

Hip Hop Church L.A.

Shifting Grounds in Inglewood

*We just praising the lord, we just doing our thing
 God don't mind if I bring along my tambourine
 Beat it on my hand, beat it on my hip, but I use hip hop as my instrument*
 —CELAH OF HIP HOPPOSITE (GOSPEL RAPPER), “TAMBOURINE” (2005)

When I heard the choir at Kurtis Blow’s Hip Hop Church service in Harlem sing a sacred rendition of LL Cool J’s 1996 hit, “Loungin’ (Who Do You Love?)”—a steamy remix that featured the velvety vocals of R&B girl group Total as well as the unforgettable lyric, “Hot sex on a platter”—I was feeling a sense of cognitive dissonance. While I had attended numerous gospel hip hop shows at festivals and local music venues, this was first time I had witnessed the inclusion of rap music in a church service, and I was surprised to hear this sultry hip hop club classic in the sanctuary. But then again, Kurtis Blow could never completely divorce himself from the secular hip hop industry from whence he came.

Kurtis Blow was one of the first commercially successful rappers to emerge in New York’s burgeoning hip hop scene in the late 1970s and early ’80s and the first to sign with a major label. His 1980 hit song, “The Breaks,” which he performed bare-chested under a white blazer on *Soul Train*, was the first certified gold rap song. He was the first rapper to tour the United States and Europe (with the Commodores), the first to record a national commercial (Sprite), and the first to be featured in a soap opera (*One Life to Live*). Many also consider him one of rap’s original producers, winning rap’s producer of the year in 1983 and 1985. To top off this list of “firsts,” Kurtis Blow was also the first rap millionaire, even before the rise of hip hop moguls such as P-Diddy, Jay Z, and Master P. A key figure in the initial commercial elevation of hip hop into corporate music circles, Kurtis then became “born again” in 1996. The pop-icon-gone-gospel founded the Hip Hop Church ministry at Harlem’s Greater Hood Memorial AME Zion Church in 2005 and began leading Thursday night services featuring rap music. Soon after, Kurtis

teamed up with Holy Trinity ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) in Inglewood to create the Hip Hop Church L.A.—an evening ministry that also put secular hip hop hits to work in the name of Jesus.

At one such service I attended at Holy Trinity in 2006, a small, motley youth choir sang soaring harmonies over an instrumental version of Snoop Dogg and Pharrell's 2002 hit track "Beautiful," changing the lyrics from "Beautiful, I just want you to know, you're my favorite girl" to "Beautiful, I just want you to know, you're my favorite God." This was one of many instances of *flippin' the script(ure)* that took place at the Hip Hop Church L.A. The original video for the song featured a bevy of Brazilian women in barely-there bikinis while Snoop rapped, "Don't fool with the playa with the cool whip." As if to preemptively address those who might throw stones at such a provocative song selection, Kurtis Blow, clad in baggy jeans, an oversized jersey, and silver cross necklace, offered the firm disclaimer: "This is not entertainment; this is not a show. This is ministry." When he called for an "Amen," the congregation responded with a resounding "Word!"—a common affirmation in hip hop parlance that is linked to the Islam-derived Five Percent Nation aphorism, "Word is Bond."¹ Kurtis Blow's hip hop churches welcomed and fused many seemingly contradictory aspects of hip hop culture.

Youth rose from the pews, one by one, to recite biblical passages over hip hop backbeats while Kurtis Blow provided musical transitions on two turntables.² The traditional Hymn of Praise was converted into a Rap of Praise, with lyrics that spoke of both divine supplications and worldly temptations. Kurtis's sermon, entitled "Holler at Ya Boy!" interpreted a passage from the book of Mark where Bartimaeus, blind and downtrodden, calls out to Jesus in faith for a divine blessing. Performing a uniquely hip hop exegesis of the passage, Kurtis Blow interpreted Bartimaeus's call to Jesus as "hollering at his boy," transforming the slang term "holla" into a call of faith, and ultimately, equating the act of hollering to praying. He assured the youth that they could use their own language—the language of hip hop—to communicate with God. His sermon suggested that when your homies fail you, when your family fails you, when your teachers and city leaders fail you, even when your church fails you—when all else fails—then "Holla at ya boy, Jesus! He'll meet you wherever you're at."

RACIAL, RELIGIOUS, AND MUSICAL FAULT LINES

The formation of hip hop ministries in Los Angeles in the early twenty-first century, often housed in predominantly black churches, brought together diverse and sometimes unlikely individuals, practices, and politics.³ They became contested sites for negotiating the role of religion and popular culture in public discourses of racial uplift and the changing lives of African Americans. Different practitioners of holy hip hop, from gospel rap artists to clergy, pastors, urban youth workers,

church musicians, hip hop fans, and congregants, young and old, mediated hip hop and Christianity in related but sometimes oppositional ways.

Hip hop ministries were not always well received by clergy and congregants. Sometimes they were vilified for their use of hip hop music as worship, intensifying experiences of urban marginality for black Americans who participated in such religious and musical practices. While the culture wars permeating hip hop culture have generally been characterized through the hyperracialized and polarized optic of black and white, sociologist Loïc Wacquant argues: “Urban marginality is not everywhere woven of the same cloth.”⁴ The hip hop ministries I attended in Los Angeles were of course enmeshed in histories of white and black hostility, territorial segregation, and social inequality, but they were also connected to waves of Latino immigration and internal tensions within black Christian communities. Specifically, the challenges and successes of the Hip Hop Church L.A. at Inglewood’s Holy Trinity Church—a church whose congregation was predominantly African American and middle class—aggravated subtle fault lines along class, gender, and race in this historically black, but now very mixed neighborhood.

While race remains a dominant fault line or “axis of oppression” in the everyday experiences of African Americans throughout the greater Los Angeles, anthropologist João H. Costa Vargas, in his work on South L.A., argues:

[E]xclusive focus on race can obscure how racial identities are inflected by and permeated with other identities, associations, and experiences . . . In attending to the inescapably racial dimensions of their experience, black communities run the risk of allowing blackness to occlude other axes of oppression and suppression like class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.⁵

For holy hip hoppers, the merging of popular music and religious practice opened up fields of creative, economic, and spiritual possibility. But music and religion also served as alternate “axes of oppression” that shaped the opportunities and constraints of their daily lives. This chapter focuses on the religious and musical dimensions of urban marginalization *and* projects of urban renewal in relation to the changing significance of race and class in African American Christian communities.

Inglewood was a particularly apt place to explore these dynamics as it was once hailed as a model city of black uplift—a symbol of racial pride and possibility. Originally a white city until the arrival of African Americans in the 1960s, Inglewood has undergone many of the social and economic transformations that have challenged South Los Angeles communities: white flight (especially after the Watts riots in 1965), an influx of drugs, poor city management, new arrivals from Latin America and Asia, and subsequent black flight. While it is a city known for its many houses of worship—churches, mosques, and temples—it is also home to a proliferation of liquor stores and by-the-hour motels. Holy Trinity Church, in fact,



FIGURE 5. Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Inglewood, home to the Hip Hop Church L.A.

shares a block of Crenshaw Boulevard with three motels, revealing how Inglewood remains fraught with social and spatial contradictions.⁶

Churches, in addition to providing salvation, guidance, and community, have served as terrains of power and authority, inclusion and exclusion, through which people have wielded influence over others and, at times, prohibited certain individuals and groups from specific arenas of social and economic capital. In many African American Christian communities, critiques about the use of certain musical forms in religious worship have been deployed as foils for fears and discriminations based on age, ethnicity, gender, class, and place of residence. The alienation and marginality that holy hip hop practitioners and supporters experienced at Holy Trinity was located at the edges of religious tolerance; exclusions were enacted when the hegemonic norms and hierarchical structures of institutional Christianity were threatened by emergent and unorthodox voices and practices. In particular, the transgressive nature of hip hop was an affront to the notion of respectability politics espoused by many traditionally minded black churches, highlighting the limits of what is deemed appropriate musical expression. Sharon Collins-Heads, director of the Hip Hop Church L.A., commented:

The problem I have is when one Christian group talks about the way another Christian group worships. How do you expect non-believers to want to come to Christ when you're all talking about each other and the way they worship? Unless that group is preaching heresy, why do you get on people that like holy hip hop? And what people tend to forget, when the new gospel music came in, people didn't like it.⁷



FIGURE 6. Three motels adjacent to Holy Trinity Church near the corner of Arbor Vitae Street and Crenshaw Boulevard in Inglewood.

