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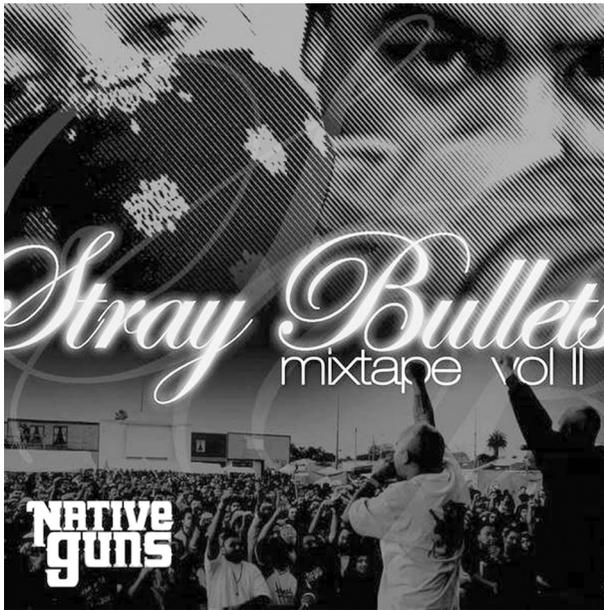


Hannam Chain supermarket, on Olympic Blvd. and Berendo St., has been a long-time mainstay in the Koreatown community. Following the 1992 Civil Unrest, a bilingual sign was placed in front of their store stating, "JUSTICE WITHOUT VIOLENCE."

© Ben Higa, 1992



We the People in Watts  
Photograph by Kat Carrido  
*Stray Bullets* CD cover, 2007



## Native Guns and Stray Bullets: Cultural Activism and Filipino American Rap Music in Post-Riot Los Angeles

Victor Hugo Viesca

We [are] like practice and theory  
Put us together to get the message more clearly  
More than merely rapping  
This is activism  
To unite the blind and give them back their vision

—Native Guns, “Said It”

The Los Angeles riots of 1992 are never far from the minds and rhymes of emcees Kiwi and Bambu. Arguably the best-known Filipino American rappers in the United States today, Kiwi (Jack Defesus) and Bambu (Jonah Deocampo) started rapping as teenagers growing up in inner-city Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The two came together to establish the group Native Guns in 2002 and, together with their Chinese American DJ Phatrick (Patrick Huang), produced the critically acclaimed full-length album *Barrel Men* (2006) and two lauded “mixtapes”: *Stray Bullets Mixtape Volume I* (2004) and *Stray Bullets Mixtape Volume II* (2007). Native Guns officially disbanded in 2007 for the principals to resume their solo careers, but in 2010, the group reunited to record the song “Handcuffs,” a song shaped in large part by their experience of the Los Angeles insurrection of 1992.

Like the working class Filipinos of Los Angeles’s Little Manila in the 1920s-1940s documented by historian Linda España-Maram, Kiwi and Bambu utilize popular culture as a site to, in España-Maram’s words, “create meaning and construct an identity through their own standards of cultural production.”<sup>1</sup> Yet

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these artists go a step further by using popular culture, in this case rap music, to organize youth of color. Spitting metaphorical bullets into the minds of their mostly youthful audience, the two Native Guns denounce the racialized and unequal distribution of justice and resources within the United States and across the world. In the process, they find affinities between youth of color within the urban U.S. and draw links to the struggles of the subjugated masses of the Third World.<sup>2</sup>

The use of the arts by Kiwi and Bambu to organize youth and express solidarity with the struggles of peoples of color in the U.S. and abroad is related to the explosion of cultural activism that occurred in the wake of the Los Angeles rebellion.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on personal interviews with both artists and affiliates, mass media sources, and the use of both published and unpublished materials related to their history, I argue that the critical sensibility and activist orientation expressed in their work was significantly shaped by the Los Angeles uprising and by the multiracial cultural activism that arose in the city in its aftermath. The roots of the art and activism of Kiwi and Bambu are worth excavating because they demonstrate the ways in which post-riot Los Angeles produced concrete grassroots institutions as well as discursive places in hip hop reception and performance that served as sites for education, agitation, deliberation, and reflection.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the history of these two artists reveals how Los Angeles youths during the time of the riots were not isolated in separate racial worlds, but related to one another as the city brought many of them together not (only) in violence, but also in sites of creativity and political action.

### Riots, Rap, and Resistance

Native Guns are part of the West Coast underground hip hop scene that emerged in the 1990s centered around Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, with important linkages to the cities of Seattle and San Diego as well.<sup>5</sup> "Underground" refers to the ways in which this particular form of rap music is produced and distributed outside the established music industry. Referencing Bay Area DJ Rasta Cue Tip, the anthropologist Anthony Kwame Harrison has noted that "the independent hip hop hustle involves 'putting out something yourself, shopping it yourself, getting people to play it,' and retaining the majority of your revenues."<sup>6</sup> Celebrated within the underground hip hop community for their lyrical storytelling and the rhythmic, pounding flow of their rhymes, Kiwi

and Bambu have developed an enthusiastic core audience that stretches from southern California to Vancouver by regularly performing in nightclubs, small concert venues, and youth and culture centers along the Pacific coast. They have also performed in small clubs and college campuses throughout the nation and across the Pacific in Hawai'i and Manila. In the scant media attention they have received as a group, their lyrics are often cited for their critical perspective, in contrast to the (over)emphasis on money and sex in much of mainstream rap music.<sup>7</sup> Song titles such as "Till We Free," "Gangsters and Guerrillas," and "Agitation Propaganda" from *Stray Bullets Mixtape Vol. 2* provide some insight into their use of rap music to raise the political awareness of their listeners, a core audience made up of Filipino American youth and urban youth of color more generally. Their rhymes are syncopated with a variety of rap production styles, such as jazz-funk breakbeats typical of 1990s New York rap, bass-heavy grooves reminiscent of Dr. Dre's G-Funk production style, and the slower, more melodic sounds of reggae-sampling music. The album *Barrel Men*, titled after a popular Filipino souvenir doll, exemplifies the radical political perspective that has earned them a place along side more famous activist rappers like Dead Prez, the Coup, and Immortal Technique as part of the unofficial subgenre of rap called Raptivism.<sup>8</sup>

On their CDs, Kiwi and Bambu take on the persona of storytellers, rap artists, war protesters, former gang bangers, U.S. consumers, and representatives of the "people." This latter persona is a fluid and expansive category that seeks to embody and speak for the exploited in the Philippines and throughout the Filipino diaspora. The "people," however, is also symbolic of working class urban youth of color in the U.S. and the marginalized and disenfranchised around the world: *Barrel Men* contains critical statements about racial and class oppression in the United States ("Slave Thinking," "Drowning"), the imperialist actions of the U.S. government—especially as they pertain to the land of their "roots" the Philippines ("Get Down")—and the need for organized resistance ("Treason," "Hammer"). Significantly, in their self-representation as urban young men of color, they become self-critical of their role as U.S. consumers who contribute to the exploitation of workers throughout the Third World ("Work It") and their struggles with their own patriarchal position and "sexist conditioning" ("Right There").

The critical and transnational race consciousness apparent in the music and activism of Kiwi and Bambu registers the pro-

found impact of the 1992 Los Angeles riots on the working class youth of color who, in a way, were born out of that galvanizing event. Kiwi and Bambu experienced the chaos and frustration of the 1992 Los Angeles riots first-hand. They were from the two areas of the city where much of the conflict was concentrated. Kiwi was raised in the racially mixed neighborhood of Koreatown just west of Downtown and Bambu was from the predominately black and Latina/o Watts district in South Central Los Angeles. Kiwi, in high school at the time, was listening to his favorite hip hop station when he heard the not guilty verdict for the Los Angeles police officers accused of beating Rodney King: "I was driving my car home from school when I heard the verdict on '92 the Beat.' I remember the uncertainty in the air." He remembers questioning himself, "Should I hit Circuit City and get a TV like my friends?"<sup>9</sup> He decided to watch the burning and looting of his neighborhood at a distance.

