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Chitown Loves You

Hip Hop's Alternative Spatializing Narratives and Activism to Trump's Hateful Campaign Rhetoric About Chicago

ABSTRACT Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign rhetoric about violence in Chicago spatialized a narrative that branded the city as the poster child of urban disarray. His bombast lacked any contextual understanding of the issue and offered no productive pathways for collective solutions. Alternatively, I argue in this paper that a rising collection of Chicago hip hop artists were producing musical discourses in 2016 that not only challenged Trump's negative rants, but also spatialized a multilayered narrative of the intersections between hip hop and activism in the city. Through textual analysis of three tracks from three breakout artists in 2016, my goal is to show how hip hop enables audiences to imagine Chicago's 1) structural resistance to violence in the city's communities of color, 2) a sense of place and belonging among the city's youth, and 3) a loving and unapologetic "black liberation" lens to social movements in the city.

KEYWORDS: hip hop, activism, space and place, race, Chicago

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign and beyond, Donald Trump painted Chicago as the poster-child of street violence, its relentless wave of killings reflective of the low-income, black and brown urban spaces across America. On 12 July, he tweeted, "Crime is out of control, and rapidly getting worse. Look what is going on in Chicago and our inner cities. Not good!" By this point, Trump was positioning himself as the "law and order" candidate who would bring an authoritarian ethos to the White House. Further gesturing to a pro-law enforcement platform, in a 22 September interview with Sean Hannity of Fox News, Trump said:

"I think Chicago needs stop-and-frisk. Now, people can criticize me for that or people can say whatever they want, but they asked me about Chicago, and I think stop-and-frisk, with good, strong, you know, good, strong law and order. But you have to do something. It can't continue the way it's going."

Trump's disciplinarian rhetoric about Chicago's violence continued into his presidency in 2017, as he portrayed Chicago as America's iconic urban space of social disorder. In his first official week in office, he was back on Twitter, calling Chicago a place of human "carnage" and threatening to send in federal troops.

Against this backdrop of threats, putdowns and insensitivity, an emerging crop of Chicago hip hop artists were producing a discourse of their own, one that not only would

counter Trump's message, but galvanize the very people and neighborhoods he sought to diminish. That their voices were heard at all amid the billionaire's incessant barrage spoke not only to the power of hip hop but also to the virtues of activism. The merging of those endeavors helped mark the battlefield of ideals then, and does so today.

Trump's vitriol about Chicago reinforced his tough-guy image with his political base, but to many others his words were tinged with racism within the tradition of the country's history of white supremacy and state-sanctioned violence against communities of color. His rhetoric signaled a platform of misguided policies toward communities of color that were and are materially affected by violence on Chicago's south and west sides.

Trump's attacks were compounded by the reality that Chicago experienced a violent year in 2016, with 751 killings, the most in any American city (DNAinfo Chicago, 2016). The combination of real violence, Trump's rhetoric and a mainstream media discourse that sensationalized nearly every aspect of the issue, gave credence to the city's polarizing nickname, "Chiraq." Chicago drill rappers in 2012 had created the metaphor to invoke the image of a war zone in Iraq, given the fact there were more deaths in Chicago that year than there were U.S. casualties in the Iraq war (Cochran, 2015).

This incendiary discourse about Chicago was exacerbated in 2016 with the release of director Spike Lee's similarly named film "Chi-raq." Based on the Greek play "Lysistrata," the movie told the story of black women in violent neighborhoods abstaining from sex with their gangster boyfriends to pressure them to stop the gun violence in the city. Lee's film was not well received by many in Chicago, especially social justice organizations that contended the movie did not shed light on structural conditions that lead to violence, such as government disinvestment and public school closures.

Neighborhood activists and others further claimed there was little effort to acknowledge the years of collective work by blacks and Latinos to provide positive alternatives to violence in the communities most affected. Pushback was particularly strong in Chicago's hip hop culture, led by Rhymefest and Chance the Rapper, the latter calling Lee's film "exploitative and problematic" because of its sensationalized treatment of the violence and lack of context (Daly, 2016).

With such controversial mainstream representations circulating about Chicago, many segments of the broader national public were inclined to believe the negative portrait Trump painted of the city. In political circles and the mainstream media, the words "violence" and "Chicago" became almost synonymous (Mirabile, 2016), and a parallel line of thinking emerged that accused the hip hop culture of embracing and exploiting the "Chiraq" image rather than doing anything materially or symbolically to invalidate the phrase and challenge the policies that fueled violence in the first place.

To be sure, violence and negativity were (and are) a part of Chicago's urban and hip hop discourse, but they didn't (and don't) make up the entire story, serving more as a reaction than a cause agent. In fact, this essay argues that it is shortsighted to find only fault with Chicago's hip hop culture, when instead it should be recognized for unleashing in 2016 musical artists who challenged Trump and his perceptions, while invigorating a city's soul.

Through textual analysis of three hip hop tracks by three breakout stars—Vic Mensa, Chance the Rapper and Jamila Woods—this essay will show how hip hop enables

audiences to imagine 1) structural resistance to violence in communities of color, 2) a sense of place and belonging among the city's youth, and 3) a loving and unapologetic "black liberation" lens to social movements in the city. This essay pushes against Trump's negative discourse by critically pointing to the agency artists can inject into their hip hop platform, which reflects on the structural causes and potential solutions to violence. Moreover, these same artists also are active in creating community infrastructure to steer youth in the city away from violence.