In the years I frequented hip hop services throughout Los Angeles, gospel hip hop remained mired in ongoing debates about the fault lines between the sacred and the profane, good and evil, youth culture and “the old ways.” Gospel rap was, for young black Angelenos, *both* a means of coping with the multiple assaults on their physical and spiritual well-being *and* an instrument through which they were being challenged and stigmatized by certain members of their own communities, church leaders, local police, and commercial music networks. As Vargas’s ethnog-

raphy keenly reminds us, “We must be aware of the political, social, cultural, and generational chasms within the communities that bear the disproportionate brunt of structural inequalities and racist policies.”⁸ While holy hip hop provided practices through which young black Christians uplifted themselves spiritually and economically, these same practices were also highly contested, policed, experimental, and often ambiguous.

AND THEN THERE WAS HIP HOP CHURCH

Sean Heads, an African American male churchgoer and Inglewood native, was working as a security guard for the Urban Music Conference in Palm Springs in 2005 when he first met Kurtis “Blow” Walker. Well aware of the rap star’s turn toward Christianity, the then teenager introduced himself and invited Kurtis to address the youth at his church home—Holy Trinity. Kurtis informed Sean about his two hip hop churches on the East Coast and his vision to bring a sister church to Los Angeles. Sean recounted his serendipitous encounter with Kurtis to his mother, Sharon Collins-Heads, who then brought the idea of a West Coast hip hop church to her dear friend, Carol Scott—an African American woman in her late forties, associate pastor at Holy Trinity, and longtime resident of Inglewood (since 1968).

Considered an “activist pastor,” Carol Scott began preaching the gospel at nine years old in her backyard. She seemed destined for a life of pastorship. After the 1992 riots, she and other local activists and residents organized an annual “mock funeral” procession to bring attention to the high rate of homicide in L.A.’s black and brown communities. The event featured a multicar funeral procession in which hearses and other vehicles made a slow, sepulchral crawl down the streets of Inglewood, Lennox, and South Angeles. Bullhorns blasted from car windows, calling the community to action. The procession ended with a mock burial in Inglewood’s Darby Park, over which Pastor Scott presided. Handguns were placed in a baby blue-hued coffin, symbolizing the death of violence.

Always looking for ways to bring the community into the church and the gospel to the streets, Pastor Scott called Kurtis Blow immediately. After a meeting one morning at Denny’s that also included Sharon and Kurtis’s friend, Mike Green, the Hip Hop Church L.A. was born. Pastor Scott explained:

I connected with Kurtis and as we began to talk, as I heard his vision unfold, we had the same vision. And the vision that we both had was that while the *traditional* church, which has always been in place, speaks to some, God is bigger than that. And so there are other ways and avenues that I felt like we could use. And hip hop is such a big influence—the music, the dress. I have fifty-year-old men wearing pants that are hanging down . . . we weren’t thinking about Christian rap or holy hip hop. We were thinking about using socially conscious hip hop. That was the initial idea. Kurtis wanted to strengthen the youth, which was also my mission. So his idea was

to come to this church and plant the seed of Hip Hop Church L.A. He wanted to teach the youth the traditional hymns but he also wanted some of the newer hip hop and holy hip hop songs to show them that you don't have to say certain words and use negative images . . . that you can honor God with hip hop . . . Because when Christian rock first came out, it wasn't happening. Nobody was listening. Even when gospel rap first came out, nobody was feeling it. That's because basically they take a few words and they say Jesus. You can't fool kids. But let's take a popular song and do it for the glory of God. And that's what the church should be all about—reaching out to the community. And I said, oh man, that's my vision too. So Kurtis and I went into partnership. What we didn't realize was the opposition.⁹

Carol Scott, as pastor of the Hip Hop Church L.A., and Sharon Collins-Heads, the appointed director of the ministry, worked diligently over the next year to implement the groundbreaking Friday night hip hop service. They were met with resistance. Congregants and leaders at Holy Trinity Church feared the stigma around the term “hip hop.” Holy Trinity's head pastor, an older white man whom I will refer to as “Pastor Wallace,” explained to me that most churches perceive hip hop as “evil” and “of the devil”—phrases that parallel many early critiques of blues and jazz music, especially as a medium of worship. Several Holy Trinity churchgoers expressed concern over having hip hop in the sanctuary, because, as Wallace once commented to me, “It can be next door in Parish Hall, but not in the sanctuary because the sanctuary is sacred.”¹⁰ Particularly in Los Angeles, hip hop and rap were often associated with the ungodly aspects of gangsta rap by artists such as Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and more recently, The Game, Tyga, Nipsey Hussle, and Vince Staples, among others. Pastor Scott reflected:

And really what people didn't understand is that hip hop is not gangsta rap. We weren't saying take gangsta rap and use it in the church. Gangsta rap is a totally different expression, a different experience, a different pain that needs to be heard. Things were happening that people were overlooking, so that voice needed to be heard. But that wasn't going to be a musical expression that the church needed to use. So, the leaders here were afraid that some of the old timers, when they saw that term, they would either leave or protest.¹¹

During the initial conversations about the Hip Hop Church L.A., one of the older African American congregants of Holy Trinity brought in a video of G. Craig Lewis—a well-known speaker and church leader famous for his fierce polemics against hip hop and holy hip hop—in an effort to sway the church leadership from housing such an “immoral” ministry. Similar counterattacks further stalled the implementation of the hip hop church night. Pastor Wallace then lobbied to call the Hip Hop Church L.A. a “Youth Revival Blast,” much to the amusement of the youth present at the organizing meeting. Pastor Scott pushed back, as she argued for the importance of being straightforward about the focus

on hip hop music as worship. But Holy Trinity was not alone in its uneasiness toward broadcasting the inclusion of a hip hop ministry.

The Crenshaw Christian Center, a prominent Los Angeles megachurch that televises its traditional Sunday services, previously held a hip hop service every fifth Sunday led by Pastor Fred Price, Jr.—a preacher and gospel rap artist. Sharon and her son Sean attended one such “Hip Hop Sunday” that featured an array of hip hop performances before commencing with a traditional service. Sharon recalled, “That’s what went on television; they didn’t show any of the hip hop things that went on before because they were still kind of scared.” Eventually, Pastor Price, Jr. would change the name from “Hip Hop Sunday” to “The Blueprint.”

