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Gangs and gangsta rap in Chicago: A microscenes perspective

Geoff Harkness

Northwestern University in Qatar, 2020 Ridge Ave. M/S 1801Q, Evanston, IL 60208, United States

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Abstract

A microscene is a distinct component of a music scene, located in a delimited space of mutual social activity—where certain clusters of scene members assemble and generate socio-cultural cohesion through collective ideologies, attitudes, preferences, practices, customs, and memories that distinguish them from the larger scene. This article explores the relationship between active gang members and the gangsta-rap microscene in Chicago, Illinois. While gangs and gangsta rappers have been considered separately, this research examines cultural practices at the intersection of these groups. The participants of this study—gang members who rap—utilize gang affiliation as a resource, employing it strategically to advance their music careers. The relationship is symbiotic: The rappers use gang membership to generate revenue, promote and market their music, recruit band members, and provide security at live concerts. The gangs rely on the rappers as a source of income, for promotion and marketing, as recruitment tools, and as a means by which to wage rivalries and settle disputes. The article examines the physical, social, and economic ramifications for those at the intersection of street gangs and gangsta rap, and it offers an account of risk-management strategies designed to moderate potential violence, career limitations, and other challenges.
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1. Introduction

On September 4, 2012 Joseph Coleman, an 18-year-old aspiring gangsta-rapper who went by the moniker Lil JoJo, was gunned down in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, the victim of a drive-by shooting. Chicago police immediately began to investigate the connection between

E-mail address: g-harkness@northwestern.edu.

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Coleman's murder and the war of words and music he was having with another Chicago rapper, 17-year-old Keith Cozart, better known by his stage name, Chief Keef. The feud between Coleman and Cozart had all the trappings of a media sensation, as evidenced by breathless headlines in the local press: "Chicago Hip-Hop War of Words Turns Violent" (Kot, 2012), "Chief Keef and Lil JoJo: A Rap Feud Straight Outta Englewood" (2012), "Cops Investigating Whether Hip-Hop Feud Linked to Slaying" (Kot and Gorner, 2012).[1]

By any measurement, Cozart's music career was on the rise. While under house arrest for a gun charge, he had recently inked a deal with Interscope Records, a powerhouse label home to rap superstars such as 50 Cent, Dr. Dre, and Eminem. In August 2012, Cozart performed in front of tens of thousands of revelers at Lollapalooza. His YouTube music videos had received tens of millions of hits, and a movie deal was purportedly in the works. "Street buzz, his criminal record and the Internet hit 'I Don't Like' have conspired to make Keef the most notable new face of Chicago hip-hop," opined Chicago Tribune music writer Greg Kot (2012).

Cozart also wrought attention from songs and Twitter posts that made frequent reference to the number 300, a well-known reference to the Black Disciples street gang. According to investigators, Cozart was a member of the Lamron faction of the Black Disciples, whose longstanding rivalry with another gang, the Gangsta Disciples, dates at least to the 1970s. Coinciding with Cozart's rise in fortune, the hostilities between the Gangsta Disciples and the Black Disciples heated up online, with members from the two gangs using rap songs, social networking sites, and YouTube to insult and goad one another. In May 2012, Coleman, who investigators claimed was a member of the Gangsta Disciples, posted a music video entitled "3 hunnak" (translation: "300 killer") that appropriated the backing track for Keef's song "Everyday" and added new lyrics over the top. In the original song, Cozart regurgitated the standard gangsta-rap clichés (making money, having sex with "bitches," smoking weed) over a crawling beat. Coleman's remake replaced the word "every day" with "BDK," meaning Black Disciples killer. "These niggas claim 300 but we BDK," Coleman taunted repeatedly. The accompanying video featured Coleman and a number of associates rapping gleefully to the camera, dancing, and waving an armory's worth of automatic weapons. According to Coleman's aunt, Sonia Mares-DuBose, Coleman was attempting a "Tupac and Biggie thing and get under the skin" of Cozart and his associates (Konkol et al., 2012). "They were feuding in the rap game," added Coleman's mother, Robin Russell (Kot and Gorner, 2012).

Criminologist John Hagedorn (2008, p. 86) is among the few scholars to denote the "crucial role of gangs in the history of hip-hop culture." Rap's history is strewn with musicians who were gang members or ex-gang members—including Afrikka Bambaattaa (Black Spades), Ice-T (Crips), Mac Dre (Romper Room Gang), Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. (Bloods), Cypress Hill founders Sen Dog and B-Real (Bloods), Snoop Dogg (Rollin' 20 Crips), MC Eiht (Tragniew Park Compton Crips), Tone Loc (Westside Tribe Crips), and The Game (Bloods). "How can anyone understand the outlook of gang members today without exploring the meaning of gangsta rap?" Hagedorn (2008, p. 85) asked. Cynics assert that rappers emphasize their gang connections to engender publicity and record sales, but the Coleman-Cozart incident illustrates how mixing gangs with rap music can result in a deadly concoction.

[1] The term "hip hop" is generally defined as denoting a culture comprised of rap music (whose lyrics are performed by rappers or MCs), breakdancing, DJ-ing, and graffiti art. The term is contested and used differently by scholars, journalists, musicians, and fans. To avoid confusion and because this article examines rap music specifically, I avoid use of the term "hip hop," unless quoting an author or research participant.

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