



Western Histories

William Deverell, series editor

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Post-Ghetto

Reimagining South Los Angeles

Edited by Josh Sides

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- 42 Richard F. Catalano et al., "Prevention Science and Positive Youth Development: Competitive or Cooperative Frameworks?" *Journal of Adolescent Health* 31, no. 6 (2002): 230–39.
- 43 Todd I. Herrenkohl et al., "Risk Factors for Violence and Relational Aggression in Adolescence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22, no. 4 (2007): 386–406; J. David Hawkins et al., "A Review of Predictors of Youth Violence," in *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions*, ed. Rolf Loeber and David P. Farrington (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998), 106–46.
- 44 Thornberry et al., *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*; Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.
- 45 Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*; Advancement Project, *Citywide Gang Activity Reduction Strategy: Phase III*.
- 46 For more on empirical problems with the broad inclusion of risk factors in risk assessments in the area of juvenile justice, see Christopher Baird, "A Question of Evidence: A Critique of Risk Assessment Models Used in the Justice System" (special report, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009).
- 47 Measures appropriate for this context were selected by reviewing the scales used in past research. While researchers often share measures, studies frequently assess these general constructs in different ways, and wording variations are quite common. We obtained various measures of the constructs from publications or directly from colleagues and would like to thank Finn Esbensen, Terence Thornberry, Pam Porter, David Huizinga, Karl Hill, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, and Rebecca Stallings for their assistance. We selected the GREF measures from the studies that included study samples that approximated the anticipated GRYD population. Past data sets that used the selected scales to measure selected risk factors for middle school-aged youth were used to calculate cut points, including data from the G.R.E.A.T. evaluation from Finn Esbensen, the YFAM evaluation, and Maxson's Adolescent Violence Project.
- 48 Hill et al., "Childhood Risk Factors"; Thornberry et al., *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*.
- 49 Paul E. Meehl, *Clinical versus Statistical Prediction: A Theoretical Analysis and a Review of the Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954); William M. Grove et al., "Clinical versus Mechanical Prediction: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Assessment* 12, no. 1 (2000): 19–30.
- 50 Patricia M. Harris, "What Community Supervision Officers Need to Know about Actuarial Risk Assessment and Clinical Judgment," *Federal Probation* 70, no. 2 (2006): 8–14; Edward J. Latessa, Francis T. Cullen, and Paul Gendreau, "Beyond Correctional Quackery: Professionalism and the Possibility of Effective Treatment," *Federal Probation* 66, no. 2 (2002): 43–49; Lowenkamp and Latessa, "Understanding the Risk Principle."
- 51 Dodge et al., *Deviant Peer Influences in Programs for Youth*; Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.

"GENTE-FICATION" ON DEMAND:
THE CULTURAL REDEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH LOS ANGELES

This city wasn't a city. And if it was, it was a hidden city. There were several cities within it, and you had to yield to it, before it revealed any of its magic to you. . . . Los Angeles was a rambling maze that didn't apologize for what it was. Instead it forced you to find the city within you. In that way it was a grown-up city.

—Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* (2007)

In Karen Tei Yamashita's magical-realist L.A. novel *Tropic of Orange* (1997), the African American character Buzzworm is a funny sort of community organizer. Towering like his beloved palm trees over the action of the novel, he cuts a striking figure: "Big black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet, an Afro shirt with palm trees painted all over it, dreads, pager and Walkman belted to his waist, sound plugged into one ear and two or three watches at least on both his wrists." A freelance social worker and self-described "Angel of Mercy," Buzzworm walks the streets of South Los Angeles, ministering to the needy of all types—a Salvadoran street peddler trying to unload her oranges, bananas, and peanuts; a black gang member who has just dodged a bullet; even a crass, successful Japanese American news producer who denies that she has any needs whatsoever. Born and raised near the corner of Florence and Normandie—the exact intersection where black assailants attacked white truck driver Reginald Denny during the Rodney King riots—Buzzworm speaks to the possibility that black strength might be channeled into interracial collaboration rather than violence. As the two syllables of his name convey, Buzzworm is both sophisticated and humble, media-savvy and grassroots-oriented. And with all those watches, he knows what time it is: when traffic on the 110 Freeway is paralyzed in endless gridlock and a homeless colony takes residence on

a strip of it, he seizes the political opportunity and turns the media spotlight on the trials of the poor.¹

Tropic of Orange is a dizzyingly postmodern multicultural novel. It evokes a world where characters are marked less by their point of origin than by the arc of their aspiration, where the borders of identity exist to be playfully manipulated, and where the Tropic of Cancer itself can literally migrate to Los Angeles, defying the iron laws of geography. But for all its giddy air of excitement, the novel is also a serious-minded effort to imagine how the most economically ravaged parts of Los Angeles might regenerate themselves as communities. Buzzworm's plan on that score involves a redefinition of "gentrification" along more democratic lines:

Not the sort [of gentrification that] brings in poor artists.

Sort where people living there become their own gentrifiers. Self-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification. Latinos had this word: *gerite*. Something translated like *us*. Like *folks*. That sort of gente-fication. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees. Some laughed at Buzzworm's plan. Called his plan *This Old Hood*. They could laugh, but he was still trying to go to heaven.

Buzzworm is pegged as a listener—his Walkman is always on and often tuned to non-English-speaking radio stations—and his very invention of the term *gente-fication* suggests the creative outcomes that can result from "tuning in" to alternate frequencies, to communities not your own. It also speaks, more directly, to the possibility of a grassroots black-Latino-Asian alliance in Los Angeles, a coalition rooted less in identity politics and more in an ethics of solidarity and mutual care.²

Yet, there is a reason why people laugh at Buzzworm's dream of *gente-fication*, and it is the same reason that *Tropic of Orange* seemed so out-of-step—good-hearted to the point of cheesiness—when it was published a mere five years after the Rodney King riots. In the wake of that event, intense pessimism about the future of Los Angeles gripped many artists and intellectuals; the city appeared to be in the throes of "death by globalization," its balkanized citizens at each other's throats while a globally interconnected labor market fatefully pushed L.A.'s working class and even middle class into a race to the bottom. Anna Deavere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) offered a set of monologues on the riot

in which a diverse group of Angelenos seemed especially gifted at talking past each other and dwelling in their private pain. Mike Davis followed his *City of Quartz* (1990), whose scathing analysis of L.A.'s class and racial inequality seemed to have forecast the riots, with *Ecology of Fear* (1998), which upped the apocalyptic ante: L.A.'s political calamities were going to be compounded by a set of ecological catastrophes, Davis predicted, as the greed of city elites pitted the city against nature itself. And T. Coraghessan Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) offered a parallel analysis of social and ecological disaster. Its well-meaning "liberal humanist" protagonist, the nature writer Delaney Mossbacher, descends into a homicidal rage as he becomes convinced that an illegal migrant from Mexico is threatening the well-being of his gated community. At the end of the novel, Delaney's beloved corner of Topanga Canyon is consumed by a horrific mudslide that swallows Delaney himself, until he looks, tellingly, "like a man drowning in s—."³