Watching this scenario unfold, Sharon began to understand that her struggle—the struggle of the Hip Hop Church—was perhaps not unique. After ongoing discussion and debate, Pastor Wallace finally agreed to hold the hip hop ministry every third Friday of the month. Although excited by the idea of attracting more youth to the church and developing culturally relevant church programs, he was also wary of the social baggage that often accompanies hip hop and wanted to make sure that the presence of a hip hop ministry in his church would not compromise its reputation. In a conversation we had in his office one afternoon, he offered a slightly different origin story for the Hip Hop Church—one that strategically focused more on efforts to draw in youth rather than valuing hip hop as a medium of worship. Wallace, who has served as head pastor of Holy Trinity since 1979, explained:

The roots, as I see them, were started in 1996 when we called Randy Winston to be our youth minister here at Holy Trinity. His day job is working with high school students to get them into college. He was at Crenshaw High and Freemont High. He has been very successful getting youth from our community into college and getting them the financial support and aid that they need. We wanted to put more resources into youth and reaching them and their families . . . so that when we were approached in May 2005 by Kurtis Blow—you know, well, an old school rapper—wondering if we would want to do a holy hip hop worship, we said, “Well, yes, let’s sit down and talk about it.” So there was great openness to it and the possibilities of reaching deeper into our community because we know that there’s a whole generation of young people right here in this community that won’t come to church. And if parents aren’t involved, they’re not going to get involved and there’s nothing that will bring them to church. The public school across the street, 71 percent of the students are in foster care. So, they’re bringing all kinds of baggage to school with them. So to reach them at school over there, we’ve got to do something very radical.¹²

Pastor Wallace’s interest in hip hop worship stemmed from his desire to bring more youth to Holy Trinity. As a pastor, he has used music to reach the communities he preaches in, and specifically, to engage younger folks and their families.

In the 1970s, before coming to Holy Trinity, Wallace was preaching to African American congregations in Harlem—another city long hailed as a Mecca of black culture and uplift. He often cited this piece of his personal history when talking about his efforts with the Hip Hop Church as way to authenticate his position of power and leadership within a black congregation. After arriving at Holy Trinity, he quickly changed the style of worship and the musical program of the church to reflect the tastes of Inglewood's African American communities. While still singing hymns from the traditional Lutheran hymnal, he began incorporating more gospel music. "In the African American tradition," Wallace explained, "there's a lot of talking back to the preacher and participation so we encourage that here." He has always taken great pride in having a "sense of what it means to serve in a community like this," even as he returns home every day to the safety and isolation of his gated community, "Briarwood"—a fortified sanctuary of brick townhouses, manicured landscaping, and tranquility hidden within Inglewood's somewhat less attractive urban sprawl that the *Los Angeles Times* once referred to as "the Beverly Hills and Bel-Air of Inglewood."¹³ This fact would later add both a class dynamic and racialized tone to the tensions and misunderstandings brewing within the Hip Hop Church ministry.

Pastor Wallace viewed hip hop as a way to make Holy Trinity more culturally and stylistically relevant to the local community, and thus he privileged learning the languages of community members rather than forcing community members to learn the language of the church. He elaborated:

There's a movie that came out some years ago called *Nell*, starring Jodie Foster, about a young woman who was discovered living far away from civilization in the woods of North Carolina. She had her own mysterious language. There was a psychologist that studied her. He concluded, 'She needs to learn our language for us to reach her.' But then another doctor said, 'No, we need to learn her language.' And that struck me that that's really what we need to be about if we want to attract young people to the church. We need to first learn their language and not expect them to learn ours initially. What I started to do in my sermons, in my preaching, was to include stories and examples that would connect with young people. And as I did that, young people started feeling very connected and then I started to do some rap. Yes, me, some old white guy.

That Pastor Wallace would fashion his mission strategy from the plotline of a Hollywood blockbuster starring a famous actress was strange and yet somehow fitting for a Los Angeles pastor. Christian hip hop artists often critiqued the church and other gospel rappers for being too "Hollywood"—that is, selling out to commercialism, pop spectacle, and the politics of ego and self-interest. While Wallace occasionally inserted short "raps" into his sermons—*converting* traditional hymns and scripture into simple rhyme—he rarely spoke about hip hop music or addressed topics of social relevance that are often articulated through hip hop music: racial

injustice, poverty, gang culture, police brutality, incarceration, and other daily realities of inner-city existence. He also showed little enthusiasm for incorporating actual rap music and rap artists into the hip hop service.

Pastor Wallace's initial statement on the origins of the Hip Hop Church also foregrounded the efforts of Randy Winston over Carol Scott, a point of contention for Pastor Scott and Sharon that would give later struggles a gendered tone in addition to the growing dissonances of race and class between church leaders and members of the council and congregation. Pastor Scott often spoke of the entrenched patriarchy of the church—how certain male leaders continue to take issue with women becoming pastors and assuming positions of authority within the church. “I think that’s probably one of the major downfalls of the church and hip hop,” she lamented, and then continued:

When they go to interview any religious leader, if you're female, they're not going to interview you. You're not seen as the leader. I've had Kurtis do several interviews where he would mention my name in terms of who was running the Hip Hop Church, but he was the authority in terms of what was happening here. It's a man-made issue. It's a power issue—an ego issue. It's a sin issue in my book. But that's not where my focus is. They'll see the fruits of our labor and then they can't say anything. That's where I'm at. Don't get angry too long. I work in a male-dominated arena and I'm looked over.¹⁴

Due to some of the more negative experiences associated with being a black female leader in the church, Pastor Scott and Sharon began to interpret roadblocks and challenges to the implementation of the Hip Hop Church through the lenses of race and gender.

INGLEWOOD FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Pastor Wallace had an affinity for preaching to inner-city black communities. During the years I attended Holy Trinity's hip hop services, its highly intergenerational congregation was approximately 95 percent African American—the remaining 5 percent made up of white and Latino families.¹⁵ Despite belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a very small minority of the congregation grew up Lutheran; most members were raised in various Protestant denominations. The church was located off Crenshaw Boulevard in the heart of Inglewood, around the corner from three notable L.A. landmarks: Hollywood Park and Casino, Inglewood Park Cemetery, and the Great Western Forum. Its geographical proximity to these places, as well as the fact that the city of Inglewood boasts more than one hundred churches, was not insignificant.

Examining *where* the politics and performances of religious hip hop are re-worked and enunciated gives insight into the forces shaping the possible futures of hip hop ministries and holy hip hop. Interestingly, the Great Western Forum,



FIGURE 7. Welcome to Inglewood, “City of Champions.” Street sign from 2008.

former home of the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Kings, has hosted “Battle Zone”—an annual hip hop dance competition that featured a street dance style known as krumping. Born in the neighborhoods of South Central, krumping, or clowning as it is sometimes called, is a hyperkinetic dance resembling street fighting, moshing, sanctified church spirit possession, and aerobic striptease. Every Sunday, the Forum holds the megachurch congregation of Faithful Central Bible Church, where hip hop–inspired gospel star Kirk Franklin formerly led the musical program on Sundays and hosted a biweekly hip hop “Take Over” service. In another sacred-secular twist, the Battle Zone competitions I attended began with a Christian prayer while youth at Franklin’s “Take Over” often krump-danced during Christian rap interludes throughout the service. The arena continues to fuse elements of sport, competition, media, hip hop, and religion and is shaped by entanglements of culture, power, and space that are unique to Inglewood.

It was the earthquake of 1920 that originally put Inglewood on the map. Visitors flocked to see the damage caused by the 4.9 magnitude quake, and many ended up staying due to the inviting, temperate climate. Over the next five years, it was the fastest growing city in the United States. After the Olympic marathon ran through Inglewood in 1932, the former settlement became touted as the “City of Champions.” Three Inglewood High School alumni were Olympics winners: Hector Dyer for track in the 4x100 meter relay, George Jefferson for the pole vault, and Frank Booth in water polo. The Hollywood Park Racetracks opened in 1938, where millions of dollars were handled and exchanged every week. Eight years later,

George Foster opened the first Fosters Freeze in Inglewood. Introducing the soft-serve cone and a line of soft-serve desserts, Fosters Freeze truly could be described as California's first fast-food chain. Constructed in the late 1960s as the city became racially integrated, the Forum attracted more crowds and commerce to the "City of Champions," hosting not only the World Champion Lakers basketball team and Kings hockey team but also championship boxing.