Kiwi may have been watching Bambu. Bambu rode up to Koreatown with friends from his home in Watts to take part in the developing storm: "I was a young kid, so me and my friends were out doing what they labeled as looting and rioting and things like that."<sup>10</sup> The lasting impression of Bambu's experience and participation in the riots is evident in his choice of CD release dates. Bambu issued his first album *Self-Untitled* (2002) on the tenth anniversary of the Los Angeles insurrection and his second album, *I Scream Bars for the Children* (2007), on its fifteenth anniversary, while the ironically named *A Peaceful Riot*, an EP collaboration with DJ Fatgums, was released on April 29, 2009.<sup>11</sup>

Kiwi and Bambu are part of what the writer Jeff Chang has called the hip hop generation, the multiracial and polycultural youth born into the post-industrial cities of the late 1970s.<sup>12</sup> They are the children of the post-civil rights era politics of abandonment—"to whom so much had been given, from whom so much was being stolen, for whom so little would be promised," according to Chang.<sup>13</sup> Young people like Kiwi and Bambu, working class children of immigrants raised in the diverse inner-city core of a U.S. metropolis, remade the urban wasteland they were given into a space for the creation of an art form that has influenced popular culture throughout the world. In Los Angeles, this generation came of age in the shadows of the crack epidemic and gang wars of the 1980s and the 1992 riots. In those times of tumultuous change, the resident youth of the massive ghettos and barrios of central Los Angeles would carve out its own cultural

spaces and became makers of a unique west coast hip hop culture.<sup>14</sup> As Chang notes, “For Los Angeles’s war-weary youths, the gang truce and the Uprising unleashed a burst of creative energy” in rap, graffiti, street fashion, and hip hop journalism.<sup>15</sup>

As part of this generation, Kiwi and Bambu lived through the large-scale demographic, economic, and spatial changes that has marked the formation of Los Angeles into a “global” and “divided city.”<sup>16</sup> Since the 1960s, immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East has transformed Los Angeles from one of the whitest large cities in the nation into one of its most diverse. Significantly, over two-thirds of the population at the time of the 2000 census was comprised of immigrants and their U.S.-born children. During this era of mass immigration the economic structure of the region underwent a radical transformation in its own right. Deindustrialization, combined with white flight and suburbanization, contributed to the decentralization of the Los Angeles region and the decline of central city neighborhoods like those in which Kiwi and Bambu were raised. Economic restructuring, de-unionization, along with the federal cuts in social spending since the 1970s contributed to a widening economic divide among Angelenos, with African Americans, Latinos/as, and their working class immigrant neighbors, such as Filipino Americans, concentrated at the bottom.<sup>17</sup>

Paralleling the rise of the post-industrial economy and the erosion of the social safety net was the rise of a criminal dragnet in which the federal and state government relied on the criminal justice system and the racially biased “war on drugs” to deal with the crisis of the central cities.<sup>18</sup> Chicanas/os, African Americans, and growing numbers of Central Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders made up the majority of the state’s prison population at the time of the riots.<sup>19</sup> As Chang puts it, “a generation raised on the politics of abandonment saw that it now also faced a sharply evolving politics of containment,” wherein juvenile crime statutes became more punitive and the “War on Gangs expanded into what young activists came to call a ‘War on Youth’.”<sup>20</sup> The Los Angeles Police Department was at the vanguard of this war on youth. Four months after the beating of Rodney King, for example, Mayor Tom Bradley commissioned Warren Christopher, who would later become U.S. Secretary of State, to examine the LAPD. Informally known as the Christopher Commission, the report noted that “[t]here is a significant number of officers in the LAPD who repetitively use excessive force against the public



FROM LEFT: Native Guns—DJ Phatrick (Patrick Huang),  
Kiwi (Jack DeJesus), and Bambu (Jonah Deocampo).

and persistently ignore the written guidelines of the department regarding force” and that the “problem of excessive force is aggravated by racism and bias.”<sup>21</sup>

The disaffection with the new transnational political and economic regime of neo-liberalism and the LAPD was registered in the riots.<sup>22</sup> During the riots, residents throughout the city, but particularly the poor and working classes of central Los Angeles, seized property and destroyed what many saw as the symbols of domination. On the night the verdict was announced, hundreds of people of all races laid siege to Parker Center, the headquarters of the LAPD. Kiwi and Bambu could relate. Although he did not directly take part in the activities of the unrest, Kiwi empathized with the rioters’ anger at the police: “I had been victim of police harassment and brutality. I knew that experience with law enforcement. I was driving to school one day and the police stopped me and targeted me as a gang member. I was going to school and they were not treating me like a human. I remember thinking, ‘Fuck the police!’” As a Filipino American, however, Kiwi was also ambivalent about the violence of the riot. Although he had an idea to partake in the looting, he wondered, “What would I be

looked at as? I saw what was going on Florence and Normandie,” recalling the intersection in South Central Los Angeles that was the flashpoint of the riots. “Would I be with the people rioting or the people being targeted like Reginald Denny, the Mexican workers, or the Korean merchants? Being treated like an Asian wasn’t weird, but I feel more Mexican than Korean.” Although sympathetic with the anger at the LAPD, particularly from African Americans, he was still weary of the interracial conflict among people of color that the uprising brought to the surface.<sup>23</sup>

Kiwi understood the rebellion as a pivotal moment not only in the history of Los Angeles, but in his own politicization. “It was a visual representation of what I was feeling at that time. It was not just riots, but what came out of riots. The dialogue that happened. The atmosphere created in L.A. set the stage for me to become political, to think more critical, to ask who I wanted to be. I could have been a regular apolitical dude who likes hip hop and goes to work or turned into someone working for change. The L.A. riot was a benchmark because of my political development. It was less theorizing politics and the world to what was actually happening right in front of me! It was something tied into my own experience.” Later, he would use this experience to communicate and find some understanding with the youth he works with as an organizer. “I take that approach and say ‘I experienced the L.A. riots, but what’s your experience with police? What’s your relationship to oppression?’”

Bambu, only 13 years old when the unrest took place, had no qualms about joining the celebration of the oppressed. At such a young age, he did not really know the context of the situation, but he knew he wanted to participate: “I mean, politically, I didn’t understand what was going on, I just knew that everybody else was doing it and there was some kind of rage that was building up.” Although he didn’t know all of the implications of that momentous event, he did realize he was seeing something new and transformative. As Bambu explains, “I actually think that was one of the great fruitions of the rebellion was that it brought people together, in a sense, in our communities. It was black, brown, Blood, Crip. These certain streets were now focusing on one common enemy. Which I thought was wonderful.”

### Hip Hop Polyculturalism and Youth Organizing

While the multiethnic riots raised the important question of what it meant to be Asian American, and especially Korean American,

for Kiwi and Bambu, the events and the aftermath of the rebellion were tied to an emerging racial consciousness that included, but was not limited to, their Filipino American heritage. While Kiwi wondered with whom to identify—was he Asian? Black? Mexican?—Bambu saw the rebellion as the coming together of the predominantly “black and brown” communities he was a part of in Watts and South Central. It may be the case that they were inhabiting a liminal space that included all three group identities.<sup>24</sup> A way of understanding this liminal space is as a dynamic and flexible form of identification known as polyculturalism, a concept that is based not on the reification of discrete, pure cultures, but on boundary crossing and affiliation. In “My Life in Hip Hop,” the cultural critic Vijay Prashad explains that, as a fan of hip hop, he came to understand that “[c]ultures are not spatially sealed. Cultural worlds are created in relationship with other cultural worlds. They interact; they are alive. There are no boundaries, only center.”<sup>25</sup> The pride Kiwi and Bambu now take in their Filipino American identity is evident throughout their music. As Kiwi has remarked, “I feel like my Filipino-ness has everything to do with the quality of my music. We don’t want that to be removed from the art.”<sup>26</sup> Both artists, however, also continue to assert their identification and engagement with African Americans and Latinas/os. Their music is an expression of that polycultural self-understanding.

