

## Roads to Zion

### *Hip Hop's Search for the City Yet to Come*

*No place to live in, no Zion  
See that's forbidden, we fryin'*

—KENDRICK LAMAR, "HEAVEN AND HELL" (2010)

*The sense of the end-times and last days must be entered in order to find the creative imagination that can reveal paths of survival and threads of renewal as chaos winds its wicked way back to cosmos again.*

—MICHAEL MEADE

Robin D. G. Kelley, in his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, argues that Exodus served as the key political and moral compass for African Americans during the antebellum era and after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Exodus gave people a critical language for understanding the racist state they lived in and how to build a new nation. Exodus signified new beginnings, black self-determination, and black autonomy. Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement represented a powerful manifestation of this vision of Exodus to Zion. He even purchased the Black Star shipping line in order to transport goods and people back to their African motherlands. Though Garvey's Black Star Line made only a few voyages, it has remained a powerful symbol of the longing for home. As the dream of Exodus faded, Zion has become the more central metaphor of freedom and homecoming in contemporary black cultural expressions.

Along these lines, Emily Raboteau—reggae head and daughter of the renowned historian of African American religion Albert J. Raboteau—explores Zion as a place that black people have yearned to be in her book, *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora*.<sup>2</sup> In her wanderings through Jamaica, Ethiopia, Ghana, and the American South and her conversations with Rastafarians and African Hebrew Israelites, Evangelicals, Ethiopian Jews, and Katrina transplants, one truth emerges: there are many roads to Zion. One may take

multiple spiritual, musical, and physical routes in search of a homeland, but “To end any story,” Raboteau writes, “even one far simpler than this, is a magic trick. The Promised Land is never arrived at.”<sup>3</sup>

By way of conclusion, I would like return to holy hip hop’s black religious traffics—traffics that are both multicultural and diasporic. I will move from one of the first rap music forays into Christianity (MC Hammer) to some of the most recent iterations of Christian sensibilities in contemporary hip hop (Lecrae and Kendrick Lamar) in order to connect the dots between multiple hip hop trajectories toward Zion. Tsitsi Ella Jaji argues, “black music has come to be a privileged *figure* of transnational black sensibilities and modernist expression.”<sup>4</sup> I would like to more broadly explore the intersections of blackness, religious conversion, and postcolonial popular music in relation to holy hip hop. In seeking a place to belong, sometimes musical, religious, and physical borders are crossed and diasporic resources are employed. Hip hop artists, in their ongoing searches for a spiritual home, have assembled multiple geographies and remixed diverse black musical and religious repertoires.

#### DREAMING DR. KING

Just two years after Stephen Wiley released the first known Christian rap album, *Bible Break* (1985), and in the same year that Soup the Chemist recorded *Fully Armed* (1987), Oakland rapper MC Hammer joined a gospel hip hop group called the Holy Ghost Boys. While best known for his rapid rise to fame, ecstatic dance moves, signature parachute pants, and hit rap songs “U Can’t Touch This” and “2 Legit 2 Quit,” Hammer has also dedicated much of his life’s work to serving the Lord. Now an ordained minister in the Church of God in Christ, he was raised in a Pentecostal church and joined a street ministry in 1984 after working for Charles O. Finley, then owner of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. Even as he “backslid” away from his faith during the peak years of his career, he promised to dedicate one song on each of his albums to God. The motivational 1990 hip hop anthem “Pray” is probably most well known.

After falling out of favor in the popular music industry and declaring bankruptcy, Hammer turned back to the church from whence he came. In October 1997, he began a television ministry called *M.C. Hammer and Friends* on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (the same network that gospel rapper Soup the Chemist was watching during his conversion to Christianity), insisting that MC then stood for “Man of Christ.” Three years later, MC Hammer was invited by Pastor Dick Bernal to lead a gospel hip hop service on Sunday nights called “Hammertime” at the Jubilee Christian Center, an independent charismatic church in San Jose, California. “Hammertime,” a term made famous in his megahit “U Can’t Touch This,” drew in “the unchurched and disenfranchised, including gang members,

troubled youth and curious teens.”<sup>5</sup> Reaching such populations, as demonstrated by the work of Pastor Carol Scott and Sharon Collins at the Hip Hop Church in Inglewood, has been one of the most activist components of gospel hip hop practice.

MC Hammer intersected with a Los Angeles gospel MC in 2012. Cue—self-proclaimed “Pastorfarian” and leader of “The Church Without Walls” on L.A.’s Skid Row who found Jesus through Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*—crossed paths with Hammer in Watts at a funeral of a mutual friend, Eugene Williams. An activist pastor who founded the Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM)—a faith-based organization that sought to address high crime and poor education in communities throughout Los Angeles—Williams was also co-director of University of Southern California’s Center for Religion and Civic Culture, where Cue took courses with him. Before lung cancer took his life at age fifty-two, Williams had also been working with Hammer on implementing faith-based civic engagement initiatives—work that inspired Hammer to speak to an audience of fifteen thousand youth at the first-ever “We Day” in Seattle to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