Inglewood's accessibility to major freeways and the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) drew business investors as well as the expanding air freight industry. High-rise office and government buildings were erected, most recently the fourteen-story, \$50 million Trizec building on La Cienega. As new buildings penetrated the skies, some notable individuals chose to be buried below ground in Inglewood Park Cemetery. Opened in 1905, it has served as the final resting place for civic leaders like Mayor Tom Bradley and Supervisor Kenneth Hahn and entertainers such as actor Cesar Romero, William "Buckwheat" Thomas of *Our Gang* fame, and vocal legend Ella Fitzgerald. Many of the stars who helped make Hollywood famous also now rest permanently in Inglewood.

All of these developments led to Inglewood receiving one of the All-America City Awards in 1989 by the National Civic League (and yet again recently in 2009 for its visible progress). But by the 1990s, the "City of Champions" also suffered some losses. Property values declined as air traffic steadily increased at nearby LAX. The Lakers and the Kings, long the saving grace of Inglewood, announced plans to move to downtown L.A., placing the Forum's formidable tax revenue in limbo. The "Landers" earthquake of 1992 (M7.3) and "Northridge" earthquake of 1994 (M6.7) further shook up matters. Roosevelt Dorn, who served as mayor of Inglewood from the late 1990s through his resignation in 2010 after pleading guilty to the misuse of public funds, was known for his bombastic prophecies for Inglewood's impending resurrection. *LA Weekly* journalist Eric Pape states:

Out on Market Street, once the city's shopping nexus, struggling merchants find such optimism hard to fathom, highlighting the mayor's tendency to talk of far-fetched scenarios and unsigned deals. The commercial strip is today virtually lifeless, a line of desolate buildings, fortified jewelry and loan shops, 'For Lease' and 'For Sale' signs. Parking is far too easy . . . Yet Dorn speaks with zeal about Inglewood's incipient revival, his optimism staked in part on massive aid infusions and development projects he expects to bring online by the end of his term—Home Depot, Starbucks, car dealers, a new 16-to-20-screen theater and plenty of hotels. Add to that hundreds of millions of dollars for schools from a recently passed bond measure with state and federal matching funds, as well as massive neighborhood revitalization and other projects he claims are in the pipeline. In a couple of years, Dorn promises, "You won't recognize Inglewood."¹⁶

Mayor Dorn, in his persistent fervor for Inglewood's resurrection, used to begin council meetings with a prayer. But Inglewood was in need of much more than prayers. Columnist Erin Aubry Kaplan lamented that "Inglewood has always

fallen through the media cracks . . . As a study in the great possibilities of urban renewal and the dismal failure of local, solidly middle-class government to enact them, Inglewood should be an endless source of stories.”¹⁷ What were the stories circulating about Inglewood?

As elaborated in previous chapters, these challenges of urban decay laid the groundwork for a cultural and political landscape in which multiple stories and narratives of salvation would intersect and strengthen one another. Vargas argues, “During the 1980s, the semantic connection between race and urbanity became fully accepted by a large proportion of the U.S. public. Dominant political discourses equated, on the one hand, the urban inner cities, and on the other, neighborhood deterioration, people of color—especially black—and purported amorality.”¹⁸ Influenced by these discourses as well as the growing moral panic over the content and messages within hip hop and especially gangsta rap, certain cultural critics and censorship advocates, such as Tipper Gore, spearheaded efforts to keep America’s youth safe from the ills of inner-city life. They did not want their own children listening to the harsh tales of daily life in black American ghettos. This “purported amorality” was not only leveled at black youth by white middle- and upper-class Americans, but also by African Americans from various social strata (what I referred to in the previous chapter as “black-lash”), creating intracomunal and cross-generational tensions within predominantly African American neighborhoods. Such tensions would surface in the efforts to implement hip hop ministries in and around L.A., and particularly, at Holy Trinity. The nexus of discourses at work in equating amorality, blackness, hip hop, gang life, and the inner city also found parallels in narratives of Inglewood’s failed urban renewal and therefore a place of *fallen*, unrealized glory for African Americans. In so doing, it has also *fallen* through the media cracks. Hip hop, black youth, and Inglewood, according to such accounts, were all in need of some serious *saving* and *salvation*. As Tupac raps on “California Love,” the iconic 1996 hip hop collaboration, “Inglewood always up to no good.”

Latino youth were not absent from this barrage of assaults by both local Angelenos and the national media. Increasing black and brown animosity and violence in Inglewood at the turn of the twenty-first century put further stress on the neighborhood. In the 2003 article “Gangster’s Paradise Lost,” Dennis Romero quoted three sources as saying that Hispanic gangsters in that year were moving to Inglewood as a result of higher rents, or “gentrification,” and increased police presence in West Los Angeles districts where they had been living.¹⁹ Inglewood became home to many displaced Latino Westside gang members as well as an influx of Central American gangs like MS 13, who were more brutal, CIA-trained killers than the local gangs.²⁰ The black presence in old-line black neighborhoods such as Watts, Compton, and Inglewood was receding, making the notion of a geographically delineated African American community an impossibility.²¹

These shifts in the geographical borders and concentrations of black neighborhoods produced a great deal of instability around issues and experiences of home, turf, and territory between blacks and Latinos and within African American communities of various class levels. The Hip Hop Church L.A. was one of the many efforts by local church leaders and organizations to reach both African American and Latino gang-involved youth in the musical vernacular of the times and address such “dislocations” and “fragmentations” on a spiritual plane. After the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Pastor Scott was particularly committed to ending the gang violence in her communities and creating spaces of positive intergenerational interaction. She had heard and seen the effects of this violence firsthand at the previously defunct Martin Luther King Jr.–Harbor Hospital (what used to be the main destination for gunshot victims), where she volunteered as a chaplain.²² During one of the mock funeral processions in 2005, she delivered a prayer, calling on “advocates and peacemakers to raise the consciousness of our community and show solidarity with families and friends who’ve lost sons and daughters in this continuing war against urban terrorism.”²³ Her humble hope for the Hip Hop Church was to provide a sanctuary from this urban terror for gang members and those in the trenches of violence. She also hoped it would provide a space for intergenerational exchange as schisms between the black youth and elders, black working classes and black upper-middle classes, were growing wider and more entrenched.²⁴

Pastor Scott and Sharon bemoaned the generational divides and differences that gave rise to misunderstanding and alienation at Holy Trinity Church and on the streets of Inglewood. While common critiques of this perceived generation gap have often scapegoated black youth or blamed the instability and irresponsibility of the black family, other historical factors have drastically altered intra-communal and intergenerational relations and resource-sharing within black and brown neighborhoods: the collapse of public institutions, state policies of urban abandonment, the uneven development of capitalist economies, and the punitive containment of the black underclass. Loïc Wacquant theorized about the shift in American cities during the twentieth century from the “communal ghetto”—a kind of urban existence that Pastor Scott romanticized as the days of old—to the “hyperghetto” of the last two decades:

The historic shift from *communal ghetto* of the mid-twentieth century, a compact and sharply circumscribed sociospatial formation to which blacks of all classes were consigned and bound together by a broad complement of institutions specific to the group and its reserved space, to the *fin-de-siecle hyperghetto*, a novel, de-centered, territorial and organizational configuration characterized by conjugated segregation on the basis of race *and* class in the context of the double retrenchment of the labour market *and* welfare state from the urban core, necessitating and eliciting the corresponding deployment of an intrusive and omnipresent police and penal apparatus.²⁵

These forces of spatial and social division continued to pattern the consciousness and practices of urban residents, contributing to interactions of misunderstanding and hostility. Growing class inequalities manifested spatially and socially across historically black neighborhoods in Los Angeles. “And so the Crenshaw District stands divided,” Aubry states, “with the modernized Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza serving as a kind of Berlin Wall where the two populations occasionally intersect in a food court or shoe store, but later retreat to their respective north-south camps.”²⁶ African American residents in Los Angeles experienced and articulated class dynamics and geographic segregation in dichotomous terms. Among churchgoers, the rhetoric was often couched in religious images and ideas around sin and salvation and illustrated the way that territorial stigmatization and religious/moral stigmatization were enmeshed. And yet, Aubry’s statement did not account for all the subtleties of socioeconomic instability and fluctuation across class levels. Nor did it account for the ways in which black residents moved across and around various “Berlin Walls” within the city, within the span of a day or a lifetime.