In their album *Barrel Men*, the Native Guns describe themselves as two “bald-headed brown brothers with tattoos” from “Los Angeles, Califaztlan.” The use of the term Califaztlan signals their alliance with Chicana/o youth, as the term is a reference to California as part of Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs—“Azteca” being the Nahuatl word for “people from Aztlan.” The name Aztlan was used by Chicano nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s to make claims of belonging in the face of segregation and exclusion. The word has had a resurgence among Mexican American and Latina/o youth in California since the 1990s.<sup>27</sup> Throughout their work, Kiwi and Bambu signal the influence of black nationalism on their music as well, sampling the speeches of Malcolm X and dropping the names of prominent pan-Africanists, from Marcus Garvey to Franz Fanon. Kiwi was profoundly influenced by the Black Power strains of hip hop in the work of 1980s and 1990s groups like the Afrocentric rap collective Native Tongues, which included Queen Latifah, A Tribe Called Quest, and De La Soul; the very name Native Guns plays

on that earlier collective. As Kiwi explains, “My consciousness started with hip hop. Public Enemy and KRS-One, X-CLAN, Paris, even NWA—all those folks from that era who are talking about black nationalism, black consciousness, Afrocentricity. I mean, the only access I had was to the black struggle, the Black Panthers, Marcus Garvey.”<sup>28</sup> Kiwi was so inspired with these groups that he became a follower of Rastafarianism as a teenager and expressed the desire to join the Nation of Islam.

The influence on Bambu was similar. In his teens and early twenties Bambu sported African medallions and Taqiyah caps early on in his career because he was deeply affected by Afro-diasporic culture. Bambu’s inspiration was much closer to home, however, as he was adopted by Earl White, a black man, and his Mexican American wife Diana White when he was in his mid-teens. He was deeply influenced by both of his parents’ critical perspective of U.S. history. Diana was involved in the Chicana/o power movement of the 1970s and his father Earl was a priest in the Yoruba tradition and trained in the African martial arts. Bambu became a follower of the Yoruba faith and a student of African culture because of his father’s inspiration. These actions reflect the very real bond both Kiwi and Bambu had with Afrocentric culture, especially the anti-racist critique of the U.S. While Kiwi picked up his critical education from 1980s Black Power rap, Bambu, a fan of west coast gangster rap, became familiar with black nationalism through his study of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* while doing time at Juvenile Hall for robbery. Like Kiwi, Bambu was a former gang member, and the story of Malcolm X’s redemption from a life of crime to a crusader against anti-black racism deeply affected the psyche of the then teenager.

The mentoring and education they found in Chicana/o and black nationalist critiques of U.S. history and politics, and later in the movements for democracy in the Philippines and the struggle against racism by Filipino Americans in the U.S., encouraged the rappers to mentor and educate youth like themselves, especially working class urban youth. Kiwi organizes a “Hip Hop Workshop” series for young people at San Francisco’s Filipino Community Center and collaborates with the critical literacy organization Youth Speaks, a non-profit that encourages youth to express themselves using their own vernacular that is largely inspired by hip hop culture. Bambu is one of the lead coordinators of Kabataang Maka-Bayan, or Pro-People Youth, an organization whose aim is to raise the social consciousness of the youth

and students to organize and mobilize around issues affecting their communities, the oppressed people of the Philippines, and other pro-people issues around the world. Bambu and DJ Phatrick, working in collaboration with the Los Angeles community organization Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA), organize the Youth Media Arts Program for multiracial youth in Historic Filipino Town near downtown Los Angeles. The program teaches youth the mechanics of music production in order to, as Bambu puts it, “use the power of media social networking to go out and actually organize the community, as well as use it to as an outlet for your music.”<sup>29</sup> Bambu has explained that this work involves getting youth to think beyond their neighborhood, to “connect the issues that they’re having in the community with issues globally and getting them to actually organize by creating organizations. . . to create these little bubbling peoples’ organizations that can eventually collaborate and ally or create alliances, and actually go out and create the change that we need.”<sup>30</sup>

Bambu believes that the experience of the 1992 Los Angeles riots taught him how to better relate and understand the youth he is working with today. “Post-riot, I became more politically savvy, or my ideology started to build, and my politics started to build. Eventually, I started to focus that [experience] with my organizing. I started to understand what was happening back then and have more clarity to it because of the work I was doing, reliving the angst of some of these 13- and 24-year-olds, which at the time I didn’t understand what I was going through. But now being an adult watching the youth going through this same thing, I get it now.” It was for these reasons that Native Guns reunited to produce the song “Handcuffs” in 2010. They wanted to productively intervene in the analysis of another episode of police brutality that, like the beating of Rodney King, was caught on video and sparked a riot.

#### “Handcuffs” and the Black Spatial Imaginary

“Handcuffs” deals with the killing of Oscar Grant by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer in Oakland on New Year’s morning, 2009. Grant, an unarmed 22-year-old African American, was shot in the back at point-blank range while lying face down with his arms behind his back on the platform of the Fruitvale BART station. Johannes Mehserle, the white officer who killed Grant, placed handcuffs on the dying man after shooting him.<sup>31</sup> The scene was captured by the cellphone cameras of fellow train passengers, and was later broadcast online and then on national

television. Organized demonstrations against the shooting held a week later turned into minor riots in downtown Oakland when demonstrators confronted the police. Within a few days of the protests, Mehserle was charged with murder and arrested.<sup>32</sup> The trial took place in Los Angeles, where it had been moved because of pre-trial publicity. The jury contained no African Americans. Recognizing the disturbing similarity of the developing circumstances in the Mehserle trial with the case against the four Los Angeles Police Department officers caught beating Rodney King on videotape in 1992, Kiwi and Bambu decided to act. As Kiwi explained, "With so much emotion and uncertainty around the outcome of this case, we felt a sense of urgency to come back together and do this track."<sup>33</sup> Bambu specifically recalled the memory of the riots in Los Angeles nearly twenty years earlier to explain the production of the song: "We both experienced the L.A riots in 1992 firsthand, and we wanted to remind people of the lessons learned from back then, so we can keep them in mind as we move forward with this current situation."<sup>34</sup> The track that they produced was meant to be used as a consciousness-raising tool for those angered at the police, so it was circulated for free as an Internet download just hours before the Mehserle verdict was to be announced.<sup>35</sup>

"Handcuffs" places the shooting and death of Oscar Grant in the context of a systematic and global war on the poor and powerless waged by law enforcement on behalf of capital and empire. The "handcuffs" placed on the dying and brutalized black body of Grant become a metaphor for the structural violence being waged at the same time against the marginalized in the U.S. and the Third World. The song opens with Kiwi reciting a list of innocent victims of relatively recent police shootings: "Sean Bell. . . Amadou Diallo. . . Aiyana Stanley Jones. . . Oscar Grant."<sup>36</sup> All of these victims were black and one of them—seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley Jones—merely a child. They ally themselves with these victims as brothers, while noting how things have not changed much since 1992. The song links the murder of Grant in Oakland with that of other innocent black victims in New York and Detroit and to the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. Kiwi's verses in the song, rhymed over a slow, funky breakbeat layered with mellow guitar licks, describes the frustration with police brutality as a spark for civil unrest:

Another brother taken down by the fuckin' police  
We're sick of just yelling "No Justice! No Peace!"