When I came across this picture of the two men standing side by side at the memorial service at USC, mourning the loss of another spiritually minded soldier in the struggle, I thought back to Cue’s original question: “How do I come with Malcolm and Martin at the same time?” Over twenty years after his conversion, Cue told me during a 2013 conversation, “I’m more in the space of Martin now. We’ve endured hoses. We’ve endured our youth being murdered in cold blood, like Trayvon Martin. There is no need to be violent. I wouldn’t have said this ten years ago, but I’m at peace with nonviolent resistance now. I’m OK if someone takes my life. Malcolm and I have the same roots but I wouldn’t use *any means necessary*. I’m willing to be the sacrifice.”<sup>6</sup> Cue reaffirmed this message on a social media post from October 25, 2016, in which he reacted to the news headline, “White Supremacists Threaten War against Black Americans if Donald Trump Loses the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” with a lyric from the famous late rapper Notorious B.I.G.: “I’M READY TO DIE.” But then he posed the question, with equal parts humor and seriousness: “Should I get strapped just in case? Y’all know I hate guns.”

Over the Thanksgiving holiday in 2014, Cue led a crowd through downtown Los Angeles in a Black Lives Matter protest of the multiple police killings throughout the nation—killings in which most of the victims were black men. In Los Angeles, it was Ezell Ford, a mentally disabled African American man, who was shot dead by the LAPD in August of that same year. As a member of the Black Brown Clergy Alliance with CLUE Los Angeles (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice) and an organizer for SCLC—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of which Dr. King was president at the time of his murder—Cue continues to honor Martin’s legacy and fight for that city of Zion. Like his stated mission for the open mic, Klub Zyion, Cue’s musical and activist work is for the city yet to come—or in his words, “a city we’re anticipating with walls of jasper and streets of gold.”<sup>7</sup>

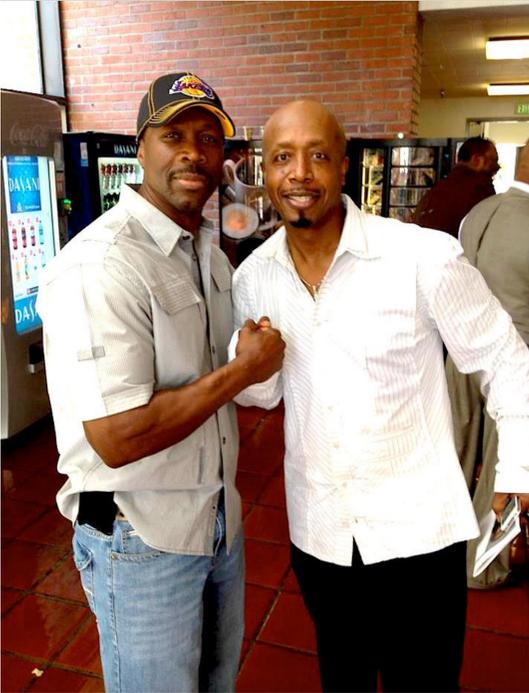


FIGURE 18. Cue Jn-Marie and MC Hammer at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California for a memorial of their mutual friend, activist pastor and professor Eugene Williams, 2012.

Even though the Black Lives Matter movement and black evangelical Christian communities have sometimes been at odds in their visions of and methods toward black liberation, the holy hip hop artists that I worked with in Los Angeles looked to embrace this social movement. Efrem Smith, co-author of *The Hip Hop Church*<sup>8</sup> and president and CEO of World Impact—a missions organization committed to the empowerment of the urban poor—explains some of the “anti-church sentiments” reverberating through the Black Lives Matter movement:

As I look at the Black Lives Matter Movement and hear some of the anti-church sentiments, I realize that part of this dilemma is that the Black Church is lacking a comprehensive, contextualized, and professionalized view of youth ministry. I have witnessed this priority shift from my teen years as the Hip Hop movement came into prominence through today . . . the hard reality is that within the Black Lives Matter Movement there is anger not only at broken aspects of the law enforcement system, but also at the Black Church. This anger could stem from the perception that youth are not prioritized in annual budgets or staffing concerns. I recognize that there are a number of Black Churches that have been highly committed to youth ministry, but far too many have put other ministry initiatives above a robust commitment to youth.<sup>9</sup>

This lack of commitment to youth by black churches is something that holy hip hoppers and hip hop ministries have worked hard to change. Holy hip hop is in a unique position to bridge these two important cultural entities—Black Lives Matter and black churches—by offering a cultural and musical practice that can hold the complicated social and spiritual realities that young black Americans confront in their everyday lives. Smith goes on to say that Black Lives Matter, like the civil rights movement, should be understood as a complex movement made up of multiple views, agendas, and tactics that are sometimes in tension and sometimes in alignment with one another.

The Civil Rights Movement was much larger and more complex than just the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yes, there was King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but there was also the NAACP, the Urban League, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, as well as leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Malcolm X. These groups and leaders didn't always agree.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, there is no unitary position or viewpoint that represents the Black Lives Matter movement or the holy hip hop movement. Although he rarely performs gospel rap these days, Cue embodies the complexity of holy hip hop in the way he merges the spiritual and political philosophies of the prophetic Christian leader and the militant Muslim minister in his search for Zion.

