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# Black Placemaking: Celebration, Play, and Poetry

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**Abstract**
Using Chicago as our case, this article puts forth a notion of black placemaking that privileges the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being black and being around other black people in the city. Black placemaking refers to the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction. Our framework offers a corrective to existing accounts that depict urban blacks as bounded, plagued by violence, victims and perpetrators, unproductive, and isolated from one another and the city writ large. While ignoring neither the external assaults on black spaces nor the internal dangers that can make everyday life difficult, we highlight how black people make places in spite of those realities. Our four cases – the black digital commons, black public housing reunions, black lesbian and gay nightlife, and black Little League baseball – elucidate the matter of black lives across genders, sexualities, ages, classes, and politics.

**Keywords**
African Americans, race, urban

## Introduction

> Negroes love and hate and fight and play and strive and travel and have a thousand and one interests in life like other humans. When

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> his baby cuts a new tooth, he brags as shamelessly as anyone else without once weeping over the prospect of some Klansman knocking it out if and when the child ever gets grown. (Zora Neale Hurston, 'Art and Such' [1990 (1938): 24])

The corpus of social science scholarship on black people in the US tilts in the latter direction of Zora Neale Hurston's keen insight. Instead of focusing on their 'thousand and one interests', research on black people and black communities attends more to the literal and metaphorical Klansman who causes weeping and worrying about if children will 'ever get grown'. We think it's time to balance the scale. Using Chicago as our case, this article puts forth a notion of black placemaking that privileges the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being black and being around other black people in the city. 'A spot in the universe', writes sociologist Thomas Gieryn, 'becomes a place only when it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory' (Gieryn, 2000: 465). We show how black Chicagoans use interaction and meaning to transform spaces into places, however ephemeral they may be.

We ignore neither assaults on black placemaking from the outside – as in lethal policing and destructive urban planning – nor internal dangers – such as homophobia, harassment, and homicide. Instead, we highlight how black people make places amidst and in spite of those realities. Black placemaking refers to the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance. Connecting this point to the current historical moment, we argue that one of the reasons that activists have had to insist on what is an otherwise obvious assertion – that 'Black Lives Matter' – is because the social science scholarship on black urban communities (not to mention mass media portrayals) so rarely captures the life that happens within them, and thus the matter of black people's humanity.

Lest we fall into the trap we are criticizing, we do not rehearse the history of indignities visited upon black Chicago and the disorders that sometimes arise in response. There is a long, deep, and illustrious scholarship on these topics (Hirsch, 1983; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013; Venkatesh, 2006; Wilson, 1996). This literature, however, is the essential backdrop of our theoretical argument. Yes, many black people live within a fundamentally racialized and racist structuring of (urban) space and some black people exhibit bad behaviors as a result, but this reality does not wholly consume the energies of the black community. What remains are the creative practices of black placemaking. Hence, black placemaking also offers a framework for understanding the placemaking of other deeply disadvantaged, stigmatized, and often segregated groups – e.g. poor people, Native Americans, some immigrants, the mentally ill, and people with HIV/AIDS – since all such groups must find

meaning in hostile spaces. The concept of black placemaking, then, attempts to counter the scholarship that contributes to the unrelenting negative portrayals of black neighborhoods without losing sight of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, between domination and resistance.[1]

We begin the article with a brief discussion of foreclosures and the urban planning that grows out of it. This topic allows us to highlight interventions that call for the displacement or exclusion of black people (and other stigmatized groups) for the purposes of progress and improvement. Legal scholar Patricia Williams writes: 'In the context of today's ghettos, inner cities, and those places doomed to be called the Third World, … [policies often envision] poor and dying populations as separate, distant, severable' (Williams, 1997: 11). Whereas a problems-based scholarly discourse about black communities contributes to inclinations towards 'amputation' (as Williams also calls it), focusing on black placemaking recognizes the life that such efforts destroy and explains why marginalized populations often cling so fiercely to places that powerful and privileged city elites see as degenerate (Fullilove, 2004). We then offer a discussion of the idea of placemaking and its particular application to black communities. Next, we offer four empirical cases that illustrate how placemaking works and what it looks like in practice. These vignettes illuminate how black sociability is rooted in physical and virtual spaces that are remade into black places through claims and practices of endurance, along with a healthy dose of verse, song, and poetry. We conclude by considering how our analysis might shape the future study of urban America and the lives and experiences of black residents therein.

## Black Placemaking in Context

The foreclosure crisis in the early decades of the 21st century follows a long history of housing (and other) injustices (Satter, 2009; Taylor, 2012) and is acutely felt in many of the neighborhoods that comprise black Chicago (Immergluck and Smith, 2006; Woodstock Institute, 2014). The toxic cocktail of subprime lending, unemployment, and unmanageable mortgage payments has left a trail of foreclosures that have pockmarked neighborhoods across the city's South and West Sides. For example, in 16 Chicago communities that are majority African American, 10 percent or more of the homes were in foreclosure between 2008 and 2012 (Rodkin, 2013). It takes roughly 18 to 24 months for a foreclosure to be completed, thereby prolonging the pain of vacant buildings and stolen wealth.

In these situations of concentrated foreclosures, some banks have decided that walking away from a home is a better bet than succeeding in a foreclosure proceeding. Chicago journalists Gallun and Maidenberg (2013) report that, as of 2013, Chicago had 33,902 vacant homes, a

22 percent increase from 2010. The culmination of these processes of foreclosure, dispossession, and abandonment has been a campaign of demolition. Throughout Chicago, houses are marked with a dreaded red 'X' indicating their precarious, perhaps even dangerous, state. Orders to demolish houses rose from 119 in 2010 to 859 at the end of 2013 (Gallun and Maidenberg, 2013). When Cook County Commissioner Bridget Gainer was asked to describe the implications of the pending demolition of hundreds of abandoned properties in primarily African American neighborhoods, she said, 'We see "demo" as a negative activity, like you're destroying things, you're taking away ... [But] in some ways, it actually makes the surrounding things more valuable. It's almost like pruning a tree' (as quoted in Gallun and Maidenberg, 2013).