This critical textual analysis follows other hip hop studies by scholars such as James B. Peterson that apply it to show how the music can construct discourses of the underground, especially in hip hop's articulation of African American culture and its criticism of social differences (Peterson, 2015). Through this essay's textual analysis, a discursive construction of the three above-mentioned artists' music seeks to signify the cultural production of alternative spatial narratives to Trump's negative campaign rhetoric. This study builds on what scholars in a recent *Journal of Popular Music Studies* roundtable on "perspectives on popular music and the 2016 presidential campaign" have claimed about such analysis, that "it sheds light on the cultural politics and warfare necessary to perpetuate the bloody practices of competing ideologies" (Deaville, Gorzelany-Mostak, Gosa, & Patch, 2017, p. 2).

The essay starts with a succinct literature review that builds on the significance of hip hop music's power to engage mainstream politics, community activism, and how hip hop is particularly relevant to spatial imaginations of racial formations. The social activism setting of Chicago hip hop culture in year 2016 is discussed next, focusing on the dynamic scene of up-and-coming socially conscious artists whom journalists and community groups have credited with helping shape the cultural and activist renaissance in the city's contemporary creative arts scene.

HIP HOP MUSIC'S POLITICAL SPATIAL IMAGINATION AND ACTIVISM

John Street argues that "music's politics is primarily a product of its political context, that in some way or another political change produces songs that reflect, and reflect upon, their times" (Street, 2013, p. 13). The relationship between music and politics is distinctly a part of American history. Popular musicians across rock and soul reflected on the 1960s civil rights movement and political controversies of the Vietnam War. More recently, musicians such as Bruce Springsteen and the Foo Fighters agreed to play concerts for presidential candidates they supported.

Hip hop music, of course, is no stranger to reflecting on political and social change in the United States and globally. The distinction in hip hop's politics is its roots in the post-industrial disinvestment in U.S. urban communities of color. This social and political context has led to the history of hip hop concerns with conditions of poverty, unemployment, racial segregation, white flight, lack of quality affordable housing, public school disinvestment, drug addiction, familial organization issues, and a host of problems associated with the criminal justice system that continues a legacy of state oppression against black and brown communities (Chang, 2007). Historian Robin Kelly argues that these urban conditions create the postindustrial "ghetto" underclass discourse around which white

political elites have built profitable deviance studies, a poverty public policy industry, and a prison-industrial complex (1997). These very same urban conditions produce a ghetto arts aesthetic of black youth that is sold to a white mainstream society that desires to consume African American popular culture based on enduring caricatures of the black urban “ghetto” (Watkins, 1998).

Even though hip hop culture was born in the harsh urban conditions detailed above, its cultural production, and especially its music, has sought to express consciousness about the structural and economic forces that shape the typical stereotypes of black and brown deficiency in cities. A more multilayered understanding of the world in hip hop’s culture often comes in the form of rap lyrics and catchy musical beats that discursively construct social resistance to limiting public narratives transited by elites (Rose, 1994; 2008). In oft-cited Tricia Rose’s (1994) *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, she argues that rap has enabled artists from marginalized urban communities of color to carve out expansive identity spaces that express an alternative political consciousness to the mainstream that may have no exposure and experience with disenfranchised urban environments. Given hip hop’s affordance of expansive identity spaces, social consciousness is also expressed by Chicago’s drill rappers who engage in the “Chiraq” metaphor to signify war zone conditions when describing their urban environment on the south and west sides of the city.

At the same time, socially conscious “message rap” that focuses on political activism expressions has also reached the realm of everyday public memory and is represented by acts such as Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, KRS One, Public Enemy, Immortal Technique, Dead Prez, and a host of others that are both commercial and underground. The key takeaway remains that the expansive creativity from these artists challenge reductive mainstream narratives of low-income communities of color. Political messages in hip hop music counter mainstream media news coverage and conservative politics that misrepresent urban spaces where communities of color live, work and play.

Yet, whether the social and political consciousness expressed in hip hop music translates into effective activism is heavily critiqued in academic scholarship. Critical scholars argue that that hip hop will never be the focal point for political change because the culture is run by the cultural industries and that mainstream acts (however political their artistic expressions are) will be on a corporate leash, therefore limiting any prospects for actual radical activism (Perry, 2004; Watkins, 2006; Asante, 2008). Yvonne Bynoe sees a proliferation of politically ineffective hip hop artists solely engaging in “raptivism”—personified by the “raptivist,” essentially a rap artist who dabbles in activism on the side” (2004, p. ix)—and “lacking the necessary combination of organizing experience, political savvy, and capital” (ibid., p. x) to build the necessary infrastructure to deliver substantive political change to marginalized communities of color. Craig S. Watkins in his book *Hip hop matters: Politics, pop culture, and the struggle for the soul of a movement* (2006), documents flawed attempts by raptivists such as Russell Simmons (Hip Hop Summit Action Network) and P. Diddy (Citizen Change). These two hip hop moguls started activist efforts respectively aimed at repealing drug laws in New York and nationally registering youth to sway the 2004 presidential election in the favor of

the Democratic Party. Both artists' efforts failed in their initial goals and demonstrated that hip hop celebrity power can only go so far in having an impact on large-scale politics if there is no on-the-ground infrastructure and youth political education that could lead to a more coherent agenda.