In another gospel hip hop invocation of Dr. King and Zion land, I witnessed the group Hip Hopposite perform “Road to Zion” at the weekly Christian hip hop praise party, Club Judah. The Hip Hopposite MCs took turns at the microphone, spitting lyrics about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King, freedoms bells and dreams, over a laidback hip hop groove and slow crawling, ascending guitar lick. MC Crossfire rapped the final verse:

If I get shot like Dr. King, homie, I got the dream  
Telling people black, white, young or old  
That in the middle of the ghetto I found the road

Crossfire remembers moving between various places in Los Angeles as a youth, accompanied by the voices of Tupac and Snoop Dogg. “We had a rough upbringing,” he recalled to me in one of our conversations, with “broken homes and drugs and all kinds of crazy stuff.”<sup>11</sup> He remembers finding the road in 1996, the day before Tupac’s double album, *All Eyez on Me*, was released. “The night before that album dropped,” Crossfire continued, “it was just like, Pow! I wasn’t even in church or nothing. I had been dipping off in church, and it just hit me like, dude, you gotta abide. That’s what it is. It’s Jesus.”

After Crossfire finished his verse, lush gospel-inspired harmonies swooped in to sing the final chorus on Hip Hopposite’s instrumental track:

I’m on the road to Zion where freedom rings on every hand  
Where there’s a king named Martin and he’s with his wife again

The bodies of Hip Hopposite glided across the small stage against the folds of a burgundy velvet curtain, traversing the very grounds where a Western Surplus gun store once stood, where rioters protested the police beating of Rodney King, and where the fires of destruction made way for this performance of hip hop praise. A meditative hush came over the crowd at Love and Faith Christian Center as the colorful tiled mosaic lion on the exterior of the building kept watch just beyond the walls of the sanctuary. In that moment, Dr. King's vision did not feel like a lost dream.

#### BROTHERS IN BABYLON

It was while standing next to the members of the Hip Hopposite collective that I first heard a Christian rap re-versioning of Nas's 1994 hip hop hit, "The World Is Yours." Nas, an MC from Queensbridge, New York, released the song on his breakout album, *Illmatic*. The hook of the song features a haunting piano progression over which Nas raps, "Whose world is this? The world is yours. The world is yours. It's mine, it's mine, it's mine. Whose world is this?" In this gospel rap version, the lyrics were changed to "The world is the Lord's." Listening to this spiritual remix, I was reminded of another pop culture quest for Zion—Damian Marley and Nas's 2005 collaboration, "Road to Zion."

Nas himself, like Cue, has stood at multiple religious crossroads. His music evokes the names of Jesus, Jah, and Allah as he positions himself simultaneously as both saint and sinner, *God's Son* (2002) and *Street's Disciple* (2004). The latter features twenty-seven tracks, just as the New Testament has twenty-seven chapters, and the cover artwork depicts Nas playing every role in the Last Supper. When asked about his main religious influences as a child, he answered, "I was surrounded by Christians . . . my grandmothers, all my family was from the South, Baptist. As I got older I got into the 5 Percent Nation, and then that pushed me toward Islam. But I'm not any religion . . . I know there's a higher power."<sup>12</sup>

If Nas were to rap about his own road to Zion, it would reveal a complicated navigation through multiple routes of black religiosity. His collaboration with Damian "Jr. Gong" Marley on "Road to Zion" is an exploration of Rastafarian ideas, practices, and symbols as it exposes the oppressive systems of police brutality, political dictatorship, hypermaterialism, and the prison industrial complex. Jr. Gong wails the lyrics of the hook, "I got to keep on walking on the road to Zion, man. We got to keeps it burning on the road to Zion, man," Twenty five years earlier, Damian's father, Bob Marley a.k.a "Tuff Gong," recorded the song "Zion Train" a year before his death, in which he belts out, "Soul train is coming our way. Zion train is coming our way. Oh people, get on board!" The song also links to the American jazz standard tradition as it contains a looped sample from Ella Fitzgerald's 1958 recording of "Russian Lullaby." Ella's fluttering, melancholic hum undulates over a nostalgic harp

arpeggio and a quintessentially four-beat hip hop rhythm. The original lyrics of this Irving Berlin classic also gesture toward a Zion of sorts:

Somewhere there may be  
A land that's free for you and me

Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline to a Jewish cantor in a synagogue in imperial Russia, wrote the song in reflection of his family's quick escape to the United States in 1893 after their house was burned to the ground as part of the anti-Jewish pogroms initiated by Nicholas II, the new tsar of Russia. Ian Whitcomb describes their escape: "the Balines smuggled themselves creepingly from town to town, from satellite to satellite, from sea to shining sea, until finally they reached their star: the Statue of Liberty."<sup>13</sup> Always inflecting a veneer of patriotism in his songs, Berlin's Zion—"A land that's free for you and me"—was America. But Jr. Gong and Nas are more explicit in their critique of imperialism and do not offer a clear definition of Zion land, instead painting a picture of multiple Babylons.