The tandem of purported dysfunction and abandonment serves as a pretext for reimagined urban space that is contingent on the 'pruning' of not only dilapidated and emptied houses but also of the people who are blamed for the decay. City planners and political leaders emphasize 'smart growth', 'right sizing' and 'creative destruction' as they try to shrink city boundaries and neighborhoods, or simply start over, rebuilding new structures with new people, and creating new cities. But what is lost? Comparing the destruction of houses in black neighborhoods – and therefore the communities themselves – to the mundane act of 'pruning a tree' is to conceive of these as unproductive, diseased, obstructive, and derelict spaces. The obliteration and attenuation of black spaces across Chicago threatens to eliminate significant cultural artifacts and contributions apparently unknown to city officials and others who speak of remaking Chicago as if it were only an exercise in cartography (or horticulture, to continue the 'pruning' metaphor). But contrary to the ignorance, willful blindness, or malign intent that contemplates demolition, black Chicagoans have always transformed segregated and often violently enforced neighborhood boundaries into a 'Black Metropolis' (Drake and Cayton, 2015 [1945]). They have turned 'segregation into congregation' (Lipsitz, 2011: 56; also see Lewis, 1993). The residents of Black Metropolis are not just objects of history or of socioeconomic circumstances; they are also subjects that fashion places by inscribing them with their own interpretations, meanings, and cultural significance. This enterprise, which is not the dominant narrative in the social science research on black communities, is what we call black placemaking.

Black placemaking refers to the ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics. Our framework draws not only on the poetics of Zora Neale Hurston (and the other wordsmiths cited throughout this article), but also on theoretical literatures across a range of disciplines. In architecture and urban planning, placemaking is the simple idea that people 'transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in

which we live' (Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995: 1). Placemaking assumes 'human competence' (p. xii), which is often not an assumption granted to black urban residents. Black placemaking also draws on the notions of linked fate (Dawson, 1995) and secondary marginalization (Cohen, 1999). Black people's beliefs that their individual outcomes are tied to the well-being of the group bind them economically and politically, even as internal practices of marginalization threaten unity. Placemaking recognizes that race and racism – especially as manifest in residential segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993) – beget black political consciousness and offer opportunities to create new sites of gathering (Lipsitz, 2011). Finally, black placemaking seeks to analyze and recover the agency of urban blacks often lost in conventional perspectives.

As we will show, black placemaking occurs within a context of racial residential segregation, high unemployment, bad schools, urban violence, police brutality and a broad array of destructive urban policies. Yet, drawing on the idea of the urban commons (Harvey, 2012), we recognize black placemaking as a form of resistance to those offensives. As David Harvey (2012: 74) contends: 'Through their daily activities and struggles, individuals and social groups create the social world of the city, and thereby create something common as a framework within which all can dwell'. Yet, Harvey and other existing notions of placemaking (see, e.g., Project for Public Spaces, 2014) are relatively moot on the topic of race and do not explore what particular, concrete, and *colored* expressions of urban commons might look like. Black placemaking offers this perspective.

We selected the case studies from our collective repertoire of research projects in order to illustrate the various scales of black placemaking – from one nightclub, to public housing projects (even when they're gone), to whole 'sides' of the city, and virtually through social media – and to emphasize an intersectional perspective (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) that captures the attitudes and actions of a wide range of black Chicagoans – men and women, old and young, gay and not gay, poor and not poor, digitally connected and in the 'real world'. The vignettes also draw on multiple kinds of data, from digital and social media, ethnography and qualitative interviews, archives, and content analysis. Obviously we do not capture all of the black placemaking that happens in Chicago or elsewhere, but our goal is to add to a growing literature centering black agency as consequential to city life and urban processes (see, e.g., Cohen, 2004; Kelley, 1994; Hunter, 2013; Pattillo, 2007; Robinson, 2014). In combination, the cases are evidence of urban black residents making places that have value, places that counter the depictions in the barrage of books and articles about black subjugation and deviance, and places where lives matter.

## The Urban Commons of Black Gay and Lesbian Nightlife

Racial residential segregation shapes the landscape of urban America (Massey and Denton, 1993). Nowhere is this truer than in Chicago. But there are also schisms and distinctions within black communities, such as class, gender, ethnicity and, the focus of this section, sexuality. Black gays and lesbians in Chicago create shared leisure spaces as their own 'urban commons' – places to share affinities and resources and to sustain and expand networks in an effort to thrive and survive in the city. Nightlife is a moment to party, unwind, and cope. For black lesbians and gays in Chicago, nightlife takes on the added importance of facilitating intercommunity connections, bringing together residents of the 'sides' of Chicago and its suburbs to enable a critical mass (Cohen, 2010; Hunter, 2010). As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues, the invisibility of black lesbians and gays and their mistreatment both outside of and within the larger black community create the need for safe and affirming spaces. One Chicago nightclub, The Spot (a pseudonym), serves as that urban commons for black LGBTs on Friday nights, or 'gay night'.

