“Mexicans Gotta Support More Mexicans:” Pride, Representation, and Community Care in Mexican Chicago’s Hip-Hop Underground

A Thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology, Bryn Mawr College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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9 May 2022
ABSTRACT

This study examines the function and meaning of hip-hop/rap to Mexican artists and cultural producers contributing to Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene. Through in-depth interviews with artists who engage this scene from various perspectives – as rappers, audio engineers, or videographers – this thesis hopes to highlight the significance of this music scene to members of Chicago’s Mexican community and, more importantly, how artists’ Mexican identities inform and/or are informed by the art they produce. This work contributes to a, relatively limited, body of knowledge surrounding the history of Chicago’s Mexican community, Chicago’s underground hip/rap scene, and Mexicans’ contributions to hip-hop. The findings of this study show that while Mexican artists generally lack support from other artists, their families, and their communities to pursue their artistic passions, that these artists are still finding ways to push the limits of this field and what’s accepted in their communities, ultimately indicating that the scene has a bright future ahead of it.

Key Terms: race/ethnicity, urban neighborhoods, culture, grassroots cultural movements, music scenes, underground hip-hop/rap, Mexican communities, Mexican diaspora, Chicago, Little Village, Brighton Park
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you Professor Veronica Montes and Professor Amanda Barrett Cox, my thesis co-advisors, for the time and attention you’ve poured into me throughout this process. From the earliest stages of this project you helped shape what this exploration would be, asking all the right questions to aid in workshopping and narrowing my topic. This project took a million and one turns and when things got difficult you reminded me that there would be many opportunities ahead to investigate what new topics and issues were emerging. As your support extends far beyond just the confines of this research project, I am forever indebted to the both of you for all that you’ve invested in my growth both as a scholar but, more importantly, as a person.

Thank you to Capo Hendrix, Big A, and Sergio Esparza for your time, energy, and willingness to participate in this project. Through our conversations you each welcomed me into the inner workings of a world I know relatively little about and I am immensely grateful for the new perspectives you gave me access to and for your patience throughout our conversations and process. Because of your contributions, this thesis joins a growing body of work that aims to make sense of our communities and the everyday experiences of those who inhabit it. What you all are a part of, as artists and cultural producers, is very special and know that I will always be supporting you and the growth of this scene. It’s all love for my people and our side of the city.

Thank you to Hasibe Caballero-Gomez for your unwavering support and for all the love, guidance, and encouragement you showed me throughout, and well beyond, this process. Even in this project’s most difficult stages, you stuck around providing me with the care and kindness that I needed but that I wasn’t showing myself. You’ve been a grounding presence for me,
always reminding me to consider the bigger picture and that this project was but one step in the long academic journey ahead.

Thank you to Jasmine Reed, Zakiyyah Winston, Taryn Barrett, Roy Simamora, Erica Kaunang, Ali Ho, and Zarahy Rivas for your guidance, encouragement, and for holding me accountable to my writing. Most importantly, thank you for making my senior year as eventful and as fun as it was – because of you, I always had something to look forward to and be excited about. Our group dinners, and weekend hang-outs, has allowed me to better appreciate the impact of engaging in restful, restorative, and self-care activities.

Finally, thank you to my family for always being a beacon of pride and inspiration in my life. You taught me to value the quality of my work and that people are a lot more beautifully complex than academia and the news might have us believe. These lessons resonated with me at every stage of my writing process, pushing me to always paint as full of a picture as I could.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Overview

In my eight years of having attended “elite” private, predominantly white and wealthy, educational institutions, I've worked tirelessly to overcome or work around the various social, cultural, and academic challenges I've experienced while trying to navigate these environments. One of the challenges that remains unresolved, and likely always will, is the tension I feel between the cultures of these exclusive environments, which prioritize elite cultural and social reproduction, and the cultures present throughout Chicago’s Mexican community, which I've always called home. It’s rare that I've felt my lived experiences represented throughout my high school and college experiences and so where this representation has been lacking, I've found other ways to stay connected to my roots and the memories of my community and life before attending these “elite” educational institutions. The most important of these grounding mechanisms being the art created by members of my community – specifically that which is produced by Mexicans and other Latinxs contributing to Chicago’s ever-evolving underground hip hop/rap music scenes.

Although the art forms and the content of these cultural productions in this scene are often the focus of critique, and rightfully so, for promoting gun violence, gang violence, sexist and racist language and/or ideologies, a growing number of scholars aim to recognize the value of these art forms and productions, as popular artistic practices and means for cultural reproduction but also for their liberatory potential. Scholars of race/ethnicity, culture, diasporic studies, and ethnomusicology are increasingly identifying how this music “functions as a vehicle to express oppositional politics” (Delgado 1998); can have “potential for emancipatory political projects that are anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial, alterNative and pro-life” (McFarland 2017); and
can illuminate on interracial relations and futures across urban Black and non-Black Latinx communities (Martinez-Morrison 2014).

Given what difficulties I’ve experienced finding my lived experience and cultural backgrounds reflected anywhere in the educational institutions I’ve attended, I often return to the art of Chicago’s underground hip-hop/rap music scene’s Mexican artists and have developed a genuine appreciation for this art as it represents the soundscape of my community and experience which can’t be so easily replicated anywhere else. This study is the first time I’ve ever openly embraced these art forms, as a key part of my background and identity, in my academic work. Through this exploration of Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene, I hope to ultimately encourage other scholars from urban low-income communities of color to embrace and explore what feels real to them – whatever topics resonate most with your identity and/or the experiences of those who comprise the communities you come from. Even if “problematic” in some regards, there is so much value to what’s created by members of our communities and so much more that remains unexplored, underexplored, and misunderstood about what meaning is inscribed into these creations and what values and visions of the world and our society this art can convey.

Despite Chicago being third in the nation for total music industry employment, fifth in employed musicians, and fourth in largest grassroots or underground music scene, its local music scenes and hip hop culture remain relatively unexplored in comparison to other major cities, such as Los Angeles and New York City (Rothfield et al., 2007; Harkness 2011b; Harkness 2012). According to Geoff Harkness (2012) – scholar of micro practices of group behavior and culture and whose work on Chicago’s underground rap music scene and “microscenes” largely foregrounds the context of this study – Chicago, as “one of hip-hop’s cradles… offers a unique
Other scholars have found that Mexican and Latinx influences on hip-hop and rap are being forgotten or remain undocumented (Martinez-Morrison 2014) and that Chicago’s Mexican community has been largely written out of the city’s memory and records (Seif 2018). At various intersections, we find that Chicago’s Mexican artists’ contributions to the cultural identities of the social and built environments they inhabit are seldom being documented, explored, and/or valued. This is particularly concerning as many of the city’s predominantly Mexican neighborhoods have, in recent years, become the target of gentrification-inducing developments, which threaten not only the cultural identities of these communities but also the important support systems (e.g. mutual aid networks and cultural institutions) that these communities have developed to support new migrants, low-income, and otherwise marginalized community members for decades.

In recent years, residents of Chicago’s historically significant Mexican strongholds – namely the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods on Chicago’s Southwest side – find themselves engaged in an arduous battle for their right to remain in these neighborhoods amid development projects being promoted by city government officials and networks of private development firms and limited liability corporations. These developments, and particularly those designed for public-use (e.g. parks and libraries) (Harris et al, 2020; Fernandez et al, 2019), have increased home values and rent prices in the area and have made way for droves of young professionals and college students seeking affordable housing that’s proximate to Chicago’s downtown and in neighborhoods rich in representations of cultural and ethnic pride (Curran 2018). These changes have, in turn, pushed many long-term residents of Pilsen and Little Village further away from the city’s downtown and deeper into the city’s South, West, Southwest sides,
and well into its peripheral suburbs like Cicero and Berwyn, where access to important urban infrastructure and institutions – such as public transportation, hospitals, and quality public schools – become increasingly scarce. Gentrification, and more specifically the “pricing Latinos out of traditional neighborhoods,” taking place across these communities is one key contributing factor to the mass exodus of Chicago’s Latinx community in recent years (Mendoza and Lydersen 2020). According to the Latino Policy Forum in Chicago, from 2000 to 2016 the percentage of Latinos in Illinois living in Chicago has dropped from 49% to 37% while the proportion of Latinos in Illinois living in suburbs rose from 43% to 53% (Mendoza and Lydersen 2020). Additionally, census data analyzed by Chicago-based demographer Rob Paral shows that from 2000 to 2017, The Latino population in the community areas that contain the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods have declined by 14,000 and 13,000 people respectively (Mendoza and Lydersen 2020).

Although Little Village and Pilsen are the focus of concerns surrounding gentrification on the city’s Southwest side – rightfully so given that they’ve served as gateway communities for Mexican immigrants and as central hubs for their descendents since the early twentieth century – it’s important to note that the frontlines of the battle against gentrification have become increasingly blurred as residents of other Southwest side neighborhoods have expressed concerns about new developments in their areas. Of particular interest, for the purpose of this paper, is the Brighton Park neighborhood which will soon be home to the Chicago Park District’s new $65 million headquarters. This comes at the heels of several shopping center developments in the neighborhood as well as the 2014 development of La Villita Park which sits less than a mile away from Brighton Park’s northern boundary. Concerns about gentrification in the area have led
community organizations like the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council to orient their existing programs towards empowering residents to stay in their neighborhood (Jones 2021).

With the future of Chicago’s Southwest side communities in the balance, as a result of concerns surrounding gentrification-induced displacement, the art produced by members of these communities becomes especially important as it can serve to motivate resistant collective action. As sociologist Pancho McFarland (2017), whose work on Chican@ rap also sits at the foundations of this study, puts it: “Chicano hip hop narratives symbolically reterritorialize their colonized urban places…. music becomes a means for claiming and occupying space” (McFarland 2017, p. 50-51). Rap by Mexican artists from Chicago’s Southwest side can therefore be seen as a critical tool in their community’s fight against gentrification. How these artists articulate meaning in their work, and how that meaning develops and is developed by their sense of Mexican identity, thus becomes the topic of my sociological inquiry as I seek to better understand the culture of the underground hip-hop/rap music scene that these artists make up. Ultimately, if the challenges existing in this scene can be mitigated by intervention and increased support from community based organizations, we can imagine that a cultural revolution, with this art form at its center, could help realize Mexican and Chicano rap’s true emancipatory potential in and well beyond Chicago’s Southwest side communities.

The purpose of this research project is to understand the function of Mexican rap to Mexican artists and cultural producers a part of Chicago’s underground hip hop / rap music scenes. Using in-depth interviews with Mexican artists – and specifically rappers, an audio engineer, and a videographer – from Mexican communities in and around Chicago, I hope to better understand what meaning Mexican artists find in their participation in this underground rap music scene. This meaning is explored through a careful investigation of how these artists’
artistry and artwork both influence and are influenced by their identities as members of the Mexican diaspora with my principal research question being: how do members of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene use their art to make sense of their Mexican identities and community?

To answer this question, this thesis aims to first make sense of what the, relatively limited, literature pertaining to underground hip-hop/rap music scenes, and Mexicans’ participation in it, has to say about the importance of these art forms. Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive review of this literature and is organized in four sections which began with an exploration of Latinx diasporic musical cultural forms and music scenes. The first two sections broadly cover the evolution of Latin American music genres, challenges with preserving musical traditions, the origins of Chicanx music and rap, the fluidity and diversity captured in the development of music genres and subgenres, the development of music scenes and “microscenes,” and the challenges with negotiating authenticity. The remaining two sections take a deeper dive into the challenges that artists in underground hip-hop/rap music scenes face with regard to ownership and acceptance within American society, and how race and narratives of American urban experience shape identity development for members of the Mexican diaspora.

Chapter 3 discusses the use of in-depth interviews as the primary research methodology utilized in this project. In this section, I explain my process of using social media networks to identify potential participants for this project. Additionally, this section explores the origins of Chicago’s Mexican community, specifically through historicizing the movement of Mexicans in and throughout two Southwest side neighborhoods: Little Village and Brighton Park. These two neighborhoods are separated only by the southern branch of the Chicago river yet they vary tremendously in their histories – Little Village is notably considered the mecca of Chicago’s
Mexican community today due to its population density and economic impact while Brighton Park is comparatively smaller in population and holds a lesser known, yet significant, history of Mexican community development.