In Rastafarian culture, Zion usually refers to the "Promised Land" of Ethiopia or the African continent more generally. But Nas's verse does not figure Africa as a utopian destination. He talks about feeling so "haunted" and "helpless" about what he sees in the world that he's "havin' daymares in the daytime." Nas elaborates on this "daymare":

Human beings like ghost and zombies  
President Mugabe holding guns to innocent bodies in Zimbabwe<sup>14</sup>

Robert Mugabe, in power since 1980 when Rhodesia officially became Zimbabwe, has often been accused of conducting a "reign of terror" throughout the country.<sup>15</sup> Linking forms and instances of domestic and international violence, the specter of police brutality also haunts the track with Damian Marley's repeated warnings, "And police weh abuse dem authority." Nas enforces the point, "And badges screamin' at young black children stop or I will shoot." Their performance connects the terrors inflicted on black bodies and sounds multiple searches for black liberation in Babylon from Marley's Jamaica to Mugabe's Zimbabwe to Nas's New York.

The music video, filmed with Marley and Nas in Kew Gardens—an ethnically diverse neighborhood in Queens, New York, with significant immigrant populations from Latin America, Guyana, the Middle East (especially Israel), South Asia, and East Asia—features cameos from hip hop artists as well as an appearance by funk icon George Clinton. Connecting the dots, it is not hard to imagine Clinton climbing aboard his Zion Train, the Mothership, toward outer space—the only place he could truly envision freedom in a 1970s United States still wrought with deep racial and economic injustice. The map grows larger when we consider the namesake of this New York neighborhood—the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, an

important epicenter of colonial curiosity and power, housing exotic plant specimens taken from Britain's colonies around the world. Nas and Marley, whose lives and ancestries have both been shaped by histories of British colonialism, would rearticulate this bond musically in their 2010 dub-rock/hip hop collaboration under the album title *Distant Relatives*—a name that resonates equally with Black Nationalist sensibilities and Black Atlantic circulations. As Jaji argues, “music has quite literally *rehearsed* transnational black solidarity emerging simultaneously in literature, film, and other cultural domains.”<sup>16</sup>

In the “Road to Zion” video, Damian Marley wheels a cart of books down a cell block corridor and then passes a card to Nas through the steel bars of a prison cell. On the card is the Lion of Judah—the same lion pictured on the flag of Ethiopia, an image often used in Rastafarian culture. One interpretation of this scene would be that Jah or Rastafari is his escape route, his ticket to freedom, his “Road to Zion.” In the Rastafari movement, the Lion of Judah is Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, crowned eighty-three years ago with the titles King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of Judah, Defender of the Judean faith, and the Light of the World. Rastas believe that Haile Selassie is a direct descendent of the Israelite Tribe of Judah through the lineage of King David and Solomon, and that he is also the Lion of Judah mentioned in the Book of Genesis.

Given the religious pluralism (if not confusion) expressed in Nas's music, the Lion of Judah he holds in his hand could resonate equally with the Rastafarian Movement and Christianity. In the Christian tradition, the Lion of Judah represents the triumphant Jesus who was from the tribe of Judah as is mentioned in Revelation. It is not uncommon for Christian organizations and ministries to use the Lion of Judah as their emblem or even their name, as is the case with the Love and Faith Christian Center.

#### LIONS IN ZION

Another Lion has been stalking hip hop's diverse religious crossroads. Born Cordozar Calvin Broadus Jr. in 1971 in Long Beach, Snoop Dogg grew up singing gospel music and playing the piano at the Golgotha Trinity Baptist Church. In sixth grade, he began rapping, developing that syncopated, laidback, molasses drawl that has become his signature sound. At the time that he was discovered by Dr. Dre in 1992, Snoop was thought to be a member of the Rollin' 20 Crips gang in the eastside of Long Beach, lending an authentic air to Dre's solo debut album, *The Chronic*, with lyrics laced with tales of street violence, gangsterism, and misogynist conquests. The following year, Snoop dropped his debut, *Doggystyle*, under Death Row Records. Scaling the *Billboard* 200 and *Billboard* Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums charts to number one, the album sold almost a million copies in the first week of its release, became certified 4x platinum in 1994 and spawned several megahits,

including “What’s My Name?” and “Gin & Juice.” While Snoop is best known for his myriad commercial successes, jail sentences (mainly for the possession and selling of drugs), references to cannabis consumption, and creative slang inventions, I am more interested in his diverse religious forays and incarnations as well as the ways in which his pursuit of spiritual salvation is deeply entangled with his professional and social aspirations.

It was in 2012 that Snoop Dogg announced his turn toward the Rastafarian way following a visit to Jamaica. After decades of making some of the most violent and misogynist gangsta rap, he sought a new path of peace and love. “I want to go to the White House,” Snoop lamented in the documentary *Reincarnated* that chronicled his journey to Jamaica, “but what the fuck can I perform? All my songs are too hard.”<sup>17</sup> In addition to recording a reggae-inspired album of the same name that featured Diplo, Drake, Miley Cyrus, Akon, and Rita Ora, among others, Snoop’s pilgrimage to the heart of Rasta involved a visit to Tuff Gong studios, a walk through Trenchtown’s western ghettos, and conversations with Rastafarian elders, including Bunny Wailer—the only remaining member of the Wailers. It was during a Rastafarian purification ceremony at a Nyabinghi temple that Snoop was rechristened Snoop Lion by a Rasta priest, his signature gangsta ruff (bow wow wow) ostensibly transforming into a regal Rasta roar.