For instance, Sharon raised her two children—son Sean and daughter Simone—in the church in hopes of passing on the Christian tradition in her family. And yet, she may be unable to pass on aspects of the financial security that she has achieved in her life. Sharon came from a middle-class, well-educated black family. Her father, while never finishing high school, went on to get a master’s degree and a law degree and was one of the first black council members in Inglewood. In those years, Sharon made a good salary teaching dance classes at Southwest College, but between two costly reconstructive knee surgeries and rigorous physical therapy treatments as well as being a single mother, she did not have excess income to invest significantly in her children’s future—what Vargas has referred to as “intergenerational status fall.”²⁷ Within many African American middle- and working-class families, increased earnings still cannot compensate for a lack of inherited wealth, making it difficult for African American parents who acquire financial capital to pass it on to their children, thus providing them with certain life opportunities. And yet, her house—a property that has been in her family for years—is increasing in value due to the rising real estate prices in Inglewood. Massive houses and Mercedes-Benzes now line the blocks surrounding her home.

Here, Aubry’s portrayal of “two populations”—those who have prospered and those who have not—falls a bit short in its reductionism, as middle-class and upper middle-class African American families are often subject to many of the same problems and constraints that lower- and working-class families face. Terms like “working class” and “middle class” do not even adequately capture the subtleties and intermediate classifications that are a part of the everyday lives of black Angelenos. Further, class distinctions often appear to have less to do with eco-

nomic standing than “everyday matters of speech, style, labor, and leisure”: how one moves, walks, and talks, where one resides, what and how one eats, and with whom one interacts and associates.²⁸ Social classes are fluid categories dependent on a wide range of factors and practices.

VICTORY IN DEFEAT?

One story about Inglewood that did receive some media attention was Wal-Mart’s 2004 campaign to build a megastore near Hollywood Park. Despite the promise of an abundance of new jobs, local residents decided it was not in the neighborhood’s best interests. In what was deemed a major civic victory, Inglewood inhabitants rallied together against the high-powered, high-financed efforts of Wal-Mart to successfully defeat the initiative.²⁹ Always an advocate of local politics, Pastor Scott also found herself at the center of the proliferating Wal-Mart debacle, which highlighted tensions between the interests of corporate America and communities of color, big business and local commerce.

After the Wal-Mart initiative, known as Measure 4A, was defeated, a story was published in *LA Weekly* about Annie Lee Martin—an elderly Inglewood resident and member of Holy Trinity Church who got “duped” into becoming the poster girl for the corporate giant Wal-Mart. Pastor Scott was surprised when she received a colorful mailer from Wal-Mart featuring a photo of Annie Lee Martin and a letter encouraging Inglewood residents to approve a ballot initiative allowing the company to build a supercenter—what Larry Aubry called an attempt to “put a folksy, African American face on an increasingly heated battle over the fate of development in Inglewood.”³⁰ Pastor Scott was concerned because Holy Trinity had recently joined the fight against the Wal-Mart initiative, and the congregation had been holding discussions about the downsides of Measure 4A. Scott was not convinced that the mailer reflected Martin’s actual views on the subject and decided to give her a call. Confirming her suspicions, Martin told Scott that Wal-Mart had tricked her into being their poster girl for a mailer that was central to their campaign. None of the words on the letter were hers. None of them were true. The letter said that the eighty-two-year-old Martin—a retired nurse who lived in a senior complex near Manchester Boulevard—had resided in Inglewood for fifty years, when in fact, she had only lived there for thirteen.

Martin was aggressively approached by Wal-Mart representatives in the parking lot of her local grocery store. They were snapping photos and asking if she supported the creation of new jobs for youth in her neighborhood. Tired of being harassed by young folks for “quarters,” she quickly supported the idea of creating new jobs in her community, unaware of the potential negative impacts of certain measures laid out in the initiative. She was later asked to sign a blank piece of paper under the guise of a petition. Martin was dismayed by what she considered

an invasion of privacy orchestrated by Wal-Mart and embarrassed that the public assumed she was a Wal-Mart spokesperson.

The fact that Martin belonged to Holy Trinity Church was critical in the eventual surfacing of her story. In 2004, the church became one of the newest members of L.A. Metro, essentially a local chapter of the national community-organizing group Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). L.A. Metro is involved in a variety of progressive, grassroots campaigns, many of which promote workers and workers' rights. After catching wind of Martin's news, Pastor Scott, other L.A. Metro members, and several Inglewood officials and activists held a town-hall meeting at a packed Holy Trinity about the Wal-Mart initiative. Scott told the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, "Here's one of my seniors being used, and I'm angry. I see this as a church issue, and I'm going to take the gospel out to the people. We're not going to wait for it to happen."³¹ Even though the Wal-Mart initiative was defeated, one of the more distressing outcomes of the campaign was Martin's refusal to support any causes in the future. Formerly a stalwart voter, she threatened to retreat from the democratic process altogether. But she also refused to shop at Wal-Mart, despite her constant need of low-priced goods for her children and grandchildren.

It was not always easy for Pastor Scott to connect the church with social services and advocacy in her local communities. Inglewood residents may have won the victory against a giant corporate entity, but ironically, Sharon and Pastor Scott sometimes found it more challenging to help individuals and provide them with the ongoing support and resources they need to make transformative changes in their lives. For example, at one of the Friday night hip hop services at Holy Trinity, a young man walked down the aisle and confessed, "I don't want to be in gangs anymore. I'm tired of being in gangs, but give me an alternative. What else can I do?" Sharon recalls how hearing this man's words broke her heart because she didn't have any resources to offer him. She asked him for his phone number so that she could keep talking with him about his situation. "Well, he was in transition," she explained, "so he didn't have a number we could reach him at." Sharon ran into him again a month later at a local gym where she pleaded with him to come back to the Hip Hop Church. He shrugged his shoulders as he walked across the parking lot, hunched over with his head down. Sharon remembers feeling helpless and despondent, as if she had "left somebody in the jungle to die."

Hip Hop Church services did not explicitly address the aforementioned structural and social conditions at work in the production and transformation of such inner-city realities—that is, the multiple effects of joblessness, gang involvement, the justice system, institutionalized racism, segregation, massive immigration into the inner city, and income and wealth concentration. Instead, Sharon and Pastor Scott attempted to address the social and spiritual alienation within the black inner city itself by opening the doors to people who felt unwelcome to sit in the

pews. Through the many challenges these two women faced in implementing the Hip Hop Church and the general lack of support from the Holy Trinity congregation, they began to understand their work as a truly “grassroots deal”—something more about creating “community” than attending church. Pastor Scott proclaimed, “It’s not about being in church. It’s not about trying to get you to do anything. It’s to bring in those that have really been hurt and are hurting but they’re seeking comfort and they need a place where the music speaks to them.” Hip Hop Church existed as a respite from the unpredictable conditions of urban existence, as a place to worship through gospel rap, and as a sacred forum to discuss the social issues that churches have not traditionally addressed.