Something strange happened, though, on the way to death by globalization: Los Angeles twitched back to life, galvanized by a multiracial, labor-led movement for "social democracy in one city." This new Los Angeles-based social movement emerged out of a series of concrete campaigns focusing on the struggles of the working poor—an expansive living-wage campaign, union drives among home health care workers and janitors, the fight for affordable public transportation spearheaded by the Bus Riders Union, and more. Umbrella organizations like the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) challenged and redefined the term "new economy," which conventionally conjured up images of high-tech workers telecommuting to work in a newly rootless world, insisting instead that the new L.A. economy be tied to community needs for decent-paying jobs and environment-friendly practices. Perhaps most crucially for the purposes of this essay, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor sought out strategies that would bring black and Latino Angelenos together. Fighting against the sense that African Americans were losing jobs to low-earning Latinos in the building trades and janitorial services, for instance, the County Federation looked to groom African American leadership, raise the floor of wages, and reserve segments for African American workers in those areas. The consolidation of this new black-brown alliance was reflected in the fate of former labor organizer Antonio Villaraigosa's two mayoral campaigns. In 2001, he had been defeated by an odd and, as it happened, unstable coalition of blacks and white conservatives; in 2005, he rode to an easy victory by adding black Angelenos to his Latino-labor-Anglo-liberal base.⁴

This fragile and hard-won alliance between blacks and Latinos grew out of a pressing demographic reality: the transformation of many bastions of "black L.A." into mixed-race neighborhoods, with a large influx of Latinos tipping the balance. Typically, the fabled Lincoln Theater—the musical hub of L.A.'s black community in the 1930s and 1940s, the "West Coast Apollo"—now hosts a Spanish-speaking congregation, the Iglesia de Jesucristo, Sur Central. Numbers suggest the massive scale of this shift. The larger South Los Angeles region was 55 percent black in 1990, 40 percent black in 2000, and only 31 percent black in 2006, as tens of thousands of black Angelenos left the area and a larger number of migrants from Mexico and Central America settled and raised families there. No longer could black Angelenos press claims for representation in city government based simply on demographic predominance in South Los Angeles. With only a few areas in South Los Angeles, such as Leimert Park, Baldwin Hills, and Inglewood, retaining a majority-black presence, African Americans had to find a coalition beyond the black-white liberal alliance that stood behind the administrations of Mayor Tom Bradley (1973–93). As Raphael Sonenshein and Mark Drayse have observed, "African Americans have found themselves playing catch-up in a new era of diverse city politics. Forging alliances with available groups on a self-interested, pragmatic basis will inevitably be a key part of the new black politics."⁵

We might ask, then: how much has the culture of South Los Angeles prepared the way for this "new black politics"? The rest of this essay will explore three separate attempts to reimagine the terrain of South Los Angeles for the twenty-first century: first, the underground hip-hop music that emerged from the Crenshaw district's Good Life Café and Project Blowed and offered a freestyling alternative to gangsta rap; second, the recent boomlet of novels set in South Los Angeles, which seek out the hidden interracial history of the area as a prelude to its open-ended future; and third, artist Edgar Arceneaux's Watts House Project, an ongoing "collaborative artwork in the shape of a neighborhood redevelopment." These three projects represent only a small fraction of the culture produced through and around South Los Angeles—after all, with a population of almost a million residents, the area would be the fourth-largest city in California if it were incorporated as such—but they do suggest three overlapping modes of engagement. In music, literature, and the built environment, artists are upending conventional representations of South Los Angeles as America's ultimate urban combat zone. Instead, they are underlining—and, more powerfully, embodying—a dream of community, putting *gentefication* into practice.

Two Decades of Underground L.A. Hip-Hop

The history of underground L.A. hip-hop begins with the story of an open-mic, held every Thursday night from December 1989 through 1995, at the Good Life Café. For most of the week, the Good Life was a health-food store, offering an alternative to the highly processed options available at the nearest supermarket. On Thursday nights it became the center of lyrical battles between local hip-hop emcees, offering an alternative to the rap music then dominating the airwaves. Aiming to create the "atmosphere of a serious arts workshop," Good Life owner B. Hall forbade the use of obscenities onstage, and anyone who slipped one in would be roundly booed. The performers took the prohibition as a goad to aesthetic innovation: since the usual provocative moves were banned, they would have to find more subtle ones. Hip-hop of that moment had been undeniably ghetto-centric, its imagination driven by the attempt to describe "the 'hood," but Good Lifers aimed largely to step outside the aesthetic of caricature that, tellingly, excited neighborliness when it turned the "neighborhood" into a "hood." As journalist-documentarian Brian Cross observed more generally, "The success of the Good Life was a reaction to the more cartoonish Delicious Vinyl pop-radio hits of the day at the one extreme and the gangsta-thugs—at the other, with dope money and radio payola always lurking in the background. . . . The Good Life was the first self-consciously indie-thinking movement in hip-hop driven by a passionate commitment to lose all this garbage."⁶

At the same time that gangsta rap was searing an indelible image of "South Central" in the American, and even global, imagination, Good Lifers moved away from the gangsta aesthetic in two crucial ways. First, gangsta rap forcefully developed an analogy between gang posses and rap posses, putting a premium on stylish boasts that belittled rival posses and defied police authority; the "badman" was the key persona of gangsta. In N.W.A.'s genre-establishing *Straight Outta Compton*, for instance, Ice Cube bragged of "mix[ing] up" his rivals and "cook[ing] them up like gumbo," claimed a "crime record like Charles Manson," and pledged to "swarm on any m---- in a blue uniform." By contrast, Good Lifers thought of hip-hop as a spiritual and political alternative to the world of gangs and drugs. Abstract Rude (Aaron Pointer) rapped that

Hip hop, if it were not for you,
I would probably walk the street,
Carry Glucks and heat,
Be on some ill s— that you would not believe,

Maybe a cat thief giving you grief, family beef.
Instead I use the inner eye, energy and chi.

Likewise, the paradigmatic Good Life group Freestyle Fellowship took its name to mark a healthy distance from the posses and crews that dominated the gangsta rap scene. Myka 9 (Michael Troy) remembered thinking, "Dude, I don't want to be a crew. Why don't we become a fellow-ship? Let's pull something more conscious, spiritual." Good Lifers tended to embrace traditional bohemian and political imperatives (turn on and expand your consciousness; expose the unspoken rules of "the system") rather than traditional badman ones (go out guns blazing).⁷

Second, the *music* coming out of the Good Life departed from gangsta's "hard" aesthetic, which one musicologist has described as the "hip-hop sublime," in that it was meant to inspire both fear and pleasure. The music performed at the Good Life was marked by a "freestyling" aesthetic, where the aspiration was less to be menacing and invulnerable than to be open to an ongoing flow of possibilities. As the Freestyle Fellowship announced on the opening manifesto of their first album *To Whom It May Concern*... (1991), "Acknowledging rap as an artform, we break the rules and set new standards in the vocal arena. By experimenting in tonal and harmonic inflections and sporadic pitch changes in delivery, we'll stir your emotion and take rap music to its threshold of enlightenment." Self-consciously modeling the rhythm of their raps after the postbop soloing of Miles Davis and John Coltrane, Good Lifers seemed, in the words of one observer, "like musicians trapped in rappers' bodies." Their chief vocal method (the one advertised above) became known as "chopping": words delivered rapid-fire, with rhythmic displacements that played in and around the beat, and with internal rhymes that emphasized the angularity of the phrasing. The chopper par excellence was Myka 9, who aspired to the vocalese mastery of jazz singer Jon Hendricks, who had himself cut an album (*Freddie Freeloader*) with words set to the solos of Davis, Coltrane, and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley. In all, this was a far cry from the dominant vocal strategy of gangsta rap, in which words were spoken, not sung, and often with a finger-jabbing insistence; the vocal styles coming out of the Good Life were plastic, one might say, rather than hard.⁸

Yet, along with its far-reaching ambitions to "take rap music to the threshold of enlightenment," the early Good Life milieu was also decidedly black—black in its demographics, and black in the cultural nationalism that suffused the scene and its productions. To question a rival emcee's blackness was one of the most serious insults that could be slung

in the "battles" around the mic; a virtuosic blackness (and arguably a virtuosic black masculinity) was implicitly what most Good Life rappers aimed to perform. One of the few Latino emcees to emerge from the Good Life, 2Mex, testified with both ambivalence and appreciation to its "pro-black" vibe:

We got sweated for being Mexican. It was very pro-black. So when I got to the Good Life and there was a lot of that more militant vibe, it was just something that I wasn't up on, and I appreciated it if it was something that was making people more proud. I thought it was beautiful.

