues.*

*Cymone: Yeah.*

*Angelo: He was a Baby Avenue under Big Munson. Yeah. So at that same time when they were doing their thing over there, we was doing our thing on the Westside.*

*Cymone: Right.*

*Angelo: My mother used to move three or four times a year so from the 100s all the way to the 30s. So I was familiar with all the neighborhood gangs you know. We joined Raymond Washington over a conflict with the Inglewood Crips; we brought three neighborhoods in. And we actually made the population of the Crips being on the Westside.*

*Cymone: So Smaks turned into Crips?*

*Angelo: The Smaks, the 80s and the 60s. The Smaks, the 80s with Al Capones, the 60s with the Avenues. And I had been a part of all of them. Mind you, when I was out with Tookie and Raymond, all of them, I was young, you know, like they were turning 18, I was like 14 years old. So uh all of us got together and we expanded. Everybody wants to say that you know that they're co-founder and leader but there's only one founder. Raymond Washington was the undisputed leader and founder of the Crips. Tookie, he had nothing to do with that (Angelo White, personal communication, December 31, 2013) .*

Raymond Washington, once a member of the Baby Avenues, had the idea to expand the Crips from the Eastside to the Westside of South Central. On the Westside, Angelo "Barefoot Pookie" White was part of the Smaks, which spanned to street numbers in the 100s. The 100s territory ranged from Gardena City to Century Blvd. Since White moved often, he was not only a member of the Smaks, but also part of the 60s and 80s. The 60s represented the streets 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue to 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, all the way down to Slauson Avenue; the 80s went from 74<sup>th</sup> street to Manchester Avenue. White had gang affiliation with all three neighborhoods. When he joined with Raymond Washington and the Crips, White brought all three sets with him. There is an extensive amount of conflicting literature and documentaries describing the founders of the Crips. However, White adamantly states there is only one leader of the Crips, denying the popular notion that they were co-founded by Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Williams, like White, comes from the Westside and was part of the 80s. Other literature such as Steven Cureton's *Hoover Crips: When*

*Cripin' Becomes a Way of Life* (2008) says the Crips were co-founded by Raymond Washington and Bunchy Carter which is contradicted by White's account.

Between the Eastside and Westside division, the gang was further broken into neighborhoods or "sets" that claimed a unique identity specific to their living environment; this identity was derived from street names to movie or music references. For example, a Crip member would most likely identify as the Harlem Rollin' 30s rather than the gang at large. For a short period, the Rollin' 30s was also known as the Harlem Godfather Crips. As White explained, "Back then you know, most of our name gangs were out of the media you know; the Godfather Crips came out of *The Godfather*."

White is referring to the movie *The Godfather* directed by Francis Coppola and released in 1972. White is credited for naming The Underground Crips, which came from the song *Underground* by Curtis Mayfield; the Westside Insane Payback Crips came from the song *Insane Payback* by James Brown. Thus sets claimed broader gang affiliations while maintaining their individuality (Cureton, 2008; Phillips, 1999; Alonso, 2010).

Unfortunately, there is no clear consensus regarding the Crips' naming. Sloan (2005) argues that the Crips were first called the Baby Crips; Alonso (2010) maintains that Washington was influenced by an earlier Black gang in the 1950s, who called his gang the Baby Avenues or Avenue Crips (Alonso, 2010; Delaney, 2006). A. C. "King Bobby Louie" Moses, once an original Crip until he formed his own gang, affirms this idea:

We wanted to become the Avenues, which didn't happen because the original Avenues did not accept us. But there was one Avenue that was a crippled dude.

He was crippled for real, one leg was shorter than the other one. He knew he was walking hard, but when we imitated that walk, he thought we were making fun of him and he set some examples, you understand what I'm saying? So after a few demonstrations went down, you know, people got the message. Every chance we got, when we weren't around him and go on the other side of town, we took on that walk. The someone name was Victor Adams. We just said to hell with it, we were not going to stop imitating our boy.

Raymond Washington received his gang's name from this interaction with an Avenue. Victor Adams or "Victor Vicious" as Moses calls him later in the interview, had a certain defined walk that showed his disability. The younger boys in the neighborhood adopted this particular way of walking as their own and it became known as 'crippin'.

Offering another perspective, Tookie Williams believes the name changed due to gang members mispronouncing the word 'Cribs' into 'Crips' as far back as 1971; the name stayed from then on (Williams, 2004). Cle "Bone" Sloan (2005), the director of the documentary *Bastards of the Party*, argues the name "Crip" came from a discussion between Washington and Jamel Barnes. Barnes tells how he believes the Crips came into existence:

Jamel, Jamel I got it. I got it Cuz. I got it Cuz. [I said] What the fuck are you talking about? He said, this is what I'm talking about Cuz...and threw it out that Baby Cribs. He said, R.I.P. may you rest in peace. From the Cradle to the Grave, Cuz. We are going to start this gang called the CRIPS. 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

ain't nothin' but a CRIP thing. Eastside Cuz. He said, twenty years from now  
Jamel you'll see this gang will be worldwide.

Raymond Washington has no idea how true his words would one day be. Ten years after  
creating the Crips, Washington was shot and killed in August of 1979.

*Sidenote: A Peace Offering From Washington*

*Raymond Washington died leaving four children behind. His youngest daughter, Rayshana Washington, was born in February of 1980. While at the 2<sup>nd</sup> call office on New Year's Eve, I talked to Rayshana Washington about her dad and what he is known for. Washington, now 34, shares the same skin tone as her father. She is a vibrant, outspoken woman and we instantly hit it off. Like Angelo White, this is my second time seeing Rayshana; the first was at the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Cease Fire Breakfast, which began after and recognizes the execution of Stanley "Tookie" Williams in 2005. Washington and I open up quickly to one another. I admire her outfit; she looks cute in 4" inch floral print wedges, sea foam green color pants, and a floral print top that compliments her shoes. Washington speaks clearly, enunciating every word. I am excited for this interview. We sit down comfortably facing each other on the brown leather couch like we are about to share some juicy news. I began with my questions:*

*Cymone: Wow. You are the direct descendent of Raymond Washington. Raymond Washington was your father.*

*Rayshana: Yes.*

*Cymone: And he started this whooole thing of what we now know as the Crips and Bloods. How does that make you feel?*

*Rayshana: Um. Me, personally? I'm proud. I'm very proud.*

*Cymone: Yeah.*

*Rayshana: You know, even though it started for something good and it turned out bad, I'm proud. I'm here. Even though it's all hectic out here, I'm out here willing to make a change.*

*Cymone: Uh huh.*

*Rayshana: Because my dad's vision wasn't for it to be this way. And me being the youngest child, I'm willing and able to help in any way possible.*

*Cymone: When were you born?*

*Rayshana: Um. February 16, 1980.*

*Cymone: Dang.*

*Rayshana: Yeah. My mom was four months pregnant with me. He never got to hold me, none of that. But you know, I still love him. I love him dearly.*

*Cymone: Of course. Of course. Anddd as he your father... how did you grow up, knowing this legacy, knowing that Raymond Washington was your daddy?*

*Rayshana: (chuckles) You know it really didn't hit me until my high school years.*

*Cymone: Really?*

*Rayshana: I always heard of Raymond Washington and I knew he was my father, but I never knew what it meant for him to be my father until one day I was going to Locke High School and we had an assembly and they were talking about the Crips and the Bloods and this particular person mentioned my dad. And after the assembly was over I went and introduced myself and I said, "The person you're talking about is my dad."*



*And he looked and said, "Is your name Ray..." He couldn't pronounce it.*

*And I said, "Yeah."*

*He said, "Tami's your mom?"*

*I said, "Yeah."*

*He said, "It's funny because we've been looking for you."*

*Everybody knew my dad had because it's four of us. It's three girls and one boy. I'm the baby.*

*He said, "We knew your dad had uh a child, but we never knew how to get in contact with you."*

*And from that point on, I just really started doing research on him, you know.*

*Cymone: Uh hmm.*

*Rayshana: It has its good and it has its bad. Because some people be like, you know, your dad started this and look what it's causing, all this killing. You're right. He started it to protect the neighborhood and this is what it caused, true enough, but by me being who I am, I look at it different. Don't judge me on what my dad did, judge me on what I'm trying to do today.*

*Cymone: Right. How do you think Raymond Washington would perceive what's going on now?*

*Rayshana: He wouldn't be happy. He wouldn't be happy at all. Because of all these... when my dad and Barefoot Pookie, and and Tookie and Jackie and when all them were gangbanging, if they had a problem with a person, they went out and got their target, they wouldn't go shoot or beat up innocent bystanders. It's too many innocent kids and*

*young people losing their lives, so yeah my dad wouldn't be happy at all* (Rayshana Washington, personal communication, December 31, 2013).

During the interview, Rayshana Washington was aware of the conflicted emotions representing and being the offspring of Raymond Washington. On one hand, she is proud. Her father began a legacy, a subculture that continues to thrive today. On the other, this subculture has resulted in the destruction, in the end of too many lives, too many victims, her father included. Rayshana never met her father. I can only imagine the many children left without fathers in this environment who, unlike Rayshana, grew up to avenge their fathers', uncles', or brothers' death and begin the cycle once more.

Reflecting on the previous interviews and according to the film *Bastards of the Party*, the Crips were first formed to clean the streets and to change the direction of community. Researchers believe the Crips derived their style and mentality from The Black Panther Party, hence the name of the film *Bastards of the Party* (Alonso, 2010; Davis, 1990). This film recognizes the impact and influence the BPP had towards the Crips in terms of recruiting techniques. However, without clear guidance and instruction on how to use power for positive social awareness, young bright minds in the community soon turned on each other (Alonso, 2010).

*Fieldnote: While in South Central, Along Comes a Wishbone*

On Sunday, January 5th, I receive the chance to hang out with the director of *Bastards of the Party*, Cle “Bone” Sloan. I met Sloan through D and after rescheduling our meeting twice, we finally got together late Sunday night at The Cork on Adams Blvd. We are in Crip territory—West Blvd Crips to be exact. We sit at the bar. The fifty-

inch television set is blaring the Los Angeles Lakers versus Denver Nuggets game and the overhead music is blasting Earth, Wind & Fire. The restrooms are to my immediate left while Sloan is on my right. It seems many people at the bar are aware of Sloan; he is acknowledged with nods and handshakes when someone approaches. Not only is Sloan's documentary highly regarded and nominated for an Image Award; he also appears in Hollywood movies like *Training Day* (2001), *Street Kings* (2008), and *End of Watch* (2012), as well as the TNT television series *Southland*. I am extremely excited to meet Sloan. He is the inspiration for my journey as a gang researcher and source of awareness regarding this subculture more than anyone else: I watched *Bastards of the Party* for the first time three years ago and instantly revised my study to focus on reasons why men join gangs. It is truly an honor to have drinks and talk with someone so influential to my career. I am also extremely hungry by the time we sit down, so I order chicken wings and French fries with a Shock Top beer. He orders a dirty martini. To the right of Sloan, is another man named Snow, who Sloan calls, "The smartest man I know." Between us three, the conversation and atmosphere is lively yet intense. Our discussion ranges from the production of *Bastards of the Party*, to the past and current gang scene, to the broader issue of Black America. Two drinks later, two trips to the restroom, and at 12:00 a.m., we all hop in Sloan's dark green Jeep Cherokee and leave.

Sloan is supposed to drop me off at Indugu's house after leaving the bar, but we get lost. Or rather, he gets lost in the many stories he is telling, landmarks he is showing, and the directions Snow is giving him. At this point, I believe no one in the car cares. Hell, I know I don't. Sloan is from Athens Park Gang and also has close affiliations with

the Black P. Stones. He is a Blood. During one of many wrong turns Sloan takes, not listening to the directions, he distastefully states, “I don’t know this crab shit, Blood.”

We are in the Rollin’ 60s neighborhood and crab was an offensive term used to reference Crips. Although one may perceive me to be in danger, I am not. There is no one out on the streets or the neighborhoods we visit. Everyone is asleep and the air is peaceful and calm. The atmosphere reminds me of Clement Moore’s *Twas the night before Christmas* poem: “Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house/Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” Here on the corner of Slauson Avenue, this is the case. The houses, with their lush green lawns and white gated fences, remind me of the Gary Grey film *Friday* which portrays the area between Normandie Ave. and Western Ave., the Rollin’ 30s neighborhood. From someone not familiar with the area, this looks like a White middle-class neighborhood; this is *Pleasantville*.

In the midst of storytelling, Sloan drives to Hyde Park where the Slauson Ave. clothing store is located, at the intersection of Crenshaw Blvd. and Slauson Ave. He proceeds to tell the story behind this store that particularly pertains to my research interests and musical tastes. Not only do I study gang members but also gangsta rap, and this store belong to one of the most respected gangsta rap artists currently in the rap game. Slauson Ave. is not owned by Black Americans. Rather, Nipsey Hussle and his family hail from Eritrea and Ethiopia and are engulfed in the gang environment. Hussle gangbangs out the Rollin’ 60s Crips. Although his earlier mixtapes, *Slauson Boy, Vol. 1* and *Bullets Ain’t Got No Name Vol. 1 & 2* reflect the gangbangin’ lifestyle, his most recent album (released in 2013), *Crenshaw*, reflects a solid foundation of family,

community, and success. From his earlier music, my personal favorites are “Questions freestyle” and “Piss Poor.” While parked, Sloan proceeds to explain that Hussle’s strength comes not from his gang but from his family. Thus, Crips and Bloods transcend while being enmeshed in the Black culture of Los Angeles. Not only do Black Americans belong to and involve themselves in the gang culture, but also Blacks across the diaspora.

### Crip Consequences

The Crips tried to emulate the BPP in their clothing style and militant mentality. AMDE, a Watts Historian, featured in Sloan (2005) documentary remembers the Crips as, “They were very creative, man. I mean in the way they dressed, in their talk, the language umm, [they] could have really been something.” Sloan furthers this discussion and explains, “In their mind it was almost like the rebirth of the Panthers” (Sloan, 2005). Besides their mannerisms, the Crips adopted a constitution that was similar to the BPP ten-point program for community progress. The writer of the Crip Constitution, Danifu (an Eastside Crip) also helped with the acronym of the word Crips: Community Revolutionary Interparty Service. Another version, offered by Mike Davis (1990), is, Continuous Revolution in Progress. When Washington, a respected fighter who was against fire-arms, began his quest to form a gang, the formation of the Crips began as a way to protect the community but soon it just provided a way to protect its members and their families (Alonso, 2010). With the expansion of Crips into different sets and neighborhoods across South Central, Long Beach, Compton, and Inglewood, the youth was joining at an increasing rate and the atmosphere and attention turned for the worse.

Crips were becoming known for harassing others and stealing leather jackets; an act which proceeded to have an irreversible effect and continues to haunt the Black community decades later.

On March 21, 1972, Robert Ballou, Jr. leaving a Wilson Pickett and Curtis Mayfield concert at the Hollywood Palladium, was attacked and later killed by a group of Westside Crip members after protecting his friend's leather jacket. Days later, nine members of the Westside Crips were arrested for the murder (Alonso, 2010). Ballou, a student athlete at Los Angeles High School and non-gang affiliate, marked the first death and introduced the option of killing in gang feud (Alonso, 2010; Afary, 2009; Sloan, 2005). Not only was Ballou non gang-affiliated but he also represented a special affluent position in the Black Los Angeles community. His family lived in Baldwin Hills with his criminal lawyer father and his realtor mother. Robert Ballou left behind a family that will never recover from his heinous murder. Ballou's younger brother, who was only six months old when he was killed, would eventually follow a path influenced by his older brother's death.

*Sidenote: Ballou not so Blue*

*In his first ever interview, Brian Ballou describes the killing of his brother. I met Brian Ballou through Sloan. As if the meeting was destined Sloan tells me later, "That is my first time seeing Brian Ballou in three years; and he is going to give you an interview, something he declined for my own documentary." Ballou is a fair, light-skinned, 6'1" male. He looks like he is of mixed descent. He is approaching his early*

*forties and talks with a southern drawl. He comes from an affluent background and prestige. This is Robert Ballou's younger brother.*

*Two days before my research trip is supposed to end, Ballou picks me up in a 500sl black Mercedes-Benz and we head to Harold & Belle's for some good food and good conversation. I conduct the interview here located on the corner of Jefferson Blvd and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. At the end of a scrumptious gumbo dinner and apple pie dessert, I turned the audio recorder on and we begin talking about his family.*

*"His name was Robert Brooks Ballou. He was way older than I was. He was seventeen years old basically uh when I was born. So uh basically yeah, that was my older brother. He was a high school student," states Ballou as he introduces his brother. "Yeah, played football. College was definitely part of his future, academics and sports. He had scholarships being offered to him, but yeah just a regular guy from what I've been told because I was so young, you know what I mean," he continues.*

*"Yeah. So what happened to him?" I reply back.*

*Brian: Basically he went to a concert at the Hollywood Palladium and uh as he and his friends were leaving the concert, there was group of Crips there that wanted to take his best friend's leather coat. His best friend's name was Charles Flowers.*

*Cymone: Okay.*

*Brian: The coat actually belonged to his sister, Charles' sister.*

*Cymone: But Robert was wearing it?*

*Brian: No, actually Charles was wearing it.*

*Cymone: Charles was wearing the jacket.*

*Brian: Yes. So what ended up happening, they came out, they tried to leave a little early, to beat the crowd. I guess these guys saw them go into the concert, so they called other guys up. You know there were no cell phones or pages or anything so I guess they got on the pay phone and was like, “Ay you know, there is this coat—yeah, we are trying to get this coat from this guy.” That was like the big thing back then in the 70s, the leather coats and what not. So uh yeah, they left early, they had 15 to I guess 20 Crip gang members outside waiting specifically for Charles, really for the coat that he was wearing.*

*And uh Robbie stood with Charles and told you know the guys hey leave us alone, we are just trying to leave early, it's not even his jacket, it's his sister's and they weren't trying to hear that. So, they started brawlin' more or less. And from what I was told, my brother started getting the best of quite a few of them, and then one of the bigger guys who were more intoxicated or what have you, came and hit 'em on the back of his neck with brass knuckles, while he's fighting you know three or four of the guys who were hitting his friends or whatever, the crabs, whatever you want to call them. So yeah, fellow gang members (Brian Ballou, personal communication, January 6, 2014.)*

Brian Ballou explains this thought, stating: “So that was the devastating blow that pretty much took his life.” Due to this unfortunate event, the Crips began to receive increased media attention, which in part attracted more members. Robert Ballou was the first victim of gang violence without ever being an affiliate, a participant, or a member. Brian Ballou explains that his brother had a bright future with college in his path. Soon after the murder, any incident involving criminal activity in the Los Angeles area was



attributed to the Crips, regardless of their involvement. This set a new path for the gang (Alonso, 2010; Sloan, 2005). In this excerpt, Brian tacitly tells the reader about himself as well. After mentioning who killed his brother, Ballou uses the derogatory, offensive term “crabs” used by Bloods to describe Crips. Brian is a Black P. Stone from The Jungles (see Chapter 3).

In the early 1970’s, Washington began coercing, or rather bullying, smaller gangs into joining the Crips in Southern California. This coalition was not only concentrated in South Central, but also Compton, Inglewood, and Long Beach. Angelo White calls this era the “Crip Multiplication.” Washington envisioned the Crips becoming the largest gang in the nation; to reach this goal, he convinced smaller gangs to merge with Crips ideology. As the Crips grew in numbers throughout Southern California, other gangs resisted, forming an oppositional alliance. Thus began the number one enemy nation against Crips: The Bloods.

### **Blood Brothers**

Three months after the Ballou incident, vengeance through murder became the ultimate goal; the first gang-related homicide occurred between the Westside Crips and the Brims, a rival gang (Alonso, 2010; Sloan, 2005). The Bloods were formed out of response to the growing amount of Crips that terrorized smaller gangs. One person who can affirm this statement is a founding member of the Pirus, the Blood set originally formed on the streets of Compton.

*Sidenote: All Hail, King Bobby Louie*

A.C. “King Bobby Louie” Moses is an actual king. His presence is both mystifying and menacing. At 6’4” and weighing 280 pounds, he is one to avoid for confrontation. I met Moses at the Cease Fire Breakfast, hosted by a coalition of non-profit organizations aimed to eliminate violence in the community; 2<sup>nd</sup> call is a member of this organization. I was invited to the breakfast by D and he directed me and Lena to sit at the table that Moses occupied. Not knowing at the time his importance to the community, I saw him stand up and embrace a tall, lean man. They talked for a couple minutes, and you can tell they knew each other pretty well. As the program was about to start, they parted ways and took their seats. Just then, D approached the microphone and wanted everyone to recognize the moment that just happened. The two men who just shook hands and hugged are founding members, Original Gangsters, of two long time feuding rival gangs. A.C. “King Bobby Louie” Moses and Angelo “Barefoot Pookie” White were no longer enemies, peace could occur. As I acknowledged this significance, I thought to myself, “Wow, I’m sitting with a leader who started the Pirus, the Bloods, and he just embraced a Crip. Profound.”

A few days later, I am in a dark green Chevy Blazer with A.C. Moses and his long-time Blood brother. This interview is going to be different than any other I have conducted. I recognize it instantly. First, I have to explain myself. Who am I? Why am I here? What are my intentions? The questions are being fired not by Moses but by the Piru driving the car. I can tell I’m not getting near “King Bobby Louie” without the acceptance of the driver. So I explain myself. I tell them who I am, where I grew up, and about my research. I share why I’m so passionate about advocating and spreading

*awareness. During my spiel, Moses is sitting in the passenger seat, nodding his head, and listening to every word; whereas, Mr. T (this is a made up nickname since I did not know his name until afterwards, when he dropped me back off at Lena's) is interrogating and asking questions. I can tell this is a guarded, protective space, but surprisingly, I am not uncomfortable. I am actually quite the opposite and feel extremely relax. I have gotten used to the many first interactions with gang members who are leery and suspicious of my presence, but once after a few exchanges are comfortable and come alive. Soon enough, Mr. T, not yet allowing me full permission into his and Moses's world, did begin to open up and converse with me. Rather than asking questions, we begin to have a conversation. We talk until we reach Denny's at University Village, across the street from the University of Southern California. This is the second reason I know this interview is going to be different. The plan is to go inside Denny's to eat and talk, but instead I end up conducting the interview inside the Chevy Blazer at the Denny's parking lot. I do not want to interrupt the flow of information and jeopardize the dichotomy of private/public space so instead, I ask if we could just stay in the car and I conduct the interview in here. They agree.*

*A.C. "King Bobby Louie" Moses is now 59 with a full, thick greying beard. Besides his facial hair, he is hairless. Moses is completely bald. His voice resonates a gruffly, deep baritone pitch, but he sometimes struggles with speech. It is hard for him to form words and they usually come out fast paced and as a mumble. In the following excerpt I will insert moments of expression/sounds when Moses is speaking. After spending time with him over a course of three days, I later discover two instances where*

*Moses' speech instantly becomes clear while simultaneously commanding attention: when discussing the present state of Piru and when singing. Moses, once part of the singing group The Delfonics, has a beautiful, melodic baritone voice. I witness this from the backseat; as I watch mesmerized him belt out "Zoom" by The Commodores on Audible 92.3 FM. Moses is a walking, talking contradiction. In the Denny's parking lot, Moses tells me how he first began as a Crip and soon afterwards formed Piru:*

*Cymone: Okay, so you are one of the founding members of Piru?*

*A.C.: Yes, course.*

*Cymone: And you, yourself was a Crip before?*

*A.C.: Correct. Correct. Correct.*

*Cymone: Did you know Raymond Washington?*

*A.C.: That's my boy... We started the Crips together. We were just trying to take over the world and everywhere we go, we always wanted to be the baddest boys, so yeah...*

*[Let] me explain this to you right now. When [I] got into-my first confrontation was [with] the Crips. I did not respect the fact that they were claiming to be Crips at Centennial High School. I was informed there were people at Centennial claiming to be Crips and my best friend Lorenzo Bennett, at that time LB, uh convinced me to check those Crips out. At Centennial, when I got there, I recognize no one as a Crip. I knew all those that I was associated with.*

*Cymone: Right.*

*A.C.: And I was never associated with any of those.*

*Cymone: What was your thought...*

*A.C.: Actually my whole sole attention was to to uh...embarrass and point out imposters and wannabes.*

*Cymone: Right, did it happen?*

*A.C.: Yeah I was doing that till I ran into a uh...nice mob [chuckles]. And they all uh claiming to be Crips.*

*Cymone: Yeah.*

*A.C.: So I came too far now to turn back around. [pause] One of them across the street told me I had to uh back up on, you know, how I was disrespectin' their homies and shit so one thing led to another. I asked who is he, he identified himself as Rico from Carver Park Crip, aww shit you know. After that question go down, you gotta do what you do. [chuckle] You gotta handle some business. Fist to cuz.*

*So we got to fighting and they didn't like the way I was handling it with him [snicker] they jumped me. Kinda rough me up pretty bad, the guy like I told you that asked me to come and take these dudes out, my boy, my best friend Lorenzo Bennett, he was there with me you know and we just did what we do. In the process of feeling [chuckles] the pain of the asswhooping, what pained me most was that I lost my hat. I took great pride in my ace deuce hat. And mine was newly purchased.*

*Cymone: What color was it?*

*A.C.: Black and White. It was fixed up. You know, I was always a trendsetter (A.C. Moses, personal communication, December 29, 2013).*

Moses describes the confrontation that eventually led to his separation from the Crips.