Still, hip hop scholars acknowledge that hip hop culture has significant power to make young people feel they matter and to serve as an agent of social change by willful actors who choose to use their voices to amplify issues that concern marginalized groups (Alim, 2009; Haupt, Williams, and Alim, 2018). Imani Perry's views are insightful here when she says that hip hop is not inherently "liberation music," but admits that intentional artists can harness the culture and its music toward "liberatory agendas" (2004, pp. 6-7). Increasingly, such liberatory agendas are being played out in the country, calling for clearer activist visions that engage issues that speak to a "post-civil rights" hip hop youth generation. Such an agenda promises to be more attentive to place-based dimensions that build local capacity to organize against injustices that are intersectional and structurally different from the 1960s. Andreana Clay's *The hip-hop generation fights back: Youth, activism and post-civil rights politics* (2012) shows that younger activists in today's hip hop generation are expanding notions of activism beyond formal civic engagement discourse, even in light of Barack Obama's becoming the first U.S. president of color. Clay's ethnography of two Oakland based non-profits that use hip hop to work with underresourced youth of color demonstrates activism that engages in local issues such as racial injustice, education inequality, police brutality, and mass incarceration that affect current hip hop generations. Further her work illustrates that it is just as important for these non-profit organizations to engage in the self-expressive aspects of hip hop music that empower the youths' selves, identities, and bodies.

These expanded forms of activism that engage more vulnerable aspects of the self and localized urban realities are consistent with scholars who for a long time have argued that hip hop activism needs to engage newer generations of youth on their own terms. Angela Ards writes that older generations should not see new forms of hip hop culture and its youth activism merely as insignificant social events, but potentially as a "prepolitical phase of consciousness building that's integral to organizing" (1999, web). She states that as the activism of the younger hip hop generations "mature," four characteristics may emerge, 1) hip hop may not look like the hip hop of the old because it will be youth-led and -defined, 2) hip hop activism will not be solely a race-based analysis because it will be more intersectional (engage multiple oppressed identities and experiences), 3) hip hop activism will move from a civil rights to human rights framework, and 4) that society more broadly will have to deal with the ironies of hip hop that engages in developing a strong voice but is also open to personal human vulnerabilities. These insights concur with Chicago's current activist spaces, represented in the hip hop musical discourses being produced and the activism inspired by artists and the broader activist scene.

Attention to constructing musical discourses of urban environments speaks to the significance of representing space and place in hip hop culture. Murray Forman argues that rappers can be understood as embodying "alternative cartographers" in their artistic practice because they map interpretations of societal issues and collective identities of place

within their music (Forman, 2000). The collective identity of a place championed by rappers often takes the form of the representation of the cities and of specific “hoods” where they built their craft. Representing specific places, such as Kendrick Lamar’s ties to Compton, California, or Yasiin Bey’s (Mos Def) shout outs to Brooklyn, New York, has become important social currency in the construction of a rapper’s persona and musical discourse. In the Chicago artists highlighted below, discursive expressions of place play an important role in constructing alternative narratives that challenge reductive and harmful rhetoric displayed by elite political actors such as Trump.

George Lipsitz’s conception of the “black spatial imaginary” is an important contribution to how we can understand hip hop music’s ability to challenge mainstream narratives of space and place. Lipsitz theorizes the black spatial imaginary is a “counter-spatial imaginary based on sociability and augmented use value” (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 13) in which communities of color place a higher value on “solidarities within, between, and across spaces” (ibid., p. 10), prioritizing the public good over individual interests. The black spatial imaginary is in contrast to what Lipsitz theorizes as the “white spatial imaginary,” understood as “the ideal of pure and homogenous space through exclusiveness, exclusivity, and homogeneity” (ibid., p. 13). The latter can be seen in the history of racial covenant laws that restricted whether communities of color could live in the city, or can also be understood in the privatized spaces within commercial malls in cities that encourage conspicuous consumption.

A black spatial imaginary can be applied to the discourses that hip hop music constructs because socially conscious artists can imagine a different politics. Alternative politics represented in hip hop music can reveal narratives of urban spaces that counter conservative political rhetoric, such as what was witnessed during Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Trump’s blasts at Chicago can be conceived as a white spatial imaginary that not only misrepresented the city but also promoted a militarized response that harkened back to state-sanctioned violence against communities of color. These militarized urban conditions are characterized by the ideal, pure and homogenous white space that Lipsitz theorizes in a white spatial imaginary. Trump’s rhetoric and the mainstream media’s sensationalized stories of the violence in Chicago lack the social and political context that can provide pathways toward productive solutions. Consistent with a black spatial imaginary, this essay instead examines Chicago’s hip hop music created the same year of Trump’s rhetoric, and how the music constructs more nuanced and productive narratives about the context of Chicago’s violence and community resistance.

CHICAGO’S CONTEMPORARY HIP HOP CULTURE AND ACTIVIST INTERSECTIONS

Chicago is a bedrock of activist hip hop music and politics. With respect to hip hop, the city is home to rappers who have consistently been known to perform socially conscious rap, such as Common, Lupe Fiasco and Rhymefest. Additionally, even though Kanye West at this moment receives heavy criticism for representing a hyper-materialistic rapper

persona, his early origins in Chicago were undeniably a part of the socially conscious hip hop representative of the south and west sides of the city.