Chapter 4 is the first chapter that examines the data collected through in-depth interviews with Mexican artists a part of Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene. In this chapter, I explore how these artists conceptualize their membership to and experiences within Chicago’s Mexican community. I make use of artists’ orientations towards their communities to then examine what feelings of pride are evoked by these artists’ consistent use of distinctly Mexican symbols across music videos and song lyrics. I argue that this pride is intimately connected to these artists’ perceptions of Mexican Chicago as being a particularly resilient community – represented through bilingualism and celebrations of diversity represented in Mexican Chicago’s hip-hop/rap soundscapes and cultural traditions. This resilience is notably in direct contrast to artists’ accounts of dealing with adversity in their community – which represents itself in artists’ descriptions of a general proximity to and normalization of poverty, gun violence, gang violence, and racial/ethnic descrimination.

Chapter 5 explores artists’ motivations for pursuing and developing their artistry despite the challenges that come with a general lack of institutional, organizational, and peer support in this field. In this chapter, I analyze a quality of difference, or unique-ness, that artists strive for, usually in reference to other artists a part of the underground hip-hop/rap scene or the greater Mexican community they’re a part of. This difference is typically articulated in the context of more traditional occupations taken up by members of these artists’ families and greater community and also in artists’ attributing success in this field to the strength of one’s self-sustained motivations (e.g. passion and drive) to make art. This chapter dives into the often
solitary and individualistic qualities of being an artist in this scene – highlighting specifically what difficulties these artists experience with mentors and idols being far and few in between. These solitary and individualistic qualities get further emphasized as artists contend with the social pressures and expectations imposed on them by other artists, their families, and their greater Mexican community.

Chapter 6 closes my analysis of the in-depth interviews on a positive note, highlighting how artists are finding support, finding community, and developing more collectivist visions for the future of this music scene. More specifically, I dive into the importance of peer networks and physical spaces to these artists whose expressed hopes are to build a more supportive environment for other artists and the youth in their community. This chapter touches briefly on the specialized and racialized aspects of resources within this music scene, clarifying the positive impact that representation has for these artists who see themselves as contributing to something new and without general guidance and direction. In other words, it matters to these Mexican artists that they are supported by other Mexican creatives and that they see themselves, their hopes, and their greater community represented in the spaces they inhabit and the support systems they’re developing.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

This review is organized into four sections of thematic and conceptual frameworks. It begins with broadly discussing Latinx Music and the relevance of diasporas in continuing and transforming cultural traditions and progressively narrows to discussions of underground hip-hop/rap music scenes and Mexican identity formation in Chicago.

Ethnomusicology, Latinx Music, and Diaspora

The study of music is one area that, while well covered, continues to evolve and shape cultural studies across different fields, including sociology. In his overview of Latin music, J. Leon (2021) covers the history and expansion of Latin Music, the term itself, and its different subgenres which are increasingly breaking their way into the mainstream musical spheres internationally, and especially in the U.S. In their work Leon makes clear how Latin music’s roots in the U.S. go as far back as the 1930s with the emergence and popularity of Rumba, a genre of Afro-Cuban origins, which is itself heavily influenced by two other Cuban genres and became popular due to its “Caribbean feel” (Leon 2021, p. 3). Around the same time, in the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican corridos and boleros would begin to take off in the U.S. with the help of recording industries in San Antonio, Los Angeles, and Monterrey, Mexico. By the 1940s, Mexican artists like Agustín Lara would become so popular that alternate English-language lyrics would be written to accompany their work and Chicano music would begin to flourish, with U.S.-based Capo Guerrero pioneering pachuco music, “a Mexican version of jump blues,” earning him widespread recognition as “the father of Chicano music” (Leon 2021, p. 3). According to Leon, the various conflicts unfolding on the national and international stages during the 1960s would see a growing identification among Latinx youth in the U.S. with countercultural movements of the time which would end up influencing Latinx music and tying
its production to “symbols of a growing Latino consciousness” (Leon 2021, p. 3). Leon’s (2021) names the Civil Rights Movement as having a critical role in inspiring new styles of Latin music – such as Chicano rock, brown-eyed soul, and Tejano. Latin music in the 21st century, according to Leon, has benefited significantly from the international crossover of pop music (e.g. the works of J. Lo, Shakira, Ricky Martin, etc) which has also brought about increased attention to other Spanish-language genres, including hip-hop.

While Leon (2021) writes on the origins and expansion of Latin Music, Christina Burbano-Jeffrey’s work speaks to the nature of these historical developments through her writing on the significance of diasporic studies in the field of ethnomusicology – particularly in studying imagined homelands and tracking “musical stasis and change” (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021). Burbano-Jeffrey writes that the study of music, through the lens of diasporic studies, can reveal important aspects about intergenerational music and cultural instruction, pan-ethnicity identity development, and the issue of cultural loss. The possibility of cultural loss becomes a means to justify intervention and support from outside experts (such as researchers and musicians) who can play important roles in facilitating instruction that would traditionally happen intergenerationally (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021). Burbano-Jeffrey argues that musical changes are linked to geographic distance, noting how important perceived social or musical benefit to a community plays in gauging authenticity and the ultimate acceptance of musical change.

Magdalena Olszanowski’s (2019) work also speaks to this piece of authenticity in raising issues relevant to Black ownership and control of their own music – an important point explored further later in this review. Aside from providing historical context to rap music – as a product of the hip-hop movement which began in 1974 when DJs started speaking over their own records in the Bronx, New York City – Olszanowski’s overview of rap music addresses its importance in
establishing urban street cultures which were then hyper-criminalized by the media, the state, and the general public. Furthermore, Olszanowski’s attention to the manifestations of rap in other international and/or cultural contexts – namely Haitian hip-hop and Chicano rap – highlights the importance of rap as something that is fluid and constantly evolving, meeting the needs of racialized, minoritized, and/or hyper criminalized urban communities in similar ways.

Borderlands discourses and imagined homeland are concepts embedded in diasporic musical productions, styles, and practices (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021). Communities negotiate authenticity through careful prioritization and critique of “instrumentation, lyric content, form, style, meter, or performance context” which can be what deems music as “pure and representative of the homeland and community identity” (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021, p. 3). Culturally significant musical productions – including tools, styles, and methods – must be documented because their loss would constitute “cultural loss” which may not ever be restored (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021, p. 3). Musical stasis and change are also important for understanding diasporic cultural production as “musical changes are linked to geographic distance or perceived social or musical benefit to community” and intergenerational instruction plays an important role in “the passing of cultural ideology, cultural inheritance and transmitting tradition” (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021, p. 3).

**Scenes, Microscenes, and Authenticity**

In establishing the concepts and frames for the study of Mexican rap music, and relevant scenes and subcultures, the works of Geoff Harkness, Leslie Baker-Kimmons, and Pancho McFarland are particularly useful. Their works serve as critiques to earlier studies of rap music scenes in the U.S.’s urban cores, arguing for frameworks which better elaborate on the immense diversity represented within these scenes and networks, as well as frameworks that demystify
belonging to these scenes and subcultures through analysis of boundary work and “situational authenticity.” Leslie Baker-Kimmons and Pancho McFarland’s work more specifically elaborate on representations of gender and masculinity in rap music, offering a framework by which to understand these representations as vertical and horizontal orientations in reference to hegemonic notions of masculinity.

In one paper, Harkness (2013) illuminates the unique positions of artists operating at the intersections of street gangs and gangsta-rap ultimately serving to prove a point that studying music scenes in their entirety fails to recognize the subcultures and sub-scenes that larger music scenes encapsulate. Harkness (2013) offers a categorical framework that can help scholars understand the differing conditions that individual artists navigate in pursuit of their own visions of success. Harkness suggests that music scenes be divided into what he calls “microscenes:”

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 (2013, p. 151).

If underground rap is a music scene, Harkness (2013) argues that there exists two microscenes underneath this umbrella term of a music scene: gangsta rap and backpackers. Harkness understands members of these microscenes to be in competition with another, oftentimes dismissing the other group and community as inauthentic. Harkness (2013) finds that artists of these microscenes differ along the lines of “social class, race, style, musical esthetics, performance technique, audience, ideology, and aspirations,” (p. 161) with backpackers generally benefiting from more socially advantageous backgrounds – a claim supported by the work of Martinez-Morrison (2014). Harkness (2013) defines backpackers as usually immersed in
“progressive rhymes that espouse positivity, gender equity, and political activism” (p.161) while gangsta rappers deliver “ghettocentric lyrics that describe a street life filled with guns, gangs, violence, and drugs” (p.161).

According to Harkness (2013), underground rap, in the context of Chicago (but presumably other contexts) exists in itself in relation to other “tiers” in which rap artists are categorized depending on their success and proximity to major music corporations. These tiers being the “corporate tier” which consists of internationally successful artists who’ve largely been accepted into the mainstream, the “independent tier” which consists of “locally and regionally successful rappers who operate independently of the major music corporations,” and the “underground tier” which consists of rappers who are in the early stages of their careers and actively trying to find their footing in the industry (P. 161).

Much of Harkness’ writing in the years leading up to this study speaks to the important boundary-work happening within microscenes of Chicago’s underground rap scene. In True school: Situational authenticity in Chicago’s hip-hop underground, Harkness (2012) highlights how authenticity is negotiated within this music scene and how “outsiders” practice “situational authenticity” and manipulate culturally significant behaviors to navigate cultural boundaries. Through this study of “outsiders” of Chicago’s Hip Hop Underground – namely white, female, and/or suburban rappers – Harkness argues that many studies oversimplify insider and outsider groups and that attention to “situational authenticity” allows for greater understanding of belonging within this music scene and culture. Harkness’ work is especially helpful in identifying that certain conditions and requirements for belonging to a music scene, and presumably microscenes, are more malleable than others and that some are continuously emphasized and/or downplayed by those seeking acceptance into these scenes.
On the topic of acceptance and artists’ navigating authenticity, Baker-Kimmons and McFarland’s work on representations of masculinity in top rap songs by Black and Chicano artists illustrates how lyrics and images from these songs exist in reference to hegemonic ideals of masculinity – which they argue Black and Chicano men typically don’t have access to. Baker-Kimmons and McFarland understand representations of hyper-masculinity in this music to be attempts at filling a void left by an exclusion to hegemonic ideals of masculinity. This is important as a framework as it makes clear how hypermasculine representations in Black and Chicano rap are productions connected to marginalization and exclusion. Baker-Kimmons and McFarland then connect this marginalization to this music’s attention to being “anti-racist” but lack thereof when it comes to being “anti-capitalist and anti-sexist” (Baker-Kimmons and McFarland, P. 340). This analysis brings to light an important gendered aspect about historical and contemporary productions of Mexican and Chicano rap, which has led many scholars to recommend that future studies should include, or center, the perspective of women creatives across this scene and others like it (Harkness 2011a; Baker-Kimmons and McFarland, 2011; McFarland 2017; Seif 2018).

Ownership, Influence, and Evolving Cultural Forms

Many scholars of Latinx and Mexican rap have pointed to another interesting concept relevant to authenticity: ownership. Olszanowski’s overview of rap touches on this topic in breaking about a critique of the industrialization of rap music. Their work highlights, although only momentarily, that many Black rap artists lose control and ownership of their music while working with major music labels, and thus lose the rights to much of the economic profits. The history of music labels barring artists from most of the profits of their creative labor is well known today and many successful artists of the rap genre have come forward to share their own
stories, usually told as a warning to upcoming artists about what exploitation is possible in the industry (“The Truth About the Music Industry,” 2021). This exploitation is, of course, protected through webs of legal infrastructure leaving upcoming artists’ ownership over their own music and its profits dependent on whether or not they’re reading the fine prints of their own contracts. It’s for this reason that many underground rappers today refuse to get “signed” to major labels and prefer instead to remain independent artists, create their own music labels and collectives, or join those created by friends or close associates in the scene.