The Spot is a nondescript building on a nondescript block near Chicago's downtown. The crowds that come to The Spot bring an undeniable energy to the relatively empty streets surrounding the club. The lights of cars illuminate the night. The sound of car radios blasting the newest hip-hop songs, loud conversations between friends and lovers, and voices expressing the excitement and anxiety regarding what the night will bring combine to produce a lively scene. Patrons snake along a small series of velvet ropes at the entry indicating the direction and location of the line to get in. The club is spacious, with two rooms of music and a stage in each room. Produced and operated by a local black promotion group, The Spot is a jambalaya of black bodies, black English, black music, black flirtation, black dance moves, and black life.

On any given Friday, Chicagoans come to The Spot from predominantly black neighborhoods like Englewood and Bronzeville on the South Side, and Garfield Park and Austin on the West Side. Although Chicago natives dominate the club, there are also black out-of-towners from as close as Milwaukee and as far as Atlanta. As in most nightclubs, The Spot is rife with sensual scenes of flirting, partnering, and pleasure. Jamaican dancehall artist Beenie Man offers a steamy, verbally pulsating soundtrack: 'Pon bed pon floor against wall/ We sex dem all till dem call mi/ I'm di girls dem sugar dats all/ Welcome di king of di dancehall' (Beenie Man, 2004). The music brings together strangers, friends, and partners, forming a dynamic urban commons wherein black gays and lesbians build and reaffirm a sense of desirability and worth.

The Spot is also a space where patrons build and sustain more instrumental ties of social support. Consider the insights of Prince (age 32, gay)

and Lisa (age 24, lesbian), both of whom asserted in interviews that attending the club was necessary for meeting their daily needs:

> *Prince*: I think it's an important space for black people in this city, period. But being gay or being lesbian, having this kind of space matters even more. There are just not a lot of places that provide a space where, as a gay black person, you don't feel like the minority. This is why for me I think of this space as a place to listen to music, dance, and build the kind of friendships that I need.
> *Lisa*: People just think the club is a place to fuck, get fucked, dance crazy or fight. And I tell people all the time, the club is what you make it. I don't need to go to no club to get sex, you know what I mean. I go for other things … Like I have a daughter and she's a teenager now, but a few years ago I came here and was really like needing a babysitter. I needed a job but she was too young for me to leave alone in the summer when school was out. So I would go to The Spot to see what other chicks there knew about people who did, like, babysitting. And a few other lesbians there really knew some people, like for real knew people. And what they said helped me find my babysitter for like two summers. The lady I took my daughter to was off of information I got from these ladies at The Spot. And that wasn't no accident, like I was really askin'. And it might seem strange but that's what you do. Not just me, a lot of people be there trying to get some help. I mean, you in a space with all these different black people who live in all these places in Chicago. What other space has that?

As both Prince and Lisa demonstrate, the decision to attend the club for them was based on acquiring a specific resource. They and others describe their experience at The Spot as 'getting what you need'. Their needs might be for belonging, for friendship, for good music, for stimulation, or to find a babysitter. This array of 'services' illustrates the marriage of marginality, unemployment, and single-motherhood, with the human imperative to have some fun.

In another interview, Denise (age 27, lesbian) represents the perspective of someone who has something to offer and uses The Spot to share information, resources, and expertise.

> I work at this local organization that is out to help young black parents. When I first started going to The Spot I figured it would also be a good time to encourage people to come out to my office and learn more about my organization and what we do … The first time I went I talked to someone and told them what I did, and they

> took me over to a group of what had to be five or six people, and they just started asking me questions. Later the person I met told me that it was such a great coincidence that I ran into her, because her friends had come out hoping that they could run into someone like me … The club is more than just this shake your ass kind of place. It can be, and it is for a lot of people, a space to get what you need, so you can make your life better.

An important feature of an urban black commons is that it provides, as one club-goer said, 'a space to make the community you need'. Jamal (age 25, gay) described The Spot as an important place for the creation and maintenance of networks of social support. Jamal, originally from Atlanta, GA, came to The Spot within the first week of moving to Chicago. For him, the club was an opportunity to meet all types of black gay people within one space, and to begin the work of creating his own community of support – a network that would help him to get acclimated in Chicago. He recounted:

> I been here now for like three years, and I remember going to The Spot the first week I got here. It was hard when I got here, I only had just enough money to pay rent, and had spent most of my money moving and stuff. I didn't know nobody so that made it really hard. So when I came to the club, I wanted to meet some people who could be my community here. People who could show me around, because I had no idea where stuff was, like what street was where … you know the stuff that matters in trying to get around in a new city. And that night I met my best friend Donovan. He introduced me to some other people, and since then, I have about four or five really good friends, and all of them I met first at The Spot. It's crazy, because these people are my support, they help me get through stuff.

Jamal's reflections about using The Spot to develop social support networks were very common among interviewees. Jamal and others reveal that the club was a key space to meet a heterogeneous black gay population, with individuals from different social classes and from different neighborhoods across the city.

The Spot was also the place to nurture pre-existing friendships and fictive kin relationships. Simple pleasurable congregation was an overarching principle and purpose. This was true for Terri (age 22, lesbian), who was from the southwest side of the city. Terri characterized her experience at The Spot as 'kinda like goin' to a family cookout … You go with a few of your close friends, and meet up with your family who you don't get to see during the week, and catch up, and have a good time with each other'. Often people gathered in small cliques of three to

four people along the dance floor and in the seating areas. They hugged, talked and danced in groups. While The Spot is at one level a pulsating, sweaty, erotic, and sexually intense space, Terri's description captures the other things that are going on. Both the bodily and the verbal communion make up this dynamic urban common. She described:

> A lot of people that be at the club be there to be with friends. I go there to catch up with my people, hang out, and have a good time. Now from time to time I do meet a dude, but that's not what it's about … It's really where I met my friends … I mean the people who help you get through, especially in hard times.