Bob Marley, whom Snoop considers himself a reincarnation of, sang often of the “lion of Zion,” referring to Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. Snoop Lion’s Jamaican journey sounded these global connections as it simultaneously portrayed Kingston as a kind of Zion and Los Angeles as a Babylon, especially in light of the harsh realities of L.A.’s postindustrial landscapes, racial segregations, policing practices, and pop culture excesses. While Snoop Lion’s recent reggae offerings have been widely critiqued on both their religious and aesthetic merits, his *Reincarnated* was nominated for the 2013 Grammy for Reggae Album of the Year.

During Snoop’s visit with Bunny Wailer, the reggae legend donned a sweatband bearing the symbol of the Lion of Judah. Snoop blessed Bunny with some “Cali herbs” as they smoked a “chalice” together. Bunny prayed for Snoop’s soul through the power of Selassie in the hopes that LBC rapper’s adoption of the Rastafari faith wouldn’t become too “commercialized.” As it happens, the *Reincarnated* film features abundant product placement for Adidas, which sponsors Snoop and which kicked in money for the budget, according to a member of Snoop’s management team. Upon seeing the film, Bunny, like many other Snoop fans and detractors, was critical of Snoop’s conversion from hardcore gangsta rapper to enlightened reggae singer<sup>18</sup> and eventually “excommunicated” Snoop from Rastafari (on Facebook) for “outright fraudulent use of Rastafari Community’s personalities and symbolism.”<sup>19</sup> Snoop struck back in an interview with *Rolling Stone*: “It’s like, people take my kindness for weakness. In the Nineties, Bunny could have never tried that because I’d have slapped the dog shit out of his old ass.” But he ended

his rant on a softer note: “Bunny, keep your head up. Jah bless; wisdom; guidance and protection.”<sup>20</sup>

Bunny isn’t the first spiritual advisor from whom Snoop has sought guidance. Years earlier, Snoop received counsel from his then spiritual advisor, former pimp-turned-preacher Don Magic Juan, who made a cameo on Snoop’s hit single, “From tha Chuuuch to da Palace” in 2002. Snoop also visited the Honorable Louis Farrakhan at his home, commenting that Farrakhan was one of the few black leaders that supported him and fellow gangsta artists. In 1999, after Notorious B.I.G. was murdered in Los Angeles, Snoop put a call out to Minister James who then called Minister Farrakhan to hold a gathering of rappers to address the deadly nature of the East/West feud. Snoop recalled that day at the Nation of Islam Savior’s Day event in Chicago on March 1, 2009: “we ended all of our beef and there was love and we’ve been living that way every since. Nobody ever really gave Minister Farrakhan credit for that.” In that same year, it was reported that Snoop Dogg was a member of the Nation of Islam, donating a thousand dollars to the organization.<sup>21</sup>

Snoop’s intertwined voicings of God, gangsta, Nation of Islam, Rasta, and reggae articulate a diasporic black religious pluralism. His varied musical and spiritual transformations return us to the original themes of black conversion and liberation set out at the beginning of the this book. His story reveals how he is both a highly localized product and expression of Long Beach City and a diasporic symbol of multiple black Americas. His dream to visit the White House, an ironic Zion of sorts for the gangsta rapper-turned-Rasta, finally came true in 2013, when he was invited to perform at the 36th Annual Kennedy Center Honors for Herbie Hancock.

Despite his previous lament that his hip hop songs were “too hard” for the White House, Snoop returned to his early gangsta rap sound. He donned a velvety tux while gripping a blinged-out microphone bearing his most common moniker: Snoop Dogg. In front of President Obama and the First Lady, he performed a version of the 1992 classic “Gin & Juice” over Us<sub>3</sub>’s “Cantaloup (Flip Fantasia)” — an acid-jazz-rap remake of Herbie Hancock’s “Cantaloupe Island.” It was vintage Snoop with a few choice lyrical omissions and politically correct revisions, reincarnating himself on another island. He even got political elites, including Michelle Obama, to “Hey Ho!” along with him with waving arms and all. Afterward, Snoop humbly turned to Hancock and shouted, “Thank you for creating hip hop.”

. . .

In another instance of the Jamaica–Los Angeles connection, I encountered the “Snoop Dogg of Gospel Rap” one night on the stage of Klub Zyon and across the way from a storefront Jamaican restaurant in Leimert Park. Majesty Moore, an African American female gospel rapper in her late thirties, flowed with the regal poise of a lioness over hip hop instrumentals in a smooth, understated yet potent

style, reminiscent of the singsong-like quality of Snoop. I met up with Majesty about a week later on another hot and smoggy summer day in the historic black arts district of Leimert Park. We sat down at a small table on the patio of Fifth Street Dick's Coffee and Jazz Emporium across the street from the parking lot that houses the weekly Leimert Park Village flea market. A well-known hub for jazz music, Fifth Street Dick's was founded by Richard Fulton in 1991 after he was homeless for four years on the streets of L.A. and just before the 1992 riots broke out. The logo for the coffeehouse was a homeless man pushing an overflowing shopping cart—a reminder of and homage to his former life.