Although historical accounts of hip-hop and rap’s origins place Puerto Ricans at the beginning of the genre’s inception in 1970s Bronx, Latinx’s connection and impact on the genre is often forgotten. Martinez-Morrison expands on this in her study of race and hip hop’s formation in the Bay Area in which she argues that “the extensive participation of Latinos in hip-hop culture regionally as well as globally suggests that hip-hop can no longer be understood (if it ever could) narrowly as ‘a black thing’ where blackness is equated solely with African Americans in the U.S.” (Martinez-Morrison, p. 1). In her work, Martinez-Morrison highlights an overlapping history and present situation for Black and Chicano artists involved with the hip-hop movements in the Bay Area. Martinez-Morrison (2014) ultimately frames “hip-hop as a transfrontera contact zone for Bay Area Latinos where the social experiences of people racially marked as ‘brown’ converge with those of black populations, creating culturally conjunctural urban identities” (p. 5). Martinez-Morrison’s work is particularly significant in establishing connections in Black and Chicano cultural histories and making some sense of Latino engagement with Black cultural forms. She argues that Chicano artists are “cultural hybridizers” who code switch and traverse “Spanglish, Black English, [and] urban street slang” (Martinez-Morrison 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, Martinez-Morrison’s (2014) analysis of
borderlands, as being “not tied to geographical regions but 'where misfits and the marginal assemble, where opposing elements collide to create something newly hybridized’” is important in framing Chicano rappers as stuck in some kind of state of “liminality” (p. 4).

With respect to the influence of Mexican, and Latinx artists more generally, on hip-hop and rap, recent works point to an issue of these influences getting lost in the history (Martinez-Morrison 2014; Seif 2018). Martinez-Morrison (2014) argues that the “influence of Mexican Americans in hip-hop remains underexplored” (2014, p. 5) and highlights how this under exploration can lead to musical movements being misunderstood, misconstrued, and/or histories can be lost. This under exploration, and general underappreciation for the historical influence of Mexicans over hip-hip, presents a serious threat to sustaining cultures produced by members of the Mexican diaspora, and thus should be centered in future research conducted over the ever evolving rap music scenes (Burbano-Jeffrey 2021). On the topic of under exploration, it’s worth mentioning that Harkness (2012) finds that Chicago’s local rap-music scenes remain relatively unexplored, especially in comparison to local rap music scenes in New York City and Los Angeles. By Harkness’ account, “few major studies to date explore hip-hop culture in Chicago” (Harkness 2012, p. 284). Chicago’s Mexican community, as a whole, faces the same struggle. Citing work from sociologist Jaime Alanis (2010) on Chicano organizing in Chicago in the late 1960s, Seif (2018) writes that Chicago’s Mexican community has largely been left out of the city’s memory and records and decontextualized “from the making of their own history” (2018, p. 70). Although Harkness (2013) writes that recent scholarship on music has moved away from studies of communities and subcultures and towards a study of “scenes,” I argue that studying scenes, in the context of community and subcultures is particularly useful, and needed, in the context of Chicago’s Mexican community. As various scholars have indicated, Chicago’s
local rap music scenes, Mexican community, and Mexican influence on hip-hop are all underexplored and/or excluded from the history of hip-hop and social movements. One goal of this thesis is thus to help illuminate these histories, through this exploration of Chicago’s Mexican Underground hip/hop rap scene.

**Mexican and Diasporic Identity Formations**

So what does Mexican rap have to do with Mexican-ness and being a member of the Mexican diaspora? Studies of both historical and contemporary states of Mexican Chicago, as well as Mexican communities elsewhere, point to an important marginalization that descendants of Mexican migrants experience in their own Mexican American communities. This marginalization is built on a belief that Chicanos exist in a space of liminality which positions them not in between Mexican-ness and American-ness but between Mexican-ness and “the degraded racialized status of U.S. ‘minority’” (De Genova 2008, p. 149).

Nicholas De Genova’s (2008) research on Chicago’s Mexican community is particularly helpful in understanding this phenomenon. Using interviews and observations from his time as an ESL instructor in Chicago’s Mexican community during the mid 1990s, where he lived in the Pilsen neighborhood, De Genova examines constructions and perspectives of Chicano identity from the perspective of Mexican migrants. De Genova problematizes the origins and subsequent reclamation of the Chicano term and he argues that while members of the Mexican diaspora in Chicago rarely self-identify as Chicano, the term is often used by Mexican migrants to describe members of the Mexican diaspora which they perceive to be threatening their more authentic representations of Mexican-ness. De Genova writes that Chicanos are understood to be “a pivotal link in the fraught nexus between Mexicanness, as a racialized transnationality within the space of the U.S. nation-state, and the degraded status of U.S. ‘minority’ associated with African
American Blackness” (2008, p. 141). Furthermore, De Genova’s work shows that Chicanos exist as a scapegoat for the violent and criminalizing narratives associated with Mexican migration and undocumented communities. In this way, authentic Mexican-ness is negotiated as being more closely aligned to traditional American values, and therefore, those Mexican migrants who exhibit non-violent behaviors are more deserving of inclusion, acceptance, and social supports than the Chicano who are othered by Mexican migrants as an inauthentic representations of Mexican-ness. De Genova’s (2008) observations reveal that the Chicano, to many Mexican migrants, is “a figure of perdition and abjection” (2008, p. 142) and understood as an “assimilation’ process gone woefully awry” (2008, p. 146). Chicano identity has become a re-racialization of Mexican identity – synonymous with gangs and violence, making the term a convenient catch-all explanation for U.S.-born Mexican’ whose actions are misaligned with the image of the unproblematic Mexican. From De Genova’s (2008) study, we can understand how Mexican identification in Mexican Chicago has become complicated and policed, leaving descendants of Mexican migrants to navigate authenticity and acceptance against a backdrop which sees Mexican Americans as being prone to, un-Mexican, violent activity.

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa – esteemed scholar of Chicana, feminist, and queer theory – explores this marginalization in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* which continues to contribute significantly to Chicana feminisit thought since its publication in 1987. Drawing on her experiences growing up in Texas near the U.S.-Mexican border, Anzaldúa (1987) describes the complexity of Chicano self-identification in her writing:

“Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands… Among ourselves we dont say *nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos*. We say *nosotros los mexicanos* (by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexican; we do not
mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (1987, p. 62).

Here, Anzaldúa explores racial identification as existing beyond traditional, or state-imposed, racial classifications (e.g., Black, white) through arguing that a racial identification as Mexican more accurately describes the Chicano experience, which Anzaldúa understands to be a mix of many influences and complicated by “borderlands” of various kinds. De Genova (2008) affirms Anzaldúa’s argument by writing that “Mexicans born or primarily raised in the United States pervasively identify themselves in Chicago simply as Mexican. The term Chicano, much like the term Mexican American, has very little currency in the everyday life of Mexican Chicago” (2008, p. 143). In addition to complicating racial identification for Chicanos, Anzaldúa distinguishes Mexicans from the U.S. and Mexicans from Mexico in order to support her ultimate point that identifying as Mexican has nothing to do with Mexican or American citizenship. Elsewhere in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa (1987) writes that she is “possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. It's a validation vision… I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question” (1987, p. 87). Anzaldúa’s writing illustrates how intimately Chicanx identity is with a sense of not belonging and feeling like one’s worth is trivialized. As we’ll see, these divisions surrounding Mexican identity span many generations and have become a defining characteristic of what it means to be Chicano, Xicano, Mexican-American, or a member of the Mexican diaspora more generally.
In Louise Ano Nuevo Kerr’s (1976) historical account of Chicago’s Mexican community, she finds that in the 1970s, following four major waves of Chicano “in-migration,” communities in the first three major Mexican and Chicano settlements in the city found themselves varying in culture by means of different occupations and self-identification. In the Near West Side neighborhood, work in the railroad industry predominated and Mexican-Americans identified primarily as “Chicanos” (Kerr 1976, p. 204). In the Back of the Yards neighborhood, most residents worked in the meatpacking industry and self-identified as “Americans of Mexican descent” (Kerr 1976, p. 204). Finally, in the South Chicago neighborhood, most residents worked in the steel factories and identified primarily as “Mexican Americans” (Kerr 1976, p. 204). These developments alone were products of several generations of Mexican migration and progress made to living conditions of these communities were the result of the work being done across various community organizations (e.g. churches, community-based organizations, and street gangs). Kerr (1976) finds that as early as the 1920s, community organizations operating in, and for, Chicago’s Mexican community experienced internal conflicts which were usually because of differing political attitudes “toward events in Mexico” and because of differing degrees to which members of Chicago’s earliest settlements were “forgetting Mexican past and establishing local roots” (Kerr 1976, p. 42-43).

De Genova (2008), Anzaldua (1987), and Kerr’s (1976) works come together to illustrate a complicated and difficult terrain of identification that members of the Mexican diaspora are forced to traverse, alongside the pressures of American assimilation. Legacies of “othering” and identity policing have positioned members of the Mexican diaspora in a space of liminality, triangulated by: ideals of authentic Mexican-ness, which are difficult to obtain; non-Mexican-ness, which are assumed of Chicanxs whose identities have become synonymous
with violence, inauthenticity, and minoritized classification in America; and an unachievable full
acceptance into American society. Anzaldua makes sense of the complexity in a unique Chicano
struggle by describing how “as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize
ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that
there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong..’” (Anzaldua 1987, p. 45).
CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

In-Depth Interviews

All information used to contextualize and analyze different dimensions of Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop music scene, and the importance of Mexican identity to the cultural producers engaged in this scene, were gathered using three semi-structured in-depth interviews with artists who self-identified as being of Mexican descent and originally from Chicago’s Southwest side. I chose to conduct interviews for this project, as opposed to using what interviews were available to me across online social media platforms or narratives found throughout the scholarly literature relevant to this study, as I had hoped to capture more contemporary perspectives on what I perceive to be a blossoming Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene in Chicago. Given that many underground artists go in and out of this field, and sometimes stop producing art altogether, it was also imperative that I captured the perspectives of artists currently engaged with this music scene. My hope was to capture a representation of the culture, soundscape, and challenges of being a part of this music scene today.

This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Bryn Mawr College. Participants were recruited from targeted social media outreach efforts to potential participants that I sourced by combing through countless Youtube profiles and Instagram pages. Given that there are virtually hundreds, if not thousands, of artists who meet the criteria for my study – I compiled an extensive list of potential participants from researching artists who follow, are followed by, or who have been featured in posts from other artists and from organizations and pages for whom promoting artists, music, and music videos is a central focus such as: Chicago
Street TV, Rack EM Entertainment, and DJay Films on Instagram. All participants were 18 years of age or older.

These interviews were conducted virtually, via the Zoom videotelephony software program, and lasted approximately one hour. This data collection period in which these interviews took place was between February and March of 2022. An interview guide was developed before interviews were conducted but what questions were asked was ultimately determined by the flow of my conversation with participants in this project, allowing space for new questions to be asked based on participant’s responses. The data from these interview were transcribed using Otter.ai, a free transcribing software. I then used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, to analyze the transcripts of these interviews using a combination of Provisional and In Vivo coding approaches to identify major themes arising from my interviews. Finally, all participants indicated that they would prefer their names to be included in this study.

**Participant Introductions**

BBE Big A, or Big A as I refer to him throughout this project, was the first artist I interviewed. Big A is an 18 year old rap artist, audio engineer, and producer who was born and raised in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood. Big A identifies as Mexican-American and he began making music in 2017, when he was 14 years old. He had started off wanting to be a producer, and then became a rap artist, and is now mostly both an artist and audio engineer. He started off making music on his phone, and then his computer. Big A now works out of the House on Knox studio in Chicago’s Westlawn neighborhood where he mixes audio for other up-and-coming artists a part of this music scene. He is inspired by Los Angeles-raised Mexican rapper OhGeesy and the rap artist collective he was a part of called Shoreline Mafia.
Capo Hendrix is an 18 year old rap artist from Chicago’s Brighton Park neighborhood. Capo Hendrix identifies as Mexican and got his start in music with the help of a friend when he was 10-11 years old and in the fifth grade. He credits his early passions for reading and writing poetry for driving his interests in rap and takes immense pride in the time and attention he dedicates to the writing process. His participation in this rap scene and the sounds and styles of the music he creates are influenced by Houston rapper SPM (South Park Mexican) and Los Angeles rapper Tupac Shakur.