Moses, from Compton, associated with Raymond Washington and others on the

Eastside. But he also identified with the Piru Street Boys in Compton. Alonso (2010) affirms this, stating, “In 1971 the Piru Street Boys, led by Sylvester “Puddin” Scott and Vincent “Lil Vence” Owens, joined with Washington and the Eastside Crips...However, Mac Thomas, of the leaders of the Compton Crips immediately objected to the Piru alliance” (p.152). Since Moses and the Piru Street Boys were known in South Central and associated with most of the founding Crips on the Eastside, he was unfamiliar with the Crips that spread to Compton. He viewed them as frauds. Moses lived on Piru Street, and while Crips were his friends, the Piru Boys were his family. Eventually Moses was confronted at a party where someone told him, “You a Crip or you ain’t nothin’.” Moses thus had to choose between the two; his choice of the Piru Street Boys over the Crips initiated the gang element.

Many smaller gangs grouped together as one and created the Bloods. Before the Blood alliance, the Brims were the largest non-Crip gang. The original members of the Blood alliance included the Piru Street Boys, Brims, Van Ness Boys, Denver Lanes, the Bishops, Bounty Hunters, and the Athens Park Gang (Sloan, 2005). As Alonzo explains, “The Bishops, a Watts-based gang on Badera Street, led by Bobby Lavender; the Bounty Hunters in the Nickerson Gardens Housing projects; and Jan Brewer and the Inglewood Families joined with the Piru Street Boys to create a new federation of non-Crip neighborhood” (Alonso, 2010, p.153). Eugene ‘Taboo’ Battle and Roosevelt ‘Cowboy’ Banks amongst others are also considered founders of the Bloods alliance (Sloan, 2005). Moses further explains:

Bloods became an enemy of mixed breed of those who were not affiliated with the Crips. That was a thing that the POLICE [voice raises] identified and categorized. It was much easier to do that... Anyone who killed Crips was recognized as red. And that's something that the police helped us get together [chuckles] and be safe in the jailhouse. You was dead meat going to jail because all the Crips were inside and when I was in jail, it weren't no other Pirus. Or if it was, he was way over there. And I was over there handling my mess. So therefore, we had to rely on [those] who weren't Crips.

The Bloods were not just one gang who were against the Crips; instead a coalition of independent, neighborhood gangs joined together to offset the rising number of Crips members. Additionally, the Bloods formed to protect the smaller gangs who needed protection in Crips-dominated jails. T. Rodgers, who is credited for the Black P. Stones, also merged with the Blood alliance. Rodgers, a Chicago native, modeled his set after the Black Stones based in Chicago but with the street personality of LA (Phillips, 1999). T. Rodger is quoted in Alonso (2010), "We were out-numbered by the Crips, so we formed an alliance with the Brims, and eventually an alliance with other neighborhoods [that] felt threatened by the Crips" (p.153). Because of their staggering numbers, the Bloods became the Crips' greatest enemy.

The Bloods derived their name from the revolutionary period of the 1960s. During the 1965 Watts riot, in order to prevent damage on business property, community members would call each other 'Blood' or 'Blood Brothers' (Phillips, 2012; Sloan, 2005). Blood was a common reference to address those in the Black community. Even

the revolutionary group, The Black Panther Party, used the term to refer to Black people. The newspaper, *The Black Panther*, under the heading “Armed Black Brothers in Richmond Community,” states, “The nice thing about these Bloods is that they had their arms to defend themselves and their Black Brothers and Sisters while they exercised their Constitutional Rights: Freedom of Speech and the right to Peacefully Assemble” (Vol. IV No. 2). The newspaper column shows the pervasiveness of the word: it was used in a number of other references, such as the Black men in North Richmond near Oakland, California. Blood was not just a term signifying Black men in Los Angeles, but a specific region. To add, Moses discusses how the term eventually was used to signify the Bloods gang:

Yeah, no more Cuz. Because a lot of people was trying to use that word in order to slide in and slide out, you understand? You slid in, you slid out because the jailhouse Crips they were [pause] fakes too. If you can fake it, you can make it. We stopped that. We stopped saying Cuz and for now on we Piru. And when you address me, you say Blood. When they started saying, “What happenin’ Cuz,” we say “We Piru. What happenin’ Blood?” Yeah, we saying Bloods now.

What was once used as an endearment towards others in the Black community soon became a way for gangs to decipher the difference from Crips. Due to the extensive number of Crips both inside and outside of jail, non-Crips needed to a language device to offset ‘Cuz,’ a Crip term. “Blood” became this term. Although initially used by Piru Street Boys, Moses explains that Blood became an umbrella term for smaller gangs.



Another word used during this time was ‘Damu’ which means Blood in Swahili (Phillips, 2012).

Crips and Bloods were most easily identified by their colors. Since the Crips were known for representing blue, the Bloods adopted the color red. However, this was not the case when the gangs first began. Moses explains, “Actually, you know everybody was free to wear any color they wanted in the beginning. Because back in the day, we used to say blue for ru. It wasn’t prejudiced against colors. [But] shit, they started having their rags out, they started having Blue rags. We had our red one.” A gang member could wear any color at first, until the Crips began to represent blue with their rags, their bandana or their flag, as it is called. For every neighborhood that had ties to Crips, there was a neighborhood near with a set of Bloods.

By the end of 1972, both gangs were established with claimed territory and set identities; during this time “the Pirus held a meeting in their neighborhood to discuss growing Crip pressure and intimidation, which by year’s end resulted in a bloody death toll that increased from twenty-nine to 501 homicides in Los Angeles” (Alonso, 2010, p.153). Between 1972 and 1979, gang-related murders increased to 450 total in South Central (Alonso, 2010). The year 1979 also marked significant turn of events: the imprisonment of Stanley “Tookie” Williams and the death of Raymond Washington. I asked Angelo “Barefoot Pookie” White and A.C. “King Bobby Louie” Moses both how they were affected by Washington’s death and the catalyst of gang formation. White said solemnly, “It makes me feel real bad; it makes me feel real bad because I know that we

are our own enemies. We don't even know who the real enemy is," while Moses cynically stated:

It hurts and pains me, you know? I hate to say it for those of us that grew up with him [Washington], it impacts US. But those [snicker] that came up in the era he died in, I don't think it had an impact on them at all because he was just like a soft guy, used to be something, they didn't respect us like we did. The history's been broke. It's been history.

Both White and Moses share regret. Their emotions mirror each other regarding loss and reflections on the past. Being Original Gangsters comes with a price. Although they can each reminisce on how the Crips and Bloods formed, they both knew Raymond Washington, and they survived the entrenched warfare, they also have to live with the past. Since its formation in the late 1960s, Crips and Bloods in Southern California have killed more Black men than any White hate group. Sloan (2005) reflects this sentiment: "We doing what they want us to do, you know? Killing each other. We playing right into the system's hands." After the incarceration of Stanley "Tookie" Williams and the murder of Raymond Washington, the gangs began to go further downhill as warfare began to occur between sets in the same gang (Alonso 2010, Davis, 1990). No longer was the feud just between Crips and Bloods, but now Crips were killing Crips, and Bloods were killing Bloods.

Crips and Bloods are two cultural organizations birthed out of the identity and eventual demise of The Black Panther Party. What initially began as the BPP's rebirth soon became misguided and destructive. Thus, it is imperative to understand the demise

of the one organization that eventually gave rise to the other and led to further resistance in the Black community. Next, I will discuss the correlations among the broader social and structural forces that formed gangsta rap music in the 1980s.

## CHAPTER II

### TUNING INTO GANGSTA-ISM

“First of all Music Man, Music IS Entertainment: Music is for people to enjoy. Music is to explain theories as well as [to] let off anger”-Krupt<sup>3</sup>

It is December 27<sup>th</sup>, my first day back in Los Angeles after a seven month hiatus and I am with Tremont. In his green Dodge Durango, we catch up on each other’s lives. “How you been young lady?” Tremont affectionately asks. I know he is excited to see me and I share his enthusiasm. I tell him I am just glad and relieved to be back in Los Angeles. I have come to view LA as home. In the midst of our conversation, he drives to Hawthorne, a section between Inglewood and Gardena, for me to meet his younger homie who is also an underground music producer. We reach his apartment and are greeted by E-Roc. E-Roc strongly resembles E-40, with his squared wire frame glasses and laid-back presence. Tremont and I are sitting on the couch when I notice that E-Roc even sounds like E-40, fast-paced but clear, saying multiple thoughts in one breath. He resumes his seat in front of the Protools mix session and begins to play his latest music for us. An hour later, after he plays a couple songs produced for a young Compton artist, we all three jump in Tremont’s truck and head to a studio in Long Beach, California.

This is my first time inside a music studio and I do not know what to expect. I am concealing a burst of excitement for this new opportunity. The outside landscape looks like a warehouse, but inside reminds me of a house. As you enter, there is an open, spacious area, and further inside there are stairs to the right extending to the second

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<sup>3</sup> *Kronick Magazine* Fall 1998

floor. At the top of the stairs and to the direct right there is the studio room with another further down the hall. Tremont, E-Roc, and I enter the studio and are greeted by another homie, Keke Loco who is part of the gangsta rap group N.O.T.S-Nigga's Off The Street- and like Tremont and E-Roc, is from the Harlem Rollin' 30s, a vast Crip set on the Westside of South Central. Keke Loco, dressed in all Black, is albino. He is a Crip whom many perceive White at first glance, but quickly realize that he is Black. Despite the stark contrast of his skin tone, Keke Loco embodies Blackness from his language to his interactions with those like him. In this room of difference, the color of commonality is not black but blue.

Late into the night after Tremont and I leave and return with a box of pizza and two 2 liters of Coke, everyone is chilled and concentrated on making music. It is no longer just us four, others artists have come to share the communal space of studio time. One in particular is Glasses Malone. Malone, from Watts and Compton, is a 117<sup>th</sup> Street Crip. He signed to Cash Money Records three years ago and his EP *Beach Cruiser* features gangsta rap artists like Snoop Dogg, Mack 10, Nipsey Hussle, and Jay Rock. While stuffing my face with chicken and jalapeño pizza in the lounge area connected to the studio, Tremont puts me on the spot. "This here young lady is from Texas and writing her thesis on gang members and gangsta rap. Yeah, so Cymone tell Glasses about your research," he says as he introduces us. With remnants of mozzarella cheese and marinara sauce filling my mouth, I quickly swallow my meal and proceed to respond. I explain how everyone understands gangsta rap as a subgenre of hip-hop, but what is not explicitly discussed is how gangsta rap is a resistant tool of expression for

those involved in and surrounded by the gang culture. My research attempts to look at the producers and consumers of gangsta rap through gang members. While I am speaking, Malone looms in the doorframe between the lounge and studio, listening to my every word. He nods his head and does not break eye-contact as I give a 30-second summary of my project. “Okay, Okay,” he says in agreement and as quick as my spiel is finished, he’s off to write rhymes.

Not long after the conversation with Malone and a pizza slice later, another round of men come in and this time with a baby in tow. Three guys in their early twenties walk in the lounge area and greet everyone with head nods and daps. As they see me sitting on the couch, one by one in succession, they say hi and introduce themselves individually, and turn around to help unlatch the baby out the car seat. I cannot help but notice the gentleness in caring for and entertaining the little baby boy. Unsure of who is the father, they all seem to share an attentive involvement in the child’s wellbeing. I am touched by their open acts of affection. “This is a portrayal the media typically overlooks when talking about Black men,” I reflectively observed. I soon discover only one is a rapper and the other two are there for support, both for their friend’s rap career and his baby.

The hip-hop artist, Flash, is from Compton, California, whose music Tremont and I listened to earlier that day. Flash is from Kelly Park Crips, on the Eastside of Compton. In the recording booth Flash exhibits the source of his passion: his child and his gang. As Flash is rapping into the U87 microphone, he is wearing a blue rag wrapped around his head, held in place by the headphones. He is also in the booth with his baby.

After the baby becomes restless and begins to cry, Flash stops recording, leaves and walks back into the booth with his baby. When Eric asks him impatiently what he is doing, Flash expresses, “All my baby wants is his daddy and he’s good now, so let’s keep recording.” I watch in amazement as Flash raps into the mic with his son in the crook of his right arm and realize the irony of this image. He is a Black man who provides for his kid, a Crip who protects his son, and a rapper who loves his baby.

In this section I will provide a performative, economic, and social account of what led to the formation of gangsta rap in the late 1980s. Quoted in Annette Saddik (2003), Chuck D asserts Black artists use rap as CNN, like a daily news source of information regarding Black people (p. 110), or as the “black urban beat,” (Keyes, 2002, p. 122). In this instance rap is the medium of networks that communicates the social struggles and awareness of the Black community. Gangsta rap emerged on the West Coast just when the LA Black community was dealt with a height of crack and gangs in areas of Los Angeles, Long Beach, Compton, and Oakland (Dyson, 2004, p. 421). Brian Cross (1993) believes gangsta rap was heavily influence and first originated on the East Coast but after the killing incident of Karen Toshima in affluent Westwood, near UCLA, took the “prize in authenticity” (p. 24).

I focus on gangsta rap as the originator of the popular, commercialized subgenre recognized today. Formed on the West Coast with its glaring gang subculture and in search of Black male identity, gangsta rap became a fight and fantasy. Tricia Rose (1994) also makes this connection, “During the late 1980s Los Angeles rappers from Compton and Watts, two areas severely paralyzed by the postindustrial economic

redistribution developed a West Coast style of rap that narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life as a poor young, black, male subject in Los Angeles” (p.59). Gangsta rap is directly tied to LA Black males’ sexual exploits and severe strife. To add in the discussion, Michael Eric Dyson (2004) traces the tropes to historical, racist portrayals, “Black men as sexual outlaws and black females as “ho’s” in many gangsta rap narratives mirror the ancient stereotypes of black sexual identity” (p.412). Hypersexuality was a theme already appropriated to describe Black identity before gangsta rap took shape. With this understanding, gangsta rap is also a set of performance events. As such, it can be considered a performance of Black male identity. In the next section, I will discuss how this identity performance plays out within mainstream and underground gangsta rap culture. KRS-One’s 1989 song “Ghetto Music” defines underground as, “a sound that is “raw,” a sonic depiction of the grit and grime of the urban ghetto landscape (Keyes, 2002, p.122).

### **Gearing for Gangsta Groove: Performative and Resistant**

Although largely overlooked, a vital component to understanding gangsta rap is *knowing* that it is a performance of Black masculinity. This performance involves “lyrical fluidity, rhythm and timing, articulation, voice quality, musical mix, stage presence, and above all, originality” (Keyes, 2002, p.125). Saddik (2003) argues that ‘gangsta rap’ or ‘reality rap’ is a self-reflexive performance of the “complexities and commodification of black male identity in America” (p. 111). Reality rap is how many gangsta rap describe this genre. Nelson George (1998) in *hip hop america* also designates gangsta rap as “reality rap,” but does not give a reason why. Quoted in Keyes



(2002) Ice Cube states, “[N.W.A.] deals with reality. Violence is reality; You’re supposed to picture life as a bowl of cherries, but it’s not. So we don’t do nothin’ fake” (p. 139). This is why rap artists believe gangsta is not the correct term to categorize their music, but rather it is the reality of their life. And it is violent. Whereas television and films are rarely criticized for violent depictions; gangsta rap is continuously shunned and reprimanded for its theatrical, sometimes comical performance. Saddik (2003) asserts that instead of judging gangsta rap for its linguistic performance, it should instead be viewed as representational; that is, recognizing the “performance, play, and perhaps even social message all at the same time” (p. 111).

Bryant Alexander (2006) defines cultural performance as the dramatization of lived experience in a particular cultural context. Building on this idea, I contend that gangsta rap is a performative space, used to enact and express daily modes of conduct. Gangsta rap allows “cultural members to understand, critique, and transform the world in which they live while also providing outsiders with cues to understanding cultures that are not their own” (Alexander, 2006, p. 73). Even Alexander’s analysis on performing Black masculinity and its contradictory position of “Good Man-Bad Man” opens a cultural and critical lens to gangsta rap where “bad becomes good and good becomes bad” (Alexander, 2006, p.76). Specifically, the notion of ‘Bad Black Man’ situates itself as a normative, stereotypical performance of the violent, aggressive Black male and anything labeled as other. The ‘Good Black Man’ is often portrayed as odd, different, and queer. Although gangsta rap resists dominant societal relations, it simultaneously reaffirms the normative images placed upon the Black masculine body.

Gangsta rap is resistant music reflecting the frustration living in a hegemonic dominant culture with little to no power. It was birthed during a time of social changes and economic disadvantage in Black communities. Dyson (2004) asserts that gangsta rap “embarrassed mainstream society and the black bourgeois” (p. 417). In addition, the subgenre reflected a clear message about police brutality; an issue Blacks have been subject to since the LA migration in the 1940s (Flamming, 2005; Robinson, 2010). Since LAPD Chief William Parker’s tenure (1950-1966), overt acts of discrimination and violence have been forced upon the Black community. Most of the police officers were recruited from the South (Sloan, 2005; Davis, 1990). The inner city of Los Angeles faced many economic downfalls due to the rising poverty rate and rapidly decreasing employment opportunities. Cities like Compton and Watts were most affected (Hunt, 2010). Music was therefore used as a form of societal resistance against issues such as racism and urban neglect.

Similarly, there are other subculture-specific, influenced music genres. Still aligned with the Black musical lineage, the culture of Rastafarian and its Reggae music provides another example of how resistance permeates through music while addressing issues most pressing to the community. Rastafarianism began in 1930 after Haile Selassie’s accession to the throne of Ethiopia. With the combined belief of Black Africa and the “White Man’s bible,” the movement believed in the deliverance of the Black race (Hebdige, 1979, p. 32). The Rasta movement first took place in impoverished neighborhoods of Kingston, Jamaica and then transported through sound to the West Indies community in Great Britain (Hebdige, 1979). Hebdige further explains, “Clothed

in dreadlocks and ‘righteous ire’ the Rastaman effects a spectacular resolution of the material contradictions which oppress and define the West Indian community,” and through Reggae music the cultural message is disseminated (1979, p.34). Reggae was used to confront the problems of race and class with its focus on African heritage. The very essence of resistance came through as Blackness was transformed into a positive, empowering identity. Though gangsta rap and the gang subculture do not exactly subscribe to the religion of Rastafarian, there is a strong thread of community resistance found in Black diasporic music.

Like Alexander, bell hooks (1992) argues that the Black male body uses rap as a resistive voice to racism, but at the expense of phallocentrism. That is, rap as a Black male space allows for gender privilege and power at the expense of misogyny and molestation of the Black female body. hooks (1992) further states that rap was once “a male thing” (p. 35). She refers in past tense to the genre as a male-dominated space. While male creativity, needed open spaces to grow and move, “domestic space, equated with repression and containment, as well as with the “feminine” was resisted and rejected so that an assertive patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity and its concomitant emphasis on physical prowess could emerge” (hook, 1992, p. 35). In the following field reflection, I will demonstrate that “the rap scene” is still “a male thing”:

*Reflection: When in Rome, do as the Romans do*

There is no toilet paper.

Tremont and I are about to leave the studio to run some errands and as I stand up, I am flooded with the urge to urinate. Realizing I may need to release before we depart, I

quickly ask where the restroom is and am directed down the stairs. I open the restroom's door and turn on the light. Surprisingly, the restroom does not look frightening. A girl's worst nightmare is to use a dirty, dingy restroom, as was my initial worry when I first entered. To the left is the sink and a couple feet to right of it, is the toilet. I walk in and feel my tension ease; I can pee in here. Right across from the toilet there is a shelf with cleaning supplies and scrubs. I complete a 360 degree turn in the small restroom and notice the space is pretty legit, with limited dinginess being that it occupies mostly men. And then I see it, or lack thereof. There is no toilet paper. I look at the toilet paper holder and it is empty. There is no toilet paper. As I start to shift footing position, I bewilderedly ask myself, "What am I to do?" I do another quick survey of the space and think, "Damn." With a smirk on my face, I am confronted with the irony of the situation. There is no toilet paper because there is no need for it here. In my search for a miracle, I even preview the cleaning supplies section for any tangible tissue. No luck. I am suddenly in a conundrum. I have two options; either wait and hopefully another opportunity comes soon or squat and shake it off. I shake my head with a Kanye shrug. Shit, when in Rome...

Rap's larger economy can be theorized in the smaller, private confines of the studio's restroom. In here, I am confronted with the realization this is a male dominated arena: a woman's basic necessity is not met nor thought of. I am not saying this is a direct rejection of a woman's presence or that one is subject to degradation when around, but rather the political economy of the restroom represents the male space of rap and its larger context. This is demonstrated in the toilet paper, or the lack thereof. The restroom

constrains and only serves one purpose; it is in direct contrast to the Black male openness that asserts creativity and control. The restroom is viewed as a domesticated space but is further masculinized by lacking the one item that claims femininity. Toilet paper, with its soft, manipulated, easily broken cloth, is not welcome in the space of hardness, manhood, and superiority. To revert back to hooks (1992), rap is still a “male thing.” As it is my desire to one day make the studio a permanent career space I reflectively think, “Damn. Does this mean every time I return I have to fulfill the domesticated role in bringing toilet paper roll?”

### **The West Side is the Best Side**

The emergence of and thrust behind gangsta rap included rap artists/groups such as Ice-T and N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit’ Attitudes), beginning when the LA Times coined the term “gangsta rap” during an interview with N.W.A. in 1989 (Quinn, 2005). While discussing the song “Gangsta Gangsta” which was on the 1988 debut album, *Straight Outta’ Compton*, Ice Cube introduced the term for a new California style of hip-hop that is still widely popular. In order to understand gangsta rap, the history of West Coast hip-hop must be reviewed in order to understand its origins.