Déjà vu 1992 pause and repeat  
It's gotten to a peak  
It's a Molotov party and we brought our own drinks

Recalling the 1992 rebellion in Los Angeles and what would become its main slogan ("No Justice! No Peace!"), Kiwi's rap persona seems to threaten another violent insurrection spurred by the injustice of the police. Yet, while pointing to the anger and exasperation against police violence as the foundation for why people riot, Kiwi's persona becomes more self-critical, asking the questions he believes those frustrated with the police should be asking themselves:

Who am I to turn my city to ash?  
Is it really just the pigs, is it bigger than that?  
Bigger than the gat that he had stuck in his back  
Who are they really protecting, is it us or the bank?

Bambu's verses on the song point to the multiple geographic scales of the repressive order that killed Grant. His rap character points to the shooting of Grant as the latest example of police violence used in the interests of the rich and powerful against the poor and powerless in the United States and beyond:

Oscar  
Same fate shared with Amadou and Sean Bell  
Same fate shared in Third World packed jails  
To protect the haves from the have nots  
And the banks the police is really protecting  
...  
To know the role of police is not to maintain peace  
But to keep that big money safe

These lines are meant to reveal the shared histories of oppression across space at the hands of the police. Later, in a remarkable verse, Bambu connects the physical violence visited on Oscar Grant with the criminalization of undocumented immigrants in Arizona and working class communities of color in Oakland, Detroit, and Watts, simultaneously drawing parallels between the violence of the police in Oakland with the violence of neo-colonialism and war in the Philippines, Palestine, and Iraq:

From a pig in Oakland  
To a life getting stolen  
From a pig in Gaza  
To the pigs who killed Aiyana

The issues are bigger than one murderous cop  
 It's Arizona to Watts  
 Philippines to Iraq

Native Guns prescribe an understanding of the global and systematic forms of inequality that capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy wreak in urban communities of color in the U.S. and the Third World as an important step for fostering the conditions for change. They express as a critical element in making that change the formation of alliances among aggrieved communities of color in the United States and the exploited in the Third World. Their use of "us," "our," and "we" in "Handcuffs" link them not only to African American victims of police brutality, but to all racialized victims of police and state violence throughout the world. As Bambu's chorus declares: "All power to the masses, homes." Significantly, the song ends with a sample of a Malcolm X speech, a recurring figure in their work, calling for an end to the everyday experience of police brutality upon the black community. Kiwi and Bambu derive much of their understanding of the problem of racism from the writings and actions of people like Malcolm X as well as from their lived experience as racially marked Filipino Americans in working class space. As the educator Michael Viola has written, their music "continues the long history of Filipinos in America who use their cultural work to resist and challenge structures of exploitation, domination, and an ideology of racism."<sup>37</sup>

Their knowledge of the struggle of Filipinos in America was enhanced by the organizations they were involved with after the riots. At the same time, they were open to this knowledge from their own experience with the police and as racialized youth living in central Los Angeles. They developed not only a polycultural sensibility by living in the rapidly diversifying communities of Watts and Koreatown, but also a way of seeing the world through what George Lipsitz has called the "black spatial imaginary." In his important book *How Racism Takes Place*, Lipsitz discusses the development of a black spatial imaginary in relation to a dominant white spatial imaginary in recent American history. Lipsitz theorizes the "fatal links that connect race, place, and power" in American society, based upon an exclusionist white "national spatial imaginary" that promotes the division and privatization of space, individual home ownership, and commodity exchange over the values of collectivity and shared use.<sup>38</sup> This white spatial imaginary has led to the exploitation of blacks

and other racialized communities for the benefit of whites. As Lipsitz explains:

It is not so much that blacks are disadvantaged, but rather that they are taken advantage of by discrimination in employment, education, and housing, by the ways in which the health care system, the criminal justice system, and the banking system skew opportunities and life chances along racial lines.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to this dominant national spatial imaginary, the black spatial imaginary offers a prescription of how to change society. Lipsitz describes the ways in which the “black spatial imaginary” expresses a desire to develop ties of solidarity across difference and community interests. “Black” in this sense refers to a counter-spatial imaginary that is not reducible to a racial category, but is crucially linked to the history of anti-black racism.<sup>40</sup>

Kiwi and Bambu’s rhymes sonically consider the painful costs of racism, making audible that which has been suppressed under discourses of colorblindness and individualism. Like the reggae musicians they so admire, they seek healing through revelation, fostering an understanding of the ruptures produced by racism. Their rhymes acknowledge and keep in our memory the history of racism that has worked to “place” people of color—working class people of color, in particular—in disadvantaged environments and situations. Not only has the history of segregation relegated people of color to their unequal places, but contemporary history has continued to reinforce and build upon this inequality. This is inscribed in the very inner city, working class Los Angeles neighborhoods from which Kiwi and Bambu come. In their work together and as solo artists, Kiwi and Bambu continually imagine and call forth a space of alliances across race and across nations.

### Culture and Youth Activism Across Race and Nation

The flowering of student and youth activism in post-riot Los Angeles set the stage for the radicalization of Kiwi and Bambu. In 1993, for example, hundreds of college students occupied the central campus of UCLA to demand a department of Chicano Studies, while 1994 saw what at the time were the largest protests in the history of Los Angeles against the anti-immigrant Proposition 187.<sup>41</sup> That same year, thousands of students on University of California campuses rallied against the implementation of the anti-Affirmative Action policies SP-1 and SP-2, policies that would later lead to the banishment of affirmative action by Proposition 209 in



Last group photo of Peace and Justice Center  
on its closing day. Mural by Duke and Tempt.

© Ben Higa, 1996

1996. Profoundly shaped by the rebellion and the turn by unions towards organizing immigrants across the country, local Los Angeles activists mobilized to win some of the nation's most progressive protections for the poor—including two successful grassroots campaigns to raise the state's minimum wage and the country's first municipal "living wage ordinance"—and turned the city into a vibrant national and international center for organizing workers and immigrant rights. Alongside seasoned organizers stood many new immigrants who began to organize and lead strikes themselves in local industries in apparel, food services, janitorial services, and construction.

Kiwi's participation in the Peace and Justice Center, a focal point of youth and student activism of the time, was a critical vehicle for the growth of his critical consciousness. The Peace and Justice Center (PJC) was a short-lived youth and culture center located in an abandoned three-story downtown Los Angeles building, which had been acquired by longtime youth organizer Carmelo Alvarez in 1994. Alvarez had been hired by the Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC) to lead a crew of young workers in cleaning up the aftermath of the 1992 riots.<sup>42</sup> After the cleanup, Alvarez hired dozens of local youth to serve as a human services crew that would study the root causes of the 1992 civil unrest. He called them the Urban Peace Corps and began assigning them tasks to find out for themselves the history of

civil unrest in the Americas. Eventually, they would construct a play based on the historical resistance that had taken place in the Americas since 1492, which they performed at various schools throughout the region. In 1994, Alvarez's work crew moved into the downtown building and named it the Peace and Justice Center as a response to the ubiquitous slogan of the 1992 riots, "No Justice, No Peace." The PJC was transformed into an autonomous cultural and youth arts center in 1995 when it was taken over by former LACC youth workers, including Alvarez and his crew, who had been fired for demanding union representation. In the dispute that followed, the former workers were given use of the building for one year.