Sergio Esperza, also known professionally as Yuforic Perceptions, is a 20 year old photographer and videographer who directs, shoots, and edits music videos and produces other visual content for and with other artists. He identifies as Mexican and was born in Chicago. Sergio spent some time in the nearby west suburb of Cicero, Illinois before moving to Bartlett, Illinois, a village located approximately 45 minutes outside of Chicago, as a child. He’s since worked and attended schools in and around South Elgin, Illinois but maintains connections to his family who live throughout Chicago’s South, West, and Southwest sides. Sergio got his start with photography and videography when he received his first camera in his senior year of high school. Some of the artists he’s always looked up to are Kanye West, Juice WRLD, ASAP Rocky, J Balvin, Bad Bunny, and Chicago-based videographer and music video director Cole Bennett.

Research Obstacles and Limitations

While I had initially set out to interview 12 artists and cultural producers who contribute to Chicago’s Mexican underground hip/hip rap music scene, time constraints and scheduling conflicts – such as rescheduling interviews and no-shows – made it possible to interview only three artists a part of this music scene. Additionally, the data collection portion of this project was also hindered by a delayed Institutional Review Board approval process as well as by the
difficulties I experienced whilst trying to secure funding to compensate participants. Due to there
only being three interviews, my findings and analysis are not meant to be generalizable of the
greater population – and community of underground Mexican artists in Chicago – that the
participants in this study are a part of.

**Terminology**

Mexican: It’s important to note that there exists other identifications used in other geographic
locations to describe members of the Mexican diaspora – such as Mexican American, Chicanx,
and Xicanx. While these terminologies are used by members of the Mexican diaspora to describe
themselves in various other geographic locations and Mexican communities, most members of
this population in Chicago use the term Mexican to describe their racial/ethnic identity and
background. Because this is the case in Chicago’s Mexican community, and among two of the
three participants in this study, I have opted to use the term Mexican in describing members of
the Mexican diaspora, as well as immigrants from Mexico, to keep consistent with the
terminology used in this setting.

Hip-hop/rap: I intentionally use hip-hop and rap together to refer to the grassroots cultural
movement of hip hop, and the many cultural forms that have become encompassed by it.
Rapping is but one of four elements that make up hip-hop, the other three being: deejaying or
turntablimg; graffiti painting, also known as “graf;” and breakdancing or “B-boyimg.” I choose
not to separate hip-hop and rap as studying this music scene is about more than just the sounds of
the music, or what’s audible. The use of “hip-hop” highlights other elements that form this
culture which work in tandem with the beats, rhythm, lyricism of rap music, such as the visual
art forms and practices engaged in making music videos.
Underground music scene: Although there exists a conceptual distinction between scenes and microscenes, I use scenes in this paper in its more traditional sense – as an all encompassing term - given that my focus in this paper isn’t on the distinctions between gangsta, drill, or backpacker rap scenes. I find that rap artists tend to traverse these different microscenes, their discographies often representing diverse ranges of sounds and messages that would be considered a part of varying microscenes and subgenres of rap. Underground music scene is used throughout this paper to describe a community of artists, and their supporters, who regularly engage with the art forms that follow cultural traditions specific to hip-hop, in this case being rap. What makes these scenes “underground” is that they’re not supported by commercial organizations or institutions that make up the more mainstream, and far more lucrative, hip-hop/rap music scene. Underground rap artists are often considered independent artists and sometimes sign to independent labels, the key being that they typically don’t engage with the commercial rap industry or its audience, although engaging these audiences and more established labels may be these artists’ goal.

Underground Mexican hip-hop/rap music scene: Although no scholarly literature has argued the notion that underground hip-hop/rap music scenes are specific to certain racial/ethnic groups, I use this Underground Mexican hip-hop/rap music scene terminology to describe the community of Mexican artists within Chicago’s underground hip-hop/rap music scene. This specification is important given that Mexican artists a part of Chicago’s underground hip-hop/rap music scene, generally tend to only make music, and engage in other art forms, with other Mexican artists. It’s not clear exactly why this happens; however, as one artist I interviewed for this project suggests,
the racial/ethnic divisions apparent throughout Chicago’s larger underground hip-hop/rap music scene may be a reflection of Chicago’s extreme segregation which has produced many geographies that are largely homogenous in racial/ethnic composition.

Mexican Chicago: This term refers to Chicago’s Mexican community as a collective entity made up of countless, smaller and geography-specific Mexican communities across the city. Mexican communities in Chicago don’t all share the same histories – the neighborhood’s many of these communities have come to inhabit don’t all share the same historical or cultural significance to Mexican Chicago.

Research Context

Origins of Chicago’s Mexican Communities

Of the more than 2.8 million people residing in the Chicago metropolitan area in 1910, more than 900,000 residents were from outside the U.S.; these immigrants were mostly from Germany, Australia, and Russia while very few came from Asia or Latin America (Conzen n.d.). In 80 years time, Chicago would become a true global city, drawing more immigrants from Latin American countries, most especially Mexico, and almost as many immigrants from Asian countries as there are those from European countries (Conzen n.d.).

Mexicans were among the first Latinxs to arrive in significant numbers to Chicago. The first large-scale immigration of Mexicans to Chicago can be traced back to the arrival of 206 Mexican railroad track laborers from the Texas-Mexican border in 1916 (Kerr 1976). It didn’t take long for a small Mexican community to develop: the first count of Mexicans in Chicago in 1920 reached a total of 1,141 Mexicans (Kerr, 1976, p. 19). With the help of various community based organizations and religious institutions the Mexican community experienced tremendous
growth. By 1930 there were nearly 21,000 Mexicans in Chicago that had made a home out of three neighborhoods, the Near West Side, Back of the Yards, and South Chicago (Kerr 1976). At the time, the employment of Mexicans was closely aligned with the neighborhood one lived in which meant Mexicans living in the Near West Side, Back of the Yards, and South Chicago worked in the railroad, meatpacking, and steel industries respectively.

Although unemployment during the Great Depression and a mix of voluntary and forced repatriation would bring Chicago’s Mexican population down to 16,000 in 1940, the community bounced back by 1950 reaching a population of approximately 24,000 with the help of a growing U.S. born Chicano population and the Bracero Programs that encouraged Mexican migration into the U.S. (Kerr, 1976). By the 1960s, Mexicans in the Near West Side would scatter to different parts of the city, including the Pilsen neighborhood, after being displaced by the Eisenhower Expressway, by urban renewal, and by the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois (Kerr 1976). From the 1970s til the turn of the century, Chicago’s Latino population would experience an “explosive growth–” (see Table 1 and Figures 1-4) eventually making them the second-largest racial/ethnic group in the city (Loury and Kang 2021). Today there are approximately 820,000 Latinos in Chicago with an estimated 75% being of Mexican descent (Serrato 2017; Serrato 2021).

**Little Village**

South Lawndale, known more commonly as Little Village or La Villita, is the “largest center of Mexican commerce and culture in the city of Chicago” (Sweeney 2015). 26th Street – the neighborhood’s, and city’s second – most economically impactful commercial corridor attracts people from all over the region. The neighborhood is widely considered the “Mexico of the Midwest” (Gellman 2005) and “Downtown Mexican Chicago” (Acosta-Córdova 2017, p.
Despite the economic significance of 26th street, Acosta-Córdova (2017) writes that the neighborhood’s high rates of poverty, low rates of educational attainment, gang violence, and low levels of household income “are indication that many of the people who live within these boundaries [the neighborhood’s] do not benefit from the prosperity of 26th street” (Acosta-Córdova 2017, p. 44). In 2015, the total median household income for Latino families was $30,659, 37% of the Latino population earned below the poverty line, and only 5% of Latinos had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Acosta-Córdova 2017).

Little Village wasn’t always the center of Chicago’s Mexican community. Amid the pressures of urban renewal projects and the construction of the University of Illinois at Chicago during the 1960s, Mexicans that had once inhabited the Near West Side and Pilsen neighborhoods, which are just minutes from Chicago’s downtown, were displaced and forced to find new homes further Southwest in Little Village. Little Village became a major port of entry for Latinx immigrants during the 1970s – while Latinos made up only 4% of Little Village residents in 1970, they would end the decade at 47% (Reed 2004; “Little Village History,” n.d.; Acosta-Córdova 2017). In 1990, Latinos would account for 85% of the neighborhood’s 81,155 total residents which would drop slightly to 83% when the population peaked at 91,071 in 2000. (Acosta-Córdova 2017; South Lawndale Community Data Snapshot, 2021). Although Little Village’s population would drop to 79,288 in 2010 and then to 71,399 in 2020, the neighborhood has maintained a strong Latinx identity as they made up 81% of the population in 2010 and, according to 2015-2019 ACS five-year estimates, made up 85% of the neighborhood’s population from 2015-2019 – 94% of which were of Mexican descent (Acosta-Córdova 2017; South Lawndale Community Data Snapshot, 2021).
**Brighton Park**

Brighton Park is a neighborhood on Chicago’s Southwest side located just six miles from Chicago’s downtown. It was incorporated into Chicago in 1851 and was home to many European ethnic groups including Germans, Irish, French, and Eastern European Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, and Italians (Stockwell 2005). In the 1990s Brighton Park would become a “gateway community” for Mexican immigrants who would become the majority racial/ethnic group in the neighborhood soon thereafter (Novara 2015). In 1980 about 15% of Brighton Park residents identified as Hispanic, by 2010 that figure would rise to 85% (Arredondo 2008). The 2020 census reports that the neighborhood has a population of 45,053 and according to 2015-2019 ACS five-year estimates, Latinos made up 80.9% of the neighborhood’s population from 2015-2019 and 42.7% of all Brighton Park residents being “Foreign Born” (Acosta-Córdova 2017; *Brighton Park Community Data Snapshot*, 2021). Like in Little Village, an estimated 94% of the Latino Population from 2015-2019 are of Mexican descent (Acosta-Córdova 2017). In 2015, the median annual household income for Latinos was $37,400, 28% of Latinos lived in poverty, and only 6% of Latinos had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Acosta-Córdova 2017).

Although Brighton Park only became heavily populated by Mexicans and Latinxs starting in the 1980s and 90s, it has been home to Mexican immigrants since Mexicans first arrived in the city. According to Gabriela F. Arredondo’s (2008) research on Mexican Chicago from 1916-1939, “sizable groups of Mexican men had been living in these areas, reportedly since around 1916” (Arredondo 2008 p. 44) – the same year that marked the first large-scale immigration of Mexicans to Chicago according to historian Louise Año Nuevo Kerr (1976). Some of these early Mexican railroad workers were said to have lived with their children in empty box cars along the Santa Fe Railroad tracks (which make up Brighton Park’s Western
boundary), which “turned into large ovens” in the summer and “converted into freezers” during
the winter (Arredondo 2008, p. 45). By 1928 the Mexican population in Brighton Park, estimated
at somewhere between 700-800 people, had been congregating near the intersections of Kedzie
and Thirty-ninth street and had opened several commercial establishments in the area – such as
grocery stores and poolrooms (Arredondo 2008). Despite Brighton Park’s relatively recent
emergence as a Mexican enclave and stronghold in the city, the neighborhood served as a
homebase for some of the city’s first Mexican immigrants making it a historically significant site
for the city’s Mexican community.

Reflexivity Statement

When “Straight Up,” by Lil E and Wakko Dawgs, first hit the internet in January of 2014,
I could not believe my eyes. The music video, which has now garnered over 650,000 views on
Youtube, featured my neighbor Lil E rapping about his experiences as a gangero in my
neighborhood. While it brought negative attention to Lil E and the neighborhood from local
news outlets, who then blamed him for the gun violence in my community, my neighborhood
friends and I were singing Lil E’s part in the song and we knew it word for word. We were proud
that someone in our community was getting recognized and that their talent and craft was on
display for the city to see, even if that attention painted our entire community and way of life in a
negative light.

Seven years after Lil E first dropped the project that put Brighton Park on the map,
Chicago’s soundscape has exploded with the emergence of a whole new generation of Mexican
rappers, audio engineers, producers, videographers, and performers – all of them eager for a
moment in the spotlight. While Mexican artists from Chicago like LA Tone, King Ace, and Jr007
grow closer and closer to breaking into the mainstream, it’s important to recognize that
Chicago’s underground Mexican hip hop scene is far more expansive that it gets credit for – a scene that includes hundreds, if not thousands, of “up-and-coming” artists.