The West Coast had its own rap style and creativity stirring in the 1980s. Its music, like that of the East Coast, was focused on the Black urban youth and their living conditions. However, this bi-coastal counterpart did not receive credit or respect from the East Coast. The East Coast selfishly claimed the rap game for themselves; no other region could imitate (Quinn, 2005). However, this soon would change because West coast rap soon overtook the East Coast, as Dyson explains: “East Coast rap lags far

behind the West Coast in records sales and in popularity” (Dyson, 2004, p. 421). This dramatic change began when Tony Joseph brought hip-hop—the primary East Coast style—to California in 1979. Joseph, or DJ T, was from Queens, New York, and noticed the lack of a hip-hop culture in Los Angeles. He decided to incorporate an East Coast style into West Coast music by mixing and dj-ing at the local house parties (Diallo, 2010). From 1981 to 1986, DJ T, along with DJ Michael Moore, would host the “The Saturday Night Jams,” “Traffic Jams,” and “L.A. Sunday” on the FM stations KJLH and KACE, while Rodney-O and Joe Cooley hosted at KDAY (Diallo, 2010, p. 226).

Radio stations like KJLH/KACE-FM and KDAY-AM were not only pivotal to spreading rap across the West Coast, but were also influential in bringing rap artists to notoriety (Charnas, 2010). Gregory Macmillan, before shortening to Greg Mack, was the radio programmer at KDAY and played hip-hop around the clock, 24 hours a day in the mid-1980s. KDAY became “*the* voice of rap in Southern California,” located in a “windowless red brick bunker built into a steep hillside miles to the north, near Hollywood (Quinn, 2005, p.63; Charnas, 2010, p. 215). While Mack was the motivator behind the influx of rap music on KDAY, it was the DJs who, with their rhetorical skill and deft, introduced this music to the public, making them largely responsible for rap music’s successful proliferation throughout the West Coast.

After going to see Uncle Jamm’s Army at the Sports Arena, Mack knew he could collaborate with the DJs on stage, but he needed local talent. (Charnas, 2010). Rejected by Roger Clayton, the leader of Uncle Jamm’s Army, Mack turned to Alonzo Williams, leader of World Class Wreckin’ Cru, and thus had his first radio mixers. DJs like Dr. Dre

(Andre Young) and DJ Yella (Antoine Carraby) once honed their production talents at KDAY and artists like Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson) became known after his freestyle on KDAY- "My Penis," sampled after Run DMC's song "My Adidas" (Quinn, 2005). Dr. Dre once stated how important KDAY was to his career: "KDAY was the shit, they put a lot of people on the map, they definitely put NWA on the map" (Quinn, 2005, p.63). Like KJLH and KACE, KDAY also had regular program shows such as Friday Night Live and Saturday's Mac Attack Mixmasters (Quinn, 2005; Charnas, 2010).

The early 80s were dedicated to the electro rap movement. Rap groups like the LA Dream Team, Bobby Jimmy & the Critters, and Egyptian Lover were the faces behind electro rap (Quinn, 2005; Charnas, 2010). This time period was also dubbed by DJ Unknown (Andre Manuel) as "techno-hop" (Charnas, 2010). This popular movement placed emphasis on synthesizer sounds and funk music (Charnas, 2010). Additionally, one of the most inclusive hangout spots in electro rap era was Radiotron, which provided an outlet for MCs, DJs, and B-boys to show off their latest hip-hop skills. David Diallo (2010) states that Radiotron, formally named the Radio Club, was also the Los Angeles Headquarters of the Zulu Nation. Radiotron not only attracted young artists for its nightly club scene but also became a community outreach center with its educational hip-hop programs (Diallo, 2010). Quoted in Diallo (2010), David Guzman, the manager of Radiotron states, "the daytime community center was a haven of cultural creativity for inner city youths in an area plagued by gang-related violence." Even in the realm of the community, there's little escaping the feud between Crips and Bloods. Thus, Radiotron was influential, inspiring those wanting to pursue careers in the music industry. As

Radiotron rose to notoriety, its artists were known for their talent. Specifically, Chris “The Glove” Taylor began DJ-ing at Radiotron during the rise of electro-rap in 1983 (Diallo, 2010; Quinn, 2005). Taylor is known for advancing West Coast hip-hop by being considered among the first to bring scratching techniques to the rap scene, producing the song “Reckless” for Ice-T (Dyson, 2004; Diallo, 2010). Taylor was also featured in the documentary “Breakin’ and Enterin’”, a film that discussed the early beginnings of West Coast breakdancin’. Giving reverence to Radiotron for being the locus of the hip-hop movement, the movie “Breakin’ and Enterin’” was filmed at Radiotron’s club (Diallo, 2010).

The film “Breakin’ and Enterin’” was produced in 1993 and detailed the beginnings of breakdancing and its historic lineage. Breakdancin’, as brought over from the East Coast, was created by DJ Kool Herc but became popular for Puerto Ricans, who added a new style and flair to the street dance (Carrew, 1983). The film also featured Ice-T as a rapper and break-dancer who helped to mentor children in rap and breakdancin’, diverting them from joining gangs.

Although a documentary on the hip-hop culture in Los Angeles, the film underscores and references the gang culture throughout. Break-dancing and rapping provide an alternative to the streets. It is non-destructive. It is creative and peaceful. Because of its many references to the Los Angeles gang culture, it is clear that there is a direct connection between gang culture and hip-hop culture that offers youth with another, positive and creative, form of expression.. After all, Afrika Bambaataa, the godfather of hip-hop, was once a leader and warlord of the Black Rivers Project in New



York until he formed the Zulu Nation and challenged youth to channel their energy in break-dancing, rapping, and freestyling (Powell, 1991).

Although Radiotron was the place to listen to and engage in the scratching techniques of DJs and the rhyming flows of MCs, the real party was in the streets of LA; this is where the people were. Uncle Jamms Army did just that: they brought the party to the people. Founded by Roger Clayton and a high-school friend Gid Martin, Uncle Jamms Army was a crew of 20 local DJs who would get the people hyped and the party started. As Diallo (2010) discusses, Uncle Jamms Army was popularly known to throw the best parties; on multiple occasions they performed at packed arenas like the Los Angeles Sports Arena and Convention Center. Clayton was the business-man and promoter behind the success of the crew and is also known as the first promoter to bring East Coast groups to Los Angeles (Diallo, 2010).

Uncle Jamms Army solely consisted of DJs and rarely collaborated or opened their crew to MCs; that is until Clayton met Tracy Morrow, more commonly known as Ice-T. Ice-T was the first and one of the only rappers to have performed with Uncle Jamms Army (Diallo, 2010). This relationship proved invaluable to Ice-T, for it was Clayton who produced the record, “Cold Wind Madness”, which launched Ice-T’s career in 1982. With his gritty street rhymes and pimp image, Ice-T was about to push gangsta rap to a mainstream level.

Ice-T derived his moniker from his childhood favorite writer, Iceberg Slim, and thus imitated the images set in Slim’s many novels. At a young age, Ice-T became a loose affiliate of the Hoover Crips while attending Crenshaw High School (Charnas,

2010; Diallo, 2010; Quinn, 2005). His earlier music reflected what he saw and experienced on these streets, attracting those who lived the same lifestyle. After his first record brought him national attention, Ice-T pursued a career in music production and founded Rhyme Syndicate. As explained by Diallo (2010), “Rhyme Syndicate brought together a group of Los Angeles underground DJs and MCs such as DJ Unknown, DJ Aladdin, Afrika Islam, Evil E, underground sensation Toddy Tee, who had become something of a local cult figure with his very popular 1986 “Batterram” song, and Everlast” (p. 231). Ice-T forged an opportunity for underground artists to enjoy the freedom of music making without the hassle of a conglomerate record label. This also proved to be a lucrative relationship between Ice-T and its members: the song, “6 N the morning”, produced by Afrika Islam and DJ Unknown, hit airwaves and marked Ice-T’s place in hip-hop history (Charna, 2010; Diallo, 2010). Ice-T (who was born in New Jersey and moved to South Central in his early teens) was inspired to write “6 N the morning” by Philadelphia gang member and rapper Schoolly D’s song “PSK (What does it all mean?)” (Quinn, 2005). Thus in 1986, gangsta rap was born.

### **The Music is Gangsta but the Lyrics *is* Reality (1986-1996)**

Although the first gangsta rap song was Ice-T’s “6 N the morning,” gangsta rap did not grow to its currently recognized state of notoriety until Ruthless Records opened for business. Eric Wright, also known as Eazy-E, was the mastermind behind this record label, and with the business backing of Jerry Heller, co-founded Ruthless Records in 1987 (Charnas, 2010; Quinn, 2005; Diallo, 2010). Jerry Heller soon became a mentor and father figure to Eazy-E (Charna, 2010). Eazy-E, himself a Compton artist and

known drug dealer, was ambitious, driven, and had already headhunted a local artist with larger connections: Dr. Dre. By this time, Dr. Dre was reaching local celebrity status as a member of the DJ crew, World Class Wreckin' Cru; a known rival of Uncle Jamms Army (Borgmeyer & Lang, 2007; Diallo, 2010). The two formed a friendship after Dr. Dre produced Eazy-E's single "Boyz N the Hood," which was pressed to vinyl at Bill Smith Custom Records (Charnas, 2010). Quoted in Quinn (2005), Dre reminisces about their early beginnings, "Me and [Eazy] used to ride around town all day in his jeep selling the record to local record shops" (p.64). "Boyz N' the Hood" was inspired by Ice-T's "6 N the Morning," ghostwrote by O'Shea Jackson (Ice Cube) when he was only 16 years old (Quinn, 2005). "Thanks to the key business skills that Wright claimed to have developed selling drugs on the streets, the record sold more than 200,000 copies" (Diallo, 2010, p.237).

With the three in tow, along with MC Ren (Lorenzo Patterson) and Arabian Prince (Mik Lezan), the rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude) was created in 1987 and one year later, picked up by Priority Records for distribution, released their debut album "Straight Outta Compton." Although this album received little airplay due to profanity, obscenities, gangsta grittiness, and lewd behavior, the album still went double platinum (Diallo, 2010). The late 80s marked a significant change in hip-hop history: West Coast hip-hop had reached national prominence, recognized primarily for its unique genre of gangsta rap. Eithne Quinn (2005) further explains the origins of West Coast hip-hop:

Borrowing above all from the Midwest, the sound of West Coast rap was rooted in the music of Ohio Players, George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Issac Hayes, Gap Band, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and Sly Stone, as well as New York hip-hop favorite James Brown. The combination of the funk rhymes and rhythms with the poignant soul licks gave rise to the development of a slower, bass-driven meter and the minor-keyed, catchy loops, which cohered with LA cruising culture and became the classic gangsta groove (p. 61).

This show's gangsta rap was a hybrid, a cultural infusion of past genres and artists. The soul and funk music of the past was incorporated with a new style of Black expression: gangsta rap. Thus gangsta rap entered a new decade, the 90s represented mainstream DJs and MCs like "Above The Law, Boo-Yaa Tribe, CPO (Capital Punishment Organization), WC & The Maad Circle, WC (Dub C), Ice Cube's Westside Connection, MC Eiht's Compton's Most Wanted, DJ Quik, Coolio, and finally South Central Cartel" (Diallo, 2010, p.237). This shift into the 90s decade came to represent the face of hip-hop. The West Coast, and specifically gangsta rap, took over the mainstream airwaves as youth took note of its violent depictions and social frustrations, which resonated with their own experiences.

#### *Stoplight into Dangerous Territory: Drug Trade and Police Brutality*

The mid-1980s led to another destructive turn for the Black community with the introduction of crack cocaine and Chief Gates' 'War on Drugs'. In part because of the decline of jobs after the Cold War and factory plant relocations, many Black Americans were unemployed and lived under the poverty line (Alonso, 2010). With the proliferation

of drugs on the streets, things turned for the worse. Gang bangers became drug dealers and gang violence over drug turf increased. Alex Alonso (2010) mentions that the beginning of the 80s marked a high of 1,028 murders in Los Angeles, with death occurring more than once a day. The public outcry for the police department to rectify the emergence of drug culture brought a number of law-enforcing tactics that eventually caused more problems than solutions. “The Los Angeles District Attorney created the Hard Core Gang Division to prosecute gang members, and the LAPD established CRASH, Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, an anti-gang police unit trained to investigate gang-related crime” (Alonso, 2010, p.155). Adding to the convoluted bunch of problem-solvers were Chief Gates and Operation Hammer, which represented the first of many sweeps where Black males were arrested in the community for alleged gangbanging’ and drug dealing without evidence.

Operation Hammer, which was enforced between Exposition Park and North Long Beach, was responsible for the arrest of more black youth than any event since the 1965 Watts Rebellion (Davis, 1990). Between February and March of 1987, Gates arrested more than fifteen hundred youth and impounded over five hundred cars (Davis, 1990, p. 272). Operation Hammer was one tactic that, from an outsider perspective, seems to have assisted the Black community with their drug problems. In the end, however, it resulted in more harm than good. Neither gang warfare nor drug sales decreased during this time frame and those arrested were later released and added to an electronic gang file for future surveillance (Davis, 1990).

The 80s drug of choice was rock cocaine. This substance, made of powder cocaine dissolved in a solution of sodium bicarbonate and water, was the ultimate irreversible destruction of the Black community. Once a solid substance, crack was formed. Resembling a crystal nugget, the rock was priced at \$25 dollars; however with the increase in popularity and addition, the drug soon sold for \$10-\$5 per vial (Alonso, 2010). Crack was cheap, created an exhilarated but quick high, and catastrophically deformed its users. Crack was distributed in the Black community by one person; he soon became a celebrated kingpin at the expense of the downfall of his own people.

A celebrated tennis player at Dorsey High School and Los Angeles Trade Tech College, Freeway Ricky Ross became involved in the drug trade because he needed extra income to support his mother. Starting in 1981, he began distributing large quantities of cocaine into the Los Angeles Black urban areas, supported by smuggler and Nicaraguan-exile Danilo Blandon (Alonso, 2010, p.155). Living in Hoover Crips territory and right off the 110 Freeway, Ricky Ross was ideally located for easy access to employees and portable transportation. This is also how he received the name “Freeway” Ricky Ross. With Ross’s sharp mind and entrepreneurial skills, he soon earned more than \$1 million a day from the drug trade. Convicted in 1989, Ross was sentenced to life in prison. Danilo Blandon was also arrested, later granted amnesty from the Justice Department and only served twenty months (Alonso, 2010). It was later revealed that the U.S. government aided the drug trafficking in order to support the Contras in the Nicaraguan war, with the full support of President Ronald Reagan. In 1996, *San Jose Mercury News* reporter Gary Webb investigated the connection between

the Contras and CIA, eventually discovering that “drug traffickers from Nicaragua to Los Angeles were directly tied to local traffickers like Ross in South Los Angeles” (Alonso, 2010, p.156). The Black community was outraged at this discovery. However, news sources like the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* debunked Webb’s allegations. Black balled by major newspapers, Webb committed suicide in 2004. Five years later after finding a glitch in his case, Freeway Ricky Ross was released on May 4, 2009.

The LA Black community continually dealt with hardship, both inside and outside the gangsta scene. The year 1991 marked an era of protest for community residents, following the beating of Rodney King and the death of Latasha Harlins. On March 3, 1991, four LAPD officers, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodor Briseno, and Sergeant Stacy Koon (three of them White while one Latino), pursued Rodney King in a high-speed chase into the Lake View Terrace district. King was fearful of returning to jail on a parole violation so he ignored the police pursuit (Afary, 2009). Once he finally stopped, the four police officers repeatedly attacked King with Billy clubs and Taser guns (Afary, 2009). The entire incident was taped by a local resident and the image of King, splayed out on the ground and badly beaten, made international headlines.

Thirteen days later in South Central, Latasha Harlins was shot in the back of the head after a scuffle with a Korean store owner. The forty-nine year old, Soon Ja Doo, killed fifteen-year old Harlins after she reportedly attempted to steal a bottle of orange juice (Ford, 1991; Afary, 2009). Doo’s attorney, Charles Lloyd, claimed she was acting

in self-defense and accidentally shot Harlins, although the video played in court showed Harlins walking away. Two witnesses to the incident, Ismail Ali and Lakeshia Combs, ages nine and thirteen respectively, provided testimonies in court. Taking into account their ages and conflicting stories, Combs stated, “She [Harlins] was trying to walk out the door when she was shot” (Ford, 1991). The verdict of the case led to protest from the Black community when Doo received a minimum of four hundred hours of community service and a \$500 fine for the death of Latasha Harlins. As shown through history, the court sentence was a continued reminder of the value—or lack thereof—of Black life in America. Coupled with tension from the Latasha Harlins case, the verdict of the 1991 Rodney King beating further outraged the community; all four police officers were acquitted. Angry and demanding social justice for Black citizens, a rebellion erupted in the streets of LA in 1992.

*Beaten to the Punch: BG Knocc Out Remembers the Riots*

*I was all in the riots.*

*I was involved in the middle of it. Where I lived, I was in and out you know throughout the course of the day. Then my mom was like, “You seen the news?”*

*And I was like, “Nah.”*

*My moms like, “Watch this.”*

*Then, whoa. I go outside and everybody where I lived was like, “Man, we gonna walk to the projects.”*

*And I was like, “For what?”*

*“I don’t know.”*



*So we walked to the projects. We walked to the PJs and the Imperial Courts. You have probably around a couple of thousand people walking up Imperial on the way to Nickerson Gardens. We was in the streets while cars trying to go by. We were turning cars over, snatching people out of their cars. We began to just tear up this whole area from one block to the next.*

*Then the police started coming real deep.*

*Once we got back to Imperial Courts, we started seeing all these police you know like Military line-up, they were trying be tactical on how to deal with us. But there was so many of us and we had like all type of automatic handguns, semi-automatics, AK47's and that's when people started shooting like boom boom boom boom. The police started leaving out of there. So we just started looting everything, looting all the stores in the area. Every place you can think, just tearing up stuff, breaking into gun stores. It was like the world was ending (Arlandis Hinton, personal communication, March 1 , 2014).*

Depending on the source's perspective, the incident is referred to as many things: the 1992 LA Riots, Rebellion, or Uprising. I categorize the Black mob of angry Americans as an uprising due to the community frustrations leading up to the event. April 29th marked the day the Rodney King verdict was announced as well as the first day of the LA Uprising. The four police officers were acquitted. After the verdict, there were peaceful local activists and civil right leaders taking a stand outside the LAPD downtown headquarters, while deeper in the community, protestors gathered near Florence and Normandie in South Central, preparing to act upon their grievances in the

streets (Afary, 2009). On the fourth day of the uprising, the National Guard and federal troops came to disband and contain the resistant group of protestors.

Two days before the actual uprising, a gang truce transpired which led to a celebration at the Imperial Courts in Watts (Afary, 2009). The parties continued in the following months and were usually held in Watts or Compton for gang members and relatives to relish the moment of peace. “The festivities grew in size and intensity after the LA rebellion and lasted until later June when the parties were forcibly dispersed by baton-wielding police officers” (Afary, 2009, p. 65). However, the truce did not last long afterward. In an interview with the gangsta rap group South Central Cartel, Meshack Blaq (1994a) touches on the truce, “See what’s interesting about that is here brotha’s been doing good for the last year and trying to uphold. You know, keeping the peace! Brotha’s not taken out brotha’s. But, the media didn’t want to hear all that, you know what I’m saying. They never gave no coverage to the positive” (p.10).

Prior to the uprising, the only time gang members were shown in the media was in handcuffs or in the courtroom; now America was watching those same gang members discuss community grievances and propose solutions for social change. The truce was one way to show the seriousness and commitment to reforming the community. They went so far as to draft a plan, which included community rebuilding and replacing gutted buildings with sites of community flourishing: “Burned-down corner buildings must become career centers, sidewalks must be repaired and have sufficient lighting; and alleys must be cleaned up and painted” (Afary, 2009, p.40). Of course, these economic changes never took effect, and soon the truce was reversed.

Following the LA Uprising, gangsta rap artists went to the studio to express their feelings. In some ways, artists were seen as prophets because they had alluded to an uprising in the near future due Blacks peoples' treatment in Los Angeles. For example, Ice Cube's 1991 album *Death Certificate* and South Central Cartel's debut album *South Central Madness* each referred to social ills that would result in public upheaval (Blaq, 1994a). After the uprising, rap groups like Da Lench Mob and Ice Cube used to their talents to disseminate a social message. "Lench Mob's "Guerrillas Ain't Gangsta" provided an aggressive treatise on the distinction between the two types of "G": rejecting the individualist *gangsta* in favor of militant *guerrilla*" (Quinn, 2005, p.109). The stereotype of 'gorilla' and the revolutionary tactic of 'guerrilla' was another play on words gangsta rap artists used after this incident where one White L.A.P.D. officer stated, "It was straight out of the Gorillas in the Mist" (Keyes, 2002). For example, Da Lench Mob released their album *Guerillas in the Midst* after the uprising and appeared on the album cover "wearing black ski masks and carrying automatic rifles (=guerillas)" while located in "the midst of a dense forest with a heavy undergrowth of ferns (=gorillas)" (Keyes, 2002, p.134). They thus co-opted a negative stereotype of Blacks and means of actively resisting racism.

### **Moving through Mainstream and Underground Gangsta Image**

*It's a Compton Thang: On Memory Lane with MC Eiht*

One of the most prominent gangsta rap artists/groups in the early 1990s was MC Eiht and Compton's Most Wanted, or CMW for short. Although group members MC Eiht, Boom Bam, MC Chill, DJ Slip, and DJ Mike T did not receive as much

commercial success as N.W.A., they maintained underground appeal and a connection to those living in the gang environment. Rather than a lack of marketing strategies, this was in fact an intentional choice.. By remaining underground, they refused to conform to the commercial pop market, following the need to stay real and authentic (Keyes, 2002). In a personal interview, MC Eiht (Aaron Tyler)—who derives his rap name from a homeboy who always carries a .38 pistol and who appears in the 1993 Hughes’ brothers directed film *Menace II Society*—reveals that his intentions were not to become a rapper. Rather, rapping was something he did for fun and to represent his hood:

I never thought to come into rap music to be this big guy rapper riding around. I just got into rap because I like the music and I wanted to speak on what was going on in my neighborhood. That’s it. Dudes liked what I was talking about and that was it... I was gangbanging, I wasn’t no rapper. I never had dreams of going off to make records. I did that shit for fun. I did it for fun to make fun of the other neighborhood we had beef with (Aaron Tyler, personal communication, March 1, 2014).

MC Eiht was from Tragniew Park, a Crip set on the Westside of Compton. He was initially influenced by another member in his hood to start rapping: Toddy Tee and the song “Batterram.” Because his priorities were not to become a rapper, he was heavily involved in gangbanging. MC Eiht’s first rap was about his hood in which he “named every nigga he knew” from his neighborhood; this song became his first single “One Time Gaffled Em Up.”

Even after MC Eiht and his group began to receive recognition and celebrity status for their debut album *It's a Compton Thing* (1991), they were still active gangbangers. MC Eiht mentions how difficult it was in the beginning of his career because he was still heavily involved in gang life:

It was hard for me transitioning into the rapper and the entertainer because I still wanted to be associated with the neighborhood. So I'm still going over there, cats still seeing me hanging out on the block, going to the neighborhood store. Now the more popularity I'm getting and now having to go to Blood neighborhoods to do in stores to sign autographs, I'm still looked upon as this Crip dude. So for the first 2-3 years of my career, I went through a lot of shit. [pause] Cuz I wouldn't show up to certain places or we would show up and there would be fights.

Since MC Eiht still considered himself a gangbanger and not a rapper, there were repercussions to his active affiliation. Quinn (2005) explains, "Famous for his [MC Eiht] realist gangbanging rhymes, Eiht saw rapping as a potential escape, at the same time tenaciously holding onto his gang belonging" (p.55). It took time and maturity for MC Eiht to see rapping as a career outside his commitment to the streets. Unlike other gangsta rap artists who claimed gang affiliation (which is vastly different from gangbanging) like Ice-T and Eazy-E or who were completely unaffiliated like Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, MC Eiht was the real deal (Quinn, 2005).