The Peace and Justice Center became a crossroads of various social movements and cultural scenes in the city during its brief existence between 1994-1996. The participants of the Peace and Justice Center transformed and used their building to organize youth and the surrounding community through art. Located in the "City West" district just across the 110 Harbor Freeway and the skyscrapers of downtown, the PJC attracted mostly youth from the largely immigrant and working class neighborhoods in the surrounding area. Teenagers came from the predominantly Latina/o neighborhoods of Pico Union, with Filipino Americans from Temple and Beaudry, black youth from South Central, and a large mix of Asian American and Latina/o youth from Koreatown. An information packet for potential funders explained the intentions of the organizers:

We are committed to providing a space for various forms of artistic expressions (e.g. writing, painting, film/dance, poetry, graphic arts, skating, theatre, and music), as well as providing a forum for the community to come together and address the real problems facing young adults and the community as a whole.<sup>43</sup>

The multiracial collective at the Peace and Justice Center created an alternative space that allowed for the development of new social networks and encouraged forms of creative resistance through art, music, theater, and holistic spirituality.<sup>44</sup> Workers and volunteers transformed the three-story building into a space of cultural resistance, encouraging youth to become politically active through creative expression, offering workshops on theater and art-making, providing rooms for bands to rehearse and political groups to organize. In the outdoor parking lot, they built a makeshift street course for local skateboarders surrounded by graffiti art by volun-

teer and resident artists. Members of the PJC “Tribe” made decisions based on participatory democracy and consensus.

The artists/organizers of the Peace and Justice Center were part of a loosely affiliated network of interethnic working class youth who participated in the making of a broader social justice movement that flourished in the city in the 1990s. Kiwi became affiliated with the PJC through this network of artists/activists. He was told about the “open mic” sessions by his friend, Wendell Pascual, a Filipino American college student who organized weekly hip hop events there as part of the Foundation Funkcollective. Kiwi recalls the PJC as a “mellow” space:

It was independent and underground. It was in the spirit of underground hip hop, looking outside of the box. People were encouraged to come in there and be themselves. The décor—the walls were full of Mumia Abu Jamal and anti-Proposition 187 posters. For me, back then, I was barely scratching the surface in political consciousness. The Peace and Justice Center and the Foundation Funkcollective encouraged the process of developing insight and making links into why the system is so fucked up. It was a real catalyst for my political development until I became more organized. If I didn’t go to the Peace and Justice Center and Foundation, I probably wouldn’t have discovered this consciousness.

Indeed, the PJC served as a “radical space” that transformed, or at least allowed for the transformation of, those who were involved in it. According to the political scientist Margaret Kohn, “political spaces facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and practices.”<sup>45</sup> Though some spaces are sites of social control, there are also spaces that serve as sites of political transformation. They are radical spaces because “they are political sites outside of the state where the disenfranchised generated power.” According to Kohn, they can radicalize democracy “by linking diverse democratic struggles, creating new sites for more effective political participation, extending collective control into previously excluded domains such as the workplace, and expanding the understanding of citizenship or accomplish meaningful inclusion of previously marginalized groups.”<sup>46</sup> PJC was a “radical space” because it was able to “facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and practices,” as Kohn writes of radical spaces in a general sense.<sup>47</sup> Similar to the story of Kiwi and Bambu, the multiracial youth of the Peace and Justice Center took the lessons learned from social movements of

the past and the present to generate their own notions of black, Chicana/o, Filipino, and Central American identity through their encounters with contemporary social dynamics and affiliations with other struggles for self-determination.

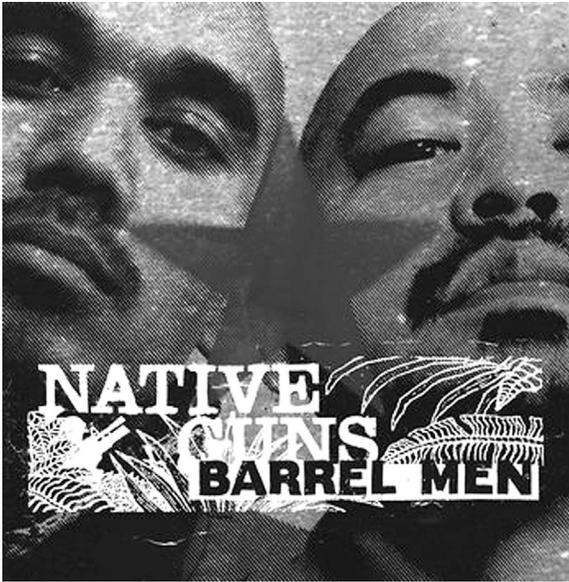
In addition to its cultural and spiritual components, the Peace and Justice Center became an important space in the political movements that were taking place in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s. The artists/organizers of the PJC became part of a loosely affiliated network of multiracial working class youth who participated in the making of a broader social justice movement that flourished in the city in those years.<sup>48</sup> The affiliated organizations of the Center, most of which had offices on the second floor of the building with very minimal rents, included Chicana/o cultural organizations such as Aztlan Foundation and Plaza de la Raza; the Central American Resource Center, CARECEN; Four Winds, a multiracial student organization attempting to fight for the retention of Affirmative Action; *The Revolutionary Worker* (now *Revolution*), the weekly newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist Party; and United Youth on the Move Coalition, a grassroots organization working towards youth empowerment through organizing, education, and advocacy. Several of the members of the PJC had been actively involved with these groups and invited them to take advantage of the space and central location the Center offered, and were also seen as allies that could help maintain and secure the survival of the Center. The Peace and Justice crew would often promote these organizations and participate in their events and rallies by contributing poetry, music, and dance.

Filipino Americans were major contributors to Peace and Justice Center. Among that multiracial group of young activists at the Center was Jose Buktaw (aka DJ Dwenz), who established the underground hip hop coalition Foundation Funkcollective. The Foundation, as it was often called, staged weekly hip hop dance and spoken word events at the "Quest Lodge" set up inside the Center.<sup>49</sup> Lakandiwa De Leon, a key participant for Foundation, has written that the purpose of their events was to "promote the concept of 'edutainment' (based on KRS-One's brand of politically charged hip hop) to youth of all ages. . . and take part in an inclusive, multicultural environment."<sup>50</sup> Kiwi became an active member of the Foundation and performed often at the Center, along with several other Filipino American hip hop DJs, MCs, and spoken word artists, including De Leon, Pascual, and Faith Santilla. "I was a regular emcee. . . .It was multiracial. It was

comfortable. I was from Fairfax High School, the most diverse high school in L.A. [The open mic at] Project Blowed was good, but it was about battling. You had to prove yourself as emcee in other people's culture, in the black community. I respect having to prove yourself, at the same time, it could be balanced with respect and love for people."<sup>51</sup> Kiwi found that balance at the PJC and the events organized by the Foundation. These events included the prominent participation of several local Filipino American student and youth organizations. Part of the larger Filipino American DJ scene that had existed and thrived in the city since the 1980s, the Foundation was an attempt to politicize Filipino American youth and engage them with youth across racial and ethnic communities.

The attempt at bridging cultural expression with political activism was taken a step further a few years later by the Balagtas Collective (BC), an art, culture, and youth-centered organization formed by a small group of Filipino American youth that was established in the mid-1990s. Kiwi and Bambu came to develop a radical and transnational Filipino consciousness through their participation in the struggle for National Democracy in the Philippines via their participation in the Balagtas Collective. Kiwi was one of the founders of the Balagtas Collective and the members of BC served as mentors to the younger Bambu, who became a member much later in the group's history. By the time Bambu became involved with the BC, Kiwi was living in San Francisco. Nevertheless, the story of Kiwi and Bambu's link to the Balagtas Collective is part the longer trajectory of their politicization in the ferment of post-riot Los Angeles.