HOLLYWOOD IN THE CHURCH

On a sweltering summer night in 2007, I attended what would be one of Carol Scott’s last Hip Hop Church services. Due to her worsening health, she no longer mingled and socialized with folks before the Friday night worship. Instead, she would lie down on the couch in the Holy Trinity office to rest before taking the pulpit. Lymphoma was just one of the many battles Pastor Scott was fighting. While she rested, Revelation—a female gospel rapper and former stripper from Long Beach—stood in the aisle with a microphone as she completed her sound check.

Revelation was the CEO of RAP4GOD records and had released her first gospel rap album, *I’M REVELATION* “*Tha Boss Lady*,” two years earlier. In the midst of some technical difficulties, she turned to me and commented under her breath, “I’m a devout Christian, but churches have not been accepting of my gospel rap thing.” The sound engineer struggled to adjust the levels of her prerecorded track so that her rhymes could be heard above the blaring music. Sporting tight white pants and a cropped denim jacket, she ad-libbed on the microphone: “It’s hot. It’s summertime, but we gonna praise Him anyway.” With increased attitude, she rapped a few lines about the 2007 Don Imus comments, in which the radio host called the Rutgers University women’s basketball team a bunch of “nappy-headed hoers.” Revelation, enveloped by the rising heat of the church building and her loudening track, boldly proclaimed, “Every time it’s hip hop that gets the fire and then the churches point fingers!”

This was the first night I met Sharon. She saw me sitting in the pews and walked over to introduce herself. Quickly identifying me as a confidant and supporter of her cause, she recounted the recent trials and tribulations of the Hip Hop Church. “It’s a struggle,” she lamented. “It’s been an uphill battle with the church. People hear the word hip hop and just stop there. They don’t know the history of hip hop. They think it’s all bad.” Above her head hung four signs. The two on the right bore the words, “New Exodus” and “In the City . . . † for Good.” Sharon continued,

“But you know what, whether it’s ten people or ten thousand people that show up, someone will get blessed.” My eyes then moved to the two signs in the left corner of the room: “It Takes a Village” and “Love in Action.”

Hip Hop Church attendees began to arrive, scattering themselves throughout the pews. One young man got a call on his cell phone and answered, “Excuse me, I’m in church,” and then quickly apologized to Sharon and me for the disturbance. A cluster of teenagers a few rows behind him talked loudly and casually about a friend of theirs who recently got shot—someone in a gang—as if this was a common occurrence.

A middle-aged African American woman rose from the first pew to lead the congregation in praise and worship, encouraging the congregants to “Praise Him how you want!” In a more traditional twist, she then belted out the gospel music classics “Eye on the Sparrow” and “To God Be the Glory” with impressive melismatic runs. Certain concessions to the traditional order of worship were made in order to give congregants something familiar to cling to. And yet Pastor Carol Scott continued to make openings for the individuality of worship and worshipful expression through her preaching: “We hear your voice this way, Lord—as spirit calling in the language of each person.” Intentionally expanding her preaching practices to the hip hop community, she admitted, “Sometimes I don’t even say that I’m a Christian, because if you do, they think you ain’t hip and you don’t know what’s what. I just say, ‘I’m a follower of the way.’ For me, hip hop is just a freer way to reach those who are seeking.”³² During the Hip Hop Church services, Pastor Scott’s preaching style “moved beyond the box,” as Sharon used to say. Scott reflected one afternoon, “I had to really let loose and I had to also understand that I really wasn’t their age. So I couldn’t come in dressing their age. I had to know some of the language but I still had to be me.”³³ Young people responded well to the balance she struck between addressing older and younger generations and her organic integration of hip hop into her own personal style.

A young spoken word artist then delivered a portion of his testimony—how he grew up on the streets of Los Angeles and ran with gangs before turning to Christ. His first rhymed poem repeated the line “Don’t put me in boxes.” Performing a cappella, he reminded the church: “[It] ain’t about the tracks. It’s about the Word”—a sentiment often expressed by gospel rappers.³⁴ Not surprisingly, many of the gospel rap artists delivered their rhymes unaccompanied when performing in churches in order to further highlight their lyrical message.

Kenny Z, an African American man in his forties who hosted a “Gospel Hip Hop Praise” television show on an L.A. public access station, strutted up to the pulpit. The youth generally appreciated the content of his lyrics, but felt that his music and style of delivery were sometimes “corny” and therefore too humorous to be taken seriously. The black pinstriped suit and polished pointy shoes he donned that night

were at odds with the more casual attire of the youth in attendance. Bouncing his head to the beat of his track, he pointed at individuals in the congregation as he rapped in a slow style about the dangers of “Hollywood in the church”—a statement that alluded to the tendency of certain churches, preachers, and churchgoers to prioritize celebrity, status, and flashiness over piety, worship, and humility. A heavy-set man stood behind him, crooning the chorus, “Hollywood, church up to no good,” in a floating falsetto over a laid-back hip hop groove. Kenny Z shouted, “Hollywood has no concern for souls” as his wife, Rozzie, danced in her seat from the first pew, clearly pleased with her husband’s performance.

Listening to Kenny Z’s rhymes, I was reminded of the ways in which Hollywood has already *been* in Inglewood: Rick Famuyiwa’s 1999 film *The Wood* depicted three young black men growing up in Inglewood and their intertwining journeys from boys to men; scenes of “inner city” life from *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and *Training Day* (2001) were shot in Inglewood; and the infamous scene from *Pulp Fiction* (1994) with Samuel L. Jackson took place at Pann’s Restaurant—a long-standing 1950s diner just down the road from Holy Trinity Church (at which I conducted one of my interviews with gospel rapper Cue). These cinematic representations, along with the rap music references—“Inglewood, always up to no good”—and Inglewood’s worsening public image in the press made the city a less desirable point of destination for people beyond its borders. For instance, Pastor Scott tried to get several Lutheran churches from the Valley to visit the Hip Hop Church, but they never showed up. She claimed, “They got scared of Inglewood.” Sharon recently told me about another damaging Hollywood misrepresentation of the city: “That movie, *Grand Canyon* [1991], really gave folks the wrong idea about Inglewood. They have Kevin Kline leaving a Lakers game at the Forum and suddenly he’s in this crime-ridden ghetto with graffiti and gangs and barbed wire. That’s a lie. That’s not the Inglewood I know. People ask me, ‘Aren’t you scared to be there?’ No! Dentists and doctors live here. They got it all wrong.”³⁵

One would also think that Kurtis Blow’s star-studded status and involvement with the Hip Hop Church L.A. would attract financial resources and notoriety to the ministry. Although Kurtis gave occasional monetary gifts to keep the ministry afloat, he was rarely present at the Los Angeles services due to his touring schedule and involvement with his East Coast hip hop ministries. But as Sharon used to say, “One monkey don’t stop the show. So whether he’s here or not, we want the service to go on . . . he’s from the East Coast and what you have is the East Coast–West Coast thing. Not everybody remembers him because he hasn’t done music in many years. People out here don’t always feel him.” Due to generational and geographical distance, Kurtis Blow’s name did not hold as much clout and capital in Los Angeles with a younger generation as it did in his native Harlem. His ties to the Hip Hop Church would wear even thinner as Pastor Scott’s health worsened.

The Hip Hop Church L.A. did not receive any economic and organizational support from Holy Trinity. In fact, aside from housing the Friday night hip hop services and offering some file space in one of the church offices, Holy Trinity did not contribute any funds to the production of the Hip Hop Church. The monthly hip hop ministry was able to function on an extremely limited budget, cobbling together minimal compensation for the performing artists—what Sharon referred to as a “love offering”—and the usual post-service meal of hot dogs, potato chips, fruit punch, and chocolate chip cookies. The money collected from the offering at hip hop services was modest as attendees had often already contributed to the offering at regular Sunday services. Many of the gospel rappers and spoken word artists offered to perform without pay, but Sharon—a dancer and performer herself—was adamant that artists should receive proper compensation for their time and talents. Sharon and Pastor Scott also wanted the Hip Hop Church to be a place where, if a homeless person walked in the front doors, they could offer them a bed or connect them with a transition house. “Jesus didn’t just preach the word,” Sharon used to say. “He also fed and healed.” Beyond directing people to the motels down the block from Holy Trinity, they were able to offer people little more than some canned and packaged foods from the church pantry.