Nonblacks who survived the Good Life's initiation rites seem, like 2Mex, to have found a place for themselves within its putatively black aesthetic. Cut Chemist (Lucas MacFadden), perhaps the only white artist to emerge from the Good Life, remembered that the word "devil" was floated a number of times in his presence (as in "white devil")—to which he riposted that "if the devil makes beats, they're going to be hot." He became the turntablist for the aptly named Unity Committee, one of the Good Life's main crews.⁹

The contours of this black aesthetic, its openness and its combativeness, can be observed in Freestyle Fellowship's "Inner City Boundaries," from their would-be breakthrough album *Innercity Griots* (1993). Featuring a jazz combo (vibraphone, saxophone, bass, and drums) that might have been at home on a 1960s Blue Note recording session, and propelled by a sinuously funky beat, the song was clearly indebted to earlier generations of black musicians. At the same time, it announced "the birth of a new generation of blackness," one that was "forced to set its boundaries." Its chorus (sung, not rapped) was propelled by an equation between the desire to be "righteous" and "conscious," the desire to be free and open, and the desire to be black:

I gotta be righteous, I gotta be me
I gotta be conscious, I gotta be free
I gotta be able to counterattack
I gotta be stable I gotta be black
I gotta be open, gotta be me and
I gotta keep hopin' we're gonna be free
I gotta be able to counterattack
I gotta be stable I gotta be black

"Inner City Boundaries" was pointedly *not* nonviolent: released just a year after the riots, it put a premium on the need to "counterattack" in self-defense, in the name of both freedom and psychological stability. The "enemy" who "crossed the wrong boundary" was warned, ominously, that he would "disappear here and end up in a tree"—threatened in effect with a lynching. Yet the song's center of gravity rested on the power of self-knowledge rather than the power of a gun. Its first lines—repeated twice over the course of the song and scattered in increasingly esoteric melodic patterns—announced that "Once we have the knowledge of self as a people, then we could be free and no devil could enter the boundaries."¹⁰

When the Good Life closed its open-mic in 1995, the epicenter of L.A.'s alternative hip-hop community moved a mile and a half south, to the Project Blowed open-mic in the commercial village of Leimert Park. The Leimert Park strip was, in many ways, a perfect fit for L.A.'s alternative rap scene. Leimert's arts institutions had roots in the local Black Arts movement of the late 1960s, and they drew on the same mixture of cultural nationalism, bohemianism, and progressive politics that colored the hip-hop vision of the Good Life. More specifically, postboop jazz—the music that inspired the aesthetic of "chopping"—was at the heart of Leimert's development as an arts district in the wake of the Rodney King riots. The scene was anchored by the jazz performance spaces of 5th Street Dick's Coffee House and the World Stage, and many of Leimert's "village elders" had strong connections to the music: Kamau Daáood operated the record store Final Vinyl and performed jazz-inflected poetry; café owner Richard Fulton was a street-level jazz impresario; World Stage owner Billy Higgins was a legendary jazz drummer; and Horace Tapscott, who lent his skills on piano to a Freestyle Fellowship recording session, was an innovative bandleader whose Arkestra had supplied the pulse for black L.A.'s community-arts scene for thirty years. The growing presence in Leimert of Project Blowed—housed in filmmaker Ben Caldwell's KAOS Network arts space, just a few doors down from 5th Street Dick's and the World Stage—promised, at least in theory, to bridge the generational gap that often divided old and young members of the black community. As Daáood announced in his poem "Leimert Park":

i stand on the o.g. corner
 tell old school stories with a bebop tongue
 to the hip hop future
 i see new rainbows in their eyes
 as we stand in the puddles of melted chains

With its multicultural evocation of "new rainbows," Daáood's poem points to a striking aspect of the relationship between the older generation of jazz bohemians and the newer generation of hip-hop artists. Elder statesmen like Daáood had mellowed in their Afrocentrism since their days in the Black Arts movement, and they now encouraged a more inclusive vision of community, rooted in "village" values of mutual care but not structured purely along racial lines.¹¹

The relationship between "Project Blowedians" and the Leimert business community was not without tension. Older black entrepreneurs accused Blowedians of littering, selling and using drugs, writing graffiti, and driving away their business—in essence, of being the sort of "ghetto youth" that were to be feared rather than welcomed. At one low point in January 1996 the LAPD raided Project Blowed, quite possibly in response to these sorts of local complaints. But in light of the music produced out of Project Blowed, these accusations seem quite ironic. Project Blowed aspired to be, in the title of an Abstract Tribe Unique album, a "South Central Thynk Taynk," and much of its intellectual energy was devoted to deglamorizing gang life and repurposing the neighborhood. "Life is hell, so why don't you dwell in your hood?" asked Abstract Rude, in a song that ruefully examined the lives destroyed in the crossfire of the LAPD and local gangs. What the hood needed, according to a Project Blowed manifesto that was a ringing endorsement of the politics of uplift, was a "haiku d'etat"—a "poetry takeover" that would restore "dignity," "integrity," and "unity" to the community. On a lighter note, Project Blowed artists were not averse to satirizing the very "nuisance" that their audience was sometimes imagined to be. The worldly moralist Aceyalone (Eddie Hayes), for instance, warned his listeners not to become a mumbling, stumbling disgrace, "drooling from the mouth with them bloodshot eyes," unable to "remember a thing no matter how hard you try." No puritan, Aceyalone had straightforward advice for those who would indulge in drugs or liquor: "master your high."¹²

Over the last decade, the circumscribed "hood" has, surprisingly, loosened its hold over the imagination of Good Lifers and Project Blowedians, and arguably over the imagination of hip-hop as a whole. In the early 1990s, hip-hop seemed an intensely territorial art, riven and structured by the East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry, and subdivided into local groupuscules (in Los Angeles, for instance, such artists as Cypress Hill, Compton's Most Wanted, and the South Central Cartel). Ethnomusicologist

Murray Forman has coined the term "extreme local" to evoke how keenly hip-hop drew attention to particular streets, neighborhoods, telephone area codes, and zip codes. The insistent hip-hop claim to "represent" was, he underlines, a claim to represent a place back to those who identified with it. But for various reasons large and small—the increasing ease of digital collaboration, which unites musicians and producers from vastly different locales; the relaxing of the traditional condemnation of "crossing over" as "selling out," given the decline of mass markets and the expansion of niche markets; the "accepted eclectic" identity of many Good Life and Project Blowed artists, which led them away from trademarking a particular sound as the sound of South Los Angeles; the growing prominence and influence of Latino emcees and Latino-led groups within Los Angeles; the smaller and more scattered place that black Angelenos inhabit within Los Angeles, which makes it less plausible to equate "the hood" with the black community—alternative L.A. hip-hop no longer seems as fixed in its attachment to one 'hood, one identity, rooted in a black aesthetic.¹³