One of these artists being my older brother, Lewis Rodriquez, who’s to thank for the intimate connection I feel today to hip-hop. I grew up a witness to his artistic development as he mixed vinyl records in his bedroom whose walls were once completely covered in beautiful graffiti art. His room became mine when he moved out of my childhood home, and while the turntables and graffiti were long-gone by the time I moved out, his spirit and artistic visions have continued to live in me - represented in my ever-growing appreciation and love for hip-hop and its cultural significance to my community.

This project originated as an extension of my fascination with the cultural productions and cultural forms of the Mexican diaspora, a group and community that I consider myself to be a part of. Having grown up in Brighton Park, a low-income Latinx immigrant community on Chicago’s Southwest side, I have naturally engaged in Mexican and Mexican diaspora cultural forms and productions my entire life. I am very prideful of my Mexican and, recently developed, Chicano identities and this deep-dive into Mexican diasporic identity formation and its connection to Mexican rap exploration is as much a scholarly investigation as it is one of my personal identity and affiliation with Chicago’s Mexican-American community.

Although I have a deep pride in being of Mexican heritage and descent, I want to acknowledge the intentionality behind my critiques of the different dimensions and social and cultural norms of Chicago’s Mexican-American community. This is not a community that I perceive myself to be an expert of, mainly because of the educational privileges I’ve experienced which have placed me outside of the normative experiences of members of my own community. Nonetheless, I spend a great deal in this paper rebuking standards of authentic Mexican-ness –
and these critiques are intimately tied to my own lived experience. I have frequently had to “prove” my Mexican-ness to strangers, family members, and friends in Mexican-American communities across the U.S.. It is traversing this terrain of having to negotiate and prove one’s own worth that has ultimately sparked my interest in place-based and diasporic identity development but also biases present throughout this work against traditional Mexican values, community norms, and representations.

Important to recognize are my identities as a cis-gender, heterosexual man which have allowed me to navigate Chicago’s Mexican rap scene with the most relative ease given that this scene is predominately comprised of cis-gender heterosexual men. Therefore, engaging with members of this scene and larger community posed little to no challenges outside of the most basic anxieties involved with communicating with strangers. Given the historical marginalization of women in this scene and greater Mexican-American community, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the ways that that my gender and sexuality have privileged me in my data collection, and it is in fact these identities, alongside my identities as a member of the Mexican diaspora from Chicago’s Mexican-American community, that enabled me to establish a level of familiarity and comfort with all those involved in my study. Achieving this level of rapport, and so quickly, would likely have been more difficult to achieve if not for the intersection of these various identities.
CHAPTER 4 – FINDING YOUR PRIDE: RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

A Community of Adversity: Violence and Discrimination

One important function of Chicago’s underground rap scene is that it has become a source of pride for Mexican rappers. It is not uncommon for rappers to specify, in their lyrics, what it means to be Mexican, that they are Mexican, or some other aspect of their Mexican identities. Similarly, “Mexican-ness” is often visually represented in music videos where artists depict Mexican identity, or some aspect of it, using symbols like the Mexican flag or culturally significant garments. These depictions of “Mexican-ness” in lyrics and imagery thus incite a feeling of pride amongst my participants and for various reasons.

One reason why depictions of Mexican-ness incite pride amongst members of this scene is because, to them, being Mexican implies both hardship and a subsequent quality of resilience to these hardships. The main sources of these hardships being violence occurring in the streets and discrimination against Mexicans based on stereotypes which present Mexicans as inherently violent. In my interview with Capo, he points to this violence in Brighton Park when he says “I love my community, but I also don't like it due to the violence, because I see little kids get killed almost like everyday… losing them just makes me so sad.” Capo’s attention to the violence occurring in his community, particularly when children are victims, is expanded upon in his song “Soul Train:”

“Gotta watch out who you trust, because it’s nothing like you see / people dying everyday even kids at age thirteen / shit I really lost my mind when i saw that in the news / cause that's my little brother’s age and even then they’d kill him too” (“Soul Train,” 2021)
As made apparent in his lyrics, the threat of violence in Capo’s community seems too close to comfort hence the connection to his own family which itself evokes feelings of loss, grief, and sadness.

Similarly, while Big A does not address violence directly, he draws on hardship in Little Village as related to the pride he feels when seeing and/or using symbolic representations of Mexican-ness in his own work when he says “yeah we talk about it in our songs because like that's really where we live. We live here, we're Mexicans coming from Chicago. It's kinda hard.” While Capo makes adversity a clear characteristic of his community, Big A does the same when he calls his area “hard” which he also specified is an attribute of being Mexican in Chicago.

Sergio, who lives just outside the city, adds to these depictions of Chicago’s Mexican community as a violent place, only from an analysis of racial violence in his experiences with white students in his community. He says “I would always feel like ‘oh, the Mexican kids are always the ones making trouble, they're bad, they're never listening’” and on questioning where these generalizations came from he says “maybe a parent, or a family friend, taught them like: ‘oh Mexican people were,’ you know, ‘troublemakers.’” This association between Mexicans and trouble – encapsulating violent and disobedient narratives – ultimately led Sergio to feel a sense of shame in his Mexican identity, something he’s since been able to realize and now actively works to address and undo. Sergio says “looking back on that, it hurts me, you know? I'm like damn, why was I like ever made to feel that way?”

A Community of Resilience: Bilingualism, Diversity, and Being Unapologetically Mexican

Resilience in Chicago’s Mexican community, like the hardships, manifests itself in celebration of the community’s bilingualism, and the diversity in its rap soundscape. Capo directly engages with bilingualism as he has several songs written and recorded in Spanish.
When asked what the intention behind the use of the Spanish language was, Capo said “I love incorporating Spanish because it shows my roots… incorporating Spanish shows that I'm really doing this. I don't just do this to do it. I really like who I am, you know? I'm proud to be Mexican.” To Capo, Spanish is a clear indicator of Mexican-ness and thus becomes a means for asserting his Mexican-ness and the pride he feels in his Mexican background to his listeners. Additionally, Capo believes his use of the Spanish language in his music provides his listeners with a closer, more intimate, look into his personal life. He described to me the importance of Spanish in his household and said that when he speaks Spanish “you see a whole different version of me.”

Contrasting Capo’s use of Spanish in his music to assert his degree of Mexican-ness and to grant listeners with a more personal aspect of his everyday life, Sergio’s use of Spanish is closely linked to his process of undoing the feelings of shame he was subjected to while growing up in a predominantly white area and attending predominantly white schools. Sergio describes this process, “I started to forget my Spanish. It could just be because I wouldn't speak it. It felt like I didn’t really want to be identified with that. But now it's like ‘nah bro,’ I don't care what anybody says I want to identify with that”. After years of not being able to openly speak Spanish or identify with his Spanish-speaking roots, Sergio’s relatively newfound use and appreciation for the language harbors a resistant nature. This resistant nature is importantly not unlike that which motivated countless historical Chicano and Puerto Rican-led efforts to overturn policy at all levels of government, including in schools, which sought to limit the use of the Spanish language in many Latinx communities across the U.S. and its colonies. Sergio shared with me a recent experience at his workplace in which he was speaking in Spanish with a Latinx coworker and another coworker told him to speak English because he’s in the U.S. This was particularly
striking given that his workplace is located near a major Latinx pocket of his area, exemplifying how this language-policing, and resistance to it, persists today. We are reminded through Sergio’s experience that the Spanish language serves as a beacon of resistance for many Spanish-speakers, including Mexicans facing similar pressures to assimilate as Sergio did at school and in the workplace.

The theme of resilience, in response to hardship-driven narratives of Chicago’s Mexican community, also reflects itself in the immense diversity existing within Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene. This diversity, Capo makes clear in our conversation, is a diversity in music style and messaging. As explored elsewhere in this paper, drill music is among the most popular sub genres of rap today. Originating from Chicago’s southside, drill music is famous for its particularly violent lyrics and dark melodic tones. As in many other low-income Black and Latinx urban enclaves, drill music is among the most popular genres across Chicago’s Mexican community, especially among young Latinx men. Today, the most popular Mexican rap artists from Chicago, such as King Ace, L’A Tone and Jr007, could be classified as drill artists or gangsta rap artists – genres similar in more ways than they are different. The violent natures of this music, and the violent images they often cast over the communities the artists claim or come from, are contested by many artists who seek to paint other, notably less violent, portraits of their own community. Capo is one of these artists who wants his music to “hug you.” Capo challenges the popularity of drill rap in Chicago’s Mexican community when he explains that the Mexican underground rap scene is a lot more diverse than most might expect or give it credit for:

There’s different people with different music just like there's different genres you know? And not just like Mexican drill… it [Mexican rap] can identify as many things and you
can see that in my circle. Like my circle really has a lot of diversity, you know what I’m saying? It’s just like something I’m really proud of.

Through emphasizing this diversity, and especially that at the center of his own extensive support network of artists, Capo decentralizes the violent-driven narratives surrounding his community which undoubtedly get culturally reinforced by the popularity of drill music. Additionally, the pride Capo has about having a diverse network of artists in his circle disrupts individualistic norms and practices promoted by drill and gangsta rap artists who, in the case of Chicago’s Mexican community, noticeably refuse to work with one another. This aspect in particular, the unwillingness of Mexican and Latinx artists to work with one another will be further explored in the following chapter.

Like Capo, Big A carries a similar critique of drill music’s domination of the spotlight relative to other sounds coming out of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene. Big A adds that while Chicago’s Mexican drill artists have served as important sources of inspiration for various upcoming artists, there exists a need for increased exposure to artists who’s sounds and messages address other topics, emotions, experiences, and aspects of Chicago’s Mexican community. Big A says:

LA Tone and King Ace, like I’ll always support their music. And I mean, I was fans of them – I'm a big fan of LA Tone and King Ace and like those are like the people that we get to look up to, you know? I kind of don't want it to be that way, I want it to be different, because, you know, like they fall into that Drill category. I kind of want it to be different. I want people to look at Mexicans in Chicago and be like ‘wow there’s a lot of different types of sounds’ not just like ‘oh you got the King Aces, the La Tones,’ you know what I mean? I want people to know everybody. I want them to see the Motives,
you know, like the Big As, the YBs, like all the different sounds that are coming out instead of like the Drill sound.

Clearly, the impact of Mexican drill artists in laying the foundations for Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene, as we know it today, is not lost on the newest generation of underground artists and cultural producers. In many ways, these artists have come to recognize the use of drill sounds and lyrics, particularly their focus on physical violence, as an almost proven blueprint for success, if not monetarily then in popularity. This consciousness is evident in Capo’s use of violence, or the threat of it, in his own discography, for example, where despite his desires to make songs that evoke more heartfelt reactions he utilizes lyrics and sounds more aligned with the nature of drill music:

*Nothing to Say*

“As a shorty I grew up with gangsters, i’m a trouble child”

“Even though I ain’t claimin nothing that shit don’t mean nothing cause you know this chopper goin spray / even though I ain’t claimin nothing that shit don't mean nothing you still get put in a grave”

*Freestyle*

“Got two brand new blicks they both spray”

“And you say you want smoke but everytime I see you I can tell you don’t want that”

*Drill Time*
“When you see my lil bloodah *inaudible* just keep your eyes open he do keep a pistol / and that .45 choppah a hit you, yeah and I hope your family goin miss you”

Finally, the theme of resilience – as a major characteristic of Chicago’s Mexican community that contributes to invoking feelings of pride when some aspect or quality of being Mexican is depicted lyrically or visually in the music – is nested in artists' assertions that they’re unapologetically Mexican. While Capo and Sergio touch on mixed feelings of shame and pride with respect to bilingualism and embracing their control of the Spanish language, Big A more directly emphasizes this feeling in relation to the content of the music produced from this scene. Big A says: “why not talk about it? Why not show it that we're Mexican instead of being kind of ashamed of it in a sense? Yeah we talk about it in our songs because, like that's really where we live, we're Mexican coming from Chicago!” Here, Big A suggests that many Mexicans are ashamed of their Mexican identities but makes clear that the music, specifically where mentions of being Mexican are made, serves as a call to embrace one’s identity at the intersections of their Mexican and Chicagoan identities.
CHAPTER 5 – TRAVELING UNPAVED ROADS & SETTING THE EXAMPLE

“I’m from Chicago where we ain’t got no role models, you better get used to the violence” - Kadoe (Lashe 2021)

Seeking Difference and Finding Your Way

Despite the oversaturation of underground artists on any chosen music streaming platform, the social pressures they face from their families and greater communities, and the financial pressures that these artists endure while working to realize success in the field, many artists remain motivated by one key vision: being different. The quality of being different – being unique and distinguishable from other underground artists and their greater community – emerged as a common theme throughout my interviews with Capo, Big A, and Sergio. These artists often drew on their passion for making music, or art more generally, and their unwavering commitment to their craft as something that set them apart, and the lack thereof of this dedication as a reasoning for why people fail in this field. Many of these artists analyzed and learned from the fates of other artists, those who stopped contributing to this music scene for one reason or another, which was ultimately used to fuel their sense of determination, figuring that they hadn’t given up because they wanted success more.