Although society may perceive his music to be glorifying the gang lifestyle, this is not the case. MC Eiht was simply sharing the reality of many who lived in Los

Angeles and regardless of gang affiliation, was affected by outside forces such as economic situations and racism. He states:

It was never our idea to gang bang in our music, it was never, I mean to tell you the truth, shit we still have to deal with the repercussions of gang banging, by making records about gang banging. It might have sound good on record but then I still gotta roll through the streets. That's why we never tried to glorify Compton's Most Wanted, Crips. Nobody started that until this era of rap. I didn't have to say I was a Crip because people already knew I was a Crip. Quik didn't have to put on red bandannas and wear all red on his album cover because people knew he was a Blood. Like I said we never glorified gang banging, we never commercialized it, we never tried to make money off of it. No. MC Eiht told you I can't find no job, I just had a kid, my people on welfare, my people got shot last night, what the hell can we do to stop it, how can I get out of this neighborhood, how can I get the police to stop harassing me, all I want to do is live normal.

Here MC Eiht shares insight on gangsta rap music and the blurred line between gangbanging and life in LA. Gangbanging occurs when there is active participation, "puttin' in work" for the hood. This ranges from stealing, to robbing, and even killing. So although MC Eiht was an artist rapping and representing his hood, he did not claim set territory or speak out specifically against his enemies (for an example of gangbanging on record see the 1993 album *Bangin' on Wax*). As MC Eiht states above, whatever was discussed on records resulted in very real consequences on the streets. This is not to mean that his music is void of gang tropes, but instead to suggest that the

performative nature of Black masculinity during this time period necessarily involved the binary position of “Good Man-Bad Man” of Black rap artists. This excerpt is also intriguing because MC Eiht mentions his main rap rival during this time period: DJ Quik. DJ Quik (David Blake) is from the Treetop Pirus, a Blood set in Compton. DJ Quik began the beef with MC Eiht after he released *The Red Tape Album* in 1987, in which DJ Quik sparked retaliation with MC Eiht’s “Def Wish” Series. MC Eiht concluded by sharing a sentiment other community members expressed during this time period: gangsta rap was more than just ‘gangsta,’ it was reality, a cry for help, an emotive expression caused to stir up feelings of injustice and frustration. This was especially true for the Los Angeles Black community in the early 1990s.

Back in 1991, N.W.A. now released their second album, *Efil4zaggin* (*Niggaz 4 life* spelled backwards); the album reached number one on charts (Jones, 1991; Diallo, 2010; Quinn, 2005). Quinn (2005) explains the significance of this album:

*Niggaz4Life* marked the moment of gangsta’s emergence as rap market leader and music industry powerhouse. Only four rap albums had previously topped the chart: two by party rappers, Tone Loc and MC Hammer; and two by white rappers, Beastie Boys and Vanilla Ice. Unlike any of these more mainstream artists, NWA had done it without the aid of a single or MTV video (p. 89).

This shift is pivotal to understand of gangsta rap’s commercial success. Not only were Black youth listening to the music, but also in White America where audience statistics reported a “65 percent white market share for hardcore rap” (Quinn, 2005, p. 83).

By this point, Ice Cube was no longer a member of N.W.A. and had launched a solo career. After leaving Ruthless Records, he joined its parent company, Priority Records, and partnered with Public Enemy to produce his solo album *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Charnas, 2010). The early departure from Ruthless Records stemmed from financial dissension between the founders, Heller and Wright. Within a few months, Dr. Dre also left for the same reasons (Borgmeyer & Lang, 2007; Jones, 1993). Whatever the cause, this exit from Ruthless Records gave Dr. Dre ammunition to build Death Row Records with Marion "Suge" Knight. Two years later, Dr. Dre and Ice Cube were at the forefront of mainstream gangsta rap with "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang" and "It Was a Good Day," which reached the Top Ten singles chart (Quinn, 2005). Knight's recently created record label was now Ruthless Records archrival; as the decade trudged on, the two Compton-based records labels would vie for the attention and notoriety to be the voice of the West Coast.

This time period also marked a new kind of gangsta music that Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg helped to make mainstream. G-funk, or Gangsta-funk, was an infusion of the gangsta hard beats with the soul and funk samples of earlier musical genres and thus kept a connection with the Black parent culture. Artists like DJ Quik along with his protégé group, 2nd II None, were masterminds of the G-funk style. "G-funk was marked by both a "hardening" and "softening" of sound and imagery that combine soulful crooners like Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, Bobby Womack to name a few" (Quinn, 2005, p. 143). Kokane (Jerry Long) who was part of the rap group V.S.O.P. collaborated with



his cousin Cold 187um (Gregory Hutchinson) from Above the Law to produce an album titled *Funk Upon A Rhyme* (Blaq, 1994b).

G-funk produced a calm and laid-back sound that underscored its more vulgar and shocking imagery, thus creating a sacred but sensuous binary. In an interview with Meshack Blaq (1994b), the editor/publisher of the underground magazine *Kronick*, Kokane discusses more on the G-funk era: “Funk ain’t nothing but the bluesy sound. The sound comes from instruments and the vocals. You know, speed it up and it’s Funk, or mellow out and slow it down, and it’s blues...Hip Hop and Funk is the way that people can come out and express they self” (p.30). This genre employed tonal semantics, whereby the rapper achieves “meaning and rhetorical mileage by triggering a familiar sound chord in the listener’s ear” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 100). Nate Dogg and Snoop Dogg both came from religious/gospel music backgrounds and used their experiences to sharpen their vocal skills; this conflation of sacred with profane would resonate with Black listeners because of its “church/street polarity” (Quinn, 2005, p. 143). Also in his 1993 song released by Death Row, Snoop Dogg’s “It’s a Doggy Dogg World” used The Dramatics to sing the chorus, while Dr. Dre’s song, “Deeez Nuuts”, employs a G-funk sound while Nate Dogg croons about the street life and male chauvinism (Quinn, 2005).

Death Row became the home to many artists in the early to mid-90s like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Tha Dogg Pound or D.P. G. and 2Pac. More than a retort to Ruthless Records and a diss to Eric Wright, Dr. Dre’s 1992 debut album *Chronic*, sold more than 2 million copies. While it usually took Dr. Dre around four months to complete an

album, *Chronic* took a year. “I was very nervous about this album. If it would have flopped, I would have been through,” Dr. Dre states in interview with USA Today (Jones, 1993, p.9). This 1992 release was followed by Snoop Dogg’s debut album *Doggystyle*, which also received great reviews and surpassed *Chronic*, selling 13 million copies. The success of these two artists, combined with 2Pac’s double CD *All Eyez on Me*, accumulated more than sixty-five million dollars in sales at Death Row. These sales figures proved that the record label was doing well; within five years of its existence, it was labeled “the most profitable black owned business in America” (Diallo, 2010, p. 241; Quinn, 2005). As a further measure of its success, 2Pac signed to Death Row after being released from prison in 1995.

While gangsta rap artists claimed success in the music industry, the gangsta persona was seeping into their personal lives in a media frenzy. Snoop Dogg, a Rollin’ 20s Crip from Long Beach, California, was charged and later acquitted for accessory to murder. Quoted in Eithne Quinn (2005), a 1993 cover of Newsweek, featured Snoop’s face with the title, “His album hits the top of the charts this week. Last week was indicted for murder” (p.155). Dre experienced legal problems of his own after he slammed a Black TV personality into the wall at a Hollywood nightclub and a year later broke a rap producer’s jaw (Quinn, 2005, p.135). “Da Lench Mob’s T-bone and J-Dee had been charged with murders in separate incidents and 2Pac was also awaiting trial for his involvement in a gun battle with two-off duty police officers” (Quinn, 2005, p.154). Although 2Pac was acquitted in this case, he was later charged with sexual assault and

sentenced to one-and-a-half to four-and-a-half years in prison (George, 1998; Charnas, 2010).

### **Confronted at Constant Controversy**

With gangsta rap at an all-time high, resistance against it arose from within the Black and White communities alike. Reverend Jesse Jackson and C. Delores Tucker were at the forefront of protest. In 1993 and 1994 respectively, Jackson served as the political spokesperson against gangsta rap and a year later Tucker, along with other civil rights leaders, held congressional hearings concerning the detrimental effects of gangsta rap, arguing that the music instigates violence among Black youth. Tucker's organization—National Political Congress of Black Women—joined forces with conservatives like Bob Dole (then Senate Majority Leader) and William Bennett (then Secretary of Education) to offset the genre's growing popularity and demand censorship of gangsta rap music (Quinn, 2005, p. 149). Additionally, the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), founded in 1985 by Al Gore's wife, Tipper Gore, lobbied at senate committee hearings until record companies placed "Parental Guidance" labels on explicit rap albums (Quinn, 2005). With gangsta rap a crossover success, White kids experienced the gritty, sensational lyrics—white kids like Tipper Gore's daughter. It wasn't until children of affluent, influential White parents begin listening to albums like *Doggystyle* that Gangsta rap was recognized as a problem that needed to be solved (Dyson, 2004).

Gangsta rap was attacked from all angles, but especially for its lyrics concerning police hatred. Ice-T was heavily criticized for his song "Cop Killer" by then Vice

President-Dan Quayle who was in re-election season (Quinn, 2005). Sharing Quinn's (2005) sentiment, the police were more concerned that rap artists exclude violence targeted at them than with solving marginalization of the Black population; black-on-black violence continued. With all the opposition, there was at least one source of support: South Central congresswoman Maxine Waters came to the defense of gangsta rap artists and is quoted in Quinn, stating, "These are our children, and they've invented a new art form to describe their pains, fears, and frustrations with us as adults" (p. 150). Unlike so many others in Waters' position, she did not judge the rappers themselves, but rather the societal forces resulting in their expressions of outrage.

Gangsta rap groups like South Central Cartel found this an unnecessary attack on their music because violence had been prevalent before rap's proliferation. In an interview with *Kronick* (1994), Meshaq Blaq asks the group how they felt about the potential ban on gangsta rap:

Kronick: Now, what's your opinion on all the ah...criminal charges going up against all these rappers, and the media hype around? And now they got some sista's in Washington D.C. that wanna try to [ban] gangsta rap. What's up wid that?

SCC: A bunch of bullsh\*t G, you know what I'm sayin'! They [trying] to blame all the violence on gangsta rap when it was violence before gangsta rap, you know what I'm saying! If they did cut out gangsta rap, violence would still be violence. So, you know they [trying] to use gangsta rap as a scapegoat, you know what I'm saying!

South Central Cartel felt like other hip-hop artists who defended gangsta rap. Violence did not occur because of the formation of gangsta rap. Rather, rap was a means by which they reflected on their environment, an environment of pervasive violence. Attacking the music displaced the real blame; instead, critics should focus on the system. This attitude is reflected in twenty-seven year-old Chris Hawkins, who commented in the Daily News after C. DeLores Tucker picketed outside a Sam Goody store in Washington D.C. He pointedly states, “I’m from the ‘hood. I grew up listening to rap music. [Rap singers] are just voicing their opinions on what they see in the community...This is a waste of time. They should be looking deeper at the problems-like why certain social programs are cut” (Weisensee, 1994) This thought reflects many in the Black community who felt that rap music was not the real problem, but rather the issues rap musicians brought to life that had long been a source of concern for poor residents.

The mid-90s marked two significant changes for gangsta rap that soon led to its demise in this era: the unexpected death of Eric “Eazy-E” Wright and the killing of Tupac Shakur. Eazy-E shocked fans and supporters when he announced he had full-blown AIDS. He died ten days later on March 26, 1995. The founder of Ruthless Records and N.W.A. sent the hip-hop community into a tailspin of disbelief (Keyes, 2002). As founder of the record label and the first group of its kind, Eazy-E was the visionary behind the subgenre gangsta rap. Ironically, however, Eazy-E’s death did not spark the same love and compassion around the world that occurred when 2Pac was murdered. Nelson George (1998) describes Eazy-E’s life more of a “cautionary tale, not one of a martyr” (p. 139). Was it because Eazy-E died of a disease popularly perceived

as self-inflicted due to risky behavior that Black community was not as responsive? Cheryl Keyes (2002) addresses this question, stating, “It was not, however, until the AIDS-related death of Eazy-E that the hip-hop community realized the disease could affect them as well” (p. 179). While many believe that Eazy-E lost his life due to AIDS, those close to him believe otherwise. Eazy-E’s protégé, B.G. Knocc Out, who appeared on the song “Real Compton City G’s,” believes Eazy-E was murdered due to the lack of symptoms prior to his admittance at Cedar Sinai Hospital. In a personal interview with B.G. Knocc Out he states:

In the beginning I was afraid like everyone else. It happened so suddenly. I was with him the day he went into the hospital. He was with me in the recording studio and we were doing a song and his lungs collapse...Um, the night before he had issues with his bronchitis so he went into the hospital. They said they had to keep him overnight. So from the hospital he came directly to the studio and I was in the studio about two hours before he got there... so you know periodically I would get up and go and look to see if he pulled up. So one time I go to look to see if he was there, he was in there talking to them [Ruthless artists]...the last time I go and look for him, nobody is there but him. He is on the floor wheezing [makes wheezing sounds]...this never happened to him before, the whole time that I’ve known him. Meanwhile, he’s trying to talk. You know trying to be normal about everything. So I-I get down next to him, he kinda slid his back against the wall and sat down. So I got next to him down on the ground. He had a big manila envelope in his hand, beside the pharmacy bag that he had. And then

he pulled out these papers, he was going through these documents. And then the guy who owns the studio knelt down on the other side. He was showing us Jerry was stealing money from the label... Two weeks before that, he fired Jerry and the rest of his family. And from this day goes into the hospital, nine days from that day he dies (Arlandis Hinton, personal communication, March 1, 2014).

After Eazy-E's death, those close to him were in shock. B.G. Knocc Out further states:

For the first month or two, everybody is like, "Wow, what the fuck?" Damn, I wonder you know, I wonder. I wonder... Now I'm waiting for someone else to come out with it. You know, his wife, his two kids, his long-time girlfriend on the side, anybody. Everyone is coming out negative, negative, negative. A year rolls by, negative, negative, negative.

The incident caused B.G. Knocc Out alarm: watching his mentor wheeze on the ground, knowing Eazy-E fired Jerry Heller, and realizing that Eazy-E died at the same hospital Heller financially contributed to, combined to support B.G. Knocc Out's suspicions. He believes there is more left untold, especially since no one besides Eazy-E was affected when he "had boasted about his sexual exploits with women" and the official documents list Cardiac Arrest as the cause of death (Keyes, 1998, p. 139).

The same year Eazy-E passed away, a new feud emerged in the hip-hop industry that led to two other deaths in the year to come. Tupac Shakur (2Pac) and Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G.) were both casualties in a feud called the "East vs. West" beef (Charnas, 2010). As stated previously, 2Pac had legal trouble when his public "thug" image seeped into his personal life. 2Pac, a Harlem native, was in New York in 1993

shooting a new movie, *Above the Rim*. While there, he was arrested for sexually assaulting a woman in his hotel room (Charnas, 2010). 2Pac adamantly denied this accusation and those who knew him supported this position. The case went to trial and the night of closing arguments, 2Pac went to Quad Recording Studios. As soon as he entered the lobby, 2Pac was shot five times (Charnas, 2010). Not knowing who to trust, 2Pac later implicated Biggie Smalls, Sean Combs, and Andre Harrell in an interview with *Vibe* magazine (Charnas, 2010).

This was the beginning of distrust between the East and West Coasts that soon ignited to an inferno after Suge Knight signed 2Pac to Death Row Records and at the second-annual *Source* awards proclaimed, “Any artist out there that want to be an artist and want to stay a star and don’t want to worry about the executive producer all up in the videos, all on the records, dancing-come to Death Row!” (Charnas, 2010, p. 474). In both incidents—the shooting and the antagonistic declaration on national television—Sean “Puffy” Combs and Bad Boy entertainment took a passive position in trying to put out the flames. Combs and his camp denied instigating the shooting and after Knight’s surprising speech stated, “I’m the executive producer that the comment was made about a little bit earlier. Contrary to what other people may feel, I’m proud of Dr. Dre and Death Row and Suge Knight for their accomplishments. I’m a positive Black man, and I want to bring us together, not separate us” (Charna, 2010, p. 474). Due to 2Pac’s paranoia, professed in *Vibe* magazine and Knight’s challenge charged at the *Source* awards, there was now a full-fledged war. However, there was only one coast that could



possibly be responsible for both murders: the West Coast and its ever-present gang culture.

Although Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace murders have never been solved, there are reasons to believe the Los Angeles gang environment was much to blame for both. On September 7, 1996, 2Pac and Suge Knight were in Las Vegas for the championship boxing match between Mike Tyson and Bruce Seldon at the MGM Grand Hotel (Phillips, 2002). After the match at the hotel, Knight, a Blood from Mob Pirus with a flank of bodyguards from the same gang, saw a known enemy from Compton. 2Pac, a fiercely loyal friend of Knight, punched the Southside Compton Crip and began a brawl on the hotel casino floor. Later that night, while leaving the club 662 (which on a telephone keypad spells out MOB) on Las Vegas Boulevard, an unknown gunman approached the black 750 BMW and fired four rounds of bullets in 2Pac's chest (Phillips, 2002). Six days later he succumbed to injuries and died on September 13. "Although it seemed likely Shakur was killed by members of a Los Angeles gang hostile to Suge Knight, many people seemed to think that Sean Combs and the Notorious B.I.G. had something to do with the shooting" (Charnas, 2010, p. 497).

The shooting and 2Pac's subsequent death left a vendetta on the West Coast community to avenge his death, although more facts indicated that the killer hailed from the West Coast. In a personal interview with Big Syke, who is credited as 2Pac's mentor and a member of Thug Life and Outlawz, I asked how the death of 2Pac impacted the hip-hop community and gangsta rap music. He solemnly replied, "I think it was a big loss for the world. He was a cold cat, I thank God that he put me around him [2Pac], he's

still affecting people. The hardest thing he ever said to me was, ‘I may not change the world, but I’ll spark the brain that will’” (Tyruss Himes, personal communication, March 1, 2014). 2Pac was murdered at twenty-five years old. Six months later, while in Los Angeles promoting his latest album, *Life after Death*, and after leaving an after-party hosted by *Vibe* magazine, Biggie Smalls was shot seven times in a green GMC Suburban and later pronounced dead at Cedar Sinai Hospital. The purpose of the trip promoting this record thus had an ironic turn of events for Christopher Wallace, aka Biggie Smalls, who was only 24 years old.

Gangsta rap’s ten-year trajectory, as shown in this project, solidified its identity as an influential change-maker that not only influenced the hip-hop community but also provided a reflective, resistant voice during many social and economic changes, specifically in South Central, Watts, Compton, Long Beach, and Inglewood. From an outsider perspective, one may perceive all gang members engaged in gangsta rap music or all gangsta rap artists talking about gangbanging and being in the neighborhood, which is not entirely true. One gang member, Tweedy Bud Loc, is quoted in Quinn (2005) saying, “I’m fed up with the busters [hustlers] like NWA. A lot of homies in the neighborhood died, man, and what the niggas did was market our life and our image” (p. 83). Not every gang member was openly receptive to the commercialization and appropriation of their lifestyle. Also, some artists who were popularly perceived as gangsta rap artists like The DOC (who was signed to Ruthless Records) were viewed as soft, failing to conform to the sound and gangsta image of Black male bodies that dominated gangsta rap (Quinn, 2005). All encompassing, this reflection and review of

gangsta rap and the surrounding social context provides an understanding regarding the complex of forces that impacted gang culture during this time period. To continue on this journey, I will introduce the participant community and describe the research project.

### **Pump Your Brakes**

So far we have traveled into unknown, rocky territory. I have discussed how gangsta rap was a byproduct of the social and economic conditions of the LA Crips and Bloods, but most importantly, the entire Black community. In this sense, the political economy of gangsta rap began long before the late 1980s and was cultivated in Black experience. The theory of gangsta rap as dystopian performative was introduced in Chapter 1 and supported through a past perspective of the LA gang environment, provided in part by its current bodies in motion. It revealed how gang members and the surrounding community have reflected and continue to reflect on their disadvantaged living situation. Chapter 2 set the context of the early gangsta music scene and its disgruntled connection to the Black LA environment. I have used Black experience to uncover and restore the historical, emotional context of Crips and Bloods, and their myriad connections to gangsta rap music. I will now blaze a new trail, a new journey of Black experience by using the idea of the dystopian performative to address the past through present voices in an ideal, future setting.

With a predictive perspective, I use the separately collected 16 interviews as conversations in two acts of the dystopian performative. The next two chapters position Crips and Bloods as consumers and producers of gangsta rap as well as music critics. In

Chapter 3, eight gang bangers discuss past struggles and successes within a utopic encounter. By reflecting on their dislocated, frustrated environment, the men hope that the despair of the past will not spill over in the years to come. Chapter 4 provides candid narratives from eight gangsta rap artists regarding how the dystopian performative is continually reproduced in music through the ongoing actions on the streets. The periods discussed in both cases are situated between 1986-1996. In total, the men share frustrations, heartbreak, and fury stemming from their living conditions of their location. These 16 men are also survivors. Music is soothing to their wounds. I therefore address the question, how is gangsta rap used and expressed as a dystopian performative in their environment? Looking at three key songs from the early development of gangsta rap can provide us with insight into how this occurs.

*“Batterram” at “6 ‘N The Mornin’” got the People Saying “Fuck Tha Police”*

This section examines three songs discussed and often referred to throughout this thesis. Not only are they categorized as some of the first gangsta rap songs, but the lyrics clearly portray the dystopian performative. In the first verse of each song the artists describe their living environment and the factors that cause dislocation while also giving personal advantages. Toddy Tee is a Compton native who belonged to Tragniew Park, a Crip neighborhood; in 1985 song “Batterram”, he raps about police officers using a military machine to bust crack rock houses but leaving destruction and debris in the process. A year later, Ice-T came out with “6 ‘N The Mornin’” where he described teenagers escaping their homes to prevent arrest during the CRASH sweep in South Central. The song also highlights his satisfaction with being a drug dealer. The rap group

(and Compton residents) N.W.A. took gangsta rap mainstream with the 1988 song “Fuck Tha Police;” in it, they direct their anger at law enforcement and the police’s assumption that every Black male sells drugs. Each verse highlights police force and drug use in the Black community.

The dystopian performative shown in the music creates graphic descriptions of what continuously transpired in the Black community. Each man explains what it means to be Black, living on the West Coast, during the 1980s. With or without drug turf and gang affiliation, Black men are accosted by police and confronted with the drug epidemic. Next, through the reception of gang bangers we will encounter how the above songs procreate reality.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BANGIN' BARBEQUE<sup>4</sup>

#### Act I<sup>5</sup>

In Act I we will enter a brief encounter of unity between Crip and Blood sets. This is a space of reflection and reminiscence. In a rare moment of togetherness, eight gang bangers reflect on the past gang environment while reminiscing on its relationship to their reality: resistant music. We will observe the intricate thread that binds together, yet stretches, the fragile experiences of these older former gang members. This dystopian performative shows the dissatisfied and dislocated gang members searching for utopic prosperity and peace.

#### *Scene One*

A Pit Stop: "Open 24/7 to Serve You"

It is a sunny Saturday afternoon at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call office in Compton, California. The atmosphere is lively and relaxed. 2<sup>nd</sup> Call is hosting a barbeque for the community and everyone is invited. People are gathered outside for fellowship and to partake in barbeque chicken, hotdogs, sausage links, and side dishes. Music, from old school soul/funk to contemporary R&B and rap, blares from the speakers inside the one-story storefront. Inside the building, people are seated throughout the space. In one area, a few men are seated on couches and chairs in a semi-circle. They are talking about known hip-hop artists in the area and the neighborhood each one represents. I enter the space

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<sup>4</sup> The former gangbangers names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect identity

<sup>5</sup> Act I have been influenced and developed from D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*

with a plate of barbeque chicken, a slice of white bread, and potato salad. I sit in an empty seat facing the guys and listen to the discussion. I ask a question.