Political activism is also important to the collective identity of the city, which is home to the direct-action community organizing model of Saul Alinsky (Alinsky, 1971). Progressive political organizations across the nation employ the organizing model to hold politicians accountable to marginalized citizens and causes. Former President Obama—whose ties to Chicago go back decades—comes out of the Alinsky tradition of political community organizations in the city, and this relationship undoubtedly shaped his early years as a community organizer on the south side. In particular, the Obama-era political relationship with hip hop culture in general has not been missed by scholars, including Travis Gosa and Erik Nielson in their edited volume *The Hip Hop and Obama Reader* (Gosa & Nielson, 2015).

Music journalists and contemporary artists in the city would point out that the hip hop artists mentioned above are of an older generation that made its impression on the city in the 1990s and 2000s. The 2010s have brought in a different hip hop aesthetic that one can argue is tied to a post-civil rights youth collective activism from communities of color. This aesthetic also is catalyzed by the social networking and promotion practices of new information communication technologies, such as social media. Music critics such as the *Chicago Tribune's* Greg Kot and the *Chicago Reader's* Leor Galil have written that today's hip hop culture post-2010 has embraced community and collective approaches in a more forthright manner than previous generations (Galil, 2016; Kot, 2015). In contrast to what these journalists have described as an earlier hip hop culture that focused on only one rapper at a time making it out of Chicago as a solo act, today's younger crop formed collectives of hip hop creatives that desire to collaboratively blow up as a community. This is most emblematic of the SaveMoney collective (that has birthed Chance the Rapper, Vic Mensa, Joey Purp, Towkio, Kami, and Nico Segal, among others), and Pivot Gang (which has brought forth Saba, Joseph Chilliams, and MFnmelo, among others).

At the same time, the younger crops of artists also participate in the community building and activist scenes in Chicago. Many of them talk openly about how arts-focused community organizations, such as Young Chicago Artists, Kuumba Lynx, and the YouMedia program in Chicago's downtown library, provided essential spaces for them to hone their craft as teenagers.

Moreover, some of the younger and less commercial hip hop artists in Chicago's present landscape have formed partnerships with youth activist organizations, such as the Black Youth Project 100 that comes out of Cathy Cohen's (2010) work at the University of Chicago and with the #LetUsBreathe Collective, a radical cultural production alliance that emerged after the 2014 killing of Michal Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri. These intersections between youth artists and activists that emerged after Ferguson have become subject matter for the Chicago-based radio-podcast-archive project AirGo, which uses dialogic approaches to feature stories about the creative art being produced within the context of social activism.

This landscape sets the scene for the rest of the essay, which analyzes songs released in 2016 by three emerging artists who articulate the structural forces underlying violence in

Chicago, while highlighting movements toward collective liberation. The textual analysis of the song lyrics highlights what socio-linguist Norman Fairclough describes when contextualizing any social phenomenon, that “there are alternative and often competing discourses, associated with different groups of people in different social positions” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 12). In this case, the social phenomenon contextualized are the competing spatial narratives put forth about Chicago’s violence by then-presidential candidate Trump and hip hop musicians from Chicago. Following a hip hop vernacular of “dropping knowledge,” the lyrics from the three selected songs demonstrate how the artists dropped alternative spatial narratives of Chicago that challenge Trump’s negligent political campaign rhetoric.

DROPPING STRUCTURAL RESISTANCE: VIC MENSA’S “16 SHOTS”

Rapper Vic Mensa grew up in the Hyde Park neighborhood on the south side. In the summer of 2016, he dropped his first EP, “There’s A Lot Going On.” The album was free if fans registered to vote through Respect My Vote!, a non-partisan program launched by the national non-profit Hip Hop Caucus.

One particular song, “16 Shots,” was Mensa’s reflection on the 2014 killing of black teenager Laquan McDonald by white police officer Jason Van Dyke. The shooting captured media attention locally and nationally after dashboard camera footage was released in November 2015 showing that Van Dyke unloaded 16 bullets into McDonald, who was armed with a small knife but appeared to be walking away from Van Dyke. The camera footage was released months after the April 2015 re-election of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, who was in a tight race with Chuy Garcia, a hugely underfunded challenger. This sparked allegation of a cover-up by the mayor’s office, which ignited weeks of protests and resulted in the firing of Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy in December 2015, the election defeat of Cook County District Attorney Anita Alvarez in March 2016, and Van Dyke’s second-degree murder conviction in October 2018.

A prominent feature of Mensa’s lyrics in “16 Shots” is placing McDonald’s killing within the context of the structural violence that plagues Chicago’s communities of color. He raps:

“The mayor lying, saying he didn’t see the video footage
And everybody want to know where the truth at
On the south side where it’s no trauma centers, but the most trauma
A lot of cannons but you don’t want no drama”

Here, Mensa points to the actual real lack of trauma care, but one can also infer the experience of *collective trauma* in black and brown communities that emerge from the structural and economic forces that spatialize violence within the everyday reality on the south and west sides.