While in conversation with Capo about the connections between his Mexican identity and the music he makes, Capo made a striking connection between his Mexican identity and his goals of inspiring others to make music and ultimately contribute to this music scene. This desire to inspire those in his community is ultimately challenged by a fear of failure, particularly as someone with a great amount of potential. Capo said:

I see it identified in my Mexican identity because, like I said, this music is not just music.
I'm doing this for a whole purpose and I'm doing this for our people… I don't want to be
a could-have-been. I don't want to be someone that just could have like ‘Oh, you could have been this,’ I'm trying to inspire

At this point in our conversation Capo’s long-term motivations to inspire others through his own success shines through clearly; however, an even more important anxiety of potential failure gets emphasized as well. In stating that he doesn’t want to be a “could-have-been,” we can only infer that Capo has, perhaps even on several occasions, witnessed, heard about, or been proximate to other underground artists who had notable talent or skill in these art forms but for whom success, whatever that means to them, could not be realized and so they would halt or regress in the development of their personal crafts. That some artists could be of unusual promise and potential that ends up not getting fully realized is clearly a concern to Capo who seems to think of himself as someone with this great potential for whom the fear of not having that realized is a real threat. Additionally, Capo connects his Mexican identity to his music having purpose, specifically but not limited to that of inspiring others in his community. Drawing on this connection, and specifically the selflessness of being concerned with others’ motivations to realize their own goals, it seems that Capo’s sense of Mexican identity is rooted in a communal and collectivist vision of his community. While we don’t know exactly what Capo hopes to inspire others in his community to do, we can infer based on his goals to make music that evokes deeper emotional connection and personal introspection (as explored in Chapter 4) that he hopes to inspire members of his community to be more emotionally in tune with themselves and possibly with one another. Finally, Capo’s anxieties about not fulfilling what potential he believes himself to be having, and how this is connected to his sense of Mexican identity and devotion to his community, raises concerns about the goals that underground artists may be pursuing and what not realizing those goals may be doing to these artists’ emotional and mental health. This is not
to say that Capo is not capable of reaching his goals; rather, this concern is for those artists who, like Capo, hold themselves to such high standards and believe themselves to be having such high passion but who don’t achieve their goals, especially after having invested so much time, energy, and resources into the process.

While Capo believes himself to be different in the sense that he’s someone who has a lot of potential, and therefore is someone who has a lot to lose if his goals as an artists are not realized, Big A’s sense of difference stems from an experience more likened to someone having a hobby and/or a talent or skill that they’re working to improve on and perfect. Big A explained:

I see the music like it's just a way for somebody to express themselves and, like, for me, it is a way to express myself, and especially being like a Latino coming from Little Village like it's hard growing up. And I'm dealing with all the stuff that's around so like with the music, it was just the way for me to be different from everybody else that was trying to be in like gaming or trying to do other stuff. Music was just my way of being different.

Like Capo, Big A’s production of music, whether his own or that which he mixes for other artists, is intricately connected to his own sense of Mexican identity. Big A sees his music, and contributions to this music scene more generally, as connected to his identity as a long-term resident of Little Village which he connects to experiencing hardship and resilience to it (as explored in Chapter 4). An important difference between Big A and Capo’s responses is that Big A seemingly paints music as offering an avenue to distance oneself from the challenges of his environment. Big A sees music as a way of expressing himself and being unique through having an activity that brings him joy at a personal level which, importantly, is not being replicated by others in his community. Later in our conversation, Big A re-emphasizes this difference when he
says “um yeah I feel like I want to do music my whole life, like, I just want to be different from
everybody else.” By indicating that the difference between him and everyone else is that he
wants to do music his entire life, Big A is insinuating that this goal may not be a shared one
among other artists and that, perhaps, other artists’ aren’t as serious about exploring music as a
career path as he is.

Big A further expands on this aspect later in our conversation when he speaks on the
importance of being passionate about and driven to make music. Big A says: “The thing is that a
lot of people don't have passion for it. They just do it, and I mean, get passionate if you want to
really do it. Yes, I love this… every time I'm in the studio making a song or mixing, it's just a
feeling like this is what I want to do. This is what I'm supposed to be doing right now.” Big A
reveals an important underlying assumption here that many, if not most, artists aren’t actually
capable of sustaining their attempts at a career in music thus making Big A even more different
from his peers in the sense that he wants this success, or opportunity to make music for his entire
life, more than others. In this way, someone’s success or failure in the industry thus becomes a
reflection of an artists’ own will and commitment to succeeding in this field, as opposed to their
access to the networks, institutions, and other resources that make succeeding less difficult. To
Big A, artists can thrive in this field only if they remain dedicated to investing an immense
amount of time, energy, and other resources into making music. Furthermore, his assertion that
this is what he’s supposed to be doing in this very moment illustrates the degree to which he not
only finds genuine joy in doing what he does but also an the important characteristic of being
sure in oneself despite the major barriers that underground artists face while trying to realize
their goals.
As will be explored in the next section of this chapter, many Mexican artists also identify as being self-taught. While all of the artists interviewed for this project got involved in this music scene through a friend or acquaintance who served as sources of inspiration and as teachers that helped them get their start, they also indicate that many of these initial inspirationers have since stopped contributing to this music scene and have either moved on to producing art with other goals in mind, or stopped altogether. In this sense, it seems common that many underground artists deal with a loss of sorts – that of artists who they relied on for support, encouragement, mentorship, or maybe even looked up to. The importance of this relationship will be expanded upon elsewhere in this paper; however, the relevance of artists dropping their artistry or contributions to this music scene is especially relevant to the discussion on the role that passion is perceived to play in an artists’ success. Big A makes sense of these artists’ movement away from the music scene and draws on these observations for inspiration as they serve as examples to him of what he doesn’t want happening to him. Big A says:

A lot of the people that I used to make music with like, not gonna lie, they either got wrapped up in dumb stuff or just kind of drifted away from music. And I knew that I didn't want to be like that. That's really what drove me to be different. Like a lot of the people that I started with don't make music anymore. Like some of the people that I'm with right now, I met in most recent years like two years, three years.

Big A’s account of his changing relationships with other artists, or ex-artists, a part of this music scene illustrate a high level of turnover that both Capo and Sergio address in their interviews, albeit less directly. This level of turnover occurring in the networks that these artists create as members and contributors to this scene raises important concerns and questions about sustainability of being an artist in this scene. If artists often “drop out,” in a sense, from this
scene, what does that reflect about the opportunities and resources available to them? While Big 
A cites a lack of passion and drive for these shortcomings, we can expand from this critique of 
the individual a greater critique of what resources, mechanisms, and/or systems exist to help 
these artists sustain their passion, drive, and general motivations for pursuing careers in this 
particular field.

While admitedly vague, we can also draw on Big A’s point that many artists get “wrapped 
up in dumb stuff,” to help make sense of what other pressures, and maybe even distractions, 
artists a part of this music scene are contending with while in pursuit of their artistic career 
aspirations. While it’s unclear on what constitutes “dumb stuff,” we can infer from the low levels 
of education, high poverty rates, drug economies, and prevalence of gang and gun violence in 
Chicago’s Southwest side communities that many artists contributing to this music scene are likely 
coming from difficult economic circumstances. Thus, because artists sustain their careers in the 
scene using their own resources, it's perhaps not far off to imagine that the economic pressures 
they, and/or their families are experiencing, take precedence over the development of their 
artistic careers. While the topic of contending with the economic pressures of trying to 
self-sustain their artistry never made its way into my interviews, Big A, Capo, and Sergio all 
indicated that they were working jobs while trying to progress in their artistic careers.

Artists’ job schedules often posed a great challenge for participation in this project. Many 
artists missed our scheduled meetings, often citing their demanding work schedules in apologies 
they would send me via text and instagram direct message. Other artists would ask to reschedule 
their interviews due to their changing work schedules and, on several occasions, artists whose 
full time jobs was the art (e.g. audio engineers) would often prioritize sessions with other artists 
who would pay for their expertise and skills over the paid interview for this project which
notably paid them less than their hourly rates. While I doubt that Big A meant one’s commitment to their main jobs as “dumb stuff” that draws them away from developing their art careers, I would add that many artists – including some of the one’s interviewed for this project – rely on other, often illegal, informal economies for their income, such as: selling marijuana and/or other substances or reselling concert tickets. Participation in these economies, which may sometimes include active involvement in street gang organizations, which put artists at risk to legal repercussions if discovered, is what I believe Big A was alluding to based on his descriptions of his community.

Finally, Sergio’s experience illuminates this point of contention for artists in this underground music scene who may struggle to sustain their passion and drive for the art amid the pressures of working more common occupations. In Sergio’s experience, he finds that the pressure to take on a more common, less volatile and risky, occupation has been reinforced most by his parents. While Sergio notes that his family is generally very supportive of his pursuit of videography, they’ve historically questioned the viability of this chosen profession and have suggested that he take on more economically rewarding jobs. Sergio notes the following about this pressure he’s received from his parents, and father more specifically, and how it’s tied to his identity as a Latino man:

You know the way he [Sergio’s father] grew up and everything it's like there’s a mentality. He’ll kind of talk to me respectfully like: ‘you really think you're gonna be able to make money from this?’, or like ‘what are you trying to do like maybe just do it as a side hobby’ but i've always known this is what I want to do full time… I'm far from where I want to be, but I feel like I'm getting there and I'm seeing a lot of people that are doing the same thing, you know? So I just always had that like Latino in me, and
sometimes I'm like ‘what am I doing?’ Like, I'm shooting videos? I'm a goofy. Then I
snap out of it. Like this is me branching off from that Latino route of like, you know,
“you gotta work with your hands, be a man,” you know?

Sergio’s experience dealing with these pressures to take on more traditional “Latino” jobs –
which he associates with manual labor – remains a thorn for Sergio even when he’s directly
engaged in his art as a videographer. The pressures he faces from his parents suggest that they
treat his art more like a hobby than an actual profession and this ends up manifesting itself in
self-doubts – evident by his self-ascribed “goofy” title – even while he’s in the field. It’s
important to note that “goofy” in Chicago lingo can take many meanings but it’s generally a
negative characteristic and usually used to describe people as naive and/or not worthy of being
taken seriously. An important aspect highlighted in Sergio’s account here is the importance of
other artists in this music scene. To Sergio, other artists serve as sources of inspiration and
encouragement – in a way, Sergio feels affirmed that even if he’s taken a leap of faith to pursue a
profession that isn’t yet as economically rewarding or culturally supported as other professions,
at least he’s not taking this leap of faith alone. Additionally, Sergio highlights that in taking this
leap of faith he’s “branching off” from a more traditional “Latino route,” in this way
emphasizing how his art differentiates him from other members of his community. This
differentiation is not unlike that which we’ve seen Capo and Big A describe. Furthermore, Sergio
goes on to explore this difference and, like Capo, connects his perceived difference to a goal of
inspiring others in his community to pursue their artistic interests.

I’m trying to make my own route and I’m seeing other people in the city doing a similar
thing. It’s really amazing. That's what kind of opened my eyes. Like, you know, there
isn't only one route: there’s a different route, there's more than just one. I think, for me,
that's one of the best things I want to show with my videos and directing, editing, and eventually hosting concerts. I want to show that there's more than one route in life to whatever it is you do, even when you are raised Latino, you know? They just kind of teach you like ‘oh you gotta work hard’ and just ‘don't try to do anything that nobody has done yet,’ you know? I think that's one of the biggest things for me.