#### Staging the Scene

There are eight men comfortably seated around the area. From my view I can see each one clearly. Left to right, seated, are Ron (C001), Mark (C002), Dennis (C003), Tremont (C004), Indugu (C005), Bobby (B006), Daryl (B007), and Byron (B008). Their voices coalesce in a synchronized rhythm. The scene mirrors the sameness in their reflection. I listen intently.

*Cymone: What hoods and gang affiliation do you all represent?*

*C001: Raymond Ave. Crips*

*C002: Gardena Shotgun Crips*

*C003: I was uh from 7-4 Hoover. They no longer Crips but at that time they were Hoover Crips*

*C004: I am a former member of the Westside Rollin' 30s Harlem Crip gang*

*C005: Harlem Crips, Rollin' 30s*

*B006: I was a Blood. Bloodstone Villains*

*B007: Blood Gang. Rollin' 20s Blood Gang*

*B008: Black P. Stone Nation*

*Cymone: Bloods?*

*B008: Oh most definitely yeah. Bloods for sure*

*Cymone: So what made you guys get involved in gangs?*

*B008: I was intrigued by the unity of the Bloods that I was being exposed to in my elementary school.*

*Beat.*

*Cymone: Elementary school?*

*C001: My community where I grew up it was already, you know, it was already infested with gangs and even when I was in elementary school, I just used to see some of the guys hanging out in the school area, trying to take my bike or ask me, "What's up? Where you from?"*

*C001: At some point, I ended up hanging out with my buddies, my best friends. So they started getting involved with gangs and gettin' put on and I was the last one left. So because of my peers you know and people who I had love for, I went on and joined the gang*

*C003: A lot of the neighborhoods back then were families. You would start seeing like his brother, his uncle and his generation that belonged to these certain type of gangs, especially back then and that's where the loyalty thing was from. I remember my cousin talking, "You a Crip or a Blood," and I said I'm a Crip and he grew up in Inglewood and he said, "Well I am a Crip too." And he say, "What hood we from?" We wanted to belong to something, because there was no identity*

*C004: I say that I made a decision to fully accept umm if I was going to be the gang banger other than a member when some guys came up to the school that I knew that was from another gang and that I actually grew up with, and soon as football practice was over put a gun to my head. A childhood friend of mine, we were like cousins, intervened*



*and he was from their neighborhood. He said you can't shoot my relative and I said I'm your cousin, that was the terminology that these particular Bloods use instead of saying cousin, they say relative. So they cocked the gun and they dissed again and I corrected them again and told them do what you do. Well the next day, my associates, my community came up there and we began to hunt these dudes now*

*C005: While, I began gang affiliation about the fifth grade. Actual active gangbanger that wasn't until uh probably about 12 years old actually getting involved with opposing neighborhoods about that old. Everybody during that time was young, so we were more claiming than actually bangin. But if you ran into somebody from the opposing side, a Blood or uh even a Crip if you got too slick and that was a fight*

*C002: I started around 12 years old*

*B008: It was kind of like an adrenaline rush, just can't even Beat. something like going on a roller coaster except for the roller coaster you know where the drops are at and the turns but in gangbanging and in the streets. That's what captivated me*

*Cymone: What's the difference between a gangbanger and a gang member?*

*C005: You can be a resident of a neighborhood but not a participant in the activities of the neighborhood, so you can be an affiliate meaning that you exist, acting in the perimeters of the hood and you know all the members but just because you doing that dont mean you're active*

*C001: You know someone that's out there putting in work, had laid somebody down or constantly beating somebody up for disrespect or whatever*

*C003: Its tiers<sup>6</sup> to this and when you are known, you got a reputation, you are heard of. Period. You known by your work not by who you related to*

*Cymone: Back in the day, how did you all identify each other?*

*C004: Well back then you know Crips wore blue, Bloods wore red. That was a total giveaway back in that time. It doesn't exist that way now*

*B007: You didn't have to ask me if I gang bang or not, you'd know it by the way I was dressed. You'd look at my clothes and see I'm with it*

*C005: If you been around long enough you can distinguish a Crip between a Blood. The style was different and hoods (emphasis added). You can tell where a guy was from. I could look at a dude and say that cat is probably from Watts or Compton*

*B007: Well in the 80s, it would be easy because the person who would gang bang would wear a golf hat or would wear something that would separate them from the rest of the community*

*C003: We actually had a uniform, a dress code. We had the golf hats, the four golf clubs mean that you were from the forties, the three mean you were from the tray, the two mean you were from the deuce*

*C005: The creases in our shirt, we might have 3 creases in the back, like the military*

*C003: We put our names and our hoods on our jacket*

*B007: I did a sweater and have iron on letters that say 2-0 on the back or we'd have a hat turned up and it would be written on the hat NHB which is Neighborhood Bloods*

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<sup>6</sup> Tiers means levels. C003 is discussing the organization hierarchy in his particular set.

*C005: Where I come from cats just had a lot more style and they paid a lot more attention to fashion*

*C001: We identified each other with Khakis, Pendletons. Crips wore the Pendletons and you know and then the way you're wearing it. You tie it up, you got your shirt tied up to the top*

*B008: Oh Levi's. You know, Ben Davis. A lot of cats in my age group, they fucked with Dickies. I wouldn't wear Dickies really, I wear Ben Davis*

*B006: You had some dudes that if they were really bangin' they be khaki suited up all the time. Them was the dudes I guess you consider like really that's all they did*

*B006 (smiling): Dudes like me, I always try to dress cool you know. Had my corduroys on, my little tennis shoes to match, a white Tee. We all wore a white T-shirt*

*C005: I wore a little bit of everything. But I was never one that had the pants hanging off my ass. That was never cool especially if you was fighting. It was a safety precaution as well as a thing about we were at least having some pride in Crippin'. That's what old cats used to tell me, man straighten out your shirt, man get your hat right, braid your hair, have some pride in your Crippin (laughter)*

*B008: We had the flame, which is red. You either going to have the laces flamed, your belt with a B on it or JS on it, you know the Jungle Stones*

*B006: I went to school up the street. It was a Crip school so I wasn't red there. Everybody was wearing blue but I didn't wear blue. I would wear black, gray, light gray, charcoal gray. Them was my colors I wear*

*C004: Our particular neighborhood was one that we got money, so you may catch cats over here tailors, tailor made pants, clothing wear. Umm..K-swiss, K-swiss was a big popular shoe, Diadora was a popular shoe, Crocasacks, Nick Kickers, umm Romeo's for sure.*

*C005: Romeos, that's a hard shoe guys used to wear, they still exist too. A lot of old cats you see with them on. It's like a house shoe almost, they called them Romeos because they kind of look like that uh 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> century shoe. It was a slipper, you ever seen them?*

*Cymone (shaking head): Don't think so...*

*C005: There were guys on the Eastside, they were wearing Filas. Most of the time, cats from the Westside had a little bit more money you know. Chuck Taylor's, Pumas, Adidas, Nick Kickers, Crocasacks. Your family had to have or you had to have some nice amount of change to get some suede Pumas because I think at that time, during the time, they cost a little bit of change. \$45- \$50 for a pair of shoes was high.*

*B007: black Pumas with the red stripes and then the K-Swiss came out so then we'd wear the K-Swiss with the red stripe*

*C001: Crips wear blue rags on the left side. Bloods wear their rags on the right side*

*C005: I used to iron my blue rag. My flag. Some of the Old Homies used to ask us sometimes, where your flag at? Just to make sure we were making ourselves stick out from other people*

*Cymone: (turns to C004) how did you identify sets?*

*C004: You would hit anybody up if they were in your area and you didn't know them. Or if you went somewhere and you gangbangin, you gonna automatically hit them with the 'what up'*

*Cymone (slowly nods): Oh ok. So, what did yall do for fun?*

*C005: Well because of the environment at the time what we consider fun wouldn't be the same as most youth during that time. I mean getting chased was fun, trying to get away, that was an adventure. Even gangbangin was fun. The risk of getting shot at. Getting away with it.*

*B007: My experiences as a gang member, first of all exciting, intriguing.*

*C004: I remember probably back in the about 1984 we went to a Kid N' Play, MC Hammer, and I think Guy concert. And it was five of us that went to this concert wearing dress shoes, silk shirts and jeans and slacks. When we come out there's maybe three dudes sitting on a wall and they was Bloods. We walked past them and they say 'wassup Blood' to us. And we sped around on them, means we turn around, and we say, "What?" They say, "What's up Blood?"*

*We say 'We don't know, f Bloods, we say slobs,' and soon as we said that about 15 or 20 of them came out the bushes (laughing). So we proceeded to have a lovely brawl you know us against them and just out of a reaction I scream, "Bust cuz! Bust!" Even though we didn't have any guns so they all started to run. As they ran we started chasing them*

*C005: Fighting especially fighting strangers, sometimes grown man; we were teenagers. And surviving it, that was fun.*

*Cymone: What were the hang out spots?*

*C004: We had three major locations within our community*

*C005: Parks*

*B008: Burger stands, basically parks*

*B007: Different parks, we have like three parks in our community*

*B006: We didn't have parks in my neighborhood. The liquor store or somebody's house*

*B008: We go to the Bity Stones Park. We don't say the C, you know that we being*

*Bloods*

*B007: Golden Bird chicken stand, we would be there when they open, when they close.*

*We'd be there til' one, two o'clock in the morning*

*B006: I be in front of my mama house*

*B008: We had hood meetings too*

*C003: up and down Hoover from Imperial to all the way down to the Coliseum which is*

*King*

*B008: Which were mandatory*

*C002: Kings Liquor store right here*

*C004: Those were just blocks in which we uh pursued our entrepreneur careers (deep laughter)*

*Cymone (smiles): So how often did you and other members hang out?*

*B007: On the weekend it was definitely a Friday and Saturday spot*

*B006: For sure the weekends, like Friday, Saturday night, we would hook up somewhere, you know*

*C002: That was every day*

*Cymone: Everyday?*

*C001: All the time. I mean night day, you know, just hanging out in the park*

*C005: That was daily*

*C004 (chuckle): Everyday when I wasn't in jail. I mean because we went to school together. We were a family you know we were tight knitted, tight together.*

*C003: Well that was everyday. Back then, we hung out everyday and most of them on streets*

*C002: Yeah, basically you know talk about issues you know what had happened earlier today or in a week, who we got to deal with or need to get dealt with. Just keeping things tight basically.*

The hoods represented here are Raymond Avenue Crips (El Segundo to Imperial Avenue and Normandie Avenue past the 110 freeway), Gardena Shotgun Crips (Van Ness Avenue to Crenshaw Boulevard), 7-4 Hoover Crips (South of Florence Avenue to 79<sup>th</sup> Street, Figueroa St. to Budlong Avenue), Harlem Crips Rollin' 30s (30<sup>th</sup> Street to King Boulevard, sections of Normandie Avenue to Crenshaw Boulevard), Bloodstone Villains (52nd Street to Central Avenue), Rollin' 20s (Eastside of Alameda Street to Crenshaw Boulevard, North of Jefferson Boulevard), and Black P. Stones (Western Avenue to Crenshaw Boulevard)

Gang affiliation and, more specifically, gang *banging* started at a very early age. C001 and B008 explain that their first interactions with gangs are among peers at school. By portraying love and unity or bullies and mischief, boys are enraptured by gangbanging early on in their lives. The generational tie of families in gangs is also

discussed. They are not just members because of their friends, but also for family reasons. Their fathers, their brothers, their *cousins*, their *relatives* are deeply involved and active in gangs. C004 explains the differentiation between the word cousin and relative. Both refer to loved ones in the gang, both have a reference to a family structure, but Crips say cousin and Bloods say relative because the letter 'C' is not in their vocabulary. They either re-word or refer to a synonym to get their message across. Thus, Crips and Bloods share similar experiences in their reasons for joining.

Identifying Crips and Bloods runs deeper than colors. Although Crips wear blue and Bloods wear red, there is further significance in styles of clothing, shoes, and other forms of material symbolism. Clothing pieces such as golf hats, Pendletons, and Khakis; shoes like Romeos, Crocasacks, and K-Swiss, all perfect the gangster image. The rag, or flag, adds another layer of identification and based on the color declares a particular allegiance. The clothing is further divided demographically. Where a gang banger lives determines the quality of his clothing. For example, C005 stated that his neighborhood on the Westside of South Central was more affluent, which resulted in more expensive attire; on the Eastside, the selections were strict due to monetary constraints. Street demographics are also shown through clothing identification, even down to the level of the individual's set (e.g., the block number depicting one's affiliation was indicated on one's clothing). C003 explains this concept with the golf hats as well as B007 with the printed numbers on his sweater. B007 had the numbers 2-0 displayed in order to signify the Rollin' 20s Bloods.



Last, and shown throughout this passage, language is a vital identity component for active members. The simple non-threatening phrase ‘what up’ becomes hard and hostile when an unfamiliar face is in oppositional space. In this instance, ‘what up’ is not an inquisitive statement seeking an answer on one’s well-being, but rather a defensive, deadly tool to decipher the enemy.

As children in this environment, the dangers of gangbanging are overlooked, replaced by reckless excitement. C005, B008, and C004 reflect on the past gang atmosphere as engaging with anticipation of the unknown. Not knowing what to expect from the day’s events brought eager exploration and participation. Most gangbangers congregated in neighborhood parks for collaboration and information. Places like parks and liquor stores are where homies gathered to hear the latest news in the hood and to receive instructions on the next move. These meetings and collective interactions are daily occurrences at the hangout spots and are used to build rapport among the members. C004 briefly mentions these locations are also where gangbangers turn drug dealers.

*Cymone: What about the gang environment?*

*C003: Well the gang environment was our reality. We never had an outside view. That’s what it is. I am locked in war. It’s kill or be killed*

*Beat.*

*C003: Hoover Crips didn’t get along with any Crips or Bloods or nobody. They went into a format to say BCK because there is not a lot of Blood sets around here and majority of the enemies that we had were Crips*

*(Silence)*

*C005: Whenever you have poverty, unemployment and frustration you have violence  
bottom line*

*(Everyone nods head)*

*C003: I do remember having to stay down, I remember as a young boy getting guns put  
in my mouth to say that I am from Hoover because that was our religion. That's what a  
religion is, a way of life*

*B006: We Bloodstone Villains, we gotta be hard, we gotta be violent*

*C003: A dude was carrying his daughter and another dude ran up on him and shot him  
in the head and he didn't even gang bang. That was the reality*

*Beat.*

*B007: In 1993, 10 members of my community were killed. My kid's cousin was shot  
maybe a hundred yards from the house. He had pulled in his driveway, just picked up his  
daughter from school, they walked up and shot him like 11 times. That was  
heartbreaking*

*Beat.*

*C005: I've seen the bodies in the casket, I've seen the bodies lying in the street, in the  
hot sun. A homie standing next to me, grabbing over, shot*

*Cymone: Damn. Who is there to protect you in this environment???*

*(Everyone looks at each other. Silence.)*

*C005: LAPD is the worst police department in probably the whole United States, the  
most foul, most politically organize, influenced, tightly structured blue line*

*B008: They just had it out for us, for what reason I don't know. But the LAPD always just tried to kick up dust, keep us, you know, fucked up*

*C005: The LAPD has always been thrown on the side of the Black community period. And that has had a lot of influence in the development of gangs*

*C003: I mean you weren't just going to come sticking dogs on us, beating us*

*C005: Today they wonder why no one wants to talk to them. Soon as you start trusting them, they gon kill somebody*

*C003: They would plant drugs on us*

*C005: They still doing it in this millennium. And people know this*

*C003: The police used to pick us up and they would take you in another neighborhood and drop you off*

*C005: They killed an old lady in Watts a few years ago that was welding a knife. About 5 police. She was 70-something years old, shot her dead. And that was justifiable*

*B008: Is there such a thing*

*Beat.*

*C003: I remember when the police would come and tell you who did a certain murder. This is the police*

*C005: You can lie to the media but you can't lie to the folks. The communication in the community is just like that (snaps finger) and we know the real*

*C002: They know how to beat your ass and put you somewhere, you know your family come visit you, "He's not here, he's at Wayside." But you here in the county jail the whole time. They just letting you heal up*

*C005: When you see someone that supposed to be there to protect you and uh supposed to be a true expression of your rights, supposed to protect your rights, your property, that's acting like a criminal, what does that do to the psyche of the individuals in the community*

*B008: It's a wicked system, it really is.*

*(Everyone looks down. Silence.)*

The gang culture is ruthless. Death, violence, and agony create a cycle that repeats endlessly among men who are Crips and Bloods. They share memories of loss, which sadly lead to desensitization. C003 mentions that his hood, the Hoover Crips, went into a full-fledged war with BCK, an acronym meaning Blood-Crip Killer. There is no refuge. How many caskets, how many gravestones, how many bodies does it take to finally erase feelings and rupture with rage? Where is the haven, the protection? There is none. The constables of the community are also the criminals. But their vicious victory occurs because they have the judicial system on their side. Gang members and community members alike have been killed and incriminated by those who swore to protect them. For those in this environment, the representatives of the law are the enemy. Violence was directed at these young men by each other and by the police. As such...

*C003: We were wild. We didn't really fall up under anything*

*B006: Shit, I did it all. Selling crack, selling weed. Robbing*

*C003: Cocaine in particular was what you call The Rich Man's High*

*C002: Cocaine hit it was a wreck, to this day. In a way we lost a lot of good people*

*B008: It was like an epidemic, it really was*

*B008: If someone was on powder, you might see him once a week maybe twice but with crack you see him 3-4 times a day*

*C002: A lot of bright males and females, a lot of smart and educated males and females, just went down*

*(Everyone solemnly nods head)*

*C001: Some people turn to gangs and some people turn to drugs*

*C003: I remember I was 12 years old with a vehicle. I remember being 13 or 14 with thousands of dollars*

*C001: When you get to the drugs selling, its more, a lot more money, quicker, faster. At the time everybody wanted to sell drugs for financial reasons*

*C003: That's what took gang banging to the new height*

*B007: There were a lot of people being killed for drug sales. People were getting kidnapped*

*C001: If it took for me to make money, I have my drug dealing hat on. If it was time for me to gang bang on somebody, I had my gang bang hat on*

*C003: We had no rules and the older homies, they were smoked out. They couldn't tell us shit. So when they came around, they were trying to get dope. We were kickin' they asses because they lost their heart*

*B008: An older homie who has knowledge, next thing you know he sitting here cracked out, you know what I mean? It's like how can you give him that same respect even though you want to*

*C003: Crack take everything from you. It just, it destroys*

*B008: It was just chaos. It wasn't until crack hit that guns really came into play*

*C003: You got to understand, now, where the guns coming from? You had it where you had shipments of guns in Watts. They used to have trains derailed and you will see a big container with a lock off of it*

*Cymone: What!?*

*C003: Yeah, that's what I am telling you. But what you got to remember is that the lock ain't there. Now you hit that and its crates of guns*

*Beat.*

*C003: We got to take the blame because we did it but you got to understand that the manipulation, the marketing, promotion or accessibility, it never came from us.*

*Beat.*

*Cymone: (shaking head) Crazy...Who was the main drug supplier?*

*B008: Big homie Freeway Rick*

*C003: Freeway Rick*

*B008: He used to come to the hood, he used to supply others. So yeah, you know he wasn't with that shit, he was on paper. He banged green. His green was money*

*Beat.*

*Cymone: Well this is a lot to decipher in one setting. I'm going to get some more food.*

*Does anyone want anything?*

Crack cocaine.<sup>7</sup> It destroys and disrupts the Black community. The former gang members relive this time period as wild, a wreck, an epidemic, while they reminisce about the abundance of wealth. For those on the drug, it was destructive, but for those who sold the drug, it was a dream. C003 and C001 discuss the amount of money selling drugs offer pre-teens. Crack cocaine serves as a means of economic gain, a symbol of success. It is a way to achieve capital, albeit at the expense of the community. The environment was set in dystopic disarray while creating false utopic status. C003 acknowledges their role as drug distributors in the destruction of the collective, but firmly states that other structural forces enabled the play. With the drug pandemic, guns were readily available and death easily attainable. In this environment, guns were operated by children without training.. Gangbanging, cocaine, and guns created an ugly mixture of anarchy and nihilism. This past dystopian peformative struck a devastating blow that continues to affect the Black community.

*Fieldnote: Parked Between a Rock and a Hard Place*

Where is Daryl?

I'm at 200 North Long Beach Boulevard waiting for him. With me is Dennis who picked me up from Daryl's apartment earlier that day so that I can interview him. Dennis is 39 years old with a bald-head and muscular build. He is 6'1" with a rough, deep baritone voice; he talks with a lisp. Dennis is a former Hoover Crip and has the physical prowess to prove it. He speaks with authority, commanding attention. After our

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<sup>7</sup> Although Crack derives from the substance Cocaine, I use the two words interchangeably to mean the drug Crack

interview he drives us to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call office in Compton so that I can spend the rest of the afternoon with Daryl. But he's late. Daryl is not here. Dennis and I sit in his 2003 black SAAB and wait. While on the street curb, we began to discuss other parts of his life. He was once a drug dealer but is now a practicing Muslim. His religious beliefs are directly opposed to what was once his doctrine, his way of life. At some point during the wait, Dennis moves from the driver seat to the backseat on the passenger's side. Both our doors are wide open with room to stretch our legs outside. Our positions in the car allow for direct eye-contact and easy-going conversation. This also leaves an open invitation for anyone to approach the car, as one person did.

She wants crack. While looking at my phone, I did not notice the woman slowly approaching the SAAB. It is not until I hear Dennis's voice that I look up to see the sight and scene unfolding before me. She is in close perimeter to the car, about an arm's length away. Dennis, too, is on his phone and I hear him say in an uninterested, flat tone, "I don't got it." Not breaking eye-contact with his phone, he dismisses the woman. Then, as if another idea popped in his mental, he mischievously mentions with a smirk, "But she does," and nods my way. This is what catches my attention and now I'm staring at the woman standing before Dennis.

She is a scruffy Black woman with an oversized button-down sweater, a dark blue t-shirt underneath and black sweatpants. Her feet are dirty and cracked inside dusty strapped open-toed sandals. Her appearance is ragged and so is her posture; her body appears permanently broken. Her eyes are bleak but eager. The woman is now walking towards the passenger door and I can't help her. She comes to my side of the car pulling



out singles as I am shaking my head. “I don’t have none. You better go back to him,” I state and point in Dennis direction. She is confused and does not know who to believe. I repeat myself, “I don’t have it.” She walks to Dennis again and stands before him, resilient in her shaky stance, resolved not to leave empty-handed. Dennis asks how much she has and out her pocket comes four dollars along with a putrid garbage smell. He laughs knowing it is not enough, even if he is a retired drug-dealer.

Suddenly, a champagne color Oldsmobile screeches to a halt next to Dennis’s car and inside is an old lady with thick bifocals. Her windows are down and gospel music is blasting from the car speakers. She is shaking a tambourine and singing, or rather yelling, to the music. Her voice is like a loud litany. The woman wanting crack creeps to her car. The holier-than-thou, God-fearing church woman keeps banging the tambourine while the other woman stares through the window. Just as quick as her arrival, the Church lady speeds away. The woman wanting drugs follows suit and soon leaves to find her next fix.

The short five minutes with three community members leaves me bewildered and reeling. I keep thinking, “Did this just really happen all while waiting for Daryl?” Within this small time frame, I witnessed the players of the community and their response to one another. The Crackhead wants drugs. The Drug-dealer supports the desire. The Christian saves the wretched souls. Yet, none of this occurred. The former drug-dealer looks upon the crackhead with annoyance and disdain. She serves no purpose, acting only at her own expense. He views her as entertainment and comic-relief. He also inserts me into the scene and I am confronted face-to-face with a problem but no solution. The

Crackhead does not leave. She stands firmly while another approaches the situation. The Christian comes close enough to save, but stays too far away to heal. She dangerously drives off. Her duty of the day accomplished, knowing she intervened in a drug transaction. The air is charged with unspoken satisfaction, weary discontentment, and total disregard combined in suspended time.