It was in that small storefront I learned that Majesty was originally born in Berkeley in the 1970s, where her parents were involved with the Black Panther Party. She later moved with her mom to South Los Angeles, but her dad stayed behind in Oakland and remained active in the Party. She met fellow gospel rapper Khanchuz while attending Westwood Avenue Elementary. "We were the sandbox kids," she recalled. "I knew him before he started doing holy hip hop. You should have heard some of his raps back then! You would have been scared!"<sup>22</sup>

In Los Angeles, Majesty's family explored and studied different religions together. "We studied with Jehovah's Witnesses. We studied with Mormons. We studied with Catholics, Lutherans, and then we studied with Christ. That was just people trying to find their way in life—which way to go—as everybody does. It was a journey and I was on a quest." She then paused in silence for minute, looking dissatisfied with this particular recounting of her journey to Christ and gospel hip hop. "Let me start my life story over for you," she continued:

When I was leaving heaven, God said, I have a task for someone to do on earth. And of all the angels, nobody responded, 'cause usually they just raise their hand, saying, "I'll go, I'll go, I'll go do that task." But no one raised their hand on this task. None of the angels wanted to go and do this task. So, finally after a little while, I said, "I'll go." And I got these instructions, but these instructions were . . . I knew but I didn't know. It was like hidden. So when I was leaving, all the angels in heaven started crying because they didn't know if I was going to make it back to heaven again because when you leave heaven you don't know if you're gonna make it back. You have to make a choice, you gotta make a decision. And the devil is here to keep you from doing that. When I got to the earth, the devil was trying to kill me. I got a rap like that. It goes . . .

The devil's trying to kill me. What did I do wrong?  
 Is it because I praise the most high when I sing my song  
 I trust no man, fear no man or woman  
 on my journey through the land  
 slow motion coasting on the waves of the ocean  
 Elohim the grand king is hosting, we floating  
 I boasting the most honorable only one  
 put me down top gun now I blast y'all town

ever since I left heaven they be missing me  
 waiting on my safe return I must fulfill my mission see  
 I've been through a lot on my days on earth G  
 I came too far to turn back I'm in the place to be  
 serving lyrical pharmaceuticals on these streets  
 everybody know my name but ain't nobody know me  
 and you ain't never shot the breeze with me but you claiming you  
 my homies  
 see I've been walking to and fro the valley of death, man  
 get lost in the worldliness well that's what's next, man<sup>23</sup>

Majesty's rap faded off as her eyes wandered across Leimert Park Village, seemingly getting lost in the world(liness) again. She then leapt back into her story abruptly: "So when I got here, when I finally reached the earth, the devil's been trying to kill me. From day one. But I'm not even going to go into all that." Our conversation went on for over an hour. Majesty shared more of her rap lyrics, but she never returned to this supernatural level of autobiographical testifying.<sup>24</sup> Nor did she end up telling me all the practical details of her life. Those details, she told me, were for the book that she intends to someday write about her own life story. In a parting declaration, she uttered, "I'm here to win souls for Christ *by all means necessary*." In this one turn of phrase, Majesty conjured Malcolm X's well-known Black Power slogan, "Liberate our minds *by any means necessary*," and rapper KRS-One's nod to Malcolm's legacy in his 1998 album title, *By All Means Necessary*. The album cover displays KRS-One, in baseball cap and dark shades, recreating the notorious photograph of Malcolm X holding a M1 Carbine assault rifle and peering out of a window—an image originally published in the September 1964 issue of *Ebony* magazine.<sup>25</sup> In that instant, her conversion narrative came full circle, from her early years raised under Black Panthers to her militant, Malcolm-inspired brand of gospel rap street evangelism.

#### HOLY HIP HOP'S AMERICAS

Houston-born Christian rap star Lecrae Devaughn Moore not only shares the same last name as Majesty, but was also raised by a single mother in a politically militant household informed by Civil Rights and Black Power politics. His mother politicized him at an early age, encouraging him to take pride in his racial identity. Lecrae remembers wearing Malcolm X hats and African medallions while sneaking off to his grandmother's house to watch rap videos. Known as "Crazy 'Crae" during his teenage years, he turned to a life of crime, stealing, and dealing drugs with his grandmother's Bible at his side as a good luck charm. At age seventeen, Lecrae hit a dead end and began attending church at his grandmother's request. But it was a performance by the Philadelphia-based Christian rap group Cross

Movement that made him realize he could be Christian and also maintain who he was culturally as *hip hop*. On his ride home, he made a quick turn on the highway, causing his car to roll, the roof to cave in, and windshield to shatter into pieces. In what should have been a fatal accident, Lecrae survived uninjured. He then committed his life to Christ, converting his smashed automobile into his Zion Train toward a new life.<sup>26</sup>

Now president, co-founder, and co-owner of the independent gospel record label Reach Records, Lecrae has released seven studio albums and two mixtapes as a solo Christian hip hop artist. Winner of two Grammy's and seven Dove Awards, Lecrae's music has been endorsed by many professional athletes, including former Los Angeles Laker and current Brooklyn Net Jeremy Lin, who claimed Lecrae was a staple in his pregame music mix. On his 2014 track, "Welcome to America," Lecrae unveils three Americas in three verses: one from his own perspective, one from a war veteran, and one from an immigrant. In the first verse, he raps:

Uh, I was made in America, land of the free, home of the brave  
And right up under your nose you might see a sex slave being traded

He bemoans that in America, people "will do anything for money." As he attacks these lyrics with his usual gravitas, images of iconic American scenes bleed together: buildings ablaze in a riot, people gambling at casinos, brass bands blowing in the streets, soldiers lining in formation, subway trains bolting through underground tunnels, police arresting youth of color, and a homeless man holding out his paper cup. This is a far cry from Irving Berlin's invocation of America as the "land of the free" in "Russian Lullaby," and instead more aligned with the "daymares" experienced in Nas's depictions of American city life. And like Nas, Lecrae also lyrically leaps across the Atlantic to link local American realities with global African histories.