Terri and the other interviewees quoted above tell a story. Black placemaking is always about finding pleasure amid challenging circumstances. It is about asserting black people's presence through connections, but it is not about an undifferentiated blackness, blind to the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, social citizenship, and age.

## Still Rising: Public Housing Reunions Reclaiming Place

> OKAY FB HERE SOMETHING YOU CAN RUN AND TELL EVERYBODY: THE 36TH STREET COMMITTEE (LOWEND) PRESENTS THE 19TH ANNUAL 36TH STREET FAMILY REUNION OUR THEME: STAYING CONNECTED SERVING OUR COMMUNITY SINCE 1995 DATE: SATURDAY, AUGUST 30, 2014 (Statewaygardens Reunions Lowend 2014)

Accompanying the above Facebook announcement of the 2014 'family reunion' is a photograph from a 2012 gathering. Six women and ten men – all African American and all over 40 – are huddled close together in front of a painted cloth backdrop. Their bodies are interlocked, their hands on each other's shoulders. Some give full toothy smiles while others look cool and nonchalant. Most of the men have on hats. Seven felt fedoras and one black pub cap. A man in the front row is dressed in a loose-fitting deep plum shirt and slacks ensemble. He has on a fedora and wears it following the advice one of Chicago's well-known African American hatters: 'Always cock it … If it's not cocked, it means you're just learning' (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2014). A man to his left has on a yellow and red suit with a red vest and a matching pocket square. Two of the women sport dyed blond hairdos and one wears silver suede cowboy boots. They are all former residents of the Stateway Gardens public housing complex on Chicago's South Side. They come together annually to share their memories of life in the projects, to celebrate their friendship and kinship, and to stake their place in Chicago despite efforts to remove them.

The last high-rise in Stateway Gardens was demolished in 2007. Most of the high-rise public housing in the city has met the same end, cleared to make way for new developments that mix low-, middle-, and high-income families all together, along with new upscale amenities and businesses. Across the US, nearly 250,000 people have been displaced by public housing demolitions, and over 80 percent of them are African American (Goetz, 2011). Chicago, where the vast majority of public housing residents are black, has demolished more housing than any other city in the US. While television and print media focus incessantly on street violence in Chicago's black neighborhoods as supposed evidence of the disintegration of community bonds and the devaluation of human life, the wholesale evisceration of the apartments, streets, playgrounds, corners, hallways, and community centers where thousands of black families once lived is state-perpetrated violence dressed in the language of social welfare policy. Yet while the high-rises might be gone, the former residents pull back together and perform important acts of place-making through reunions and other forms of (virtual and in-person) collective gathering. As the African American poet Maya Angelou (1978) wrote: 'You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise'.

Reunions bring people to a meaningful gathering place. The most salient places for residents were the physical buildings. In the online comments to a newspaper story about the Rockwell Gardens reunion, Tremaine Winston identified himself as 'from rockwell gardens 2514 #810' (Winston, 2011). Similarly, in an oral history interview with people who grew up in Chicago public housing, Eddie Leman identified himself and all of his family by building numbers in the Robert Taylor Homes.

> My paternal grandmother, her name is Zola Washington. She lived in 4525 South Federal . . . She had 17 kids. So to start off with I had about 16 uncles and aunts . . . [W]e had several people in 4425 in our family. We got several people in 4429 that was in our family. Several people in 4444. So our family of Jacksons, Lemans, Eberharts, and Perrys was scattered throughout that one block of buildings. The apartment me and my mother lived in was 4429 South Federal. (Petty, 2013: 98)

All of those buildings are gone, so there are no physical structures to go back to. The city planners have also discarded the original names. The Ida B. Wells Homes (named for the African American anti-lynching crusader and journalist) has become Oakwood Shores; the Jane Addams Homes (named for the immigrant settlement house movement leader) was renamed Roosevelt Square; the Henry Horner Homes

(named for Illinois's first Jewish governor) has become Westhaven Park. And, still, in other locations, there's just nothing. Chicago writer and activist Jamie Kalven reports that roughly 400 acres of land where public housing once stood in Chicago now sit empty. He writes hauntingly: 'Imagine having the known world, the world by which you know yourself, obliterated virtually overnight' (2014: 2).

Nonetheless, Chicago's city leaders have not yet figured out how to make a place on the map disappear completely, and so former public housing residents have some rough geographic coordinates at which to gather. In 2003, former residents of Cabrini-Green organized Old School Mondays at a public park in the middle of the mostly demolished development (Joravsky, 2004; also see Austen, 2012). A short documentary on Old School Mondays (Bezalel, 2011) shows hundreds of people dancing in the park, hugging, barbecuing, exchanging phone numbers, and watching children play. 'It's about home,' says one woman in a trio of women being interviewed for the film. Another chimes in 'Cabrini's gonna always be home'. The first jumps back in: 'Even though it's not physically here'. And the second finishes her sentence with: 'But as long as we're around each other, we're feelin' it still'. Old School Mondays came to an end a few years later. As Orchard Park, Parkside at Old Town, and North Town Village filled up the land where Cabrini-Green once stood, there was no place left for poor black folks.

In other parts of the city, the reunions live on. Residents of the former Henry Horner Homes gathered at nearby Union Park in August of 2014. 'I had a great time at the HH picnic!!' wrote one attendee on the Henry Horner Homes Reunion Facebook page (Roberts-Walker, 2014). 'Glad we are able to get together like this. HH for life!!' The Stateway Gardens reunion was also in August, and took place at Dunbar Park, three blocks west of where the buildings once stood. 'HAD A BLASTTTTTTTT', posted one woman alongside a series of photos of old friends in playful poses, in various states of embrace, with infectious broad smiles, and delighting in each other's presence (Thomas, 2014).