One can see this shift in the work of original Good Lifer Aceyalone. Ever-stylish and ever-interested in the lineaments of different styles, Aceyalone has pursued three radically divergent projects, each of which situates his music in a different soundscape. In *Magnificent City* (2006), Aceyalone teamed with Ohio- and Philadelphia-based underground producer RJD2 to make an album that was alternately punchy and upbeat ("All For U"), smooth and soulful ("Fire"), dissonant as a Bomb Squad-era Public Enemy production ("Cornbread, Eddy, and Me"), and icily techno ("Moore")—to take just the first four tracks. (The album also ended with the floating and glossy "Beautiful Mine," an instrumental version of which was later adopted as the opening credits music for the TV show *Mad Men*.) If *Magnificent City* seemed, in its sampling of styles, to suggest that underground hip-hop was heading in a multitude of directions, *Lightning Strikes* (2007) brought Aceyalone back to 1970s Jamaica and the roots of hip-hop with its dancehall and reggae production. Then, traveling backward another decade or two for his source material, Aceyalone followed *Lightning Strikes* with *Aceyalone & the Lonely Ones* (2009), a tribute to doo-wop and Motown that slipped dissonant insinuations into its largely nostalgic sound. Its single "The Way It Was" featured a catchy chorus in falsetto, sung over a Supremes-era backbeat, and might have been at home on Motown-inspired, neo-soul releases by Raphael Saadiq and Mayer Hawthorne, if its refrain did not hammer on an unsettling, noir-like question: "Is your weapon out?"¹⁴

Aceyalone's video work has similarly made it hard to locate him within any particular contemporary urban locale. The video for "The Way It Was" leans decisively on nostalgia for its effect, alternating between images of Aceyalone in a vintage red Cadillac, cruising down the sun-drenched Santa Monica coast, and black-and-white footage of the song being performed in what appears to be a black neighborhood club in the early 1960s. There is no more 'hood here—just idealized images of "alone time" and "party time" untouched by postindustrial decline. Likewise, in the video for "Think Eye Can" (2009), a positive-message-rap collaboration with Abstract Rude and Myka 9, the camera cuts between a multiethnic group of skateboarders and BMX bicyclists at several L.A. locations—the Venice Beach boardwalk, the Watts Towers, the L.A. Coliseum, a railroad yard—and watches them practice their hotdogging moves as an example of motivation on the highest level. The "extreme local" seems to have been transformed into the "sprawling local" here, as the original Good Lifers mug for the camera and travel from one part of the city to another in search of summer fun.¹⁵

This movement away from representing "the hood" in extreme local terms—as a place where constriction is a necessary condition for possibility, as in "Inner City Boundaries"—can be glimpsed also in the work of the Visionaries, a Southern California hip-hop supergroup that has aimed to bring neighborliness back into its representations of the 'hood. The Visionaries came together through the efforts of South Bay emcees Key-Kool (Kikuo Nishi) and Rhettmatic (Nazareth Nirza), whose album *Kozmonautz* (1995) is commonly regarded as a breakthrough for Asian American hip-hop. On *Kozmonautz*, Key-Kool and Rhettmatic reached out to fellow emcees 2Mex (Alejandro Ocana), Lord Zen, LMNO (James Kelley), and Dannu to record the track "Visionaries (Don't Act Scary)"—the beginnings of a collaboration that has produced four albums thus far. As LMNO raps on their single "If You Can't Say Love" (2004), the Visionaries understand themselves as an example of multiethnic community in practice: "do-gooders with the filtration, / We're Mexican, Islander, Euro-African, Asian. / Celebrate creator before creation, / Division we're erasin.'" Notably, there is no simply "white" representative in this catalogue of identities—a sign perhaps of how 'filtration' has turned the mainstream interethnic. The video for "If You Can't Say Love" follows the progress of a multigenerational, multiethnic house party, one that fills the backyard of a modest home (the group's turntablist sets up shop in the kitchen). Beginning with only the members of the group setting up the party and ending with a lawn packed with grandparents, parents, friends, wives, and

children, the video suggests how the music itself has the power to generate a community, and how close quarters can be the best quarters of all.¹⁶

The Visionaries' "In the Good" might be taken as a manifesto of this movement toward the reinvention of the hood, a movement that aims to bring together discrete neighborhoods in a larger network of mutuality. Just as the video for "Thynk Eye Can" leads the viewer from Venice to Watts to University Park, so "In the Good" takes the viewer on a tour of Southern Californian geography, from L.A.'s Mid-City (the intersection of La Brea Avenue and Washington Boulevard) to North Torrance, Cerritos, Long Beach, and San Diego. These are the areas where the individual Visionaries first connected to hip-hop, and each rapper in turn relates how the neighborhoods "made me who I am, / Taught me how to be a man." There is no desire to equate these neighborhoods, which retain their specificity: for instance, Lord Zen raps about "growing up in the [L.A.] projects . . . where the darkest darkness falls on the block" and "ghetto prophets speak in codes to those that know," while Key-Kool bikes through the streets of North Torrance, recalling record swap meets and b-boy dancing outside a shopping mall. But there is a shared sense of a common initiation into the multiracial culture of hip-hop, where individual stylization provides a means of surviving in postindustrial times. The Long Beach-raised LMNO raps about "hericurl mullets, skaters and gangsters who ain't afraid to pull it. . . / kids sagging it free, wrapping a sheet around a dead body in the street / when the toejam's busting, listening to the beats"—as good a picture as any of the life-and-death struggles answered by hip-hop's insistent rhythms, by its call to community (which brings "skaters and gangsters" together), and by its multiracial working-class accents. In this admittedly "visionary" music, the jheri curl can join forces with the mullet, just as Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Euro-Americans can find common cause in consciousness-raising hip-hop. In tonsorial and musical style, it seems, anything is possible.¹⁷

Enmity and Mutuality: The Intimate History of South L.A.

Like contemporary underground hip-hop, the L.A. novel has registered the shifting urban terrain of the last twenty years. In Chris Abani's haunting *Virgin of Flames*, the artist-protagonist carries the name "Black," but he is nothing like the allegorical "strong black man" of much Black Arts writing from the 1960s and 1970s. Living in a pocket of East Los Angeles, far from any sort of black community, Black is the son of a Salvadoran mother and an Igbo father named Frank (no Igbo name is given, and Black feels acutely the blankness of his African origins). He is a racial cipher—

"dark enough to be black, yet light enough to be something else"—in a multiracial city: even his so-called Blackmobile, the dilapidated Volkswagen bus he drives around the city, is a bright yellow. He is also acutely troubled in his sexual and racial identity, painting his face white and dressing up regularly in a wedding dress and blonde wig in order to impersonate the Virgin Mary (whom he sees in visions during sex). In the novel's climactic scene—which transpires ironically to the soundtrack of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, that Black Arts spiritual touchstone—Black suddenly attacks the transsexual stripper who is his lover and muse, pummeling her in a fit of self-loathing and rage. The novel ends on a similarly brutal note: while in his wedding dress, Black lights himself on fire with a casually dropped cigarette, and he is soon enveloped in flames. It is a harsh, seemingly capricious ending, less poetic justice than the hollow laughter of fate. Black becomes his own "virgin of flames," purifying himself in a spectacular auto-da-fé, just after he has committed a sin that, as he acknowledges, has turned him into a "monster."¹⁸

With its tragic denouement, *The Virgin of Flames* may be the most sobering L.A. novel of the last two decades, but several others share its basic narrative premise—that we must come to grips with our tangled racial identities, or die. Nina Revoyr's *Southland* (2003) and Walter Mosley's *Little Scarlet* (2004) are South Central murder-mysteries, both set around the Watts Riot of 1965, and in each the mystery can be solved, in typical noir style, only by puncturing the "official story" of the city with its secret history. And what is this secret history of Los Angeles? Curiously, it is a version of the "new new" social history of Los Angeles, which has uncovered a rich multiethnic past in L.A. neighborhoods, like Boyle Heights and Crenshaw, commonly thought to be simply segregated. Such scholars as George Sánchez, Mark Wild, and Scott Kurashige have challenged L.A. historians to think of multiethnic neighborhoods as the norm rather than the exception in L.A.'s past, and they have unearthed examples of more radical multiracial politics that put the Bradley coalition of the 1970s and 1980s in a new perspective. Like these historians, Revoyr and Mosley ask what stories of mutual entanglement lie beneath the more obvious story of ghettoization and segregation. But they also delve, as novelists do, into questions of psychological motive—how to account for race-inflected love and race-inflected hatred?—that L.A. historians, for now, have largely left unattended. Their murder-mysteries can only be solved if their detectives explore the intimate history of the neighborhood.¹⁹