A major structural force that academics and activists point to is the dismantling of public housing projects in the past two decades (Popkin, 2006; Popkin & Edin, 2016). Rooted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development federal takeover of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) in 1995, the local agency launched the 1999 Plan for

Transformation. The plan called for the demolition of CHA's worst properties and replacing them with mixed-income communities that were contracted to private developers (for-profit and non-profit) to develop. What resulted was the involuntary displacement of poor black and brown residents from not only their housing, but the communities that they had known for decades.

Displacement forced many black and brown residents to move into segregated areas on the south and west sides, leading to the hyper-segregation and concentration of poverty evident in Chicago today (Betancur & Smith, 2016). Government relocation assistance was deemed insufficient (Popkin & Edin, 2016). Further, this was aggravated by the slow development of replacement housing. Many of the youth of displaced families were left to consider gang life and selling drugs to try to get by. These housing and segregation issues contribute to the collective traumatic conditions that contextualize the gun violence because young black males are caught up in the territorial and street-level economic conflict that has led to the epidemic of shootings.

State-sanctioned collective trauma in black and brown communities in Chicago has also been exacerbated by the public education crisis in the city. Not only did Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner and the legislature create a Chicago Public Schools budget crisis by not enacting a state budget for two years (2015-2017), but Mayor Emmanuel in 2013 initiated the closing of 50 public schools, many of them on the south and west sides (Ewing, 2018). These examples of public disinvestment support what scholars such as Carla Shedd have empirically contended about public schools in Chicago, that they have become extensions of the carceral state and "powerful engines of social stratification" (Shedd, 2015, p. 159). This social stratification manifests as separate and unequal schooling that becomes spatialized in lower-income communities of color in the city.

Mensa's "16 shots" also constructs a musical discourse around the tense structural relations between the Chicago Police Department (CPD) and communities of color when he raps:

"They threw a little girl down on the pavement
Pushed her off the bike and said, "Stay out the way, bitch"
She was bleedin' on the ground through her braces
This is what happens when n — — don't stay in their places
The mayor duckin' when he fired the superintendent
But resignation come with bonuses and recognition"

The mass incarceration and unjust treatment of black communities by the criminal justice system continues to be a lightning rod issue in the country (Alexander, 2012; Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018). As Mensa alludes to in his song, black people perceive that the CPD creates an atmosphere that implies blacks should "stay in their places," meaning a position of submissiveness to authority and in general to a society that grants privilege to white supremacy. Mensa articulates his views about the CPD's oppressive treatment of communities of color by pointing out that the resignation of Police Superintendent McCarthy comes with no real acknowledgment of actual unjust treatment by the police. Instead Mensa suggests that the superintendent resignation was a manufactured scapegoating that was intended to divert blame away from the mayor's office's lack of police oversight reform in the city.

Illustrative in the release of “There’s A Lot Going On” in collaboration with Respect My Vote!, Mensa, like many of the emerging hip hop artists, does not only reflect politics in his music but engages in activism. During the “Shut Down Chi” street protests that followed the release of the Laquan McDonald shooting video, Mensa was out with activists, protesting at police headquarters and in Chicago’s ritzy Magnificent Mile downtown district. He also continues to speak out against police brutality at anniversaries of police-involved shootings and to lend his art at community festivals that connect youth to community resources, performing at Common’s “AAHH! Fest” and the Intercity Muslim Action Network’s “Takin’ It to the Streets” festival on the south side. More recently, the themes of connecting music and activism embody Mensa’s debut studio album, “The Autobiography,” which dropped in the summer of 2017. With Laundi Keepseagle, Mensa co-founded the Chicago-based non-profit SaveMoneySaveLife in 2018, which uses arts to engage underresourced youth and trains everyday civilians as trauma and mental health first responders in neighborhoods that are affected by the highest rates of violence.

DROPPING COMMUNITY BELONGING IN PLACE: CHANCE THE RAPPER’S ‘ANGELS’

Arguably the most popular musician to break out of Chicago in recent years, Chance the Rapper hails from the Chatham neighborhood on the south side. He has decided not to sign with a corporate record label and distributes his albums as mixtapes through online digital services. His third full-length release, “Coloring Book,” was released in summer 2016 to critical acclaim, and he won Grammys for best new artist, rap album, and rap performance.

Much of the project is an ode to Chicago, but the song “Angels,” which features rapper Saba, generates a prideful and hopeful sense of community and belonging. Scholars in the social sciences have pointed to the significance for cultures worldwide of music rituals that produce a sense of place and belonging (Feld & Basso, 1997; Low & Lawrence-Zunigais, 2003). Further, hip hop scholars have highlighted the importance of rappers representing their neighborhoods and how a sense of belonging and politics can emerge in the musical discourse (Forman, 2002; Perry, 2004). “Angels” took on more gravity in 2016 because it challenged the negative political discourse surrounding Chicago in recent years. For example, Chance raps:

“I got my city doing front flips
 When every father, mayor, rapper jump ship
 I guess that’s why they call it where I stay
 Bring up the streets so my daughter can have somewhere to play”

Here, Chance is making explicit the widely held belief that not only are black fathers and politicians known to abandon the low-income communities of color in Chicago, but rappers are just as guilty. The latter sentiment refers to the idea in previous decades that rappers needed to leave Chicago for New York or Los Angeles to cash in on the corporate music industry. Chance has challenged this notion by staying in Chicago to simultaneously build his musical career, raise his family and reinvest in the city. This

well-documented sense of community and civic spirit has inspired fans in Chicago to start an online campaign called #ChanoForMayor.