In addition to bringing people together, reunions are also about memories, about the 'community of the mind' (Ortner, 1997). One Facebook post (Gayden, 2012) pays tribute to a recently deceased drama teacher from the public school that many Stateway Gardens children attended. The author writes: 'I was one of his favorites when I was a kid and he pushed me to strive to be the best, cracking that whip on me to deliver weeks of memorable performances of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz … I wonder if he knew what his contributions and dedication meant to us all'.

Perhaps the most poignant memory was posted by a spoken word artist, Kyla Jenee Lacey (2014), who recalled on Facebook a family tragedy in

Stateway Gardens. She poetically weaves together the power of memory with both the durability and fragility of the built environment. She writes:

> When I was a little girl living on the south side of Chicago, I always remember this fairly tall tan building with blacked out windows near my grandmother's house. It was actually directly across the street from Stateway Gardens Projects where she lived, and whenever I saw that building I knew we were close. Tomorrow marks the 23rd anniversary of the last day my grandmother lived in those apartment homes because of a fire that not only destroyed all of her possessions, but took my cousin that only got to see ten short months of her life, three of them living with us, along with them. As I remember my mother running to the building where my grandmother lived, that other tall building directly across the street stood silently, a pillar observing my family's melee. Every October 24, I remember that soul shattering loss I felt and every time I drive down the Chicago expressway and see that building, I think about my grandmother and my cousin. The housing projects have long been torn down, and now stand condos, an open field and a Starbucks, but the building remains.

For Lacey, the land where Stateway Gardens stood is at once filled with the love of her grandmother, the remains of her cousin, and the image of that building, an inanimate sentinel watching it all. The new impersonal installations cannot erase the emotions etched in her bones and soul (also see Monroe, 2012). A chorus of her friends responded to the post with sympathy, well-wishes, memories of their own, and contemporary photographs of the 'tall tan building' and the 'open field' where Stateway once stood. As long as these memories are rehearsed, shared, spoken, and envisioned then the projects and the black families and communities that they housed will not die.

At the height of their occupancy in the 1970s, Chicago's family public housing was officially home to over 137,000 people, most of them African American (Hunt, 2009: Table 1). The actual number might have been up to 40 percent higher than that (Venkatesh and Çelimli, 2004: 28). In 2012, the population in family public housing in Chicago was just over 23,000 (Chicago Housing Authority, 2012: Appendix 2). Despite this drastic population loss, the disappearing of black public housing residents was unsuccessful. Even the children of former residents proclaim their public housing lineage: 'Me & my pops at the Robert Taylor Homes reunion/he grew up in building #4101/had to capture that', writes one young woman about a photo of her and her father in front of a mural of her father's building and the title 'Robert Taylor Family Reunion' (Thompson, 2014). But it is the pithiest slogan that insists on making and claiming place in the city. 'Fuck You / I'm From Robert Taylor Homes' announces a meme on

one Facebook page (Piggee, 2014). No matter the disregard, the disparagement, the disdain, and the demolition, black Chicago still rises in celebration and pleasure, and with righteous indignation.

## Black Little League Play

> The way that you play a game/ made people believe again/ and look at who they believing in/ the same boys who seem to get sacrificed daily/ now hitting sacrifice bunts for a whole weekend/ we paid more attention to your in-field runs/ than those battle field guns/ you don't pray for the pray/you give them resources/ and look what can happen/ you made a whole city feel it was possible to rally back against those/ who give you the most problems/ show you no mercy … (Harold Green (2014), spoken word artist, Chicago)

In August of 2014, it was the black boys of summer that captured the imagination of Chicago and the whole country (Haugh, 2014). Thirteen black youngsters ranging in age from 11 to 13, all from the Jackie Robinson West (JRW) Little League, became the first all-black Little League team to win the US Little League World Series. Their success punctured the reductive narration of Chicago's South Side through the lens of poverty and violence. The boys were celebrated as exceptions to the doldrums of South Side life; their success supposedly came in spite of the neighborhoods they were from.

The mainstream media dramatized the success of the team by highlighting the concentration of deprivation in many of the South Side communities the boys called home. One article (Islam and Crego, 2014) erroneously suggested that the team was from Englewood – one of the poorest communities in Chicago – to accentuate the uplifting story of JRW. But the youngsters hailed from across the South Side, yes including Englewood, but also Chatham, Washington Heights, and Auburn-Gresham, among others.[2] The league is made up of over 300 ball players, aged 4 through 18, making up 28 different teams. The JRW Little League teams play at Jackie Robinson Park located in the far South Side neighborhood of Washington Heights, otherwise known as the 'Wild Hunneds' to black Chicagoans (referring to the street names like 106th Street where the park is located). The majority of the players that won the US Championship came from two-parent households where their parents are police officers, engineers and teachers, among other professions. None of this is to deny the reality of hardship in South Side communities; rather it is to challenge ingrained assumptions about life, history and traditions in those communities. These neighborhoods have been at the center of many of the social crises across black Chicago, but JRW demonstrates that there is not a single story to tell about black life in Chicago. What if, instead of this being a case of

overcoming the obstacles of the hard scrabble of inner-city living, we assume that the Jackie Robinson West Little League team won the Little League championship *because* of their relationship to their communities on the South Side, not in spite of them?