Set in Watts just after the flames have died down, Mosley's *Little Scarlet* opens with a vignette that establishes the novel's moral center. The

detective Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins is visiting the burnt-out shell of Steinman's Shoe Repair, a store torched to the ground on the riot's first night. A black customer comes to Theodore Steinman, the store's owner and a German émigré, and, shaking with a rage that brings him close to tears, demands a pair of nice shoes he had left with the cobbler. The shoes have obviously been destroyed in the fire, but Steinman offers the man \$10 as recompense. After the customer refuses the offer and huffs out of the store, Easy asked Steinman why he made it:

"He was hurting," the small man replied. "He wanted justice."

"That's not your job."

"It is all of our job," he said, staring at me with blue eyes.

"You cannot forget that."

Steinman's example suggests that, no matter how often one is turned into a scapegoat (and Steinman would appear to have been doubly scapegoated, by Nazis in the 1930s and by black Angelenos in the 1960s), it is still one's responsibility to understand and attend to other claims of loss. Such a "job" certainly cannot be left to the police, who in this novel subscribe to a clannish view of justice—"serving and protecting" white lives and property—that inspired the riot in the first place. And so it is the Jewish middleman-storeowner, sometimes demonized as a parasite or interloper in black militant rhetoric of the 1960s, who appears as a figure of conscience in Mosley's reconstruction of 1960s Los Angeles.²⁰

This opening move forecasts Mosley's complex engagement with the Watts Riot and its meaning. Easy is soon called onto a case by a reluctant LAPD chief, who fears that Los Angeles will erupt again if a murder becomes public before it is solved: a young black woman in Watts, Nola Payne, or "Little Scarlet," has seemingly been raped and killed by a white man, and the police have little ability to investigate the case themselves, given how the community fears and distrusts them. The murder appears to be a straightforward crime of racial violence, and in this sense Payne's death seems connected to the deaths of the thirty-three black Angelenos killed in the riot, largely by the police. But Easy comes to unravel a more enigmatic story: the white man who visited Payne was her lover, not her killer, and the killer was a homeless black man named Harold with an obsessive loathing for black women who date white men. The screw takes a further turn when Easy discovers the circumstances behind Harold's homelessness: he was the son of a grasping black woman who has been

passing for white and who refused to claim her son as her own because the color of his skin betrayed her masquerade. "Pain has a memory of its own," says Easy at an earlier point in the novel, and Harold's anger illustrates this aphorism perfectly. Treated "like dirt" by a mother who covers up her own racial identity with "enough makeup to star in an opera," he channels his own pain into a murderous rage at other women who trouble the racial divide.²¹

The mystery of *Little Scarlet*, then, is solved only by uncovering two interracial relationships that existed on the down low—Little Scarlet's romance with her white lover, and the interracial relationship (whose interracial character was hidden even from the husband) that produced Harold. It is perfectly clear why, in the universe of *Little Scarlet*, these interracial relationships would be hidden. Blacks in its Los Angeles face the hostility of white Angelenos and the harassment of the police; endure a lifetime of foreclosed possibilities (the prodigiously capable Easy is working at the novel's opening as a janitor); and have to understand that, even in death, they will not be treated with dignity by those in power (Payne's murder, it turns out, is one in a series of murders of black women, none of which the police have investigated). But *Little Scarlet* also suggests that the interracial character of Los Angeles is inescapable—and inescapably complicated, too. Its interracial relationships run the gamut, from the hidden love of Payne and her white lover to the sympathetic friendship of Easy and Theodore Steinman; from the edgy, if eventually respectful, collaboration between Easy and a white LAPD detective to the partnership-in-crime that Easy's friend Mouse develops with a white thief, who provides protective coloration by driving the truck that hauls looted goods from the neighborhood. The interracial future of Los Angeles is perhaps forecast most clearly, and most optimistically, in the shape of Easy's own family. Though he has no children of his own, Easy has taken in a Latino boy named Jesus (whom he calls Juice) and a mixed-race child named Feather (whose mother was a white stripper who died shortly after she was born). Rather than fearing L.A.'s interracial future, Easy chooses to embrace it, to commit to it.

Nina Revoyr's *Southland* likewise explores the interracial intimacies that run beneath a South Los Angeles neighborhood, in this case the Crenshaw district of the 1940s through the 1960s. For Jackie Ushida, the novel's protagonist and a UCLA law student living in the contemporary Fairfax district, the making of the Japanese American middle class has, in no small part, been a history of forgetting. What has been forgotten is encapsulated by the contents of a box left by her grandfather Frank Sakai:

\$38,000, along with a 1964 will, never executed, leaving Frank's Crenshaw grocery store to Curtis Martindale. Who was Curtis Martindale, then, and why has her ever-practical grandfather left this money hidden from sight? To solve the mystery, Jackie must become, like Easy Rawlins, an expert in the ways of the old neighborhood; like him, she needs to decipher the relationship between the ways of the police there and the ways of love there. With the help of James Lanier, Curtis's cousin and a community organizer "who live[s] and breathe[s] Crenshaw," she pieces together the prehistory of her grandfather and, in a crucial way, herself. Investigating the "boxed-up" pain of her grandfather, she begins to see the limits of her own protected, middle-class upbringing: "Everyone, it seemed, had something awful in their lives—some death or misfortune that shaped them. But she had nothing; her life had been flat and textureless as a starched white sheet. And while she'd always considered herself lucky to be so blessed, now she felt that she was somehow not real."²²

Curtis, we learn quickly, is part of her grandfather's personal history of misfortune: he was a black teenager killed, along with three other black teenage boys, when he was locked in the freezer of Frank's grocery store on the last day of the Watts Riot. Lanier has long believed that a white cop named Lawson was responsible, and he takes Jackie's interest in the relationship of Curtis and her grandfather as a spur to build a legal case against Lawson. But, as in *Little Scarlet*, the story of the enmity between white cops and black Angelenos proves to be only one piece in a more complicated puzzle. Lawson, it turns out, did beat Curtis, but the murderer was a black police officer named Robert Thomas, a pioneering member of black L.A.'s middle class, whose family had faced a burning cross when they moved into a West Los Angeles neighborhood. Thomas's experience of racial persecution has turned him against those blacks who are disturbing the peace, whether through civil rights action (which Curtis pursues through wildcat sit-ins in Redondo Beach, Torrance, and Beverly Hills) or through the inchoate protest of the Watts Riot (which Curtis sits out, though Thomas does not believe him; Curtis comes to Frank's store to defend it, not burn it). "It's niggers like you who give the rest of us a real bad name," Thomas tells Curtis before locking him in the freezer to die. "White people don't treat you the way you like? Well, it's because you do *this* kind of s—."²³

Southland, then, is a dual meditation on the price of middle-class mobility, taking in both the "flatness" felt by Jackie as her family moved to Torrance and severed itself from its roots in Crenshaw, and the curdled anger felt by blacks like Thomas, who have experienced their pas-

sage into the middle class as a harrowing trial by fire. To the end, Thomas is unrepentant: "At least [the murder] got [Curtis and his friends] off the streets," he says. "Probably saved everyone a lot of trouble in the long run." *Southland* raises the question then: how much do working-class Angelenos need to pull themselves up into the middle class by dissociating themselves from—and, in the most extreme case, murdering—those in the community they have left behind? The mystery of Curtis's murder evolves into the mystery of why the American middle class often imagines itself in opposition to the American working class and poor.²⁴