“Angels” also demonstrates the important aspect of “black placemaking” that is integral to Chicago’s community belonging and homegrown musical and dance culture. Black placemaking refers to “the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging and resistance” through highlighting “the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being black and being around other black people in the city” (Hunter, Pattillo, Robinson, & Taylor, 2016, p. 2). Chicago’s black placemaking is in full effect in Chance’s lyrics:

“GCI 107.5, angel going live
Power 92, angel going juke
GCI 107.5, going live
Power 92, angel going juke, juke, juke, juke”

Besides the obvious shout-outs to the mainstream hip hop and urban music stations (107.5 WGCI and 92.3 WPWX), Chance has consistently integrated the sounds and history of Juke music, also known as “ghetto house music,” which originated in the south and west sides in the early 1990s. Although traditional and mainstream versions of house music owe their roots to Chicago, speeded-up Juke has remained unapologetically black at its essence. Juke was not the preferred type of house music club promoters on the more affluent north side wanted to support. And because it was ignored by the mainstream, DJ’s played Juke at park picnics and high school dances. Juke also birthed “footwork,” a mix of Chicago stepper’s moves, hip hop uproking and rave dancing that matched the rapid pace of the music. Juke has not only populated all of Chance’s albums, but he and his collaborators often perform footwork in public, for example during the live performance of “Angels” on “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.”

It is undeniable that Chance is spatializing a narrative of Chicago that is one of pride, hope and civic engagement. More remarkable is the equivalent efforts he puts into community involvement and philanthropic endeavors. SocialWorks, a youth empowerment non-profit that Chance co-founded with childhood friends Justin Cunningham and Essence Smith, reflects the transformative youth framework they embraced growing up in Chicago.

The organization seeks to create and nurture interactive spaces that support youth creativity in the city. Their work has included a concert and voter registration event called “Parade to the Polls” held days before the 2016 presidential election. SocialWorks also stages a monthly open microphone event open only to youth with high school IDs. The event is named “Open Mike” after the recently deceased Mike Hawkins, who served as a youth mentor to Chance and many young artists who came up through the YouMedia space at the public library downtown.

Another campaign the foundation has spearheaded is “Support Chicago Public Schools,” which has raised more than \$2 million for CPS arts programs but was not Chance’s first advocacy foray. Earlier he met with Governor Rauner to push for an end to the state budget stalemate. Rauner acknowledged Chance’s civic advocacy, but the budget

impasse persisted. So, Chance and his foundation decided to raise money and awareness. He has also been active in supporting the #NoCopAcademy campaign waged by multiple community activist groups that are against the city's building of a new \$95 million dollar police academy in the West Garfield Park community area (primarily black and low-income) in Chicago. Activists advocate that a restorative justice approach should be taken to the city's violence crisis, meaning the money should be directed toward public schools, mental health resources, affordable housing, and jobs that support youth of color and the neighborhoods in which they live (#NoCopAcademy Campaign, 2018). In fact, Chance attended a City Council meeting to give public testimony against the proposed police academy and continues to advocate in favor of investing in the education needs of under-resourced youth of color on the south and west sides.

DROPPING BLACK LIBERATION: JAMILA WOODS' BLK GIRL SOLDIER

Songstress Jamila Woods hails from the Beverly neighborhood on the south side and has been featured on hip hop tracks from Chance the Rapper, Saba, Nico Segal and even Seattle-based Macklemore. Her 2016 debut studio album, "HEAVN," is a musical love letter to black womanhood in Chicago and was critically acclaimed nationally.

The track "Blk Girl Soldier" acutely spatializes a narrative embracing the intersectional realities of black female activism for racial justice in Chicago. The song particularly signifies Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's "black liberation" framework, which Taylor describes as:

"Black liberation implies a world where Black people can live in peace, without the constant threat of social, economic, and political woes of a society that places no value on the vast majority of Black lives. It would mean living in a world where Black lives matter. While it is true that when Black people get free, everyone gets free, Black people in America cannot 'get free' alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation (Taylor, 2016, p. 194)."

A black liberation lens prioritizes the identification of social, economic and political structures that threatens the lives of black people in America. "Blk Girl Soldier" constructs a narrative that speaks to the devaluation of black bodies in mainstream public discourse:

"We go missing by the hundreds
Ain't nobody checkin' for us
Ain't nobody checkin' for us
The camera loves us, Oscar doesn't
Ain't nobody checkin for us
Ain't nobody checkin for us
They want us in the kitchen
Kill our sons with lynchings
We get loud about it
Oh now we're the bitches"

Woods addresses the belief that black bodies and concerns are systematically and violently erased in mainstream society. Such critique can be seen in contemporary racial and cultural politics, whether it's black girls that go missing and the lack of urgency from police

authorities, such as the recent Washington, DC, occurrence, or the #OscarsSoWhite controversy, that continue to highlight the lack of nominations and recognition of non-white contributions to Hollywood. Or whether its black mothers and women who come out to protest the police killings of young African American boys that intensified in the past few years. Woods's song constructs a musical discourse that offers up the realities of structural violence against black people that justify black women's resistance in urban spaces across Chicago.