For many in the media, JRW seemed to appear from out of nowhere, adding to their mystique. But this couldn't be farther from the truth. JRW was the product of a long and storied history and tradition of black baseball on Chicago's South Side. Jackie Robinson West was born in 1971, when a recent migrant from Bogalusa, Louisiana, Joseph Haley, wanted to start an afterschool program for the neighborhood kids. The older Jackie Robinson League had to be split up into East and West when it got too big. An assistant principle at Garvey elementary school, Haley organized JRW to give the kids something to do when school was over. Haley said, 'Gangs were just starting to form back then … It hadn't become a real problem around here yet, but the potential of that happening was certainly there … All of us agreed that sports might be the answer and baseball was sort of our only option because it's the only activity our park was equipped for' (Minnis, 1990). It was not surprising that the local park was equipped for baseball given the enormous popularity of baseball on the city's South Side. As early as 1959, the all-black Tuley Park Comets from Chatham had won the Chicago Park District's Little League championship, going undefeated at 32–0. Just a year prior to Haley's League forming, the Hyde Park Little League produced an all-black All-Star Team that competed for the citywide title and came close to advancing to the Little League World Series tournament (Unger, 1970).

By the summer of 1971, the thriving Little League scene on Chicago's South Side included teams like the Babe Ruth Warriors, the Jackson Park Hornets, the Englewood Senators, and the Hyde Park Spartans. Indeed, Little League play was so popular that the *Chicago Defender* – Chicago's black newspaper – saw fit to publish an editorial counseling parents to 'Love Your Child, No Matter What' when it came to processing the wins and losses during the season. 'If he has played badly', the editors wrote, 'he does not need to be forgiven for a mistake, or taught a lesson. He needs to learn to live with mistakes and for someone to accept his feelings' ('Love your Child, No Matter What', 1972).

The popularity of Little League on the South Side, well into the 1960s and 1970s, had its roots in 'big league' Negro baseball from an earlier generation. The homage paid to Jackie Robinson, the first African American Major League baseball player, was an indication of the reverence for the sport and the traditions that ran deep on the South Side. In 1933, the Negro National League was formed in Chicago, and a few years later the Negro American League was created. The popularity of the leagues grew as the black population in cities across the East Coast and Midwest swelled with new arrivals from the South every week. By

the mid-1940s, black baseball was as popular as Major League baseball with more than three million fans a year bringing in $2 million of annual revenue (Bogira, 1987).

The popularity of Negro League baseball in Chicago gave way to the creation of other informal leagues paid for by churches, workplaces and local political figures. Every Sunday, the 12 diamonds in Washington Park were the scene of multiple baseball games. Maurice Wiggins, who played on the South Side, described the scene surrounding black baseball as, 'great entertainment and it was free …You might scrape up a few pennies and go to the Regal [Theater], or the Metropolitan Theater down at 47th and South Park Way [now King Drive]. You might go to a dance on Sunday. And of course there were churches – always been churches. But during the week, and especially on Saturdays, people [would] look forward to going to Washington Park to see a good baseball game' (Bogira, 1987).

The phenomenon of the Negro baseball league would not last for long, especially after Jackie Robinson broke the color line in baseball in 1947. Soon thereafter, Major League baseball cherry picked the best ballplayers out of the Negro Leagues turning it into a rump of its former self by the early 1960s. But the demise of Negro League baseball did not mean the end of South Side baseball. Instead its legacy was expressed in the growth of Little Leagues in the 1960s. Perhaps the most surprising aspect about the continuity of black baseball has been its persistence even while the presence of African Americans has diminished in Major League baseball. Bill Haley, the son of Joseph Haley, explains why he thinks the League has continued: 'Our league has a strong tradition. The coaches were once players. It [has] taken hold in the community. You pull kids from a limited area, so there's a sense of community to start out with. Being state champions (the league has won two Illinois championships in a row) is incidental to what we're trying to do' (Minnis, 1990).

The success of the team, built on tradition and histories embedded in South Side practices, has created the space for JRW to have an even greater imprint on South Side life. For example, in 1999 Joe Haley led a successful effort to change the name of Mount Vernon Park to Jackie Robinson Park. Haley said of the process, 'We just couldn't have young African American children playing baseball in a place that was named after the home of a slave owner, George Washington' (Gross, 2005). The rootedness of the JRW team created the ability to literally transform an ambiguous urban space (Mount Vernon Park) into a decidedly black place (Jackie Robinson Park).

JRW's victory provided a powerful tonic to the corrosive and pervasive conversations about black pathologies that polluted the entire summer of 2014. The success of the team not only challenged perceptions about the totality of life in black Chicago but it forced the rest of Chicago to see for itself by literally, if perhaps only temporarily,

remapping the city. City maps made available to tourists in Chicago are notorious for lopping off the entire South Side, as if the city ended just beyond the edge of the central business district in the Loop. But on 23 August 2014, in celebration of the young, black ballplayers, City Hall organized an unprecedented parade that extended from Jackie Robinson Park on 106th Street to Chicago's crown jewel of Millennium Park downtown. Political leaders from the governor to the mayor clamored to speak at the opening rally in Washington Heights. The parade pressed the typically invisible South Side of the city into the full view of the entire city. When the young star pitcher of the JRW, Marquis Jackson, was asked about all the attention the team had been receiving he said, 'I think it's because we're African-American boys from the South Side that are showing people that the South Side is not just about bad things', he said. 'Something good can come from the South Side of Chicago' (Bowean et al., 2014).