The original founding members of the collective included Kiwi, De Leon, and Santilla, all of whom were members of the Foundation. At its peak, the group included about a dozen members, mostly college students, many who were children of immigrants. The group took its name from the political poetry tradition of the Philippines. As De Leon has written, "The Balagtas is an indigenized Philippine poetic form popularized in 1920s by Poet Laureate Francisco Balagtas, where two master poets are assigned to defend the pros and cons of an issue in lyrical verse."<sup>52</sup> The Balagtas Collective, as former member Terry Valen explains, sought to "tak[e] cultural performance back into the heart of the struggles of Filipino communities." This included "personal and family struggles, to farmworker and bus-rider unions, to revolutionary movements in the Philippine countryside and globalization."<sup>53</sup> The group performed at several



Barrel Men CD  
cover, 2006

youth and culture centers, college campuses, and ethnic festivals around the Los Angeles area in the mid- to late 1990s, although several members performed a few times in the early 2000s.

In addition to being more inclusive of diverse art forms than the Foundation Funkcollective, such as visual art and theater, the Balagtasan Collective was a more directly political organization. The Balagtasan Collective was an offshoot of the League of Filipino Students (LFS), the student and youth arm of the local chapter of BAYAN USA that sought to educate Filipino American students in the United States on the struggles that were taking place in the Philippines. LFS sponsored “exposure” trips of Filipino American youth from the U.S., which took them to the rural and urban sectors of the Philippines and exposed them to the grinding poverty that characterized the lives of the mass population. Students on these trips, however, were also exposed to the massive resistance to these conditions by ordinary Filipinos who had been organized by BAYAN. Kiwi was especially inspired by his first exposure trip in 1996, as he notes in filmmaker Eric Tandoc’s documentary, *Sounds of a New Hope*: “[W]hen I went to the Philippines in 1998, I just saw firsthand the conditions. . . And I got to see how advanced and how strong the movement is out there and how serious, you know what I mean? I came back, well, I’m

committed to this movement, the movement for national democracy in the Philippines.” Today, Kiwi serves as deputy secretary for the U.S. arm of BAYAN, headquartered in San Francisco.

Bambu intersected with the Balagtas Collective after finishing a six-year tour with the U.S. Marine Corps in 2002. Like many young and working class people of color, Bambu joined the armed forces because he saw no other options at that stage in his life. After serving six months for armed robbery, he was led to the Marines by the judge overseeing his case. As he recalls, “I was about to turn 18 and there were two Marine Corps recruiters literally in the back of the court room, and they were like ‘You should probably go talk to them.’”<sup>54</sup> This set up another stage in Bambu’s political development: “What it did was politicize me, especially when we went to East Timor, which is off the coast of Indonesia. There was a big conflict there and we went to support the Australians and these people [the Timorese] looked just like me. When I was a civilian without uniform, I remembered they’d double check my ID when I come back on base.”<sup>55</sup> When he returned to Los Angeles, he produced his first independent album, *Self-Untitled*, the cover of which showed half of his profile next to a map of the Philippine islands. He recalls how this album was, ironically, very Afrocentric. “It was just about me appropriating a different culture. That’s all it was. I was just appropriating black culture.” This was due in large part to the inspiration of his adopted father, as he explains: “You have my dad who practiced the Yoruba tradition in Africa who was very in tune with that. That’s why in my first album I talk about Ifa and all the religious things because that’s what I was going through with my dad, you know. It was different for me. And then I finally reconnected with my Filipino family and it was a great bonus.”

Bambu reconnected with his biological parents when he came back from his tour with the Marine Corps, while he also connected with the young Filipino American activists in the Balagtas Collective, which broadened his sense of identity. It was through Bambu’s activist work and the BC’s group study of the book *Philippine Society and Revolution* by Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines, that the rapper became politically conscious of the long history of Filipino resistance to capitalism and colonial oppression. According to Bambu, “Once I realized that the Philippines had this grand culture of resistance that continues to this day. . . Even in America the work that we put in, once I started to realize these things and

do more reading. . . Once I started understanding the PSR, then it was like, 'Wait a minute. I have something to bring to the table, too! I don't just have to adhere to what I think hip hop culture or black culture or brown culture in this country is. I have a story I can tell, too.'"

The critique of oppression from Native Guns' Filipino American perspective goes beyond one of class and race to include intersections with sexism. A significant element in introducing an awareness of sexism was the leadership role that women took on in the Balagtasan Collective. Always the majority of the group, women like Faith Santilla, Kat Carrido, and the other female members sought to integrate the questions of gender and sexism into the politics and cultural expressions of the Balagtasan Collective.<sup>56</sup> This fact, and Kiwi and Bambu's awareness of the leading role that women played in the struggle for democracy in the Philippines through organizations like Gabriela Women's Party in the BAYAN alliance, has helped to shape their self-criticism of sexism and homophobia in their music and in their personal lives.

Kiwi and Bambu's engagement with the social movements and politics of the Philippines and their relation to U.S.-led global capitalism help to make sense of Native Guns' transnationalism. It is a genuine transnationalism in that they attempt to create bridges between the politics of the Philippines and Filipino Americans through their activist work in their respective organizations, BAYAN and KMB. But, as Yen Le Espiritu has discussed in regards to her second-generation Filipino American informants in southern California, such forms of transnationalism also take place at "at the symbolic level—at the level of imagination, shared memory, and 'inventions of tradition'."<sup>57</sup> It is their application of a counter-spatial imaginary born of an understanding of U.S. racism, however, that also allows them to link the struggles of the oppressed in the Philippines with what is happening in Oakland, Los Angeles, and other urban communities marked by police violence and inequality.

## Conclusions

Although the number of rappers using their art as a form of activism, either as a means to raise consciousness about a variety of forms of inequality or to demand social justice, has proliferated since the "golden age" of black nationalist rap in the late 1980s/early 1990s, many academic treatises on activist rap have documented its failure to inspire a radical youth movement.<sup>58</sup> Kiwi

and Bambu (and also as Native Guns), however, were shaped in large part by such a youth movement that emerged out of the ashes of the 1992 uprisings. Their lived experience growing up in inner city Los Angeles, the influence of hip hop, their participation in the Balagtas Collective, Bayan USA, and Kabataang Makabayan all help explain an ongoing multiracial and transnational critical race consciousness. Indeed, these artists not only imagine an alternative way of being, they are actually in the process of making that world come into being through reflection, action, and organizing that is the very embodiment of a youth-oriented social movement.

Their activist work with youth in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and the Philippines, along with a critical rap consciousness, has garnered the attention of others outside the underground hip hop scene, including academics (like myself), documentary filmmakers, Asian and Pacific Islander American university student organizations, and urban youth organizers.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the work of Kiwi and Bambu can provide important insights into what Yen Le Espiritu has called the “self-making” practices of Filipino Americans in the contemporary era of globalization.<sup>60</sup> Their instrumental use of rap music as a consciousness-raising tool suggests how hip hop is being used to organize youth in the twenty-first century.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the history and popularity of Native Guns are reminders of the complex but significant role Asian and Pacific Islander Americans have in hip hop generally and the place of Filipino Americans in the development of hip hop in California, in particular.<sup>62</sup> The space Native Guns and other artists have carved out for Filipino American emcees in rap, given the fact that hip hop culture is associated almost exclusively with African Americans, perhaps signals how contemporary racial and cultural dynamics are changing.<sup>63</sup>

Kiwi, Bambu, and the Filipino American youth with whom they work do not separate the tradition of U.S. black liberation from global anti-imperialist movements, but rather see them as part of the same struggle. The nationalist affirmations of Filipino American pride that are evident in the work of Native Guns and their cohorts like the Blue Scholars and Power Struggle are at the same time expressions of an intersectional working class youth-of-color consciousness that flows easily across differences to find affinities and solidarities across space and race. As noted earlier, urban space contains concrete radical places like the Peace and Justice Center, but also discursive places in hip hop reception

and performance that function as sites for education, agitation, deliberation, and reflection. Kiwi and Bambu have learned quite a bit from the riots, the critical strains of hip hop, and the social movements of the 1990s, incorporating those lessons into what they are now teaching us.