### *Scene Two*

#### Road to Reality: Spin the Beat and Spit dat Shit

After about 20 minutes of mingling with the folks and fixing my plate, I resume my seat. I hear Kokane and his cousin Cold 187 spittin' on the speakers. The room has transformed into a gangsta funk environment with everyone bobbing their head to the beat and talking about the early 90s diss on Dr. Dre and Kurupt in the song "Don't Bite the Phunk." The song is on the V.S.O.P. and Above The Law collaboration album, *Funk Upon a Rhyme*. It bashes Dre for biting the funk style as it questions his allegiance to the streets. The former gang members are again seated and talk loudly, excitedly, about this long-ago beef. I laugh and listen.

#### Staging the Scene

Upon returning, we resume the same seats. I remain seated in a position where I am able to see all. To the right of me is Byron (B008), Daryl (B007), Bobby (B006), Indugu (C005), Tremont (C004), Dennis (C003), Mark (C002), and Ron (C001) is on my left. Their voices overlay with a steady beat. I speak a question.

*Cymone: How did gangsta rap come to be?*

*DARYL: Mostly all the Zap and Roger, the Rick James, The Parliament, Funk-A-Delic.*

*Those were the songs before-*

*INDUGU: We started off with basic funk, that was gangsta music. You just listen to pure R&B and funk*

*TREMONT: Atlanta Starr. Parliament*

*INDUGU: George Clinton. To me that kind of music, Lakeside, The Stylistics, Blue Magic, The Temptations, all that kind of music was gangsta music. When I was little*

*TREMONT: We used to go to the Coliseum. They used to give dances there and it was the DJs, umm Uncle Jamms Army, whenever certain songs came on like Run DMC, you know it would automatically just rile us up*

*INDUGU: On the West Coast we had Egyptian Lover and Ice-T*

*INDUGU: My first experience with hearing rhyme over a beat was Blowfly, dudes played them in their low-riders*

*DARYL: The first thing I could think about gangster rap is that when I heard "Dopeman," I guess Ice Cube was singing with NWA and I was like man, this is so real, it was different than the other songs that had come from Compton and LA*

*DENNIS: When the West Coast hip-hop came and you got to remember that we came with a livelier sound and it came with the funk that it took your bass line and it took your drums with your synthesizer. We had the rhythm and the melody*

*TREMONT: Its funny because I'm thinking what is gangsta rap [chuckle], it was just music to us you know it's a lifestyle*

*INDUGU: I think gangsta rap kind of a label put on by the media*

*DARYL: It was Ice Cube, it was N.W.A.*

*MARK: Toddy Tee*

*BOBBY: Toddy Tee and Mix Master Spades*

*DENNIS: Ice-T*

*RON: Ice-T*

*DENNIS: N.W.A.*

*BYRON: N.W.A.*

*RON: N.W.A.*

*TREMONT: N.W.A.*

*DENNIS: Khalid Muhammad*

*DENNIS: Geto Boys*

*BOBBY: Geto Boys*

*DENNIS: Spice-1*

*TREMONT: Spice-1*

*MARK: 2Pac*

*DARYL: Dre*

*TREMONT: Dr. Dre*

*DENNIS: Ice Cube*

*TREMONT: Of course we listened to Cube even when he broke off*

*DARYL: Ice Cube number 1*

*MARK: Ice Cube*

*RON: Ice Cube*

*BOBBY: Ice Cube grew up right down the street from my father's house*

*DENNIS: Eazy-E*

*BOBBY: Eazy-E*

*DARYL: I can remember Eazy coming selling CDs and giving out 8-track tapes*

*TREMONT: Eazy-E*

*BYRON: I never heard of who he was or anything about him, next thing you know he has this high rasping type of voice with some dope beats*

*INDUGU: Eazy-E, my childhood love lived next door to him*

*DENNIS: MC Eiht*

*BYRON: I really wouldn't listen to MC Eiht. It is what it is. I went to hear a mixtape from MC Eiht and he has some pretty dull stuff. I'd end up giving it to somebody and keeping the DJ Quik tape.*

*Cymone: And why was that?*

*BYRON: DJ Quik was a Piru, he was from the Blood side*

*TREMONT: Before he blew up, he was a Penthouse Player*

*DENNIS: Quik really knocked down the door. Because at first, I ain't listening to that. I remember he actually had a tape, like a mixtape. They came hard so you had to start giving them dudes their props.*

*DARYL: DJ Quik wasn't in the gangster rap. DJ Quik talked about sex a lot, all of his songs was about girls and doing stuff. But still he was so influenced in the culture of Compton*

*INDUGU: Now DJ Quik stayed in our hood for a while. Because you hear him say Shabby Blue right? Shabby Blue is a Harlem Crip. Playa Hamm is out of the Rollin' 30s also. And he [Quik] is a Blood*

*Cymone: How did that happen?*

*INDUGU: Well they recognized talent and they gravitated towards it. When it comes to money, Shabby Blue and Playa Hamm, those guys were really about their dollars.*

*DENNIS: Westside Connection*

*RON: WC*

*TREMONT: BG Knoccout*

*BOBBY: Too Short*

*DARYL: Snoop*

*RONO: My little homie DJ Aladdin*

*MARK: Scarface*

*DENNIS: Mack 10*

*DARYL: We knocked Mack 10. Mack 10 came through for us to put our low riders in his first video. I was like, "Mann, I don't want to be in that dude's video"*

*INDUGU: I think most artists, hip-hop artists, figured out as long as you don't push your hood then you gone get everybody to listen to it. Sometimes even when you push your hood, it ain't gon make no difference. Good music is good music*

*DARYL: I couldn't listen to the Crip side, it was just so disrespectful*

*BOBBY: We really bump the Blood side, you know hear a shoutout to your hood. They had one song called "Piru Love," all the homies loved that song*

*DARYL: I mean for whatever reason I would listen to The Dogg Pound. And they even Crip crazy, everything Long Beach Crip and I loved it*

*BYRON: I would say the emotion of going against the system*

*Cymone: The system...*

*BYRON: Yeah, most definitely and the system especially being the police, LAPD, LA County Sheriffs, any police for that matter but more importantly the dirty ones because there were quite a few of them, you know roaming around. And the police were putting in more work than we were, that's another thing yeah*

*(Everyone chimes in agreement)*

*INDUGU: All those songs told stories of the chapter in our lives*

*BOBBY: It identified with what we was going through*

*RON: I can relate to all of them. Umm, Dopeman, I was selling dope back then and all the things about the music, the lyrics fit into my lifestyle*

*DARYL: It suited my time frame and the era I lived in, the things that I was going through in life*

*INDUGU: Gangsta rap was only reflecting what was going on in the hood*

*TREMONT: You just hear it and you automatically feel this, this um force of energy, I'm a Crip and ain't nuthin' like it*

*BYRON: I was excited about it and I embraced it because I have loved music my whole life. So to hear our music-*

*Cymone: What's our music?*

*BYRON: Our meaning urban, you know the drums, rhythm, you know things that move you*

*DENNIS: It enrage you, it excited you*

*DARYL: It was a motivation, it was a boost*

*TREMONT: It would lift you up, encouraged you, inspired you*

*MARK: It probably pumped us up a little bit*

*INDUGU: When Eazy-E said cruisin' down the street in my 6-4, everybody can relate to that. Just rollin' in your 4. The dream of most cats from California is to have a Chevy Impala*

*DENNIS: It was more of a void and they tapped into our vein that was coursing through our street, you know*

*INDUGU: It was the soundtrack to our lives but it wasn't the emphasis of our lives*

*DENNIS: Every last word because I really, genuinely lived it*

*INDUGU: They perfectly depicted the California mentally. Fuck the Police and all that kind of stuff. Because we come up like that. Fuck the Police. (laughter) You know what I mean? We policed ourselves and we exacted revenge, punishment, the law, and all that stuff. So I would say its an honest depiction of the way it was here*

*DENNIS: I sold dope, you know "Gangsta Gangsta" it's not about a salary, it's all about reality*

*TREMONT: There was a song about the police, Batterraming the dope spots*

*INDUGU: What the hell his name, Chief Gates, that fool was just tearing up people's property. Okay lets say there's drug selling and all that kind of stuff, but fo'real the tank*



*Cymone: Batterram?*

*TREMONT: Batterram, it was actually like a um a tank with a long pole on the end that they would ram through your door and bust down your door and that's what they would call a Batterram*

*Cymone: Oh, wow.*

The former gang members reminisce on the early music that gave rise to gangsta rap. Before rap existed, music was pure soul and funk for these men. They mention artists like George Clinton, Parliament Funkadelic, and the Blue Magic band. Then comes the electro rap and the DJ era with Egyptian Lover and Uncle Jamms Army. Both Tremont and Indugu share the same sentiments regarding the definition of gangsta rap. What exactly is gangsta rap? For those living here, it is just reality. They all reflect on the artists and groups who were at the forefront of this subgenre. It is interesting to note their opinion of different artists based on gang affiliation. Some, like Byron, trash MC Eiht because of his dull sound, while DJ Quik receives recognition for his funky rhymes. Daryl bumps The Dogg Pound although he views majority of the Crip music to be degrading.

Regardless of the artist's affiliation, the men share a connection because of their environment. Indugu remembers when Eazy-E lived next door to his first love, while Tremont recalls when music artist Mack 10, a Blood from Inglewood, included Tremont's neighborhood (the Rollin' 30s Crips) in his first music video. Soon enough, Indugu acknowledges that discrimination based on affiliation did not last long because, as he says, "Good music is good music."

The relationship to and reception of gangsta rap is evident within this interpretive community. The music is a resistant reflection of the events transpiring in the streets. Words like encouragement, inspiration, and “pumped up” are used to describe the feelings the music triggered. Likewise, the memories associated with this music situate it as a memoir of reality that replicates the social and economic drama of their daily life. Amongst these men, there is a far more menacing, deadly enemy. Gangsta rap broke the silence surrounding that enemy. Gangsta rap redirected the resistance, allowing them to confront structural forces, and more specifically, their frustrations with the police. The lyrics are direct and indelicate--there is no mistake to where their anger lies. Gangsta rap also exemplified the underground economic system of advancement. The drug trade was a lucrative street career for individuals such as Bobby and Dennis. Although the streets represented the displaced status of the men growing up in this environment, those very streets later became a source of income, a means of economic advancement.

*Cymone: So what were some social issues described in gangster rap that you felt personally about?*

*RON: Say that again*

*Cymone: What were some social issues described in gangster rap that you felt personally about?*

*Beat.*

*RON: Social issues in gangster rap*

*DARYL: To be honest, I think Ice Cube was the only one who addressed issues and put messages in his music. I think everybody else was just storytelling, glorifying the foolishness that they saw*

*MARK: They weren't no encouraging leaders. They encouraged you to don't get caught*

*DARYL: Nothing that would empower me to do something, give back to the community or become an activist. There was nothing in gangster rap that would have moved me towards that*

*TREMONT: It's not to be glorified, its not to be imitated, there's no retirement plan. I always tell cats that, there is no 401 (k), there's nothing for you and although we pay these rappers, buy their CDs, we get nothing out of it*

*(Silence)*

*DENNIS: I liked the music but then you knew it was almost like they're speaking what we doing, but they don't do it. That was what I call the Hip-Hop reporters*

*RON: The rappers back in the day, promoted a lot of the gang motivation*

*INDUGU: The artist probably hadn't lived through those things but I'm sure they probably have heard some stories and some of them have*

*INDUGU: I would say gangsta rap came after gangsta-ism*

*TREMONT: I think our lifestyles influenced the music*

*DARYL: Gangsta rap didn't have any influence on the guys I was hanging around*

*MARK: It didn't make me act up*

*RON: I used to throw my CD in if I um finna<sup>8</sup> go do something*

*TREMONT: I don't think gangsta rap influenced anything we did, not me personally.*

*You know I did what was protocol, what we did as a uh...as a gang*

*DARYL: The music became soothing for me when I needed to be soothed, it was my motivation to stay focused when I needed to be focused but it wasn't the influence. I was doing whatever I was doing anyway*

*TREMONT: It didn't take a song to get us pumped up to go do something to somebody.*

The former gang members respond to the provocative question, “Does gangsta rap influence actual violence?” From the men above the answer is no. Gangsta rap did not influence gang members to actively assist with gangbanging or put in work for the hood. Interestingly, Ron states there is background music when on duty—gangsta rap music—but that it does not serve as fuel to complete the detail. In a sense, some men used gangsta rap to oppress the self and the community. Gangsta rap served as motivational noise while puttin’ in work.

Although there seems to be a consensus that gangsta rap did not affect these men because their actions were influenced by the already present, overbearing gang subculture, the individuals also exhibit a cynical attitude toward the gangsta artists who promoted gang activity rather than social activism. However, these men bought into it. As Tremont reflects, gangbangers bought the music but took little from it. As such, there are limited messages in gangsta rap that strive for positivity.

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<sup>8</sup> Ron says “finna” in replace of the word “about”. Before he was to gangbang, he would listen to gangsta rap.

*(Community members are gathering their belongings about to exit)*

*Cymone: Well seems everyone is about to leave, I-*

*MARK: One thing, excuse my language, but this bullshit is over. You know this Black on Black killings that shit is over. We stopping this violent cycle known as gang banging.*

*We might not get a lot of media attention or whatsoever but the world can know that we are dealing with this thing*

*DARYL: We were young people who were misguided, mis-educated and didn't have knowledge of self or anything positive. So we kinda made way with what we had*

*DENNIS: I helped to destroy this community and my people*

*RON: Growing up into the gang lifestyle to me is like, I lost myself*

*TREMONT: I'm blessed to be alive out of my age bracket*

*INDUGU: I told myself that as a teenager, I ain't gon live to be 20 years old*

*MARK: Everybody just don't get over it*

*TREMONT: I used to think I was never going to make it to 30. Because it was common to die early, you know*

*BOBBY: You born and you die*

*DARYL: I would like to say I'm Vicki's son, middle child. Not gang members, we are human beings, we don't crawl out of sewers, we don't get dropped off at night with parachutes, the victim, the suspect, we come out the same home*

*DENNIS: Our community. The Black community should be one. It can't be the 60 Black communities*

*DARYL: If we had a stamp on our back, it would say made in America.*

*(Slowly fades to black)*

Collectively, these men have been trapped in a tornado of turmoil; this cyclone is formed from the two emotions that collide in this environment: love and hate. Reflecting on these memories brings agony such as that experienced by Dennis—as a drug dealer he realizes his influence on the destruction of the community. Not everyone recovers from the difficulties of the eighties, as Mark states. Some, like Ron, feel as if they have lost their true purpose and identity to gangbanging, while Daryl finds his identity in Blacknessbiology. He is a son and brother; a Black man, not a gang member. It is now time for a transition. As Mark forcefully asserts, the murder, the violence, the heartache has to stop. And it takes the entire community. What first began on the streets of LA has now reached international status with Crips and Bloods worldwide. As Daryl cynically concludes, these are the offspring, the product of the American system.

**An Interlude:**

**Coffee with a Kingpin “Freeway” Ricky Ross**

*Cymone: Who is Rick Ross?*

*Beat.*

*Rick Ross: I don't know. A lot of people. (chuckles)*

*Cymone: Tell me about Rick Ross. What are you known for?*

*Rick Ross: Me? Aw, all kinds of stuff. I'm everywhere. Drugs, stealing cars, motivational speaker, philanthropist, friend to everybody (chuckles). I was born in Texas. I moved to South Central when I was three years old.*

*Cymone: Basically all your life you lived in California.*

*Rick Ross: Yeah. I'm a Californian.*

*Cymone: So what made you-*

*Rick Ross: Well, not all my life. Because you know I spent twenty years in prison. I did almost half my life in prison. I been out almost 5 years now.*

*Cymone: How did you get out?*

*Rick Ross: I found a technicality.*

*Beat.*

*Yeah, I found a technicality in the system and I used it in my favor.*

*Cymone: How you get into drug trafficking?*

*Rick Ross: Where I grew up, I stayed on the borderline of Crips and Bloods. I stayed on 87<sup>th</sup> and Fig, in between Fig and Flower. If you go one block, the Bloods started. At one*

*time I wanted to be a Crip when I was about 12, 11 uh but I started playing tennis and I played tennis up until I was about 18 ½.*

*Beat.*

*And that's when I came back to the streets.*

*Cymone: What transitioned you back to the streets?*

*Rick Ross: When it was discovered I couldn't read or write. My high school tennis coach, he already knew that I was struggling in school because of my grades. He always had to go to my teachers to uh help me be eligible to play on the team. It was discovered right around my senior year.*

*It wasn't a uh "do I want to play tennis" or "do I want to go to the streets?" I didn't have a choice. You know, I couldn't read or write. I wasn't rich. Even playing high school tennis player was a struggle. Not being able to afford the tennis shoes, the rackets. Now being out of high school, its going to be even more of a struggle. It wasn't a choice. It was almost like uh*

*Beat.*

*Tennis is over. You know, wake up and smell the coffee. Tennis was definitely forced away from me.*

*Cymone: At that time did you know what the money was being used for?*

*Rick Ross: What my money was being used for? Yeah, I wanted to fix my car. (chuckles)*

*And I was hoping to start my tennis career.*

*Beat.*

*The money got to coming so fast, the hell with tennis.*



*Cymone: Who taught you-*

*Rick Ross: I picked it up as I went. I would pick up a little here and there, make my own game plan. Basically the same way I learned how to play tennis. Because I never had the money to pay for lessons so what I would do, I would go and watch the guys who were able to afford lessons, watch what they do and then apply to my game.*

*Cymone: Amazing. Did you know how well known you were at that time?*

*Rick Ross: No, I didn't. No I didn't really understand what type of magnitude I was having until I went to prison. And I would hear people in the jail cell talk about me. And I was sitting there with them.*

*Cymone: How that make you feel?*

*Beat.*

*Rick Ross: Strange. You know, because my whole life I wanted to not be known. I wasn't the drug dealer who wanted everyone to know who I was. But you know what I found out is if you making a million dollars a day in South Central LA where everyone else is making \$250 a week and I'm making sometimes 3 million a day, uh its pretty hard to hide that.*

*Cymone: How long were you out there before you got busted?*

*Rick Ross: About 8 years.*

*Cymone: When?*

*Rick Ross: In '89. I quit selling drugs. I had invested my money in real estate. I would go around buy properties, rehab it, rent it out. I would go out and work on the jobs myself. So one particular day we were out pouring concrete and I had on rubber boots and one*

*of my little guys came back, because you know I used to have four or five guys with me, and he said, "The police just rolled by. Undercover."*

*And I was like, "Aw, we ain't doing nothing." I didn't know I had secret indictments uh pending and uh about five minutes later I heard screeches and car doors slamming. So I looked out the door and I saw this, like all these White cops running at me, with the guns drawn and vests on. I took off running the other way.*

*Cymone: Do you feel any different now knowing how the money was used?*

*Beat.*

*Rick Ross: I don't- you know when I first went to prison I was really hard on myself about selling drugs, "Aw you was a bad guy, you done some bad things, you evil man," but now I don't I don't look at it as evil. I don't look at no one who gets involved with drugs as evil people.*

*Cymone: Why?*

*Rick Ross: Because it's not a crime of vicious or ill will, it's a crime where somebody want something and you give them what they want. A drug crime is a crime that's consensual (Rick Ross, personal communication, January 2, 2014).*

## CHAPTER IV

### A MIXER OF MASTERMINDS<sup>9</sup>

#### Act II

In Act II I will engage in cross-narratives between gangsta rap artists. The eight men in this music zone will discuss how life experiences led to an expression of resistance. These hip-hop heads are deeply rooted in an environment, a subculture that is explicitly portrayed in their lyrics. The tapestry of stories shows a rare, raw exchange of reality through music. This dystopian performative is present in these rappers who reflect on their disadvantaged experience during the eighties and nineties. Despite their challenges, these individuals create a space within music that demonstrates a desire for change.

#### *Scene One*

#### A “Kool” Collaboration Concert

It is April 29, twenty-two years after the L.A. Riots, and a free hip-hop concert is about to begin. The concert celebrates Black American culture and acknowledges past social struggles. Open to the public, many people eagerly await the show’s commencement and anxiously anticipate the arrival of their favorite artists. The West Coast hip-hop headliners for today’s performance include old school gangsta godfathers Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, DJ Quik, and MC Eiht, as well as current artists The Game, Kendrick Lamar, Jay Rock, Nipsey Hussle, and Glasses Malone. Many artists are already in attendance and socialize in VIP lounges behind the stage.

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<sup>9</sup> The names presented in this chapter are of the artists’ stage name

I arrive excited and hyped. This is going to be a tight show and I can't wait to chill with some of the artists. I walk backstage with my VIP pass. To the right there is a small hallway and I approach the first door on the left. I knock and am ushered inside by a big burly man guarding the door. I survey the scene of musicians before me and become star-struck. For a split moment, I stare at individual I normally see only on TV. Inside the spacious room, couches and chairs are spread throughout; a table of eatables is prominently displayed. The room is a sensory mixture of loud, thumping music and marijuana smoke. Snoop and Dre are bobbing their heads to the beat while preparing for a dope evening. I see MC Eiht and BG Knocc Out seated talking to a journalist. I walk over to say introduce myself and listen to the conversation.

#### Staging the Scene

Four gangsta rappers are seated on a long cushioned couch. The couch curves in a semi-circle and directly across are padded chairs that complete the ensemble. MC Eiht, BG Knocc Out, E-Roc, and Big Syke are sitting and engage in separate discussions. E-Roc and Big Syke are talking to different people while MC Eiht and BG Knocc Out are talking to a hip-hop journalist. I sit in between the two groups and listen to what MC Eiht and BG Knocc Out say to the writer.