## Poetics in Black Chicago's Digital Commons

> We ain't dead yet / we been living through your Internet. (Erykah Badu, 'The Healer', 2008)

Across the country, black people use social media spaces, including Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and self-hosted personal blogs, to carve out expressive, resistant, and life-sustaining practices in the face of community, extrajudicial, and state violence. The increasing availability of smartphones and low-cost data plans has expanded African Americans' ability to participate in the digital commons, and this is especially true for younger African Americans. In these spaces, young black folks develop a discursive digital dozens, clever and poetic critical commentary on the world around them, and organize for social change. While there are certainly rules and boundaries in the digital commons, these social media spaces exist relatively autonomously – a 24-hour news cycle created by and concerned with an expansive swath of black life. In previous generations, black newspapers and radio stations were the centralized voices of the black community (Rose, 2008). Today, black social media, and #BlackTwitter in particular (Clark, 2014), is a multimedia, participatory, crowd-sourced space that features the voices of a multiplicity of black folks. It is the largest gathering of black publics ever.

While the geography of these black publics on social media may be difficult to map, there are critical moments when a particular place is under scrutiny and key users from that place come to the fore to document the situation for the rest of the black public. These critical moments allow those most affected to shape, counter, and reshape the dominant media narrative, and to continue black radical traditions of everyday resistance to inequality and erasure.

As the metro area with the third-largest African American population, Chicago is a central node of black online life. Black Chicago's resistive presence has peaked in recent years around several key issues, two of which are explored here: (1) R&B singer R. Kelly's years of preying on young black girls in the Chicago area with impunity, captured by the hashtag #FastTailedGirls; and (2) the intersection of Chicago's murder rate and police brutality against black people in Chicago, captured by the hashtags #SaveChicago and #WeChargeGenocide. These issues trended nationally on Twitter, and people continue to contribute to these discourses. These critical conversations demonstrate Chicago's centrality to understanding social problems that affect black publics across the nation: sexual violence against black girls and women and advocacy for an end to anti-black misogyny (Bailey, 2010; Hamilton, 2013); and violence in black communities born of constrained opportunities, hyper-policing, and state violence.

> Half the Black women in Chicago have a '@rkelly used to post up by my school & pick up teen girls* [experience] so let's skip the excuses. (#AskRKelly [Mikki Kendall (@Karnythia) (Kendall 2013a)

In December 2013, Chicago was the epicenter from which black women spoke out against the abuse of black women and girls. After Isha Aran (2013), writer for the online feminist blog Jezebel, attempted a satirical review of singer and alleged pedophile R. Kelly's then-new album, *Black Panties*, scores of black Chicago women poured into the Twitter streets to critique the review, disrupt the silence around the abuse of black girls, and recount instances in which the singer had waited outside of their South Side Chicago middle and high schools looking for victims. Chicago writers Jamie Nesbitt Golden (@thewayoftheid) and Mikki Kendall (@Karnythia) of the blog Hood Feminism responded by creating the hashtag #FastTailedGirls, which deconstructed stereotypes and critiqued patriarchal and anti-black misogynist discourses that make black women and girls, rather than their abusers, responsible for the sexual violence that is visited upon them. Kendall (2013b) even described her own experience of being approached by the singer in her early teens, discussing the singer's known affinity for Kenwood Academy, a high school on Chicago's South Side and Kelly's alma mater.

Kelly provoked further critique when he took to Twitter to promote the album with an #AskRKelly hashtag. Representative tweets included one from Twitter user Alex Adams (@KareemAbdulAlex), who asked, '@rkelly #AskRKelly on a scale from blue ivy to willow smith, who is the oldest female you would date?' (Adams, 2013). Far from making light of the situation, Adams's question used sarcasm as a form of indictment. Soon after, a *Village Voice* interview with Chicago music journalist Jim DeRogatis, who had covered the accusations against Kelly for 15 years,

went viral on Facebook and Twitter, driven by the posts and reposts of black women. In the interview, DeRogatis recounted his own investigative work with victims and witnesses that documented the South Side geography of Kelly's predation (Hopper, 2013). This series of events, provoked by black women's response to the invisibility of abuse, put Chicago at center stage in responding to and making visible violence against black women and girls. Golden and Kendall's hashtags, in addition to black Chicago women on Twitter who were participating in the conversation beyond the hashtag, were powerful instances of black women's resistance to the mainstream refusal to see black women and girls as victims. The black digital commons, more than any other black public space, made this conversation possible.

> I know that people wouldn't usually rap this/but I got the facts to back this/just last year, Chicago had over 600 caskets/man, killing's some wack shit/oh, I forgot, 'cept for when niggas is rappin'/do you know what it feel like when people is passin'?/he got changed over his chains, a block off Ashland/I need to talk to somebody pastor. (Kanye West, 'Everything I Am', 2007)

While violence against black girls by a well-known South Side predator is an in-group conversation that rarely, save for in critical moments, receives widespread public attention, Chicago's number of murders has sparked a range of public conversations about so-called 'black-on-black violence'. Yet the violence that happens within black communities between black people cannot be decoupled from state violence against black people that occurs within and outside of those communities. As Twitter user Mikki Kendall, cited above for her initiation of #FastTailedGirls, contended: 'Before you spout off about the epidemic of gun violence in Chicago as a reason not to discuss police brutality? Look up what happens here' (Kendall, 2014). Black death always already occurs within the context of white supremacy and state-sanctioned devaluation of black bodies – unless those bodies are laboring in bondage, in prison, or are accruing benefits and profits to the state in some way. Further, such conversations cannot be separated from the politics of pleasure that black folks employ as a strategy of resistance and resilience in the face of state violence.