## Discography

### Native Guns

*Stray Bullets Mixtape Volume I* (2004)

*Barrel Men* (2006)

*Stray Bullets Mixtape Volume II* (2007)

### Kiwi

*The Concrete EP* (as Vice Versa) (1999)

*Rites of Passage: Portraits of a Son Rising* (2003)

*The Summer Exposure Mixtape* (2007)

### Bambu

*Self-Untitled* (2002)

*I Scream Bars for the Children* (2007)

...*Exact Change*... (2008)

*A Peaceful Riot* (2009)

...*Paper Cuts*... (2010)

*Los Angeles, Philippines* (2010)

...*Exact Change*...*Reloaded* (2011)

*Prometheus Brown and Bambu Walk Into A Bar* (2011)

### DJ Phatrick

*A Song for Ourselves the Mixtape* (2009)

## Notes

1. Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles' Little Manila* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). On the ways in which Filipino Americans have used the sites of popular culture as sites of struggle and identity formation in the second half of the twentieth century, see Theodore S. Gonzalves *The Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).
2. Although a contested term, the term "Third World," which has been employed by Native Guns in their own music, remains an important signifier of commonality between the oppressed in the non-Western world and so-called minorities in the United States. As Ella Shohat has explained,

“‘Third World’ usefully evokes structural commonalities of struggles. The invocation of the ‘Third World’ implies a belief that the shared history of neocolonialism and internal racism form sufficient common ground for alliances among . . . diverse peoples. If one does not believe or envision such commonalities, then indeed the term ‘Third World’ should be discarded.” Quoted in Njoroge Njoroge, “Dedicated to the Struggle: Black Music, Transculturation, and the Aural Making and Unmaking of the Third World,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28:2 (Fall 2008): 85-104.

3. My view of the civil unrest as a rational, if violent, expression of rebellion largely stems from the conclusions reached by Melvin Oliver, James Johnson, and William Farrell in “Anatomy of a Rebellion: A Political-Economic Analysis,” in Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 117–141, and the work of Mike Davis in *Dead Cities: A Natural History* (New York: New Press, 2002). But I also appreciate the fact of that it was named a riot for the ways in which interethnic conflict became violent and because, as the artist Yong Soon Min has noted, “the term riots in the plural also seems to offer the richest possibilities of definitions in the dialectical interplay between violence and debauchery, revelry and exuberance”; quoted in the catalogue for the art exhibit, *Exquisite Crisis and Encounters*, New York, February 15 - May 31, 2007.
4. I would like to thank George Lipsitz for helping me draw this connection between grassroots activism and hip hop expression. Personal communication, December 20, 2011.
5. Elements of the Los Angeles underground hip hop scene that emerged in the 1990s are documented in Marcyliena Morgan’s *Real Hip-hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the L.A. Underground* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), an ethnographic study of one of the centers of rap performance, Project Blowed, in the predominately black neighborhood of Leimert Park. The history of The Good Life Café, an earlier iteration of Project Blowed, can be seen in the documentary *This Is the Life* (2008) directed by Ava DuVernay, a former performer at the Center. The Peace and Justice Center, another space of rap and spoken word performance which played a crucial role in the development of Kiwi’s career, is not mentioned in either source. According to writer and filmmaker Lakandiwa de Leon, Filipino American participation in the California DJ-based music scenes of the 1970s and 1980s were an important precursor to their involvement in hip hop; see “Filipinotown and the DJ Scene,” in Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, eds. *Asian American Youth* (London: Routledge, 2004). Anthony Kwame Harrison, another anthropologist of hip hop, has documented the underground Bay Area hip hop scene in *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009) and “Multiracial Youth Scenes and the Dynamics of Race: New Approaches to Racialization within the Bay Area Hip-Hop Underground,” Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield, eds., *Twenty-First Century Color Lines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009): 201-220.
6. Harrison, “Multiracial,” 205.
7. Matthew Meschery, “Native Guns: Barrel Men,” KQED.org, June 29, 2006, available online at: <http://www.kqed.org/arts/music/article.jsp?essid=8283>.

8. See Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008), and George Ciccariello Maher, “Brechtian Hip-Hop: Didactics and Self-Production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36 (2005): 129-160.
9. Personal interview August 1, 2011. All subsequent quotations from Kiwi are from the same interview, unless otherwise indicated.
10. Personal interview September 17, 2011. All subsequent quotations from Bambu are from the same interview, unless otherwise indicated.
11. Kiwi released his own full-length album, *Rites of Passage*, in 2003.
12. Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005).
13. *Ibid.*, 19.
14. Of course, the emergence of underground hip hop music was preceded by Los Angeles gangster rap, documented in its marvelous complexity by Robin D.G. Kelley in “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: ‘Gangsta Rap’ and Postindustrial Los Angeles” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994): 183-227. See also the history of hip hop music and interviews with its original creators in Brian Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1993).
15. Chang, 382.
16. Stuart Hall, “Divided City: The Crisis of London,” *Open Democracy*, October 18, 2004, available online at: [http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-multiculturalism/article\\_2191.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-multiculturalism/article_2191.jsp)
17. The transformation of Los Angeles from heavy manufacturing and a center of the defense industry into a post-industrial, service-based economy has been widely studied in the work of the Los Angeles school made popular by the work of Mike Davis in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990). For more on the Los Angeles School, see Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). The work of urbanists at UCLA has been especially significant in relating the effects of this change on the expansion of inequality, especially the gap between whites and people of color in the city. See Lawrence Bobo, Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson, and Abel Valenzuela, eds., *Prismatic Metropolis: Inequality in Los Angeles* (New York: Sage, 2000); Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, eds., *The New Asian Immigration in the Restructuring Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Paul M. Ong, et al., *The Widening Divide: Income Inequality and Poverty in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: The Research Group on the Los Angeles Economy, 1989). See also the work included in Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz, eds., *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: The Metamorphosis of Southern California* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
18. For staggering evidence of the racial bias of the “war on drugs,” see Holly Sklar’s chapter “Locking Up ‘Surplus’ Labor,” in her *Chaos or Community: Seeking Solutions, Not Scapegoats for Bad Economics* (Boston: South End Press, 1995): 119-140.
19. These statistics are gathered from Mike Davis’s prescient report on the emergence of what he called the prison-industrial complex in “Hell Facto-