Sergio lays out his feelings about art as an alternative path to more common occupations taken up by members of his Latinx community and despite his own reservations resulting from his families expectations and concerns, it’s clear that he wants to inspire others in his community to take those leaps of faith, to follow the road less traveled. Additionally, Sergio adds here a challenge against what feels safer and more comfortable. Sergio seemingly critiques the cultural constraints imposed on him, and other young Latinxs, surrounding occupational opportunities when he says that as a Latino, you’re taught to work hard and not stray away from what’s deemed normal – in this case we know to be manual labor. Through pursuing videography, and encouraging others to pursue their artistic interests, Sergio is pushing beyond the bounds of what’s expected and deemed acceptable in his community. Ultimately, we can understand this call to stray from safer occupational options as Sergio not only calling out the limitations of the parameters set by his own community but, more importantly, advocating for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of what occupational opportunities members of the Mexican diaspora should be allowed to take up. As will be explored in the next chapter, despite Sergio’s calls to action he still finds himself concealing his true intentions about a future career in this music scene from his family but is slowly pushing the aforementioned cultural boundaries enforced by his community within his family, with promising results.
Loss of Mentors and Lack of Idols

Although the topic of mentors and idols, the loss and lack of them, is briefly brought up in the first section of this chapter, this theme is so prevalent throughout the interviews I conducted that it’s a topic that deserves a section of its own. As I raised earlier, Big A touches on this topic by explaining how many of the artists he was first working with have gotten drawn away from making music because they get “wrapped up in dumb stuff” which meant that, in Big A’s own words: “a lot of the people that I started with don't make music anymore.” Sergio describes a similar relationship with the artists that inspired him to get his start in the music scene and explains, pausing in the midst of describing to me how his first camera was gifted to him by sister, that “there were other people out here [in his area] shooting videos that really inspired me, some of them don't even do it anymore which is the crazy part.” Yet again there is a theme of loss which re-emerges in Sergio’s early days as a videographer and while Sergio, like Big A, doesn’t dive into the reasons why artists stop producing there is an element of shock in Sergio’s realization which I understood as emphasizing an emotional reaction to the fact that many of his initial inspirers have backed away from their art, leading Sergio to become a “survivor” of sorts.

Capo describes a similar experience with a friend who helped him get his start, following an interest in poetry, in the fifth grade:

One day I just saw my friend just rapping. I was like ‘wait bro can you teach me this?’

Like ‘I always wanted to learn this.’ And like after that he taught me everything to get me started… After that it became like, I had to work my way up to get to the level where I'm at now.
When I questioned Capo about his relationship with his friend, he says “I haven't really talked to him” but notes that he’s just “one phone call away.” Although it’s unclear on whether Capo’s friend still raps, the distance between Capo and his friend, and initial inspirer, illustrates a similar mentor-mentee relationship that’s no longer functional which Big A and Sergio also describe. Again, the turnover occurring in these peer to peer networks remains a concern and illustrates how lonely the journey of an underground artist can be.

The challenges of being supported with an ever changing peer to peer support network seems evident to Capo who reveals later in our interview that he aspires to be a manager in the music industry so he can find upcoming underground artists and help develop their careers. Capo says:

I've always wanted to stick by music bro… If the plan works, you know, I also want to be a manager myself and, you know, find talented artists, like myself, that are almost unheard of. It’s just like, there's so much talent bro you just have to look for it. And we're not just speaking music – like I'm talking about overall. Like, there's kids that could be like the best doctors in the world, the best everything, you just got to find them.”

To Capo, it’s clear that there are many talented underground artists that are, simply put, just not getting the attention or support they deserve. Aspiring to be in a managerial role for talented artists, as a self-identified talented artist himself, implies a level of mentorship that Capo hopes to engage these upcoming artists with that they might not otherwise get.

Similar to the theme of a loss of mentors, these artists also generally indicate that there has been, until recently, a lack of idols for whom they could look up to or identify with. When asked about who influences and inspires their contributions to Chicago's Mexican underground rap scene, Capo and Big A named groups and artists from the Southwest like Cypress Hill, South
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Park Mexican (SPM), and OhGeesy as being some of the Mexican rap artists they’ve looked up to. Cypress Hill and SPM were most active in the late 1980s and 1990s and OhGeesy is a current rising star from Los Angeles who usually, if not always, raps over signature West Coast sounds. Capo considers SPM to be a “legend” and specifically notes that “it's just so amazing to see a Mexican because, like I said, it's not too many of them. It's just like, to see one, to see what they actually do is just like wow.” Clearly, Mexican representation in hip hop and rap culture is sought and highly valued by Mexican artists hailing from other parts of the country. Cypress Hill, SPM, and OhGeesy have all made major contributions to the rap genre; however, these artists are clearly not representative (understandably so) of Chicago’s Mexican communities, culture, or sounds therefore leaving a gap of representation in hip hop and rap for underground rap artists from Chicago’s Mexican community. Although artists from this community have risen to fame in the past few years, with artists like King Ace and L’A Tone having music videos with hundreds of thousands of views and some reaching over a million, these artists have yet to hit the mainstream or impact the genre and culture to the same degree as other Mexican talents like OhGeesy. Additionally, the critiques that Capo, Big A, and Sergio have of drill music’s popularity and its limited perspective which over-represents gang and gun violence in their community, makes clear that they’re still searching for artists who can more accurately speak to the conditions and experiences they can relate to and resonate with. Recently one local underground artist has emerged as that voice: Kadoe.

Kadoe, a rapper from Little Village who self-identifies as “a heavy activist on latino culture” (Kadoe, n.d.) was named in all of my interviews as a talent to look out for – the next to blow up from Chicago’s Mexican community. Although Kadoe has many songs that might be characterized as gangsta or drill rap, such as “Bs up,” “Off Tha Top,” “Where I Grew Up,” and
“24,” Capo, Big A, and Sergio speak highly of Kadoe, often characterizing him as wise, talented, and thoughtful. At one point in my interview Capo says:

Kadoe is just like, Kadoe’s literally one of the most talented folks I ever met like ever, i’m talking about ever! And you know I met a lot of talented people and it's just like, you know, he reminds me of a more modern Tupac, like live in flesh it's like. I'm talking about, I'm a big fan of Tupac! I fucking love Tupac’s music and you know how people say ‘Oh this person's the next Tupac?’ I be getting offended but it's like with Kadoe, I could really hear him. I'm like wow man, like, I can really see this man be like the next big thing you know what I’m saying?... if you listen to a lot of his lyrics it's really meaningful shit. And yeah there’s songs where he’s talking about drilling and shit, cause that's what people like, but if it was up to Kadoe, he’d be talking about the community 24/7…. he’s a really wise guy, a genuine ass person, he really just has it all.

Big A shares a similar reflection on Kadoe when I ask him who he sees as blowing up next in the music scene, who he notes he’s had a chance to work with:

I want to say that I see my boy Kadoe blowing up soon, like, i’m not gonna lie. From the moment that I met him to now he’s still one of my favorite artists. Like, before I met Kadoe I was a fan of him. Like I really seen his music and he’s from Little Village too so me seeing his music i’m like: ‘wow this is somebody from my neighborhood,’ you know what I mean? He was just different from everybody else – he was telling stories."

Finally, Sergio speaks about Kadoe from having been able to observe the shooting of the music video to Kadoe’s recently released “Free Us:”

“When I hear Kadoe’s music, he’s kinda like telling a story about how he came up, how he was raised, what he’s gone through and trying to put it into your eyes… a couple of
weeks ago I was at this Kadoe shoot [music video shoot] and it was about lives taken through violence… the song really had meaning, you know what I mean? It's not just rapping about the hottest new thing, you know, it has real meaning, real lyrics.”

Clearly, Kadoe is contributing to Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene in significant ways. Capo, Big A, and Sergio collectively celebrate Kadoe for his story-telling abilities and for his ways of baking meaning into the lyrics of his music. At the time of these interviews I hadn't listened to much of Kadoe’s music; however, I find now that he generally discusses somewhat familiar topics of gang violence, gun violence, police brutality, and the criminal justice system and does so through a discography of music which can sometimes be categorized as drill rap and, other times, categorized as backpacker rap due to its slower pace and socially conscious lyrics. While Kadoe has yet to hit the mainstream, and is lesser known than some other Mexican rappers from Chicago’s Southwest side, he seems to be well supported by underground artists who are cheering him on and eagerly awaiting for the moment that he rises to fame. Kadoe is seemingly the representation that these underground artists are searching for.

Navigating An Unsupportive Terrain

In addition to the challenges that underground artists experience when it comes to sustaining their motivations for making a career out of their involvement in this scene, in an environment where success stories are few and far between, these artists must face a generally unsupportive terrain across the various communities they’re a part of. This unsupportive terrain is propagated by almost every dimension of these artists’ communities and is illustrated through cultures that: discourage collaboration amongst artists, promote competition and individual achievement, and undervalue artistic labor altogether. In the face of this challenge, which leaves
artists virtually unsupported by most in their communities, artists dig deep to sustain their motivation.

At the level of the underground music scene, artists a part of this community find themselves in a highly individualized culture that is rarely conducive to collaboration. Although many of the artists interviewed for this project have collaborated with other artists before, and presently work with teams of artists, this level of collaboration stands in contrast to an environment that generally discourages artists from working with one another. Different gang and set affiliations can keep artists from working with one another but these divisions extend beyond gang members and is present among artists who aren’t affiliated. Capo most directly addresses this dynamic in his interview when he speaks to how separated and disconnected this music scene is:

I’d like to see more Mexicans support more Mexicans and it’s sad because, you know, you see the whole industry as of right now and it's like everyone's separated. Like what happens if all of us start making music together.? You know, instead of being separated because of gang culture this and that, and it's just like, it could be something bigger but it just doesn't happen… And that's going to be the biggest downfall, you know, because like I'm telling you man, if you hear like Lil Durk [mainstream Black artist from Chicago’s Southside] and these other rappers, like they all make music together. And it's like you know we [Mexican artists] can't get this person in the studio with this guy because of this [presumably gang affiliations] and it’s just sad to see… Imagine if like Smiles was to make a song with L’A Tone? Or if King Ace was to make a song with him? Like you know, it’s things like that. Like it's the little things like that that can make the difference
and it's just like sad that it’s never going to happen. Well I hope it comes to happen, I won't say it's never going to happen.

Capo’s perspective on the divisions between artists in this scene illustrate that there is a loss to these divisions of great magnitude. Capo speaks to gang culture as being a reason for these divisions among Mexican artists and notes that Black artists – such as Lil Durk who in late March of 2022 charted as No. 1 on the Billboard Artist 100 chart – work with other Black artists regardless of their different gang and set affiliations. Whether Black artists of different gang affiliations work with one another more than (non-Black) Mexican artists do should be further explored as this perception has been reflected in the experiences of other Mexican artists from Chicago. Nonetheless, Capo importantly cites this lack of collaboration between Mexican artists in this scene as the cause of the “biggest downfall,” which we can only presume to refer to the future and success of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene. Finally, Capo imagines a future in which L’A Tone, King Ace, and Smile – some of the most popular artists from Chicago’s underground drill and gangsta rap music scenes – set aside their differences to collaborate on projects, suggesting that these collaborations alone “can make the difference” in what we, again, presume to be the success of this music scene. Unfortunately, the tensions between these relatively successful and popular artists is well documented, hence Capo’s analysis that such collaborations are unlikely.

In an August 2019 interview with King Ace, a Mexican drill artist and member of the 30th and Sawyer set of the Latin Kings gang in Little Village, host 16ShotEm Visualz asks King Ace if Latinx artists from different gangs could ever come together to make music in the same way that Black artists from different gangs in Chicago sometimes do (16ShotemVisualz 2019). King Ace is quick in his response: “hell nah, hell nah. Shit I don’t know, hell nah. Money talks,
we’d probably get into it after that mother fucker. Finesse the opps [opposition] out their money, fuck it” implying that this level of cross collaboration is not possible within the social constraints, or code of the street, that governs Chicago’s Latinx gangs (16ShotemVisualz 2019).