The goals of "human liberation and social transformation" are what "Blk Girl Soldier" musically connects as the historical thread and current objectives of resistance spearheaded by black women in America. For example, Woods sings about many of the famous black women freedom fighters in this country's history:

"Rosa was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight
Ella was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight
Audre was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight
Angela was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight
Sojourner was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight
Assata was a freedom fighter
And she taught us how to fight"

These historical references metaphorically hold up a mirror to many of the young black women who make up today's social movements in Chicago (Carruthers, 2018; Ransby, 2018). This latter point was most prominently in the news when the *Chicago Reader* published a feature, "Queer women are shaping Chicago's Black Lives Matter movement" (Clifton, 2016). Through words and pictures, the article profiled Kristina Rae Colón, Charlene Carruthers, Rachel Williams, Janaé Bonsu and Veronica Morris-Moore for their work with organizations such as the Black Youth Project 100, Fearless Leading by the Youth, Assata's Daughters and the #LetUsBreathe Collective. Many of these activists work with or alongside the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Chicago chapter which works under the larger BLM nationwide effort centering the leadership of women, queer, and trans people. BLM Chicago was founded as a result of the Freedom Ride to Ferguson that involved many of the Chicago-based activists mentioned above participating in protests and solidarity work tied to the 2014 Michael Brown police shooting. Collectively they have all been part of campaigns like the Trauma Center Coalition that enjoined the University of Chicago and the city to deliver the first medical trauma center on the south side. Another campaign these black women organizers spearheaded after the Laquan McDonald police shooting video cover-up was the #ByeAnita campaign, which resulted in the defeat of Cook County State Attorney Anita Alvarez by Kim Foxx in the 2016 primary.

For her community activism part Woods is a full-time teaching artist at Young Chicago Artists and runs several writing workshops for aspiring youth. She also has worked on the

soundtrack and acted in “Brown Girls,” a Chicago-based web visual series that focuses on voices of queer women of color. The show was nominated for an Emmy by the Television Academy and will be making its cable television debut on HBO.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of these three artists’ creative output in 2016 extends much of the literature on hip hop, space, politics, and activism. First, the music and the activism of the artists clearly demonstrate the post-civil rights issues that constitute today’s hip hop youth generation. Police brutality, public education disinvestment, lack of neighborhood pride, and inequitable access to the arts are issues that compel youth of color in Chicago to become active. The artists and the communities of color they were raised in view these issues as material problems, but also as symbolic constructions that negatively stigmatize their neighborhoods, thereby justifying the musical discourses the artists employ above to present spatial imaginaries that are more positive and nuanced. Such discursive agency underscores what hip hop scholars consistently argue—artists can simultaneously promote a liberatory agenda and participate in a hip hop culture that is commodified by the larger cultural industries. Mensa, Chance, and Woods embody this living hip hop contradiction through their musical artistry and their various forms of community activism situated in an urban place.

Second are the levels of intersectionality demonstrated by the music and artist activism. As Ards (1999) and Asante (2008) have argued about emergent post-civil rights hip hop generations, the activism will expand beyond solely race-based analysis. As the three tracks above demonstrate, intersectionality is a fundamental feature of the musical discourse and activism that the artists and broader Chicago hip hop youth generation bolsters. This intersectionality has included multiple analyses at the intersection of class, gender, and sexuality. Increasingly, self-love, intimacy, and mental health have become features of the music and activism. Furthermore with respect to religion in Chicago, Khabeer (2016) highlights the entanglements of Islam, blackness, and hip hop in her ethnographic work with the Inner City Muslim Action Network. These emerging intersectional realities that today’s youth are experiencing and advocate for need more scholarly attention. Such future research can reveal narratives that reflect the changing characteristics of hip hop since it will be primarily sustained by youth, if hip hop expects to survive as a relevant culture within forthcoming generations.

A third implication relating to future directions of research is the need of more reception studies that examine the audiences that engage with the political musical discourses and community activism mobilized by the artists above and analogous acts. Even though artists such as Mensa, Chance, and Woods consistently produce socially conscious music, it’s important to evaluate if audiences of all ages and races who listen to the music change their perceptions about Chicago’s violent image. It will also be important to establish whether the community activism efforts these artists are involved in are actually benefiting the Chicago youth of color they purport to serve. From my own attendance at and social media exposure to the various community building art spaces these artists organize, there

is definitely a large presence of local youth of color from various parts of the city, including the underresourced south and west sides. This audience demographic within the spaces these artists and the broader activist scene organize is promising for the social consciousness building in communities of color and their potential political mobilization in the city. In fact, many news outlets have pointed to the current youth activist campaigns focused on racial justice, the supportive hip hop expressions, such as Mensa's "16 shots," and all three artists' support of #NoCopAcademy, contributing to the climate that shaped Mayor Emmanuel's shocking public announcement on 4 September 2018 not to run for a third term. The activists and artists were clearly effective in circulating the message that Emmanuel's administration was not doing enough to support youth of color who were falling victim to violence and public disinvestment.