*MC EIHT: My contribution was to show people not to glorify where I came from but to show people on the outside this is why I grew up gang banging. It's something you are really drawn into.*

*The pressure is important.*

*Beat.*

*I grew up in poverty with everyone on the block gang banging and everybody sold dope, that's what you did. Especially if you had no father. Mom was off somewhere working 9-5, all you could do was be a gangbanger. It was real treacherous to belong to a set because back then there was a lot of drive-by killings. Cats saw their lives wouldn't excel or be something greater than the neighborhood.*

*It's something like we had no choice to do.*

*Beat.*

*A lot of people got choices but we didn't have choices. We as a kid who came of age at 12-13 knowing stuff and seeing stuff, there weren't a lot of opportunities. A lot of cats still associate or belong, because that's all they know. I know cats right now to this day that still belong to the neighborhood, its just the way of life.*

*Music provided an avenue for these cats who were riding around killing each other. But honestly as a rapper growing up in that element, you still had to live it. I was making records but I still had to protect the hood...*

*BG KNOCC OUT: Well, it was different for me growing up in a gang because I was born into it.*

*My experiences was like when I came into the world, it was going on in my family, and naturally, I just became a part of it. As a kid, it was more family-oriented. But the older you got, you started getting into the activities, you know the stealing, the robbing, the jacking, breaking into houses. And the dope dealers were the gang members. You can't just be a dope dealer in the neighborhood. It didn't work that way. You have to be part of the gang or be a family member in order to move your drugs in the neighborhood...*

*MC EIHT: Gangsta rap came to be because us on the West Coast were looked at as gang bangers who basically started rapping. We always talked about the neighborhood, drive-bys, police, Crips, Bloods, so and so got shot or stole some coke. The industry decided to call us gangsta rappers. We never came up with that term, it was what the industry coined.*

*I've always been a fan of music since the first rap song I heard which was Run-D.M.C.- "It's Like That." But I started taking it seriously when I saw that you could make it a job. This dude heard my first single and started working with me after he heard that song. I worked with him for like six months because I was raw, I was gangbangin I wasn't no rapper. He was like, "You have talent," and I was like, "Yeah whatever." He told me to come to the studio. I was like, "I aint got time for no studio, I'm in the hood." He got me to come to the studio one day. I never left.*

*Beat.*

*That's how my career got started. When I walked in that studio and I seen the mixing board and mics. I just got intrigued by it. I was in the studio everyday to where the homies from the neighborhood started questioning my loyalty. I was in the neighborhood wearing Compton's Most Wanted hoodies and they be like, "What the hell is that!?" They be like, "Where you from now? What's CMW? You Crenshaw Mafia?" I was like, "A rap group," and they were like, "Nigga you no rapper, you a gang banger." It took that and my determination. Nobody thought it was going to happen. My mom was like, "You need to go get a job." By this time that was it, I stayed in the studio*

*day in and day out. It paid off. When I put out that first single, every nigga from my neighborhood was at that photo shoot...*

*BG KNOCC OUT: I remember a guy named Schoolly D, an old school rapper that came out way back in the day. These were people who were just talkin' hood shit on the mic. Like shit that we could relate to, because we were seeing it every day. At the time N.W.A. got together, I was in a boys' home. I heard "Boyz In Da Hood." This was before I even heard of N.W.A., and I heard another song called "Dopeman." Those songs struck a chord with me for some reason. When I first heard these songs, I learned how to rap them. I would just mimic all the sounds. You know, whatever words they were sayin' I would repeat them until I learned how to do it. Initially that's how I began rappin'. To me, it spoke to the things that we were livin' and going through. It's like I was goin' to a civil rights speech. It pumped you up.*

*Everything they told me was law. It was like a soundtrack for my life. You know what I mean? I identify with every single word that they spoke. And not only that, they were talented. N.W.A. was like genius and sticking with the concepts for 3/16 bar verses within a song. They would never veer off course. They were always detailed with every song they talked about and I thought it was genius...*

*MC EIHT: It was controversial it opened people's eyes to what was going on. Even though no one was speaking on it, a lot of peeps was going through the same thing. That's why N.W.A. broke the mold. Everyone is going through it but someone is afraid to speak up. Instead of someone waiting around to tell Eazy-E, 'no you can't do that,' said, 'I'm gonna start my own label.' He started telling the truth about what was really going*

*on. That's why the group blew up and they opened the door for the rappers and our type of music. Before then we didn't have an avenue.*

*It was an autobiography to a lot of cats who basically didn't have a voice. The average 19 or 17 year old cat running around Compton and growing up in LA, they don't have a voice. It gave a voice to a lot of cats that were oppressed and wanted to be saved. "I am sick of being beat up by the police. I'm sick of getting harassed cause I'm wearing a t-shirt and khakis, you know, profiled because my car is a certain color or its low to the ground. I'm tired of getting pulled over because I got on a cap and some glasses," we were the voice for a lot of oppressed youths in the inner city. We carried so much weight. We were a handful but dealt with the whole country.*

*Next thing you know sets started popping up everywhere.*

*Beat.*

*Companies knew had to play into it. If you would have bought Compton's Most Wanted first album, it would have been on an all blue cassette tape, I had nothing to do with that. They claim it was for some anniversary, it was just a coincidence. But that caused a lot of controversy for us too. Compton's Most Wanted was more about speaking behind the scenes of the neighborhood. I wanted to tell you if you messed around with scandalous females this was gon happen. I wanted to tell you about why we were gang bangers and dope dealers, why my homeboy got killed...*

*BG KNOCC OUT: When Ice Cube broke away from N.W.A. and started doing his own thing, I think he went above and beyond. The first two or three albums that he did were just stupid sick. He became like my favorite rapper back then. And then when Dr. Dre*



*came out with that first Chronic album, I thought that shit was amazing. I didn't even know him at that time.*

*Eazy-E*

*He was like an idol to me, you know? I was star-struck. It was someone I had been listening to for years. It was my first time gettin' to see the dude. I didn't know he was a little guy. You know what I mean?*

*They gave me a platform for you know when I do enter into certain situations, how to deal when the police confront me. These are the things people would deal with, but no one would really say. This was something you never heard. You know it was expressive. It was just vulgar...*

*MC EIHT: My name came from just trying to be different. I took the 'g' out and said I was Eiht for Experienced in Hard-core Thumping. You have to be clever. You still represent where you from but you no longer playing in the street game on the corner selling crack and dope. You are sitting at corporate table across from people wearing suits and ties and getting checks, so you have to be able to adapt...*

*BG KNOCC OUT: I was going around performing at like open mic places. I used to go everywhere, because it was like the thing to do then. I would look at the back of people's CD's, well tapes, and try to find their little management companies and rap on their intercoms. I was doing all kinds of little stuff like that. My name came from fighting when I was little. When I was in elementary, 1-2<sup>nd</sup> grade, I was tough but I couldn't fight. So what my uncles did they would beat me up so much and test me with other kids. So I'm fighting with someone who might be my friend. This happened so much that they*

*started calling me Knock Out. The BG came from the gang. Once we got around 14, there's a classification for the young people in the middle. The people in the middle were the BGs, the Baby Gangstas.*

*(Backstage someone calls, "MC EIHT? MC EIHT, you have 10 minutes until your performance.")*

*(MC EIHT leaves scene, BG KNOCC OUT leaves to get food, and journalist begins talking to BIG SYKE and E-ROC)*

*E-ROC: I been a gangbanger since I was 13.*

*I loved the shit. It was like a drug. You wanted to be the best at it. It was like waking up and there was a new challenge but you didn't know what the challenge was going to be. But whatever it was, you was going to be there to step up and be part of it. Waking up in the morning, gangbanging, going to sleep, gang banging, waking up in the morning again, going to a hood function, it's an everyday thing. I mean as a kid growing up, not knowing the consequences and circumstances of the shit that you're doing, you're not thinking about that. You have that mentality from the age 13 or 12 all the way to 29. You only know one way to think. If you make it to be older you're supposed to transform and be a civilian, but it's hard because you still have a lot of those what they call post-war syndrome. You're nervous when you walk into the gas station.*

*That time period was terrible.*

*Beat.*

*Mind you, I'm saying it's terrible now. Back then it was beautiful. Then it was a lovely thing. I was in my prime. Everything was buttered to me then. I was getting money at a*

*young age, the only nigga at 13 and 14 with my own cars. You're a 13 year old boy, 14 year old boy, and you have not money in your hands but some strange look like Plato rock. You've got a grown woman that would come and suck your dick or do whatever you want for that. Now, you're 13, 14 years old. So I mean it couldn't be nothing but beautiful. But now, looking back as an adult, it was a disaster, it killed us. It rocked us harder than heroin, a lot of us was still getting off the heroin kick from the 60s and the 70s...*

*BIG SYKE: Honestly people call it gang members, but it was always like a family to me. A gang is a bunch of people that care about each other. So I try not to promote either side, cuz they all the same thing. I've been in the business a long time and you can go back to pretty much what I ever rapped on and I never rapped about what gang I was from. I rapped from life, not the hood.*

*I don't really like to call it gangster rap because that was just a label that the people gave it, you know? Label it hard-core rap. Hard-core rap is based on what's going on in the city regardless if some people looked at it as bad. I never looked at hard-core rap as bad because it was what was going on outside my house. That's why we related to it so much. All these politicians getting together trying to ban rap, need to be cleaning up these streets.*

*Rap was something you didn't have to go to college for. You didn't really have to be good in your English class. Now to me, the guy who was really a gang banger got to watch his rhyme to a certain degree. The guys who aren't really gang bangers but been around the hood just watching, they say anything in a rap. I ain't going to lie, their raps*

*maybe a little bit better. They don't have any reason to hold their tongues, they can say anything, because they only write down stories, someone else's stories...*

*E-ROC: Every artist out back then on the radio was from the East Coast. There was no West Coast artists on the radio station out here prior to N.W.A. You heard all the East Coast rappers and they talked about a lot of the East Coast shit. Some of them talked about diverse shit that was just happening to Black folks everywhere but a lot of them spoke from the East Coast point of view. N.W.A. was the one that opened the doors for the West Coast to me, top with Ice-T. Ice-T did his thing too. "6 'N the Mornin'," I used to bang that shit. Yes, I used to bump and bang that shit. So when N.W.A. came out it was like, "Damn, niggas got on L.A. hats like us, rockin' the khakis." N.W.A. had Chuck Taylors on, 501 blue jeans, t-shirts, jerry curls like us, and then these niggas wasn't mainstream, you weren't seeing this on TV. This was prior to Yo! MTV Raps and Fab Five Freddy, you just heard this on the streets. I loved Eazy-E back then too. This was before I knew Ice Cube was writing all his rhymes.*

*Every rapper that came out was a Crip with the exception of DJ Quik. And DJ Quik was put out by Crips, the money that put out DJ Quik was from our homies, you feel me? Though this is California, it's the Crip City. I mean Los Angeles, California is the home of Crips and Bloods but it was the Crip town though. We outnumbered Bloods...*

*Beat.*

*BIG SYKE: When I was a kid, I went to a Run-D.M.C. concert. And that was it. I mean I seen them come out, black leather jackets, black pants, and I was like, "Damn." When I*

*said I'm gonna do it myself, I didn't even know how to rap. So my homeboy gave me a rap that he wrote so I could see how to write a rap. Once seeing that, it was on.*

*It used to be Psycho, when I was little. Then they took the 'O' off the end, and everyone was calling me Syke for short, so I ran with that. Good thing about rap, I never had to change. I only became who I already was. I was in the streets so I was able to write about the streets. I didn't look at it as being a gangster rapper. It just so happen that I was rapping about some gangster type life. Nobody got into rap music say I'm going to be a gangster rapper. That's not our get down. To me, I was trying to get away from the streets. Now that you live a little bit and you learn stuff, and get out the hood, you can see life for what it is. You can attack it from a different position...*

*E-ROC: The first West Coast rapper was a homie named Frosty that was my boy. That's when I started learning how to rap; he lived right down the street. I started getting the love of rap from him. Nothing inspired me to be a gangster rap artist, I'm not a gangster rap artist, I'm a gangsta nigga that raps, that's all. I like the music, but I'm not a gangsta rapper. I feel I'm a voice for the people, I see myself as a Public Enemy but as a street person. You can't force feed people too much knowledge because they'll resist it, so my method is I give them a couple of songs of what they like, I give them a song about weed, I give them a song about making some money, I give them a song about partying. I'm not doing music just for other people, I do it to cleanse my soul. My name from the hood was Young E-Roc., but as a rapper I switched it around and put E-Roc Young. Young E-Roc at that time was a little scarier. It was right around the shooting and Death Row was fucking up, so these white boys were scared...*

*BIG SYKE: Thug Life started when Pac came to me and we went to the studio and did some stuff. Then he went and got two other guys, Rated-R and Macadoshis. We started recording some stuff and then Mopreme came along, and you know, it was on. The Outlawz started when Pac was in jail. And uh he made me himself Mackaveli and gave me the name Mussolini. Then named everybody else, all this while he still in jail.*

*I called him an educated nut. He was so smart, but he was crazy. There was no fear in his movement. What I loved about him so much, was that he didn't give a damn about- every time he gave an interview it was like his career was on the line. He would say some shit that would turn into a problem. You know, he was a cold cat...*

*E-ROC: There was no East Coast, West Coast feud. That's what you call propaganda...*

*BIG SYKE: Well to me, it was never really a feud. 2Pac is from the East Coast man, it don't make no sense. All that was media driven. To keep niggas with beef, they keep niggas with problems with each other. And we fall into it. We love to have a problem with another Black person...*

*E-ROC: The death of 2Pac was another thing, it was 2Pac's fault.*

*Beat.*

*He died because he neglected to think about where he was. He thought it was a game when this is a lifestyle. This is not a game. This gangbanging shit, this is not a game.*

*This is a lifestyle for people. You've got to think Pac's not from here. How can it be an East Coast, West Coast beef when Pac is from New York? Okay, he came down here when he was fifteen, sixteen. But he's not a native, you feel me?*

*When Pac first came out here, now if he had stayed in Oakland, and stayed with the*

*Digital Underground, the nigga would have gone further. When he came down here and started playing with this blue and red shit, that's when shit gets serious. When he first came out here, he was Thug Life. He was living in the 40s, half of the Thug Life niggas is from the 40s. Everywhere he was going, he was wearing a blue rag, and he was talking and hanging with all the 40s. When he got on Death Row, he stopped fucking with Thug Life niggas for whatever reason but everything was now I'm a Blood mentality. You can't play with this shit. This shit is for real, you feel me? This is not a movie script you can come and jump in today and today I'm him and then tomorrow I'm going to be him, we don't do that out here. Then he played with cuz from Southside, and Southside niggas, if you know anything about Southside Compton Crips, go do your homework, it's in the newspapers. These niggas is on TV every other night.*

*It's like everybody wants to jump on this shit because they think it's a fad.*

*Beat.*

*This ain't no fad for dudes. Niggas live this every fucking day, 24/7. I don't really care about gang banging, but I still don't like being around red. I still don't like red around me. I'm still the old school nigga, I don't start shit. I don't care if a Blood nigga walk up the street, if he minds his business, I mind my business.*

(Suddenly Cymone hears the beginning beat of Kendrick Lamar's song "m.A.A.d city" featuring MC Eiht. She tells everyone she will be back and hurriedly goes to watch the performance.)

Rap provides an alternative to gangbanging. It provides way into a better life while simultaneously giving outsiders a view into the gang induced world. MC Eiht

expresses his limited choices growing up in an environment where there are few opportunities or career options. Big Syke furthers this thought when explaining there is no formal education needed to master rap. In urban areas where proper school training and corporate experiences are not readily available, rap became the means of success and income not otherwise available. However, this option is not without risk. When gangsta culture and rap first merged, it was not viewed as a viable occupation. Either you were a gangbanger or a rapper, but not both. MC Eiht shares a reflection from family and friends who did not understand his newfound commitment to a rap group. He encountered doubt, which he transformed into determination. Others like Big Syke decided to dissociate from gang life in his lyrics, instead speaking about life. Whatever each man's journey through the streets involved, each eventually found himself on the road to rap.

Learning how to rap involves emulating those who have preceded you. Each of the artists reminisces about his entrance into the rap scene. BG Knocc Out recited rhymes from N.W.A. Big Syke was inspired by Run-D.M.C. and learned to rap from a childhood friend. E-Roc received his love of rap and unique style from his role model, underground rapper Frosty. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, MC Eiht replicated a gangsta icon, his neighborhood homie, Toddy Tee and his song "Batterram."

Gangsta rap is both influential and controversial. The rap artists use this platform to voice concerns regarding violence in their neighborhoods. MC Eiht remembers that prior to Eazy-E and N.W.A. there was no expressive way for youth voice their opinions regarding community problems. Once the opportunity arose,, it proved shocking and



unsettling for society to hear. Gangsta rap discusses issues usually considered taboo, but people listened. The lyrics shine a light on police problems as BG Knocc Out explains, and the glory, gory drug trade as E-Roc recalls. MC Eiht suggests that the music provides young men with a guide into gangbanging, enabling the spread of sets throughout the U.S. This thought is reflected in the 1992 DJ Quik song, “Just Lyke Compton,” where he compares Compton to other urban cities in the country and concludes they are all alike in their societal make-up of gangbanging. But the spread of gangsta rap was not only because of the artists’ influence..MC Eiht explains how record companies encouraged the commercialization of gang culture and instigated gang expansion for financial gain.

The label “gangsta rap” is problematic for these rap artists. Both MC Eiht and E-Roc mention that the term does not signify their lifestyle and is a media-generated category. They did not instigate the label, nor do they recognize it. E-Roc is just a gangsta who likes to rap. Big Syke dubs the genre “hard-core rap,” replacing “gangsta” with “hard core,” in reference to the living environment as a whole. Hence, the label generated by the industry and mass media is shunned and rejected by those most deeply involved in so-called “gangsta rap.”

The narrative reflections provided by the artists demonstrate the relationship between the music and the environment. Before BG Knocc Out began his career, as he explains, N.W.A. provided a soundtrack to his life, a reflective mirror. His rap name was also gang influenced. BG signifies a gang hierarchy, an organizational rank. Big Syke received his name from the neighborhood along with his nickname, “Psycho.” He states

that he did not have to develop a stage name because his character was derived from his street lifestyle.

The rap game also reflects street demographics. Crip rappers outnumber their Blood counterparts. Blood rappers are rare; the most notable is DJ Quik, who is sponsored by Crips. Finally, the relationship between gangsta rap and the environment is revealed in the death of 2Pac. 2Pac, a New York native, was shot and killed by a Compton Crip. While Big Syke affectionately remembers 2Pac's brilliance and boldness, E-Roc reminds us of 2Pac's rap past. 2Pac began his career by capitalizing on the ethos of his gang affiliation. This proved to be not only tricky, but deadly. The gang environment does not look fondly upon those who change their allegiance. The connection between the music and environment is therefore an intricate tie, constantly negotiated and construed in response to the unstable environment where it resides. One must understand the limitations and boundaries afforded by this environment before getting in too deep.

*Reflection: Dangerously at a Dead-End Road*

It is two days before my trip's end and I still have not returned to the studio. Although at this point I have traveled to a number of studios, I am referring to one in particular. The studio session I attended in Long Beach on the first day of my trip left me desiring more knowledge of the music lifestyle and gangsta culture. I listen to the intermingling of vocals, beats, and production. I witness the deeply rooted engagement between the younger and older Crips. I want to see more, I want to understand better, but at what cost and how, since I have no car?

Not having a car is a hindrance. Despite proving to be a blessing in numerous ways, it still limits my ability to travel and connect with the community I am investigating. But this is what I wanted, isn't it? So why am I frustrated? Because I haven't been back to the studio and my trip is almost over. I still need to conduct an interview with E-Roc, but even more, I want to chill in their company. It is frustratingly difficult to get a ride and confirm a time. The studio schedule is usually sporadic and more importantly, my sorority sister lives in a Blood area. E-Roc is not coming this way.

It is 10:30 on a Monday night and I have just finished an interview with Byron at a restaurant in South Central. Byron is a former Black P. Stone and college graduate. After dinner, we head to hang out with friends from his childhood and college years. These affluent businessmen were never gangbangers and are graduates of Morehouse College. In the midst of a conversation discussing my career choices, I receive a call from E-Roc. He tells me he is headed to the studio. This is the call I have been waiting for all week. Now I just have to find a ride.

Long Beach is twenty minutes away from South Central and these businessmen are hesitant to take me. The uncertainty comes not from the present gang culture, but from the driving distance. To these Californians, twenty minutes is long and far. They look at each other with skepticism and opt out. Dang, just when I think I have a way.

Disappointed and headed back to Lena's, Byron casually mentions he can take me. Right before my emotions escalate to excitement, I abruptly remember his Blood affiliation, "Really!? Wait. What about you being a Blood? Are you sure?" He offhandedly waves his hand. "It's not a problem," he smiles. I recall Byron stating he's

no longer actively involved in the gang. Because this not the first time I travel between Crips and Bloods, I regain my excitement and call E-Roc. “E-Roc, what’s the address? I found a ride,” I state anxiously.

Beat.

“You getting dropped off? By who?”

“Uh.” I look at Byron and realize in my rush I mistakenly forgot to first ask E-Roc about my ride arrangements. “Uh...B-“

“B? B Who?” His voice no longer calm. His speech no longer slow.

“Um B-B-,” I stutter and stumble.

“Huh? Who is B,” his voice hardens.

Uh-oh.

“I don’t know no B,” his voice menaces.

Shit.

“And I don’t want to get to know no B,” he voice escalates.

Fuck.

“As a matter of fact, I-”

“You know what E-Roc?” I cut him off. “I’m not even that pressed, it’s late and I’m tired, there’s always tomorrow and if I don’t get a ride, there’s always a phone call, it ain’t even that serious for me to come tonight,” I quickly and cautiously state trying to diffuse the intense, charged situation.

“Yeah. Aite.” He responds.

“Alright, cool. I’ll just hit you up later.”

Click.

He hangs up. I disbelievably stare at the phone with parts of the exchange still swirling in my head. What have I just done?

The next day Mr. T and Bobby Louie pick me up from Lena's and I am still bothered by the previous night's confrontation. I reprimand myself and reflect on my own position in the almost altercation. As a researcher, I feel caught between protecting one person's identity and maintaining another's trust. In my haste and excitement of a ride, I overlooked the golden rule in the environment. No intermixing. How can I be so careless and callous? I chide myself of the dangers I could have prompted. I shudder at the thought. I take out my phone and send E-Roc an apologetic text. Just then Mr. T asks, "How you been Lil' Bit?" After our first interaction when I interviewed Bobby Louie at the Denny's parking lot, Mr. T affectionately dubbed me with this nickname. I am troubled and in turmoil. I recount last night's event and seek advice. Mr. T tells me I need to be more careful, and in this environment females are used as decoys and culprits. This reminds me of Kendrick Lamar's debut album which portrays a lust filled relationship with a woman who later sets him up. Mr. T continues, probing my lack of safety precautions, "What if they would have killed each other because of you? Or worse, if you were caught in between?" My stomach drops and I groan inwardly. That is definitely something I did not want to happen. However reckless my actions, I am grateful this ended more as a cautionary tale rather than an unfortunate reality.

*Scene Two*

Revving up the Beat and Rollin' Down the Street of Reality

After watching Kendrick Lamar perform with some of my favorite artists, I head to another dressing room and hang with the local underground artists who performed earlier. I walk in and instantly feel the vibe. “Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang,” is playing from the speakers and people are dispersed throughout the room, smoking. This space is smaller than the one before but has the same gangsta groove. An abundance of food is laid out and everyone is feeling the g-funk mood. The number five song on Dr. Dre debut album *The Chronic* samples Leon Haywood’s song “I Wanna Do Something Freaky Tonight,” which adds a funky bass to Snoop’s smooth rhymes and Dre’s gritty flow. I look around and see familiar faces. I proceed to walk towards a group of men I recognize and notice they are in discussion with a well-known Black college professor from the University of Southern California. They acknowledge me with smiles and hugs.

#### Staging the Scene

There are a couple of comfy chairs next to two short sofas. Sitting on the sofas are the rap artists from the group AllfrumthAI as well as solo artists Hittman and Keke Loco. The professor is leaning forward in the cushioned chair, absorbing every word the rappers say. I sit down next to the professor and quickly introduce myself. Binky Mac a close affiliate of Westside Connection and group member of AllfrumthAI resumes talking.