- ries in the Field," *The Nation* 260:7 (February 20, 1995): 229-234.
20. Chang, 387.
  21. *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*, July 9, 1991, iii and 69.
  22. On the relationship of the changes in Los Angeles to neo-liberalism, see Jinah Kim, "Immigrants, Racial Citizens, and the (Multi)Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Los Angeles," *Social Justice* 35:2 (2008): 36-56.
  23. The work on the interethnic conflict that the riots brought to the surface has been extensively considered in the literature of the riots. Especially important has been the critique of how the riots were framed by the mainstream media around a racial conflict between Koreans and African Americans, while downplaying the role of "white supremacist capitalism" and ignoring the place of Latinas/os. See for example, Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Kyeyoung Park, "Use and Abuse of Race and Culture: Black-Korean Tension in America," *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 492-499. The term "white supremacist capitalism" comes from Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001): 115.
  24. I would like to acknowledge one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the possibility that Kiwi and Bambu fit into such a liminal space.
  25. Vijay Prashad, "My Hip Hop Life," Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji, eds., *Desi Rap* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008). See also Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*; Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) and "Youth Culture, Citizenship and Globalization: South Asian Muslim Youth in the United States After September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24:1 (2004): 219-231.
  26. Momo Chang, "Furious Five: Native Guns—MCs That Matter," *Hyphen* (Fall 2006).
  27. For the re-emergence of Chicana/o activism in Los Angeles, see Victor Hugo Viesca, "The Battle of Los Angeles: The Cultural Politics of Chicana/o Music in the Greater Eastside," *American Quarterly* 56:3 (September 2004): 719-739.
  28. Transcribed from Eric Tandoc, dir., *Sounds of New Hope* (2009).
  29. Transcribed from the cloudcast interview by Knocksteady, "Podcast 37—Bambu—Knocksteady Live" (May 2011), available online at: <http://www.mixcloud.com/knocksteady/podcast-37-bambu-knocksteady-live/>.
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. Demian Bulwa, Wyatt Buchanan, Matthew Yi, "Behind Murder Charge Against Ex-BART Officer," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 2009.
  32. George Ciccariello-Maher, "'Oakland Is Closed!': Arrest and Containment Fail to Blunt Anger in the Streets," *Counter Punch*, January 17-18, 2009, available online at: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/01/09/oakland-s-not-for-burning/>.

33. Press release for "Handcuffs," July 7, 2009.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and was released from Los Angeles County Jail after serving eleven months of a two-year sentence.
36. Seven-year-old child Aiyana Stanley Jones was killed in 2010 by the Detroit Police in a raid that turned out to have targeted the wrong house. Sean Bell was shot to death by the NYPD in a storm of 50 bullets in 2008 and Amadou Diallo was killed in 1999 in similar fashion, unarmed and in a hail of 41 shots. These victims, like Oscar Grant, were black. See Charlie LeDuff, "What Killed Aiyana Stanley-Jones?," *Mother Jones*, November/December 2010; Michael Wilson, "Judge Acquits Detectives in 50-Shot Killing of Bell," *New York Times*, April 26, 2008.
37. Viola, 2006.
38. George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011): 61.
39. *Ibid.*, 2.
40. As the sociologist Tamara K. Nopper has explained, it is important to emphasize the ways in which the U.S. "state seeks its coherence from blackness and the fixation on controlling black bodies," that is not as persistent nor present as that against other racialized groups. Kiwi and Bambu's development of a black spatial imaginary, albeit alongside that of a Filipino American racial imaginary, is therefore distinct. See Nopper, "The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the Asian American Abandonment Narrative as Political Fiction," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6:2 (Fall 2006): 104.
41. These protests would be eclipsed by the massive marches for immigrant rights on March 22, 2006, estimated at 500,000 to a million marchers in Los Angeles alone; large marches also took place in Chicago and New York City. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there were links between these marches and the earlier ones.
42. Personal interview with Carmelo Alvarez, November 9, 2008. According to Alvarez, after President George H.W. Bush came to South Central Los Angeles to view the damage from the riots, he ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fund LACC with over six million dollars for the clean-up process.
43. Peace and Justice Center Crew, "Peace and Justice Center Information Packet" (unpublished manuscript, 1995).
44. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Linda Woodhead, "Why So Many Women in Holistic Spirituality?," Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, eds., *The Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007): 115-125.
45. Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003): 4.
46. *Ibid.*, 7.
47. *Ibid.*, 4.
48. The story of the rise of a new progressive and labor movement in Los Angeles in the 1990s, and the central role of youth of color is told in a variety

of recently published sources. See Karen Brodtkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Peter Drier, et al. *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jao Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angeles: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Notably, Karen Brodtkin's book, which is based on the oral histories of a cohort of 1990s young activists, includes the story of Aqualina Soriano, a Filipina American from Orange County who became active while at UCLA. This is notable because Soriano was one of the founders and most active participants in the Peace and Justice Center, although this fact is not discussed in Brodtkin's study. For the role of Latinas/os, particularly the organizing efforts of the ethnic Mexican and Central American communities, see Norma Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 180-218; Ruth Milkman, ed., *Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Mary Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

49. Personal interview with Wendell Pascual, June 15, 2011.
50. De Leon, 204.
51. On Project Blowed, see footnote 5.
52. *Ibid.*, 206, note 27.
53. Terry Valen "The Bus Stop: An Event by the Balagtasan Collective," *Critical Planning* (Spring 1999).
54. Knocksteady Podcast, 37.
55. *Ibid.*
56. In addition to organizing as part of the collective, the female members performed separately under the moniker "The Women of the Balagtasan Collective," which included Melany De La Cruz, Alison De La Cruz, Alfie Ebojo, Cindy Evangelista, Charmaine Jane, Christabelle Villena, Cheryl Samson, and Vanessa Vela.
57. Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 214.
58. I would like to thank Antonio Tiongson for pointing out the rise of raptivist hip hop since the turn of the twentieth century. On the criticism of rap as social movement, see Molefi K. Asante, *It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008); Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and John H. McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America* (New York: Gotham Books, 2008).
59. In 2009, Eric Tandoc produced *Sounds of New Hope*, a forty-minute documentary on Kiwi and his role in the people's movement for national liberation and democracy in the Philippines; Tadashi Nakamura has included their songs in two of his short films, *Pilgrimage* (2003), on how Japanese American activists have transformed the internment camp at Manzanar

as a symbol of empowerment, and the award-winning documentary on Asian American movement musician Chris Iijima, *A Song for Ourselves* (2009); Faye Christine Caronan, *Making History from U.S. Colonial Amnesia: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Poetics* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2007); Michael Viola, "Filipino American Hip-Hop and Class Consciousness: Renewing the Spirit of Carlos Bulosan." *MRzine* (2006), available online at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/viola150406.html>; Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground*.

60. Espiritu, 12.
61. See for example, the excellent work on Filipino American rap as revolutionary critical pedagogy by Viola, "Filipino American Hip-Hop and Class Consciousness" and "Hip-Hop and Critical Revolutionary Pedagogy: Blue Scholarship to Challenge 'The Miseducation of the Filipino'," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 4:2 (November 2006).
62. The scholarship on Asian Americans in hip hop has become an important strain in current "Hip Hop Studies," including the work of Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House*, Deborah Wong's *Speak It Louder* (London: Routledge, 2004), Oliver Wang's *AfroAsian Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and *Alien Encounters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Nitasha Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). The short documentary *Beats Rhymes and Resistance* (1997), directed by Lakandiwa de Leon, Dawn Mabalon, and Jonathan Ramos as part of their studies at UCLA's EthnoCommunications Center, visually documents the contributions of several Filipino Americans participating in the Los Angeles hip hop cultural forms of graffiti, rap, and DJ-ing during the 1990s. It contains footage of Kiwi's early performances as an MC in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the important essay "Filipinotown and the DJ Scene," Lakandiwa de Leon's contribution to the anthology *Asian American Youth* (London: Routledge, 2004), historicizes the place of Filipino Americans in the early development of hip hop in Los Angeles and the role of the Filipino American DJs and DJ crews especially. For more on the roles of Filipino Americans in hip hop, see also Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr., *Filipino Youth Cultural Politics and DJ Culture* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2006).
63. Anthony Kwame Harrison has considered the racial implications of the rise of Filipino American rap by asking how rappers like Kiwi and Bambu, Geologic of Blue Scholars, Rhapsodistas, and Power Struggle have gained legitimacy in the west coast underground hip hop scene in "Emcee Authenticity and Post-Colonial Consciousness within Filipino American Hip Hop," *International Association for the Study of Popular Music—U.S. Branch*, San Diego, CA (May 31, 2009).