I was born in the mainland; great-grandpa from a strange land  
He was stripped away and given bricks to lay

While Lecrae may feel estranged from Africa as he "was made in America," his enslaved great-grandfather connects him ancestrally to the continent—a truth he has tried to understand since a youth sporting African medallions. Sonically, Africa subtly pulses through the track as a chanted refrain—"Ta na na na muchawa, ta na na na muchawa"—projecting the continent as a diasporic source rather than an active participant in diasporic processes. A descending piano bass line enters to anchor a driving, syncopated, Southern hip hop bounce beat accented by timbale and cymbal hits. The music video fades to black on an image of the Statue of Liberty. Can Lecrae's Zion be found in this "home of the brave"?

Lecrae again questioned the state of America during his spoken word performance at the 2016 BET Hip Hop Awards. Weaving references to Donald Trump's

presidential campaign, the Black Lives Matter movement, private-for-profit prisons, and cultural appropriation, Lecrae professed that he refuses to be silent. With a clear and forceful delivery, he began his spoken word poem with the line, “They tellin’ us ‘Make America Great Again,’” but then fervently questioned, “When was America great again?”

## NO ZION

Seven years earlier, Lecrae reached out to platinum-selling, Grammy Award-winning, Compton-born rapper Kendrick Lamar after hearing the song “Faith” from Lamar’s self-titled 2009 EP. The lyrics had deeply touched Lecrae and he wanted to find out more about what prompted Lamar to compose this track. The two rappers, who appear to occupy separate territories of hip hop—“secular” and “sacred”—communed over their shared tribulations as believers in the world of hip hop. Lecrae and Lamar also shared the same stage at the 2016 BET Hip Hop Awards during which Lamar was awarded “Lyricist of the Year.” He also presented the “I Am Hip Hop Icon Award” to none other than Snoop Dogg—geographies of gospel and gangsta coming full circle.

Similar in structure to Lecrae’s “Welcome to America,” Lamar’s track “Faith” features three verses from the perspective of different people struggling to maintain their faith in God despite the challenges life doles out on a daily basis. Known for his sepulchral soliloquies of the violent and unforgiving gang territories of the South L.A. that birthed him, Lamar wrestles with the real-life murder of his friend at the end of the first verse. From his release of *Good Kid, m.A.A.d. City* in 2012—after which he underwent a baptism on tour with Kanye West—to his 2017 album *DAMN*, Christian themes of good and evil, heaven and hell, apocalypse and afterlife continue to permeate Lamar’s gritty reflections on black life in the City of Angels.<sup>27</sup> In a 2015 *Billboard* interview, Lamar commented, “We’re in the last days, man—I truly in my heart believe that. It’s written.”<sup>28</sup>

Lamar sounds out the hellish landscape of these “last days” in his 2010 track “Heaven and Hell.” He raps about racism and AIDS, police brutality, oil spills, burning buildings, hostages in Afghanistan, child molestation, and “earthquakes that’s government tested” over a multilayered mix of melodic riffs punctuated by hard-knocking snare hits. Offering a final gloss on Hell—“No place to live in, no Zion, see that’s forbidden, we frying”—Lamar then pivots toward Heaven. His Promised Land conjures an assemblage of sounds—musical, spiritual, and joyful:

Malcolm laughing, Martin laughing, Biggie spittin, Pac is rappin,  
 Gregory tappin  
 People singing, bells is ringing, children playing, angels praying

But his heavenly chorus fades away as the volume is turned down on his vocals and the listener is left with over a minute of instrumentals to ponder the departure of this divine sonic geography.

At the 2016 Grammy Music Awards, Lamar performed “The Blacker the Berry” and “Alright”—a rallying song for the Black Lives Matter movement—from his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Shackled in chains and donning a distinctive jailhouse-blue uniform, he shuffled onto a stage set that resembled a prison. The set then transformed into an African village scene with West African drummers and dancers moving in front of a raging bonfire. As Lamar broke free of the chain gang and staggered across the stage, he rapped, “I’m African American; I’m African.” The third act concluded with Lamar rhyming topics from Trayvon Martin to struggles with sobriety to questions about how to use his fame for good. Traveling down the corridors of violence, shame, anger, and anxiety, Lamar declared, “I’m on a path with my Bible.” The performance ended with Lamar’s silhouette against an outline of the continent of Africa with the word “Compton” emblazoned in its center. Lamar seemed to be saying, “This is my Los Angeles.”