*BINKY MAC: Honestly, I am going to say it like this, I might have called myself a gang banger but I never really did it.*

*I was around and affiliated from like the 7<sup>th</sup> grade to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. We were really puppets at that time, you know, we was gang banging, we was hustling and the people*

*who was really making the money was probably just sitting around and laughing at us destroy ourselves. From a youngster's stand point, I could tell that we was destroying our community in general. A lot of people getting on crack cocaine, it was sad. It was a bad period because of drugs and gangs. To be honest, some of the gangs started coming together because of the drugs...*

*HITTMAN: I never was a gang member.*

*I was raised in the Black P Stone neighborhood. I ran with them, so sometime I was guilty by association....*

*BINKY MAC: Gangster rap man, the first time I heard it, I want to say, Toddy Tee in the "The Batteram." There was some Ice-T stuff too. It became a visual from a verbal standpoint. I think that's when the cursing came in rap. I ain't gon lie, I probably heard more negative than I did positive. I've always had mixed emotions about that. Even in my own raps, I kinda have fun with it but I watch what I say. A lot of the guys that weren't gangbanging, told the story. Even though Ice Cube didn't really gang bang, he is a helluva storyteller and I think you don't have to experience it if you can tell a story. Oh I wish I had the names of all the rap artists that came out that was gangsta rapping. It was just material full of nothing. They felt like they was imitating what Cube was doing...*

*HITTMAN: I was deeply influenced in hip-hop, so I knew "6 'N the Mornin'" was an LA version of the song "PSK." The next album I bought was Eazy-E's single, "Boyz in da Hood," and I was pretty much into it at that point. I just thought it was dope. I was just thought it was awesome that finally a LA group was getting that type of notoriety you*

*know what I'm saying? "Fuck the Police," I always had a militant side to me, so that was just a given. Cops were never welcomed in the Blood community, they always were harassing people. I never met friendly police back then. "Dopeman," I wasn't selling drugs but I definitely knew a lot of dope men and it was astounding to see a few years older than me in Benz's with huge, stupid chains and I was intrigued. But there's a flip side to that, they don't get to have it long.*

*Aside from gangster rap, I was listening to Public Enemy. I used to have this saying that PE saved my life. Because I was so close to joining, you know? It was a couple of things that happened, like one summer, I was getting so good in music but the older heads, they knew I was good at rapping, they would tell me to get up out the park, like "What you doing here? Go do what you doin'. It ain't nothing here."*

*I started rhyming in '85 and finally got signed to Dre's label in '98.*

*I used to talk a lot as a kid, so I never could go outside for the after school program. I'd have to sit in my class and write dictionary pages. I would write every word on the page and then break them down into the meaning. I made my name mean Hyped Invincible Tongue Talent Making All Nervous, and then it evolved to different things like Highly Intensive Tongue Talent Making All Nervous.*

*People liked it cuz it appealed to them. I was talking about the things that they were doing.*

*Beat.*

*I can't say gangsta rap brought awareness, I think it just brought it to the forefront of mainstream America. A lot of people don't like that name, especially from that era. Even*



*talking to Dre, he doesn't like that term 'gangster rap' cuz to him it was party rap and reality rap and that's kind of how we all looked at it...*

*BINKY MAC: I never thought I was one.*

*I never said I was a gangster rap artist, you know I never liked that title because it sounds like someone who might be walking around angry and want to fight all day. Rap was different. You can be talking about somebody else or what they told you about. Rap was a hobby. It's always been a hobby for me because I don't get paid for music on a day-to-day basis.*

*Back then, we all would get on a plane, Westside Connection, Allfrumtha I, Comrads, and go to New York to do interviews with MTV. Everybody got on USC hats, UCLA hats, the Lakers this and that. Nas is in the back seat of a Honda and he just looking like, "Oh my God." Biggie had been killed at that time, and it was just crazy...*

*HITTMAN: I personally hated that era.*

*They took his beef with a person and made it an East coast-West coast thing. Pac was from New York, he was called MC New York. So how could that really be an East Coast, West Coast war? Once again like gangster rap, the term was coined by the media to sell, to push things. At that time, I was angry because I felt even Pac was moving on misinformation.*

*Beat.*

*People don't expect you to die in rap. We all were devastated by Pac and Biggie, that isn't supposed to happen. It was just like negative energy and at the same time people were so hurt. They started to feel like maybe this isn't the route to go. It was one thing*

*that E.D.I. from The Outlawz said, "If you think that Biggie and Pac died over some rap shit, you're disrespecting both of them." That's what made me start to look back. He's right...*

*KEKE LOCO: For me gang culture came about because of the fact that I was different per se and the places and the people that were giving me these type of problems were in gangs. They thought I was white, you know and you being a white boy coming from where I came from, it was unheard of. I used to be chased by kids and I am fighting you know 10-20 of these dudes, you know.*

*I am Black but I am Albino.*

*Beat.*

*The first time I ever really got put in position that I am going to be with the lifestyle was on a false arrest. CRASH was the gang suppression unit at that time. The police got everybody. The police officer, guess it was the sergeant, he told his partner to take him and he put the handcuffs on me. He said, "You know what you are going to jail for?" And I was like, "No." He said, "Cocaine." I said, "I have no cocaine." He said, "Crack Cocaine." I said, "I don't have no cocaine." He said, "Well now you do," and put it in my pocket...*

*SQUEAK RU: I'm very thankful to be alive for a lot of stuff I have been through. When I just reflect back, I think about a lot of guys who aren't here. A lot of gang members grew up from elementary, so you already know each other. I see dudes now I went to elementary school with and we belong to rival neighborhoods. Now that we have gotten older, I don't call them by their gang name. A lot of times, we glad to see them dudes*

*because you know they went through the same thing you went through, you feel like man we survived all that.*

*This was Inglewood. Inglewood was considered an all Blood city. I used to be on the bus at Manchester and some of the Crenshaw kids would get on. I remember getting on the bus and kids be like what school you go to, "Westchester." "Where you go?" "Watts" "Where you go?" "We from Crenshaw." "Where you go homie?" I go to Inglewood and the whole bus got quiet because they already know what it is. Everyone was like, "Ooohh," and I didn't have to gangbang or nothing. I was. But that would have happened to anybody from Inglewood, basketball player or whatever.*

*One thing that led me turning to the neighborhood these guys became my brothers, you know what I'm saying? My mom moved out here, I got a brother that's 2 years younger than me. She moved out here in the early 70's. She worked for Northbrook, then she got her Broker License. She's working for 6021. She sent for me to move to Inglewood and uh you know everything was starting to be prosperous. She was making good money and everything.*

*Then Crack hit. She was one who got hooked on.*

*Beat.*

*Now, I am a kid who has everything he wanted and I watched it all go down the drain. I watched my mom just deformed. My father was in Florida and he passed away in '86. No Mom and my Pops is gone. Everyone was affected when Crack hit. It was certain people you couldn't believe they was on it. It was lower class, middle class and upper class, but you know how the media can be. I had an aunt out here too. My aunt was*

*hooked for a minute but you know she was just strong enough to go get help. So, at 16 when a young man really needs that father guidance, I'm just out here on my own.*

*These older guys were just -and a lot of these guys, they were 2, 3, or 4 years older than I was, but to me it was like they were 10, 15 years older than I was...*

*KEKE LOCO: Crack was at its all time high. When it was going down, every street had rock houses. Niggas coming through putting money through that vent you know and a pebble come out. You did this in broad daylight. I mean it was no secret. I seen lawyers turned out, affluent doctors, I mean just coming to get this rock. People with good jobs, it affected every walk of life. The cocaine thing, it just took us all so hard and fast, I don't think we had an opportunity to think about the way it swept in.*

*This was at the same time they had a town hall meeting and Darryl Gates was under fire. I was there at the meeting and they was talking about how they brought in the crack cocaine. Things started turning for worse because the people really stopped trusting the police.*

*Beat.*

*When the drugs really took off and did the Batterram, that's when gangsta rap began writing this type of music. Back in the day, everybody listened to the AM 1580 KDAY and KJFK 1230. Hip-hop in Los Angeles didn't start out gangster rap. Hip-hop in Los Angeles started out straight hip-hop, it wasn't no classification. Iced T was no different than Frosty, Frosty was no different than DJ Unique, he was no different than Dr. Dre in the Wreckin' Cru. It was still hip-hop to us...*

*SQUEAK RU: In the 80's a lot of the East Coast stuff was really going mainstream. You*

*know with the Run-D.M.C., the Woodini's, and you know the LL Cool J's, so they were getting a little more mainstream than our local artists. One of our first songs, "6 in the morning" was street. Ice-T just talked about what we did on a daily basis. Then KDAY used to have top 8 at 8 and Egyptian Lover used to have like 3 songs in the top 8 at 8 hour. That was the hardest thing. Man, that was my guy. When I first heard "Dopeman," I really didn't like it. Cube is my homie now and I'm a Cube fan but I didn't really like it then. One day, I was in the neighborhood and the homie Ripple pulled up playing "Gangsta Gangsta." The first thing I did when I got some bread, I ran and got that tape. I mean, I wore it out. It was like we do this everyday. It gave you this sense of pride, this is who we are, this is what we do, this is what we stand for. These guys out here reppin' it for us, telling our story right now...*

*KEKE LOCO: I used to be in my school writing raps for people, I didn't even rap. I was on punishment one summer, a whole damn summer, and listening to KGFJ this broad named Goldie was rapping and I wrote her rhyme down and re-wrote the whole rap to come up with my own rap. From that point on I started rapping myself. I talk about the world not just my world but God, sex, violence, money, murder. Everything that's political.*

*The media started sensationalizing what's gangster rap? What's hip-hop? We didn't used to do that, we never separated rappers. I kinda wished they wouldn't have connected the two things because one does not really have anything to do with the other. The reason I say that is because the gang didn't get paid from whoever blew up in gangster rap...*

*SQUEAK RU: When I seen N.W.A., I was like, "Ay, man! I got a little flow, I wanna tell my story." So I started doing neighborhood raps and stuff. At that time nobody was saying anything about Inglewood and Mack branched off and got with Cube. Cube and Dub formed the Westside Connection. They did the Connect record and came back and got us. At that time, me and Bink, we formed the group, AllfrumthaI. My rap name was my street name. That's who I am and that was what I stuck with. I didn't want people to be like "who's that," since I had already been popular in the neighborhood.*

*It's funny looking back because I'm a B Dog, right? And most of the dudes in N.W.A. were considered Crip affiliated and you really didn't want to listen to them at that time. Like MC Eiht from Compton's Most Wanted. I seen their record cover right? So the record is all blue on the cover, khaki suit, Blue'd up, and I was not listening to that. But then uh my younger brother is like, "Ay man, you gotta listen to this record." So, next thing you know I'm banging it, Eiht was just dope.*

*You couldn't fight it because after you listen to what they were saying, it wasn't really on no Crip, they just talked. They talked about what was going on and not just with the Crips but with the Bloods, with the Eses. This what's going in the neighborhood everyday, stay being oppressed. It wasn't about Crips and Bloods. It was about we Black, it was us against the police and us against society right now.*

*(Slowly fades to black)*

Gangsta rap artists are a mixture of non-affiliated and active gangbangers. Due to its vast spectrum of representation, "gangsta" emerges as incorrect terminology. Both Binky Mac and Hittman explicitly clarify their hood involvement, wary of this label.

These men are affiliated through association, not active participation, whereas Keke Loco and Squeak Ru are heavily engaged in the neighborhood's activities. Like their musical predecessors, these artists do not agree with the label 'gangsta rap.' Artists like Binky Mac disagree with the images conjured by the gangsta rap label. Keko Loco recalls a time when there was no separation between genres and all hip-hop was under the same umbrella. Like others, he is troubled by the conflation of gangbangers and rappers; the gang culture does not benefit when an artist prospers. Despite the different ways they problematize this term, in the end all four men rap about their environment.

The Black Los Angeles social and economic space is treacherous and gangsta rap takes note of this. Police harassment and Crack rock are much to blame and personally affect these men. Keke Loco reflects on his decision to become a full-fledged gangbanger, his initial interaction with the police followed by a false arrest. Likewise, external circumstances influenced Squeak Ru. His life was swell until Crack became part of his life. He was left to fend for himself as his mother searched for her own high. During the same time, Keke Loco remembers when distrust of the police escalated in the Black community. Crack was discovered to have been supported by the federal government (Alonso, 2010; Webb, 1999). While the song "Dopeman" reflects the drug epidemic and the players involved, Hittman recollects one of his favorite songs from that era, "Fuck the Police" and its harsh, brash content. The police weren't welcome in Hittman's neighborhood; the community protected and served its own members. Thus, the music expresses hardships experienced by the people in its community.

Every artist has a reaction to the genre and its relationship to the environment.

Binky Mac thinks back on the content of rap and concludes that there is more negativity than positivity in the music. He remembers when rap first included profanity, which later sparked controversy and parental advisory stickers. Hittman has a different reaction to rap. He finds peace and solace from the streets in the beats. He attributes rap to saving his life. Squeak Ru remembers when he didn't listen to MC Eiht and N.W.A. Both were Crips, and thus both were enemies. However, he soon realized that their message was not about gang promotion, but rather resistance to a racially oppressive society. As Squeak Ru concludes, gangsta rap is about more than claiming allegiance to blue and red; rather, it concerns the constitutive color Black.

The dystopian performative present in this chapter shows how gangsta rap artists speak out regarding the reception, resistance, and reality of their music. Rather than focusing on personal experiences or the individual stories of others, these rap artists point to connections with the environment that emerge through their rhymes. Big Syke mentions the music is possibly better as non-gang affiliated due to uncensored lyrics. A rapper who is not a gang-banger does not have to worry about self-incrimination and is free to tell his stories.

These men shared stories regarding how they received the music. When gangsta rap first disseminated, they gravitated towards it. It was new, raw, and real. They identified with it before discovering their own flow. The music was angry, resistant. The artists explained that they were already in opposition to society, but the genre brought their grievances to America's attention. Now the resistant attitude does not only simmer in LA streets, but is boldly projected through stereos and speakers worldwide. Gangsta



rap refused to conform to and pacify dominant forces of societal control; however, this genre could not have evolved without the preexisting resistant spirit of Black Americans facing unrelenting reality. Police problems and Crack rock were intense issues faced by the Black community, victimizing and destabilizing its people. As shown by the men in this study, gangsta rap is merely a reaction to oppression, a conduit through which dissatisfaction and frustration with seemingly unchangeable societal forces can be challenged.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CALI CONCLUSIONS

“No Matter Where You Go, Always Know You Got That Cali Love.”-Tremont

*Don't Judge a Man by the Color of his Rag: The Reality and Resistance of Gangsta Rap among LA Gang Members* has explored the connections between music and environment by looking closely at the intersections of gangsta rap and gang subculture. I had originally set out to understand the Los Angeles Crips and Bloods through music; however, I discovered interconnectedness deeper than the subculture, rooted in Black oppression. The research question asked in this thesis, “How do gang bangers/members and their surrounding community partake in and receive gangsta rap music,” focused on two components that connected gang subculture with the larger community and was eventually revealed in music: Police authority and Crack cocaine.

This study is by no means the first to study gangsta rap and its connection to the streets. Eithne Quinn (2005) examines the closeness of the gangsta culture and commercialization. He highlights West Coast and Southwest artists during the time period from 1988-1996 and states gangsta rap significance awakened “the experiences and desires of an oppressed community in a period of economic transformation” and concentrated on “social ills that resulted in deindustrialization and destructive government policies” (p. 11). Others like Tricia Rose (1994) and Michael Eric Dyson (2004) agree. Michael Eric Dyson (2004) extends his argument to review positive and negative images of Black culture and the image gangsta rap portrays in mainstream music. While Quinn (2005) tends to focus on the mainstream and commercial success of

gangsta rap, I have sought to uncover how both underground and mainstream gangsta rap affected those living in the environment. This study has therefore viewed gangsta rap through the lens of a subculture.

Black youth were faced with many economic and social failures, specifically police brutality and the drug trade, during the time period discussed in this thesis. Mike Davis (1990) recounts the many drug raids in South Central that targeted and arrested Black kids regardless of gang affiliation and drug selling. Chief Daryl Gates is quoted saying, “I think people believe that the only strategy we have is to put a lot of police officers on the street and harass people and make arrests for inconsequential kinds of things. Well, that’s part of the strategy, no question about it” (Davis, 1990, p. 284). Without a proper strategy to combat urban problems, this time period coincided with an increase in gang violence due to drug transactions (Davis, 1990, Afary, 2009). Because of crack, death increased in the community.

My research ties the relationship between subculture and subgenre which includes representational voices, an interpretive community of gangbangers and gangsta rap artists active during the time period of 1986-1996. A collective of 16 former gangbangers and gangsta rap artists revealed the nature of their environment and their role within the community. Eight gangbangers, five Crips and three Bloods, have expressed the influence and impact of gangsta rap, while eight gangsta rap artists provided insight into their music and its connection to their personal lives. Ultimately, both the gang members and gangsta rap artists in this project recoiled from the media driven term ‘gangsta rap.’ Instead, they have dubbed the genre themselves with ‘hard-

core rap,' or 'reality rap.' These labels place the focus of rap on the lived experiences in their environment rather than the gang lifestyle and, relating to the community as a whole rather than just those involved in or sympathetic to gangbanging.

My research method has given me guidance on how to negotiate between ethnographer, Black, and woman, all which complicate the line of objectivity. In the field, I am confronted with gender politics. On the streets, I am pulled between insider and outsider positions. Being a Black feminist studying Black masculinity has its quirks. In many ways, there is a binary in my representation that comes at a price, a constant slippage and emergence. On one hand, gang members are comfortable in my presence. I am non-threatening. With this effect, I elicit trust. I gain access to their feelings and emotions. However, my research occurs within a misogynistic, male-dominated and controlled gang environment. Here, I am reminded of the blurred balance between acceptance and rejection.

Moments of acceptance occur when I am in the Chevy Blazer riding around Compton with Bobby Louie and Mr. T. The bold Blood brothers are also sensitive and interdependent. They are each other's confidants and support system. From the first interaction in Mr. T's car, when he grilled me and questioned my purpose, to the day before my departure when noticed their reluctance at my exit, I recognize the transitional affect and transferable emotions. Originally, Mr. T and Bobby Louie are hesitant and cautious of me in their space; by the end of my visit their caution turned to favor and openness.

While Mr. T drives to drop me off at the church where Tremont facilitates the 2<sup>nd</sup> Call session, Bobby Louie has a serious question to ask me. He wants my honest opinion and I am nervous. Not knowing what to expect from his inquiry, I know I am going to be forthcoming and truthful in my response. In his deep, gruff voice he vulnerably asks, “Since you’ve been deeply involved on both sides, traveled between Crips and Bloods, which one you like the best?” I am caught off guard by the question and lightly chuckled inside. I recognize the competition of testosterone. I am taken by surprise not because the difference between the gangs has not occurred to me, but because I realize they also want to be accepted, they want to be loved. My reply shocks and unsettles him. I see Bobby Louie’s head swivel around when I state, “Neither.” Before Bobby Louie could vocalize his objection, I hurriedly explain, “I love and appreciate both sides because ya’ll are the same. It has been easy to navigate between the two since each give an equal amount of commitment and refer to one another with words of endearment. If you snatch the colors away, there’s nothing left but Blackness. And that’s what I see.” The car is silent as they ponder what I said. I see Bobby Louie slowly nod his head. They may not agree with my philosophy but that night, I felt I passed an unspoken test.

Moments of rejection occur when I am discounted due to my “femininity.” In the Chevy Impala with Daryl after a Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> Call workshop, I am frustrated and pensive. I just had a tense conversation with a male facilitator that Daryl witnessed; I am also bothered by my lack of car mobility. On the ride to drop me off at Lena’s, I am silent and Daryl wants to know why. I explain the reasons and relay my feelings. I tell him I am not angry, just annoyed. Now parked outside, he turns to me with a smirk on

his face and say, “This is the first time I seen you act like a girl.” Taken aback by this statement, it takes a moment before I react. I then proceed to have my second disagreement in twenty minutes. I leave the car and walk up the stairs to my sorority sister’s house bewilderedly wondering, “Damn, when did I *stop* being a girl?”

Once inside, I see Lena in the kitchen. As she does every night, she asks how my day was. With confusion and agitation, I describe the night’s events leading up to the moment I discover that Daryl had not perceived me as female. We then discuss the nature of this environment and its gender roles. We review the pros and cons of being a Black woman studying this masculine space. But tonight, I need a break. Too many gang members have frustrated me today. Although I had intended to go out again that evening, I text Indugu and tell him I am staying in for the night. As if in silent resistance to rejection, that night I am just one of the girls. Lena, her roommate Taylor, and I curl on the couch and watch a favorite movie of ours. With Hornsby hard cider and one blanket to share, we relax and enjoy *Brown Sugar*, a 2002 classic describing the connection between the culture of Hip-hop and Black love.

As an indigenous ethnographer, I am confronted when reality hits home. I am in the truck with Tremont, Keke Loco, and E-Roc, who are catching up with each other. I sit and listen in the front seat. Tremont begins the discussion with a profound question, “We’ve mastered this dying, this killing, what does it take to master the art of living?” He continues, “We know what we’ll die for, but what will we live for?” Sounds of agreement come from E-Roc who sits directly behind me, while Keke responds, “Yeah, I

feel you brother.” In moments like this, I recognize the level of love and protection they feel for each other. And for those they care about.

My thoughts go back to May when Tremont shielded me from what he perceived to be a dangerous situation. A known homeless and drug-addicted older male approached me to compliment my natural hair when Tremont forcefully stepped between us and menacingly stated, “Not her homie, not her.” Still in the car with the three Crips, I ask about the neighborhood crackhead. “Oh, Pablo? He’s dead,” Tremont said matter-of-factly. What?! I cannot believe it. Back in May, every time I stepped into King Park, he was there, complimenting my hair, as he did the night Tremont thought I was in danger. Deemed useless to society, he was someone I knew. “Shot. In the back of the head,” Tremont continues. I ask when it happened and Tremont responds a while ago. I am shocked. I was just here eight months ago.

“About three months,” Tremont states further.

I quip back, “Three months is not that long.”

“Around here it is,” he bluntly states.

“But, wh-,” before I can finish my thought, I am interrupted. Tremont’s phone rings and so does my conscience. Tremont answers, “Wassup, loved one,” and I know he is on call with a homie. This allows me time to think. I prevent myself from asking the empty, loaded question that has no justified, worthy answer.

This thesis presents an inclusive, interactive theory to understand gangsta rap and the Crips and Bloods in the Los Angeles area. Specifically by categorizing gangsta rap as a dystopian performative, I show the continued dissatisfaction of community

members with the hopeful intention of improved living locations. Adopting the primary framework of dystopian performative from Dragan Klaic (1991), I give a future plot to discuss past pain with present bodies. Dystopia occurs when disadvantages and desires meet. Dystopia is displacement of current situations while dreaming of a different solution (Melo, 2007). The performative disrupts repetitiveness for new actions to arise. Madison (2010) reminds us that the performative can occur as a performance, as I have shown in my thesis. Gangsta rap as dystopian performative explains the relationship between music and culture as well as the oppressed yet resistant Black culture.

Using two connectors, resistance and reception, the reality of gangsta rap is examined. Reception views external circumstances that influence how those in certain subcultures will receive a media message, or in this case a musical meaning. The interpretive community of former gang members and gangsta rap artists relate how gangsta rap is received in their community. With this, resistance is more than the act of challenging dominant norms or constructing space for relief. Michel Foucault (2001) asserts, "...no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings" (p.354). For Black people, there is a militant reaction to repression. Militancy replaces madness (hooks, 1992, p. 6). Our resistance is aggressive, unrelenting, and continuous. Gangsta rap is only one example of this resistance.

Since it is more useful to produce a dystopian performative than to describe it, I have positioned my thesis as such. Chapters 1 and 2 review a chaotic and disruptive past while set in the present. Chapters 3 and 4 are set in future, utopic settings where peace



and new beginnings occur, but the material discussed is of past frustrations that saturate these reflections. Additionally, this thesis includes rhythm and beats to account for gangsta rap as well as the everyday movement of the subculture.

*Don't Judge a Man by the Color of his Rag: The Reality and Resistance of Gangsta Rap Among LA Gang Members* offers an alternative view to the gang culture and gangsta rap. Instead of criminals, these are children. Rather than ban gangsta rap, ban police brutality and the drug trade. Gangsta rap is often viewed as a mere subgenre of hip-hop; however, this project has expanded our knowledge of the subgenre and identified voices to be heard. I have provided a new roadmap to understanding gang members' social and economic strife. While we should not excuse the pain gang members have inflicted on the community, we must recognize the external forces that enable this dysfunction. We must address the root of the problem.

The connections between gang environment and gangsta rap are boundless and infinite. But instead of using the label, "gangsta rap," we should call it "reality rap" because reality is what this music reflects. The prominent proclamations professed in rap do not involve the colors red and blue. From my research road trip, I have come to recognize the dominant color as Black. These are our Black men. Surprisingly, and rarely noted in gangsta rap, there is a coming together, a united front between artists and colors. It is time to look toward music for street solutions.

Let's Kill the Violence.

Peace.

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