Again like *Little Scarlet*, *Southland* invests much of its narrative energy in developing the promise of interracial intimacy, which offers an antidote to the bitterness felt by Thomas and the potential for a shared sense of social mobility. Frank comes to own his grocery store through his friendship with its previous owner, Old Man Larabie, who sells the store at a fraction of its market price in recognition of the losses suffered by Frank's family during the interment. Frank wishes to pass it on to Curtis not only because Curtis works diligently at the store, as Frank did for Old Man Larabie, but also because Curtis is (drumroll, please) Frank's son, the product of a longstanding and long-secret affair with Curtis's mother, Alma. Meanwhile, in the present tense of the novel, the relationship between Jackie and Lanier—a relationship intimate but not sexual—suggests how much Japanese American and black Angelenos need one another to understand their shared past and anticipate a promising future. Frank's \$38,000 finally finds an appropriate home at the end of the novel: it is earmarked for Lanier's organization in Crenshaw, the Marcus Garvey Community Center, which Jackie sees at the beginning of the novel, "glitter[ing] against the tans and grays of the surrounding neighborhood, like a mirage in a desert." The \$38,000 will be invested back in the community it came from and, hopefully, make the mirage less so.²⁵

Collaborative Artwork: Edgar Arceneaux's Watts House Project

"Part of my goal here is to prove to people that this neighborhood is ordinary," says Edgar Arceneaux, the director of the Watts House Project and an internationally recognized, Pasadena-based multimedia artist. "We're not trying to counteract any narrative about Watts already—why even touch that? You buttress these things trying to knock them down." It is a balmy July morning in Watts, and we are sitting in the backyard of Felix Madrigal's bungalow on East 107th Street, just across from Simon Rodias Watts Towers. Felix, who has the energy and stout body of a lifelong do-it-yourselfer, is working to replant an avocado tree in the corner of the yard,

and he is enlisting the help of a friend to uproot and move it. Edgar and I are sitting in the shadow of a half-built storage shed, where Felix hopes to store his tools and other materials so that the Watts House Project can more easily renovate the interior of his family's modest stucco home.²⁶

It does feel surprisingly, well, ordinary, but appearances here are a bit deceiving. The Watts House Project, in its devotion to making this block of East 107th Street a more livable neighborhood, is actually an extraordinary arts- and community-centered experiment, one that both enlarges the scope of standard artistic practice and offers very practical benefits for the residents of the twenty houses it serves. Launched in 1996 by Arceneaux's mentor Rick Lowe, the Watts House Project partners 107th Street residents with artists, architects, and able-bodied volunteers, so that the neighborhood might become more of a pleasure to inhabit and also more aesthetically connected to the Watts Towers, that famed monument to the beauty found in humble industrial materials. After over a decade in the neighborhood, the Watts House Project has gained the confidence of the 107th Street residents, and it has made a number of concrete improvements to building exteriors—a new tiled driveway for the Madrigal home, custom fencing for another, and a set of murals designed by and painted by Locke High School students for still others. But the Project promises much more: Arceneaux sees the street as a holistic system rather than simply a set of individual properties waiting for home improvement. He aims to bring wireless Internet, solar paneling, and vegetable gardens to each of the properties; to harness the gusty winds that blow late each afternoon so that the neighborhood generates some of its own energy; to renovate the street itself with better paving and storm drains; and to help transition all the homes on the block from renter- to owner-occupied. All this takes money, and Arceneaux has been leveraging his cachet in the art world to generate the Project's funding: Grants from LAXART, UCLA's Hammer Museum, and USC's School of Architecture have allowed the Project to come this far; a low-interest loan from the president of the board of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art enabled Arceneaux to buy three homes on a single lot across from the Watts Towers Arts Center, which he plans to rehabilitate as a headquarters building, a coffee shop run by neighborhood residents, and a gallery and meeting hall. In December 2009, the Andy Warhol Foundation recognized the project with a \$125,000 grant, adding a considerable boost to the \$250,000 raised over the previous year and a half.²⁷

In all, the Watts House Project is arguably as close as the art world comes to the promise of community that opens this essay, Buzzworm's

dream of "gentrification." Arceneaux himself describes the Project as an alternative to the usual practices of gentrification, wherein "one makes an investment [in the neighborhood] and there's no way of extracting that investment back out again. For example, if you're a renter in Red Hook or Brooklyn, and let's say over five years you invest \$50,000 in time, labor, and materials to this neighborhood, the landlord will sell the apartment and make lots of money—and who can blame him?" Arceneaux's dream—and it is one shared by the many residents, volunteers, and sponsors who are giving the Watts House Project its momentum—is to model a new form of nonprofit housing development. "If the people who help create that profit were able to take that investment back out," he says, "that's a different story." He sees the Project's investment in the homes of East 107th Street as rippling outward—toward "social services, culture, and [job] training," all of which "have to be part of the fabric [of the neighborhood]." At the same time, he acknowledges that his plan to transition the whole block to owner occupancy is in the interest of the project itself: "Right now the investment we're making in these properties is between \$35,000 and \$50,000 per home, and it's important that when we make this investment, it doesn't go just one way."²⁸

With its nonprofit alternative to gentrification, the Watts House Project both builds on and marks something of a departure from the Watts community-arts organizations that have preceded it. Not long after the Watts Riot devastated the neighborhood in 1965, Watts started humming with new cultural life, as the creative energies of L.A.'s black community (and some War on Poverty funds) were directed toward such grassroots artistic initiatives as the Watts Towers Arts Center, Watts Writers Workshop, Watts Happening Coffee House, Mafundi Institute, and Studio Watts. At the Watts Towers Arts Center, the artist Noah Purifoy brought together youth from the neighborhood to collect debris and then assemble it into sculptures in the spirit of Rodia; at the Watts Writers Workshop, a group of poets and dramatists scorchingly described the trials of black life in Los Angeles. Perhaps the closest analogue to the Watts House Project was James Wood's Studio Watts, a multiracial artist collective that hosted acting, writing, and visual arts workshops and aimed to have its in-residence artists design and build spaces for the community. Though the wide-ranging artwork produced in this Watts renaissance defies easy generalization—black artists were split somewhat between nationalist and cultural-liberal sensibilities—many artists were spurred by a newly felt urgency to articulate a black aesthetic. Trumpeter Bobby Bradford testified that "The national spirit

was all over the place, we were all caught up in this thing, this new black awareness about the validity of the black aesthetic on every level."²⁹

Even as the Watts House Project has partnered with the Watts Towers Arts Center and other community organizations that sprang out of the Watts renaissance, its underlying philosophy also registers the distance that the community has traveled from the days of the "black aesthetic." As of the 2000 census, Watts was over 60 percent Latino; in the sixteen years since the founding of the Watts House Project, its portion of East 107th Street has transitioned from a half-black, half-Latino block to a block with one black family. For Arceneaux, this demographic transformation is no cause for anxiety, in part because he is one of many younger black artists troubling the underlying premises of the Black Arts movement. "I don't believe there is a black aesthetic," he says. "I don't know how one would categorize that or quantify it without some kind of overdeterminism, without locating these things physiologically or biologically. I don't really know where the edges of one culture would be drawn—and even to use 'edges' implies that it occupies one space." For Arceneaux—a black artist living in Pasadena, coordinating a multiethnic corps of volunteers, and helping largely Latino residents in Watts—this departure from "the black aesthetic" is part of a larger reconceptualization of community itself. "We've been working... to describe community not as something physical and geographical but as something which is intrinsic—meaning it's relational," he emphasizes. "This whole insider—outsider dialectic is such a problem because it allows for us indirectly or directly to agree that these problems are incurable. What is it that I can do to change [the neighborhood] if I'm not from there? We've got to get people to let that go."³⁰