What does it mean for the Compton MC, who recently received a key to his city, to traverse the stages of black incarceration and liberation (with his Bible)—to unlock and release Compton within Africa? Lamar’s sonic and visual conversion of Compton into an African nation gestures, once again, toward Los Angeles as a geography of mobility and transformation under the shadow of apocalypse. Despite the somewhat primitivist depiction of the African village setting, Lamar’s performance called attention to the ways that current racial realities are linked to oppressions and injustices that have plagued people of African descent for hundreds of years. Perhaps we (still) *frying* in the fires of Babylon. And fires, like earthquakes, generate destruction as well as the conditions of possibility for new creation.

. . .

Following these musical tracks to and through multiple Babylons and Zions, many places are made audible: Oakland, Watts, Queens, Russia, Jamaica, Zimbabwe, Long Beach City, Berkeley, Leimert Park, Houston, and Compton. Holy hip hop in Los Angeles, while a highly localized and subcultural expression, is enmeshed in a global, multivoiced cacophony of black soundings that underscores religious and social ruptures as well as transatlantic solidarities. Ruptures, despite their inherent violence, produce transformative mixtures and amalgamations. And so an important irony emerges: that something as seemingly niche as gospel rap has become a potent crossroads of black musical diversity and Afro-diasporic religious pluralism.<sup>29</sup> In this way, I have attempted to move discussions of black Christianity beyond a nationalist framing and beyond the thoroughly studied “black church tradition” in an effort to explore religion as a complex social, spatial, and cultural terrain.

The sound stories relayed in this concluding chapter assemble racial, religious, and musical geographies as they reveal the complex proximities of Christianity, Islam, and the Rastafarian movement in the lives of holy hip hoppers and “secular” hip hoppers alike, challenging these religious categories as uniform and fixed. These artists chose hip hop to express something that only music could communicate. What emerges is the audible interpenetration of Zion and Babylon, of Heaven and Hell, of freedom dreams and “daymares,” of Martin and Malcolm, of Jesus and Jah Rastafari, of Africa and America. I weave this hip hop mix not simply to insist on black religious, political, and musical modernity as hybridity, but to illustrate how holy hip hop articulates a diasporic black pluralism that highlights the spiritual ambivalences and powerful possibilities of conversion. Redemptive practices become revolutionary acts. Deep social rifts trigger healing hip hop riffs.

Across the pages of the entire book, conversion emerges as a collective social project among the victims of organized abandonment to “save” the city by performing music that brings wholeness, holiness, and hope. I have described how a subset of black Angelenos use hip hop to create lives of religious meaning and to sustain a quest for deliverance. Holy hip hoppers enact conversion as a religious transformation, a musical transposition from secular rap to gospel rap, and as a spatial tactic of creatively repurposing the urban environment. Exploring these different iterations and practices of salvation shows us how hip hop has become an idiom of widespread conversion in the midst of black millennial unrest in the twenty-first century.

Avoiding the depiction of race as a unified entity, I have situated holy hip hop within black heterogeneous neighborhoods and black cultural traffics, but also specific structures of racial formation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. At the same time, I have offered a very up-close rendering of the intertwined life stories, conversion narratives, and daily micropractices of holy hip hoppers in an attempt to get below some of these structures. Their everyday lives provide both a window into the cruel realities and pernicious tales of black victimization, incarceration, and death *and* an antidote to these highly circulated and one-sided visions of black America.

Lastly, my aim has been to study hip hop not just as a distinct musical genre, but as an intertextual nexus of musical, social, and religious practices that transforms city spaces. While holy hip hop soundings—and the new social relations they engender—continue to reverberate across Los Angeles, the spatial transformations produced through holy hip hop often leave little to no visual trace. These fleeting geographies of conversion remind us of the many black L.A.’s that have been pushed out, systematically dismantled, or rendered invisible—but not silent. They remind us how *place is sounded*. And so let this be a call not just to further examine the intersections of pop music, race, and religion, but to attune ourselves to the

many “invisible churches” and musical undergrounds that hold a microphone to unsung urban soundscapes and life stories at the margins.

The search for that divine city of Zion, through music and ministry, continues to lead holy hip hoppers down many roads, precipitating unexpected journeys and interactions—missionary trips to Africa and the Caribbean, processions through the streets of downtown Los Angeles in the name of Black Lives Matter, visits to the Moorish Science Temple on Crenshaw Boulevard to build bridges with Muslim brothers, and excursions to Chicano churches in the Inland Empire. Khanchuz still records and performs gospel rap throughout the greater Los Angeles, sometimes with his daughter, Jaysha, while Cue has stepped back from music making to focus on his Skid Row ministry and social justice work. Sharon Collins-Heads still directs the Hip Hop Church L.A. out of Inglewood, which is now in its eleventh year. Hip Hopposite no longer performs together but Celah, the lead MC, is still making gospel hip hop music. Pastor Graham leads his own church in Gardena called City of the Lord. And a new cadre of young holy hip hop MCs, DJs, and pastors are being raised in the scene. They are blazing their own roads to Zion throughout the Southland, using gospel rap as a way to remap, reconnect, and remake terrains rife with social fractures. The “City of Angels” has not yet arrived, but they must keep going toward it.