The digital commons have been a space for black Chicago to activate younger people in various social justice movements against violence and urban disinvestment. As in other cities, Chicago's digital commons intersect with hip-hop, another alternative common space in which black people can have in-group conversations. For instance, in partnership with their father, Chicago rappers Taylor Bennett and Chance the Rapper advocated for the #SaveChicago movement, which aimed to eliminate gun violence over the 2014 Memorial Day weekend. Since

the success of the Memorial Day weekend movement, which saw 42 hours without a murder, the #SaveChicago movement has used the digital commons in concert with grassroots youth organizing methods and hip-hop performances to challenge and raise awareness around the causes of violence. The hashtag continues to be used to report police violence, critique community violence (e.g. Cutlass, 2014) and serve as a repository for social justice activism in Chicago. It also promotes Chicago hip-hop, advertises peace rallies, and promotes parties. This expansive use of the hashtag reflects the breadth and simultaneity of black pain, protest, and pleasure.

Yet while #SaveChicago does not uniformly focus on the structural causes of violence in black communities, other Chicago-based activist movements focus explicitly on rampant police violence in the city. In November 2014, black Chicago activists took their frustration with police violence and brutality to the United Nations Committee against Torture in a resistance campaign that was at once grassroots, digital, and international. Using the hashtags #ChiCopWatch, #WeChargeGenocide, and #WCGtoUN, as well as the Twitter handle @ChiCopWatch, the We Charge Genocide movement documents police violence against black and Latino youth in Chicago, arguing for recognition of this violence as systematic genocide. In a press release, the We Charge Genocide delegation stated:

> We went to Geneva as a delegation of We Charge Genocide with the intention of getting Chicago visibly named as a site for systematic, horrific and punitive police violence against Black and Brown youth on a daily basis [. . .]. we feel a slight sense of relief in the fact that the violence that Black and Brown youth systematically experience every day in Chicago is now getting the attention, internationally, that it deserves, which will only serve as an uplifting foundation in our continued work in challenging police violence in Chicago. (We Charge Genocide, 2014)

We Charge Genocide harnesses the power of social media in the black digital commons to advocate for social justice online, on the ground, and in international contexts. As a collective of young activists of color thinking about critical issues related to policing and imprisonment, We Charge Genocide brings together activist powerhouses like Twitter user Side-Eye (Forever) (@prisonculture), whose blog, Prison Culture, is a comprehensive examination of the effects of the prison industrial complex on marginalized groups. Their posts and blogs convey the struggles of organizing and the realities of violence, but also parts of their everyday lives. Social media reveals these activists as human, rather than superhuman, highlighting how all of us, in the digital sphere and 'in real life', resist by living our lives in spite of violence.

The poetic rhetoric of black folks on social media is an extension of black folks' deft harnessing of language and expression across generations. As a relatively democratic space, the black digital commons frequently disrupts the boundaries of blackness to bring a range of intersectional black experiences to the fore and combat practices of secondary marginalization within the black community (Cohen, 1999). The freedom to speak that social media provides is a pleasure in and of itself, given the usual constraints on speech that counters the dominant narrative. From Chicago to cities and towns across America and beyond to the diaspora, black digital publics use the pleasure of language to critique, reimagine, and change the worlds around them.

## Conclusion

*Blackness*
*is a title*,
*is a preoccupation*,
*is a commitment Blacks*
*are to comprehend –*
*and in which you are*
*to perceive your Glory*.
. . .
*The word Black*
*has geographic power*,
*pulls everybody in*:
*Blacks here –*
*Blacks there –*
*Blacks wherever they may be*.
(Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Primer for Blacks*, 1980)

Drawing on a lifetime of observations of Chicago's black community, the poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks imagines an expansive notion of blackness as always on the minds of black people, in both positive ('your Glory') and burdensome ('a preoccupation') ways. That black people share geographies and make places therein is also made plain in Brooks's verse, as well as the fact that black placemaking may result from 'pulling people in' from 'wherever they may be'. Indeed, all of our examples feature this element of movement and congregation – going back to public housing sites; assembling boys from many black neighborhoods for a baseball team; commuting to a nightclub; and participating in a digital platform that has little grounding in geography whatsoever. Brooks's poem offers a window into the process of black placemaking as a collective endeavor of black people moving in and through a variety of spaces.

In this article, we offer a broad corrective to the imbalanced social science scholarship on black communities, which often portrays urban black residents and their neighborhoods as bounded, plagued by violence, victims and perpetrators, unproductive, and isolated from one another and the city writ large, if not also pathological, dangerous, and depressing. A black placemaking perspective counters this narrative by focusing on the agency, intent, and even spontaneity of urban black residents – across genders, sexualities, ages, classes, and politics – in creating places that are sustaining, affirming, and pleasurable. This is the matter of black lives.

Our intervention does not aim to curtail research on the racism that continues to undermine the ability of black folks to live peacefully and productively in the city. Neither is our perspective a feel-good story, turning attention away from the suffering that does indeed exist in black communities. Surely, we reject an interpretation of our case studies that says, 'See, black folks are making merry in their [slums, favelas, townships, ghettos, shantytowns], so what's the problem?' (see Goldstein, 2013, for a critique of such an interpretation). Instead, our goal is to offer a reminder that all-black spaces are not abandoned, overgrown, unruly, destructive spaces that necessitate pruning. They are not inherently inferior places for which the only remedy is integration. To the contrary, if black placemaking is as fun, as witty, as soulful, as smart, as biting, and as rejuvenating as the Chicago examples we have featured here, imagine what it – what *we* – could be in a more just and equitable city and world.

## Notes

Authors are listed in alphabetical order and made equal contributions. We thank AbdouMaliq Simone for inspiring this article.

1. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this insight.
2. In February of 2015, the team was stripped of its US title for allegedly using players that lived outside of the neighborhood boundaries established by the League. So perhaps they were even more dispersed than allowed, but no one disputes that they came from predominantly black south and south suburban neighborhoods. Also, this action did little to decrease support for the team in (black) Chicago.

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