FROM HOLY TRINITY TO MOBILE MINISTRY

Months after I started attending Hip Hop Church services, I received a call from Sharon informing me that Pastor Carol Scott had lost her battle with lymphoma and passed away. My heart sank. The *Los Angeles Times* obituary stated that she was known for her hip hop ministry, her “activist in-the-streets form of theology,” “her campaign to bring peace to violent neighborhoods,” and her desire for Christians to “take off the veil of elitism.”³⁶ Sharon was in tears as she told me the details of Pastor Scott’s passing, distraught that her best friend was gone, concerned about the three children she left behind, and worried for the future of the Hip Hop Church L.A. The loss of Pastor Scott at just fifty years old, along with the death of her cousin and two reconstructive knee surgeries, served as catalysts for many changes in Sharon’s life. In particular, these events crystallized her vision for and commitment to hip hop ministry, even as she had to walk around on crutches for the many months that we worked together. Pastor Scott’s death also unveiled the divergent interests and investments in the Hip Hop Church that eventually led to Sharon’s exclusion from Holy Trinity and the splintering of the ministry into two factions. The controversies that followed also made visible the patriarchal forces at work even in an alternative hip hop Christian imaginary.

Shortly after Pastor Scott’s passing, Sharon, her son Sean, and Candace Jordan—a young African American woman who helped plan and produce the Hip Hop Church services—met with the Holy Trinity council. After Pastor Carol Scott’s

memorial service, the council wanted to put the Hip Hop Church on a four-month “hiatus,” allegedly needing time to find a pastor to replace Carol Scott. Sharon rebutted, “You don’t just stop church services when someone dies.” She was skeptical of the proposed “hiatus,” arguing that it was a way for Holy Trinity to shut down the Hip Hop Church in order to implement a “tamer” youth service that didn’t spotlight hip hop so overtly. Pastor Wallace was hoping to supplant the Hip Hop Church with his “Youth Revival Blast.” His subtle discomfort with the ministry had become clear through the scant marketing of the hip hop Friday night service: the Hip Hop Church sign went up on Friday morning and came down promptly at 9 p.m. on Friday night after the service finished. During hip hop services, Pastor Wallace began sitting in the back pew of the church instead of his normal seat in the third pew, sometimes even leaving the service early through the back entrance.

Then came a litany of complaints. The youth minister grumbled that the Hip Hop Church never started on time, with Pastor Wallace adding that the service started an hour and a half late. Other council members complained that the Hip Hop Church lacked organization and that the gospel rap artists “come and perform” but “are not ministering.” To back up their accusations, members of council were picking up Bibles and quoting scripture. Pastor Wallace and the council often talked down to Sharon and other female leaders of the Hip Hop Church as if they were disobedient daughters rather than equal believers in the ministry. Sharon later told me, “The hits just keep on coming, so we know we’re on the right track. It’s just so difficult. Even before we had that male domination thing going on, it was still women doing the work. And they don’t want to give us the credit.” Pastor Wallace had wanted Sharon removed as director of the Hip Hop Church well before this particular encounter in order to create “a hip hop ministry without hip hop,” as she put it.

Aside from growing tensions between Sharon and Pastor Wallace, the main issue of concern was whether the Hip Hop Church belonged to Holy Trinity or existed as a separate ministry under the direction of Kurtis Blow. Sharon began making plans to leave Holy Trinity and transform the Hip Hop Church L.A. into a mobile ministry.³⁷ “I’m tired of walking into meetings and getting ambushed. We’re going to take the Hip Hop Church elsewhere because it doesn’t belong to them. Now they don’t have to worry about outsiders at their church anymore. This pariah doesn’t have to be here.” Pastor Carol Scott’s memorial service would be the last time Sharon would attend Holy Trinity as a member of that church.

Sharon then called an emergency meeting among Hip Hop Church faithfuls in the hope of trying to develop a new vision for the hip hop ministry. I got the call the next day: “We’re meeting this Saturday. Ten a.m. at the Starbucks in the Inglewood Hollywood Park shopping center. I need positive people there.”³⁸

When I arrived at the Starbucks on Century Boulevard and Crenshaw in Inglewood, Sharon was visibly upset, still shaking with the twin emotions of anger and

grief. Kenny Z, Candace, and Sean were all present, along with Mike—a friend of Kurtis Blow who had helped organize some of the first Hip Hop Church L.A. services. Everyone agreed to hold Carol Scott’s memorial at Holy Trinity during the Friday night hip hop service. Then the ministry would go mobile. “A three-month hiatus will kill the Hip Hop Church,” Sharon warned, “We gotta keep it going, otherwise souls may be lost.” Pastor Scott’s initial dream was to take the Hip Hop Church to the people—in group homes, rehab centers, and juvenile halls—instead of making folks come to the church. Furthermore, everyone was wary of trying to find another church home for the hip hop ministry after the frustrations they experienced at Holy Trinity. Mike warned that most churches would want all of them to become members and that there would always be some opposition from certain council or congregation members who wanted to put limits or restrictions on what kinds of music and performers were allowed. Candace chimed in, “And whatever church we go to needs to know that the youth come as they are. They wear hats, baggy pants . . . At the last hip hop service some older folk walked away from the service because people were wearing hats.”

Mike then called Kurtis Blow on his cell phone to get his opinion on the matter of the Hip Hop Church. Kurtis, now on speakerphone, confirmed that the Hip Hop Church L.A. was an offshoot of Hip Hop Church America—not under the ownership of Holy Trinity—and added definitively, “Sharon is the only one who can run the Hip Hop Church.” After all the tasks for the upcoming memorial service were divvied out, we held hands in a circle and prayed in the middle of Starbucks while Stevie Wonder’s “Love’s in Need of Love Today” graced the airwaves.

As the Hip Hop Church was planning their mobile ministry to various local churches, prisons, and festivals in Long Beach and Inglewood, Pastor Wallace and members of Holy Trinity’s council began to develop a new vision of hip hop worship—the “Hip Hop Youth Revival.” Proudly sitting behind his large wooden desk in his office at Holy Trinity, he explained the council’s reevaluation and replacement of the Hip Hop Church in the wake of Carol Scott’s passing:

We agreed that we still wanted to follow the purpose of bringing in youth, but we felt that we were not doing that. Now within that group, there was disagreement. Some said, “Oh, yes we are.” With that disagreement, there were a couple leaders who left us because they said, “We want it to remain as is. We are doing this and that’s the way it should be.” One thing that we say is that we can agree to disagree, but because you disagree does not mean that your view will dominate, even if you speak loud, you know, and try to dominate. So a couple leaders left and that was painful. And then in the midst of this, as you know, we lost Pastor Carol. So, because she had been, for that congregation, the primary leader, that created a huge vacuum. And so we decided, we cannot replace her so let’s not try. Let’s instead try to restructure the leadership and try to expand the leadership of the Hip Hop Church.³⁹

Pastor Wallace eventually appointed Pastor Scott Fritz to coordinate their Hip Hop Worship Task Force and enlisted one of the younger men of the church to preach, in addition to an adult pastor.⁴⁹ While this new hip hop night better honored the purpose of involving and engaging youth, hip hop music was largely absent from the service. Wallace invited a guest youth choir, a dance ministry, and a saxophonist to perform at the Hip Hop Youth Revival night, but no hip hop artists or gospel rappers were included during those first few services.