This reconceptualization of "community" grows out of the working method of the Project, which brings 107th Street residents into contact with a wide-ranging cast of artists, architects, designers, and young volunteers. Each home has particular needs, and it is assigned a group of architects, artists, and designers. Once a particular home-improvement project is agreed upon—often after a vigorous back-and-forth, with residents exercising veto power—the Project then assembles the crew to complete it. The residents of 107th Street bring their own considerable set of skills: the street is home to several roofers and general contractors, a blacksmith, a house painter, a welder and pipe-fitter, and a cabinet-builder. Their labor is supplemented by a crew of volunteers, some from the local neighborhood and some from more far-flung L.A. colleges and art institutes, who supply the muscle for large-scale improvements. The

relationship between residents and nonresidents is meant to be an evolving partnership, with everyone offering what they can from the nature of their personal resources.³¹

For an artist who expends much effort organizing home-improvement projects, Arceneaux has surprisingly little investment in the final shape these projects assume—and in fact, he seems in principle opposed to thinking of them in any sort of "final" terms, since such terms would cut against his relational sense of the community. "Here we see everything as changing—like that mural on that house," he says, pointing to a bright floral mural on the house next door. "It looks great... but if we painted over it tomorrow, we'd document it, then move on to the next adventure." The Watts House Project may offer concrete results—a fact that residents and arts-granting organizations certainly appreciate—but Arceneaux himself believes that if it lives up to its potential, those results will be provisional and unexpected. "There's an ongoing dialogue between the goals of the project and the place itself," he said on another occasion. "It's not just about you conforming a thing to your ideal. You allow for contingency and chance, for variables to come into play and breathe life into the thing." In a nutshell: "The true artwork is the collaborative social sculpture at the center of Watts House Project."³²

This emphasis on the *community as the artwork itself* has led Arceneaux, ironically, to object to the city's handling of the very artwork that inspired the site of the Watts House Project. In seeking to restore the Watts Towers as a monument, frozen in the moment of their completion, Arceneaux argues, the city's preservationists are in conflict with Rodia's own working method, which tended like Arceneaux's to emphasize open endings, process over product. "For thirty-three years when Rodia was working on it, there was no fence," he says,

this was a worksite, a work-in-progress. He didn't have any predetermined ideas of what he was going to do.... Towers would come up and come down again, but the city now owns it, it's a national monument, and there's a mandate to keep it in the state it was left, which is more or less impossible.

Arceneaux would prefer that the city open up Rodia's towers as his Project is trying to open up the neighborhood, bringing art and everyday life into daily contact: "There's a baptistery in there. There's a wedding chapel in there. There's a fountain and a small ship in there. Can you

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imagine people having weddings in there? Can you imagine people getting baptized in there? ... Let this place be alive."³³

How much Arceneaux can transform this one block of Watts, in his quest to "let this place be alive," remains to be seen. After sixteen years in the neighborhood, the Watts House Project can point to modest tangible results, though nothing as earthshaking as the art world usually expects, or as earthmoving as private development demands. There is a great distance between Arceneaux's vision for the Project—which he hopes will not only transform the block but also serve as a model for export, a new mode of community redevelopment in which private needs and the public interest can be folded together in collaboration—and the Project's current reach. It has proved difficult to translate that art-inspired vision into the more prosaic realms of building permits, tax codes, and construction schedules.³⁴

Yet the Project has been built with a patience that is now paying various dividends among the residents of 107th Street, the large volunteer base of artists and helpers, and its financial sponsors from the art world; it is on the verge of a large scale-up. City developers seem to be taking notice, too: Arceneaux is fielding more and more calls to serve as a community-arts liaison and consultant—most notably, on the \$1 billion redevelopment of Watts's Jordan Downs housing project, which seeks to turn the 700-person barracks-style example of public housing (formerly nearly all-black, now two-thirds Latino) into a 2,000-person "urban village," complete with health spa, computer center, a bank of stores, and a state-of-the-art high school nearby. Here Arceneaux's emphasis on the Watts House Project's open-ended community dynamic seems not only sincerely felt but strategic, too. Though the specifics of the project—its proximity to a world-renowned artwork, its link to a vibrant tradition of community arts, and its director's art-world cachet—will be hard to reproduce, its vision of art- and consensus-driven redevelopment is more likely to take wing and take root elsewhere. One does not need an artist's sensibility to imagine that Watts, as in the mid-1960s, might become a barometer of things to come.³⁵

NOTES

- 1 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), 26–27, 31, 84–86, 176–81, 251–54. For an insightful analysis of Buzzworm's character and of the novel more generally, see Caroline Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 126–44.
- 2 Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 83.
- 3 T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 353. On the widespread diagnosis of "death by globalization," see Manuel Pastor Jr., "Common Ground at Ground Zero?: The New Economy and the New Organizing in Los Angeles," *Antipode* 33, no. 2 (2001): 260–89; Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Anchor, 1994); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990); Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).
- 4 The phrase "social democracy in one city" comes from Daniel Widener, "Another City Is Possible: Interethnic Organizing in Contemporary Los Angeles," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 1, no. 2 (2008): 188–219. For more on this labor-led movement, see, in addition to Widener and Pastor, Robert Gottlieb et al., *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007). On African Americans and the mayoral elections of 2001 and 2005, see Raphael J. Sonenshein and Mark H. Drayse, "Urban Electoral Coalitions in an Age of Immigration: Time and Place in the 2001 and 2005 Los Angeles Mayoral Primaries," *Political Geography* 25, no. 5 (2006): 570–95.
- 5 Jill Leovy, "Community Struggles in Anonymity," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 2008; Dowell Myers, *Demographic and Housing Transitions in South Central Los Angeles, 1990 to 2000* (Los Angeles: USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development, 2002); Paul Ong et al., *The State of South LA* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2008), 5; Sonenshein and Drayse, "Urban Electoral Coalitions," 593. On the Bradley coalition, see Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 6 Cross and B. Hall quoted in Brendan Mullen, "Down for the Good Life: A Unified Revolution Called Jurassic 5," *LA Weekly*, June 29, 2000; Marcyliena Morgan, *The Real Hip-hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009); *This Is the Life*, directed and produced by Ava DuVernay (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: DuVernay Productions, 2008). On gheittocentricity and hip-hop's discourse of place, see Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