Most significantly, the fallout from the unseemly violence in Chicago contextualized in this essay needs to be resolved. Like electoral politics, liberatory agendas in hip hop musical discourse and artists' community activism will ultimately be judged on whether issues such as violence has been decreased. Since the bloody year of 2016 when 751 murders occurred in the city, that number fell to 650 in 2017. And according to data through September 2018 (Figure 1), it appears that total annual murders will be down for the second year in a row. Decreasing numbers of murders is always something to celebrate in Chicago, but more needs to be done when the city has a greater number of murders and a higher murder rate than New York and Los Angeles, both more populous cities. Obviously, no real consensus has been reached on the exact reasons why murders are falling in Chicago. But the decrease of violence definitely does not owe anything to any of Trump's suggested solutions—reinstating of stop-and-frisk laws or bringing in federal troops—because city officials never approved these policies. More research will need to be done on the actual solutions that are working in Chicago, especially with respect to addressing the structural conditions mentioned above in the textual analysis. At the same time, I contend there needs to be more research into the role that the hip hop community may be playing with their socially conscious musical discourse and community activism on the ground. Like generations of the past, the younger hip hop generation is maturing, and their activism expands beyond post-civil rights styles, often incorporating a more robust approach to make an impact on young people's lives. This warrants more study to discover the evidence supporting both the limitations and the opportunities of the culture's potential impact in creating a more peaceful society.

Lastly, in matters of the media and the negative narratives that are circulated about Chicago's violence, these mediascapes will continue to be a battleground for opposing ideologies. From a cursory view, the local Chicago media is doing a better job covering the structural roots of the violence. This is mainly due to the work of investigative reporting-oriented and community-based journalism outlets, such as *The Chicago Reporter*, *City Bureau*, *Vocalo*, *Free Spirit Media*, and the *Invisible Institute*. More mainstream city outlets like the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, and local television networks still lack nuanced coverage of violence but have been receptive to reporting on the activist efforts waged by artists such as Chance and Mensa. A intriguing recent development is Chance's purchase of local news site *Chicagoist*, a site that was part of the Gothamist family of

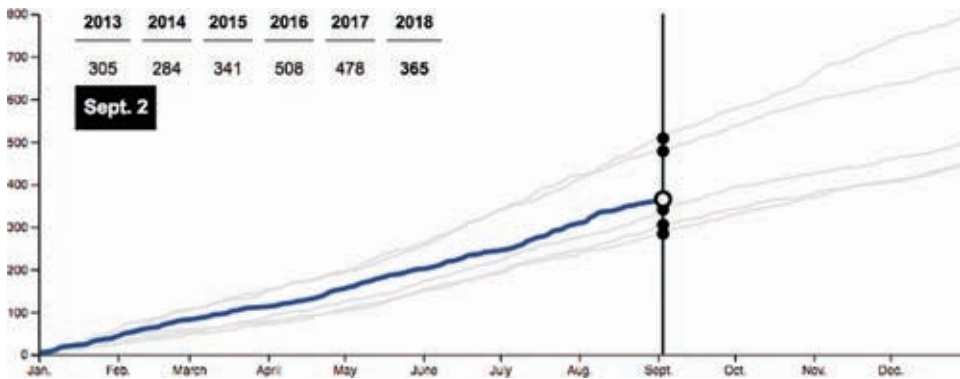


FIGURE 1. Homicides in Chicago 2 September 2013-2018. (Data from *Chicago Tribune*)

websites that closed down when billionaire owner Joe Ricketts terminated the network because of staff unionization efforts. It remains unclear where Chance and his team will bring the future of the site, but they attended the annual meeting of the National Association of Black Journalists in 2018 to hear talks and gather ideas.

On a national level, mainstream journalist networks still sensationalize the violence in Chicago, with nearly absent coverage of the structural roots of the problem or the various community-based efforts attempting to curb the crisis. Moreover, Trump and previous Attorney General Jeff Sessions continued to release quotes to the media that highlighted their law and order agenda. For example, Trump on 25 May 2018 tweeted, “Chicago Police have every right to legally protest against the mayor and an administration that just won’t let them do their job.” While in the same month, Sessions theorized to the media that Chicago’s violence was due to “the ACLU effect,” which he lamented as an effort that wrongly forced officers to collect too much data during police stops, thereby slowing police work nearly to a halt. Sessions followed up with a sneer, “If you want crime to go up... let the ACLU run the police department” (Rappaport, 2018). With national leadership that continues to demean Chicago and push punitive measures, changing the negative stigma that firmly grasps the national consciousness will take longer to change.

This essay demonstrated that alternative narratives based on a more conscious and inclusive black spatial imaginary—manifesting in Chicago’s emerging young hip hop artists—was simultaneously at play during Trump’s negative tirade during the 2016 presidential campaign. These alternative musical discourses enabled audiences of hip hop to not only imagine the structural conditions that lie at the roots of Chicago’s violence, but also engaged audiences in visions of freedom based on radical love. Mensa’s “We Could Be Free” released on his studio album *The Autobiography* embodies this unique radical love coming from Chitown’s young hip hop artists when he blows:

“That we could be free, truly
 If we’d only knew we were slaves to the pains of each other
 One thing I believe, I could learn

To see my enemy as my brother
Then we could be free, you and me
And love could wash away all the sorrows
I'm not afraid to bleed
If it makes a better day than tomorrow”

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