PASTOR SCOTT'S DREAM

I heard the hip hop–styled sounds of drums and organ spilling out into the sun-baked parking lot of Holy Trinity Church as I strolled up Crenshaw Boulevard. It was the night of Carol Scott's memorial service—Friday, October 5, 2007. Sharon, Candace, Kenny Z, and Sean crafted an impeccably organized and dynamic program. The service started on time with Kenny Z calling Pastor Wallace down from his high perch on the church balcony to come and participate in the service. In a gracious and diplomatic gesture, Kenny made a subtle appeal for forgiveness and the uniting of the hip hop church and traditional church in his prayer. “We have to know where we come from,” he encouraged, “and stay the course of tradition. The word of God does not change even though we are in the hip hop generation.” A large photo of Pastor Scott hung behind him, smiling down on the congregation.

The service opened with a small group of conga drummers—Sharon and her Cuban drum teacher among them. Dressed in all white and donning bright blue eye shadow on this special occasion, Sharon hit the conga with authority and attitude. She sought closure, connection, and catharsis. As the last hit of the drums echoed through the sanctuary, Big Preacha rose regally to the microphone. “Got to be bold! Got to be bold in the spirit,” he barked. As a gospel rapper walking the streets of Inglewood, Watts, and the Crenshaw district, he was known for approaching strangers and asking them if they wanted to pray with him. “I used to *be* on the streets,” he told the congregation, which is a common way that gospel rap artists refer to their previous lifestyles of sin, a secular state of mind, or the time before converting to Christianity. Big Preacha articulated this territorialization of experience: “After I was saved, all *home turf* here. You can hip hop for Jesus and be free. It's cool serving Jesus. I wish I would have known that ten years ago.”

Speaking of the people still living the life of the streets, Big Preacha continued, “They need something to chip away the stone around their hearts and give them hearts of flesh.” With this phrase, Big Preacha's “stone hearts” conjured the concrete of the streets—a mythic and all too real world of cold, brutal, stone-faced and stone-hearted men and woman. For Big Preacha, hip hopping for Jesus, instead of worldly things, initiated a process of humanizing the heart into flesh. His performance of the track “Bow Down” *cemented* his point. The song title referenced

a well-known Snoop Dogg line demanding people to bow to his gangsta prowess, but Big Preacha's rap spoke about surrendering one's life to Jesus.

Then Sharon danced. Dressed up like an old and haggard homeless woman, draped in threadbare rags and hunched over a wooden cane, she danced like a woman dancing her last dance, overextending her limbs in motions both swooping and jagged. She conveyed the bitter ache of aged bones and the hardening inflexibility of poverty. Her cane seemed to be an appendage, an extended finger perhaps pointing blame or twirling invisible smiles into the air. She danced for her dear friend and mentor, Carol Scott. She danced for their shared vision of the Hip Hop Church.

Sean concluded the service, reminding the congregation, "This was her dream! We love you, Pastor Scott!" Summoning Pastor Scott's teenage daughter, Lauren, to join him in the pulpit, he put his arm around her and called everyone in the church to stand and clap as loudly and fiercely as they could for the life and spirit of Pastor Scott. The congregation rose to its feet, applauding, stomping, cheering, and hollering—raising praise for this brave, committed, and visionary woman. In this moment of embodied, emotional eruption, a tear fell from Lauren's eye as her heart filled with the enormous spirit of her mother's life—a life of beautiful struggle. The memorial was a performance of legitimation for the Hip Hop Church L.A., an emotional release, an unspoken standoff between the traditional church and the hip hop ministry—a night of endings and new beginnings.

Food and fellowship commenced in the adjacent gymnasium after the service. After fueling on hot dogs, the youth swarmed the dance floor as the DJ played "Crank That (Soulja Boy)." While the song contains controversial lyrics suggestive of certain demeaning sexual behaviors toward women, these young people seemed to find a deep sense of "church" upon hearing this *Billboard* top 100 hit. Soon, many of them were lined up in rows to dance the *electric slide*. Pastor Scott would have enjoyed this jubilant hip hop scene.

. . .

Since discontinuing their partnership with Holy Trinity, the Hip Hop Church L.A. has persevered as a mobile outreach ministry that hosts services wherever it is welcome. They also hold an ongoing hip hop service every third Sunday at Inglewood's Faith Lutheran Church as well as an annual Rap & Praise Awards. Hip hop ministries continue to emerge in Los Angeles, as well as places like Harlem, Chicago, and Atlanta, among others—cities that traditionally have boasted a strong black middle class but continue to experience the fragmenting and segregating effects of urbanization and gentrification. The merging of Christianity and hip hop—two of the biggest cultural forces at work in African American communities—has created a matrix of power dynamics fraught with competing religious and commercial interests across multiple fields of social and financial capital. These dynamics and debates

are really nothing new, just dressed up in modern attire with more flashes of pop culture commercialism amidst the increasing constraints of life in urban America.

The trials and triumphs of the Hip Hop Church L.A. illustrate and sound out several important realities in hip hop ministry. First, the importance of telling this tale is to account for the diverse practitioners of holy hip hop who were often eclipsed by the commonly seen face of the male gospel MC. Mothers of adolescents, white pastors, black female pastors, ex-hip hop stars, female rap artists, young hip hop fans, and youth ministers, among others, were all crucial laborers in the daily toil of hip hop ministry and street evangelism.⁴¹ Oftentimes, their work went unseen, but they were all carving out pathways, however contested, for the merging of Christianity and hip hop.

Second, musical performance remained a contested terrain among church congregations and communities, as music was often deployed strategically as a platform to introduce new ideas, people, ministries, and practices into the church. Styles of musical worship, how much music is played during a service, and compensation for church musicians are just a few of the specific challenges regarding musical practice in African American Christian communities.⁴² These issues may seem merely musical, but in fact are involved in complex struggles around race, gender, class, social status, territory, and age. In the cultural politics of hip hop churches, music *matters*.

Change to the existing norms of musical worship in churches does not come easily. Often, it is the enormous and enduring effort of a few courageous and committed pastors.⁴³ As seen with the emergence and acceptance of gospel music in 1930 and '40s, change in religious worship is more effectively initiated from positions of authority within the church.⁴⁴ Thus, we see more and more gospel rappers becoming pastors and preachers. While some might expect Pentecostal or Holiness churches to be more open to the emotive expressivity of hip hop music, denominational characteristics actually appear to have little to do with whether or not a church and its congregation will allow hip hop in the pulpit. Rather, the trust a congregation has in its pastors and the ability of the leadership to find musicians who, while pushing the boundaries of musical worship, present this musical change in an accessible and palatable manner prove to be more important factors in the process of changing traditional practices. Despite personal squabbles and misunderstandings among those working with the Hip Hop Church, both Pastor Scott and Pastor Wallace exhibited great openness to possibilities of a hip hop ministry and a profound commitment to the presence of youth at Holy Trinity.

The politics of respectability in expressions of African American Christianity, as well as conflicts over who is allowed entry into the realms of power and authority within black churches, often play out in ideological struggles over what constitutes appropriate music and language in the pulpit. Internal policings within

black religious communities reveal the costs and benefits of citizenship in black churches as well as how religious, spatial, and aesthetic boundaries in predominantly black communities are both highly fixed and endlessly flexible. The manner in which Sharon, Sean, Pastor Scott, Pastor Wallace, the council members, and the gospel rap artists who performed at Holy Trinity navigated the shifting grounds of the *hip* and the *holy*, illustrated how complicated negotiations of the sacred and secular can activate social fault lines within churches and congregations. Ultimately, Los Angeles gospel rappers would have to take their music beyond the church walls.