- 7 On the aesthetic of gangsta rap and its emergence in the context of post-industrial Los Angeles, see, for instance, Eithne Quinn, *Nuñin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); and Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005). Ice Cube quoted in N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless Records, 1998; Abstract Rude and Myka 9 quoted in *This Is the Life*. Freestyle Fellowship, "We Are the Freestyle Fellowship," *To Whom It May Concern...*, Beats & Rhymes, 1991. On the aesthetic of "hardness" and the hip-hop sublime, see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On "chopping" and Myka 9, see *This Is the Life*; "Down for the Good Life."
- 9 Marcylena Morgan recounts a battle at the Good Life's successor, Project Blowed, in which an emcee was asked, "Are you a Black man?" in *The Real HipHop*, 104–9; 2Mex and Cut Chemist quoted in *This Is the Life*.
- 10 Freestyle Fellowship, "Inner City Boundaries," *Innercity Griots*, 4th & B'way Records, 1993. Generally, Freestyle Fellowship did not pose as a "menace to society" according to the gangsta formula, but interestingly the first single from *Innercity Griots*, "Bullies of the Block," brought them closer to the genre. Whereas the video of "Inner City Boundaries" shows the Fellowship jamming in the studio, wearing vintage clothes that suggest a nostalgic affection for previous generations of black bohemians, the video of "Bullies of the Block" places the Fellowship under a naked light in an abandoned, burning building, where they testify one by one to their place as "bullies of the block." The lines between gangsta rap and the music of the Good Life, that is to say, were never as bright and clear as they were sometimes supposed to be.
- 11 On the Leimert Park renaissance and its jazz foundation, see Steven L. Isoardi's excellent study *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 217–38 (Daáood quoted on p. 229); Erin Aubry Kaplan, "The Long Road Home," *LA Weekly*, April 14, 2005; Eric Gordon, "Fortifying Community: African American History and Culture in Leimert Park," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, ed. David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 63–84; João Costa Vargas's illuminating *Catching Hell in the City of Angels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), which has an especially good discussion of the spectrum of cultural nationalism among Leimert's jazz community; and the film *Leimert Park*, directed and produced by Jeannette Lindsay (Los Angeles: Foster Johnson Studios, 2006).
- 12 On resistance to Project Blowed within the Leimert Park community, see Morgan, *The Real HipHop*, 161–70. See also Abstract Rude, *South Central Thynk Taink*, Ocean Floor, 1999; Abstract Rude, "In the Hood," on DJ 'D, *Workers Union*, Massmen Records, 2000; Haiku D'Eat, "Poetry Takeover," *Coup de Theatre*, Project Blowed, 2004; Aceyalone, "Master Your High," *Accepted Eclectic*, Ground Control, 2001.
- 13 Forman, *The Hood Comes First*. Hip-hop culture has always been influenced significantly by Latino music and style (for instance, N.W.A.'s buttoned-to-the-top Pendleton shirts recalled the fashion sensibility of Latino gangs), but the last fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of Latino emcees and groups, and a corresponding transformation of the genres mixed into hip-hop. See Poncho McFarland, "Chicano Hip-Hop as Interethnic Contact Zone," *Aztlán* 33, no. 1 (2008): 173–83; McFarland, "Chicano Rap Roots: Black-Brown Cultural Exchange and the Making of a New Genre," *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (2006): 939–55; and Josh Kun, "What Is an MC if He Can't Rap to Banda?: Making Music in Nuevo L.A.," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 741–58.
- 14 Aceyalone and Rjda, *Magnificent City*, Project Blowed/DeCon, 2006; Aceyalone, *Lightning Strikes*, DCN, 2007; Aceyalone, *The Lonely Ones*, DeCon, 2009.
- 15 Abstract Rude, "Thynk Eye Can," *Rejuvenation*, Rhymesayers, 2009.
- 16 Key-Kool and Rhetttmatic, *Kozmonautz*, Up Above Records, 1995; Visionaries, "If You Can't Say Love," *Pargaea*, Up Above Records, 2004.
- 17 Visionaries, "In the Good," *We Are the Ones (We've Been Waiting For)*, Up Above Records, 2006.
- 18 Chris Abani, *The Virgin of Flames* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 15, 30, 287.
- 19 Nina Revoyr, *Southland* (New York: Akashic Books, 2003); Walter Mosley, *Little Scarlet* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004). Revoyr and Mosley's novels were part of a wave of fiction, published after the Rodney King riots, that examined racial and sexual violence in the simmering cauldron that Los Angeles—and South Los Angeles in particular—was imagined to be. See, in addition to those works already cited, these variations on the police procedural: Paula Woods, *Inner City Blues* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1999); Michael Connelly, *Angels Flight* (New York: Little, Brown, 1999); and Len Deighton, *Violent Ward* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Revoyr and Mosley's novels are distinguished, though, in the textured sense of L.A. history that they evoke. On L.A.'s multiracial neighborhoods and politics, see George J. Sánchez, "What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 633–61; Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Widener, "Another City Is Possible." Wild's excellent book includes a chapter on interracial couples. For a broader anthology that examines interracial sex and intimacy in a historical light, see *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in American History*, ed. Martha Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

- 20 *Little Scarlet*, 7–8. For the classic analysis of Jewish–black relations in the mid-to-late 1960s, see James Baldwin, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White,” in *Black Anti-Semitism and Jewish Racism*, ed. Nat Hentoff (New York: Schocken Books, 1970).
- 21 *Little Scarlet*, 49, 253, 261.
- 22 *Southland*, 24–26, 61, 146, 300.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 236–39, 312–13.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 330.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 58, 120–21.
- 26 Edgar Arceneaux, interview with the author, July 7, 2009.
- 27 *Ibid.*; Sharon Mizota, “Public Equity,” *Artforum*, November 2008, which discusses how the Watts House Project revises the idea of “community arts” projects; Lynell George, “Watts House Project: Art Meets Architecture Near the Towers,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2008; “Andy Warhol Foundation Funds Bid to Rehab Homes near Watts Towers as Live-In Art Objects,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 2009.
- 28 Arceneaux interview.
- 29 On the Watts renaissance, see Isoardi, *The Dark Tree*, 74–111 (Bradford quoted on p. 87); Curtis L. Carter, *Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965–1992* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Haggerty Museum of Art, 2003); and Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), which analyzes the Watts Writers Workshop in the context of the clash between cultural-liberal and nationalist paradigms.
- 30 Arceneaux interview.
- 31 *Ibid.* See also George, “Watts House Project,” for a description of the collaborative process.
- 32 Arceneaux interview. See the video and text produced by the Hammer Museum as part of its sponsorship of the Watts House Project, Hammer Museum website, http://hammer.ucla.edu/residencies/detail/residency_id/1.
- 33 Arceneaux interview. On the Watts Towers and the history of their preservation, see Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
- 34 The gap between the project’s reach and its grasp has incited controversy among its stakeholders. See Jori Finkel, “Watts House Project under Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2012.
- 35 Arceneaux interview. On the Jordan Downs redevelopment, see Sandy Banks, “Utopian Ideals Clash with Gritty Reality in South L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2009.

SETTING THE SEEN: HOLLYWOOD, SOUTH LOS ANGELES,
AND THE POLITICS OF FILM

For outsiders, including many longtime residents of other parts of Los Angeles, Hollywood and South Central remain the great metonyms of Southern California. The first means fantasy and glamour, while the second is a buzzword for destitution and decay. Each, too, operates as a materialist metaphor, symbolizing the entertainment industry and the netherworld of the postindustrial inner city respectively. Of course, as voices as distinct as screenwriter Nathanael West and former Los Angeles city council member Joan Milke Flores have told us, historic Hollywood was as much a proletarian space as any Downey slaughterhouse or Long Beach shipyard, whereas South Los Angeles, as Flores once said of Watts, “is a community, not a riot.” In a city that has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the country, the contrast between the symbols of sunshine and noir offers a helpful vantage point for thinking about how equity and access were imagined in the past, as well as how they might be seen in the future. If we take the terms “Hollywood” and “South Los Angeles” to be intimately related, we can ask what the view of Hollywood that came from South Los Angeles tells us about the political trajectory and historic utility of each term.

This essay offers a brief survey of black efforts to establish a *modus vivendi* with the motion picture industry. It concentrates principally on the late 1960s and early 1970s, when competing visions of an autonomous black cinema took hold in South Los Angeles. These visions offered an active subjectivity that saw self-representation as a building block of self-determination. This was both a material and ideological imperative, and, as we will see, black filmmakers sought to depict South Los Angeles in ways that were comprehensible to the local black community. In doing so, they raised acute questions about the place of black people within the entertainment industry and within American society as a whole.