These gang-centered divisions affect even those who aren’t members of street gangs – as is made apparent by L’A Tone’s past relationships with Mexican artists Jr007 and Two Timez. L’A Tone and Jr007’s hit songs “Nightmare” was put together without prior expressed consent by either artists but both artists approved of the song and even came together to shoot a music video for it which did over 404,000 views on Youtube, one of both artists’ most popular songs to this day. After the release of the song it was revealed that neither artist was particularly excited to work with the other and their relationship ended just as quickly as it had begun. While L’A Tone is not in a gang, his close friends are known members of one who claim 64th street and Troy in the Chicago Lawn neighborhood on Chicago’s Southwest Side. Jr007 is a known member of the Bankroll/TMB gang or set on Chicago’s Northwest Side – the geographical distance between both artists alone suggesting there was likely never any bad blood between both artists or the gangs they’re affiliated with or proximate to. Since “Nightmare” dropped, both artists have generally opted to work almost exclusively with artists from their own crews and sets.

In an interview with Two Timez, a known member of the Two Six gang whose territory on 63rd street borders that of L’A Tone’s closest friends, he reveals that L’A Tone and him were best friends in middle school and had never had issue with one another (DJAYFILMS 2020). This changed when L’A Tone’s friends reportedly began a conflict with Two Timez’ friends, ultimately resulting in a hostile relationship between the two artists after L’A Tone allegedly refused to work with Two Timez. This tension took to a more public stage when Two Timez, in response, disses L’A Tone in the beginning of his song titled “Till This Day” when he says “fuck
L’A Tone bitch” and calls him a “bitch ass n****” (STG Productions 2019). In the comment section of the aforementioned interview with Two Timez, L’A Tone left a comment in January 2022 that reads “aint no beef n**** ❌ [these emojis mean “no cap,” slang for “I’m not lying”] you a fan” (DJAYFILMS 2020). L’A Tone’s relationships with Jr007 and Two Timez illustrate King Ace’s assertion that Latinx artists affiliated with gangs, even nonmembers, will not work with one another – undoubtedly leaving many up-and-coming artists with relatively little opportunity to collaborate with and/or learn from other artists, expand their networks, or get much needed exposure and introduction to other, likely similar, fan bases.

Outside of the community of artists that make up Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene, these artists receive little to no support from the much bigger Mexican communities they come from. This lack of support is perceived, by Capo and Big A, as stemming from two different sources: a reluctance to give Mexican rap music a chance and a general disdain that Mexicans are perceived to have for one another. When asked how Chicago’s Mexican community generally receives Mexican rap, Capo says:

Okay now that part’s a little tricky because sometimes I feel like the Mexican Community, they see Mexican rap as too, you know, like they think oh ‘this is like gangster music… we’re not gonna listen… we don’t like that’ and sometimes they can be just so closed minded. And, you know, I'm not speaking on behalf of everyone, you know, I'm just saying that I know there's a whole lot of people who are like ‘this is not for me’ and I respect that, you know, but I feel like Mexicans could have more support on Mexicans… I’d like to see, Mexicans gotta support more Mexicans. I think they don't give it [hip-hop/rap music] a chance sometimes.
Capo’s analysis suggests that, generally speaking, Mexicans overly associate Mexican rap music with gangs and/or gang culture thus marking it as undeserving of their time and attention. Capo says Mexicans can sometimes be “closed minded” and while he accepts that some people might, simply, just not like the genre he expresses a disappointment that Mexicans don’t support one another for the sake of supporting one another. Capo is ultimately arguing that members of his Mexican community just don’t give the subgenre an opportunity, suggesting that if they did there would probably be more support for the subgenre and this music scene.

Big A’s perspective is levels more critical that Capo’s as he ultimately argues that Mexicans lack of support is an inherent quality of Chicago’s Mexican community:

I don't want to be bogus but Mexicans kind of hate on each other. Like it's kinda a thing and like I don't know why. Like, if a Mexican sees another Mexican winning they’re not gonna be like ‘congratulations,’ you know what I mean? Like a lot of other races, you see them, they'll put up their people and be like: ‘good stuff.’ And our race is kind of weird. Sometimes they'll be like “go do your thing,” but other times they just start hating cause you’re doing better… Other Mexicans will support you but kinda still be shady, it’s not the same… Mexicans from Chicago have that ‘Chicago mentality–’ like everybody's for themselves, everybody's on their own. And in places like in Cali and in Texas, Mexicans over there are more proud to be Mexican, you know what I mean? They’re more about like the ‘raza’ and being together. That’s why the scenes are different over there than in Chicago…

Big A perceives Mexicans’ lack of support for one another to be a uniquely Mexican Chicago dynamic, apparent in his comparison to Mexican communities in California and Texas which he perceives to be more unified around a prideful Mexican nationalism and heritage. Big A
emphasizes an individualistic quality of Chicago’s Mexican community and interestingly positions Mexicans as seemingly always in competition with one another, even noting that what may look like support and praise for one another may not always be genuine. Big A’s framing of Chicago’s Mexican community mirrors that of Capo’s in the sense that they both believe that members of this community lack genuine support for one another and a desire to see each other succeed.

As Big A demonstrates, artists of this scene are also “othered” by members and non-members of their Mexican community alike through a process of racializing rap as an art form:

Mexicans will see rap and will be like ‘oh you’re trying to be African American, you’re trying to act African American’ and Mexicans are like ‘you’re trying to be like them’ but then African Americans will see that and be like ‘you’re too Mexican to rap’ so it’s like you’re stuck in the middle and I don’t know.

This account brings to light an important discussion over how Mexican artists see themselves relative to their engagement with what’s perceived to be a predominantly, if not solely, Black art form. Rapping becomes a means, for a Mexican artist’s Mexican community, to trivialize someone’s “Mexican-ness” nevermind the existence of Black Mexicans. Rap as an art form, by Big A’s account, is clearly demarcated for Black people, by both Mexican and Black communities, thus creating a liminal space that Mexican rappers are forced to exist in – creating yet another borderlands for members of the Mexican diaspora to traverse. Capo speaks to a similar dynamic in his interview when describing the goals of the informal artist collective he’s a part of: “we're trying to expand the Latinos because I feel like, you know, we're just so underrated and I feel like rap shouldn't just be all Black community, you know, it could be all
around you know? Like, it's music, it's just something we love doing. I feel like we can really do it.” Capo argues here for the inclusion of Latinxs in the field of rap music, laying claims to this art form and drawing on Latinxs artists’ quality and talent as evidence to justify why Latinxs are worthy of inclusion, and perhaps even some ownership, over this art form. This theme of Black ownership of rap as an art form, and (non-Black) Mexicans’ engagement with it, remains relatively unexplored in my interviews and should be further explored in future studies as it raises important questions about race, ownership, and authenticity in the context of hip hop and rap.

To be fair, where artists don’t feel generally supported by other artists or the Mexican communities they come from, they receive some support by their friends and family. Though, it’s important to note that even this support is not without its limitations. When asked how Capo’s family and friends receive his music he says “my friends love it. My friends and my family they’re probably my number one supporters, you know, as of right now and it's just like, you know, it's just amazing to see my people love my music.” Here, Capo demonstrates both that he has a support network and that it plays a presumably important role in sustaining his motivation to pursue his art.

Although Big A and Sergio describe a similar level of support from their families, this support is often paired with questions about the viability of their artistic careers. Big A importantly connects these questions to his Mexican identity when he says:

my family supports me overall, but like you know, they’re still Mexican so they'll tell me “get a normal job,” you know I mean? But there's something that… like in the long run, like it's gonna work out and, I don't know, I just have a feeling.
The desire that Big A’s family has for him to pursue a “normal” job, juxtaposed with Big A’s “feeling” that his commitment to being a rapper and audio engineer will “work out,” echoes what I’ve explored earlier in this chapter in the context of a “leap of faith” which ultimately is what sets Sergio apart from others in his community. Additionally, the association that Big A makes between the pursuit of a normal job and his parents being Mexican is particularly interesting as it, again, reifies the relationship that Sergio describes between his families Mexican identity and more common employment opportunities for Latinxs in his area. Sergio and Big A’s perspectives on “normal” occupations and Mexican identity reveal a shared observation by these artists that to be Mexican is to not disrupt the norms – to not branch off the well beaten path.

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, but further explored here, Sergio’s parents, like Big A’s, also want him to pursue a “normal” job. This is evident in the following account of Sergio’s experience when he describes how his parents routinely talk to him about his future and how he’s resorted to holding what may seem like a more stable job as an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) technician for his parent’s sake:

Once I dropped out of school I was like ‘all right,’ I know I can't just focus on the videos because you know I'd probably get shit from my family or whatever. So I had always heard of HVAC and one of my very good friends was doing it so I was like alright i'm going to do that. I'm going to tell my family that’s what I'm going to do, but to me it was really my backup, you know? To them, it was my main thing…. Because of the way my parents were like, I really didn't show them any work for like two years, until recently. I was just like ‘all right,’ whenever they would give me the talks. They would talk to me and be like ‘oh, you know, what do you want to do?’ like “are you sure you want to do this?”
Before taking on videography, Sergio was inclined to become an HVAC technician to help avoid being accosted by his family for investing his time, energy, and resources into his artistry. It’s this worry that also ultimately keeps Sergio from showing off his artwork to his family for two years, illustrating the degree to which Sergios feels a pressure to pursue more traditional occupations over his artistry. It’s important to note that while Sergio suggests his parents’ line of questioning isn’t directly addressing or even discouraging his work as a videographer, their natures seek to cast some doubt over the viability of such a career and Sergio’s intent to pursue it.

To be clear, Sergio seems always to be left in charge of his own destiny; however, it’s shaped by his parents’ passive concern or disapproval.

Finally, with the relatively limited support that underground artists receive from other artists, their families, and their larger Mexican communities, these artists are often left in a position where the labor of their artistry is undervalued and almost completely fueled by their own passion. When asked about his intended audience, Big A spoke at length about creating music for himself and about the importance of feeling prideful in the quality of your art: “If you're going to make music, I feel like you have to make music you want to listen to… If you don't believe in your music, who will?” This point on believing in what you produce is especially powerful as it highlights individual resilience in the face of the discouragement and doubt that these artists seemingly often have to endure. In the face of this doubt, particularly from some members of his family, Capo reflects on his consistent passion despite not being taken seriously: “They think it's like a game when in reality I put blood, sweat, and tears into this. It’s like they treat this like a monopoly game or something, you know? I’m not, I don’t do this for fun. I really love to do this, this is what I want to be.” Capo’s emphasis on the time, energy, and effort he pours into perfecting his craft, and the love that drives this heavy investment, highlights the
conviction he holds, again, despite the doubt and discouragement from the different dimensions of his community. Sergio shares a similar conviction to Capo, sharing that “My work is my life, you know? Like, I love this shit. Like, you know, I’d die doing this stuff, like, I will do this until I literally pass away,” again, illustrating the degree to which artists need to believe or be convinced of their passion amid the often unsupportive terrain they have to traverse.
CHAPTER 6 – HOPEFUL FUTURES

Creating Supportive Environments

Although it’s clear that artists a part of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap scene face immense challenges in the pursuit of a successful career with their respective artistic talents, these artists demonstrate that the field, and thus the possibility for success, is ever-widening. Members of this music scene are increasingly finding opportunities, and spaces, where important resources for upcoming artists – such as peer to peer networks – are being actively formed and developed. Out of my interviews emerged one recurring topic which speaks to the promising future of this music scene: building a supportive environment.

Building a supportive environment, as a theme, is represented in both artists’ expressed encouragement and support for one another but also in the kinds of spaces and organizations that these artists are forming and increasingly relying on. These networks and spaces which artists can depend on for various kinds of support are especially important as they contrast artists’ experiences with a general lack of support from other artists, their families, and the larger Mexican community. Big A speaks to these networks and their importance when he described to me how he came to find his current team of artists through networking and the power he sees radiating off their collective energy:

We all met through mutual friends. Just knowing each other ‘Oh, he makes music, oh let's make a song,’ you know I mean? And we really came together and just made our own team and just tried to make music together – trying to break through together, because nothing is stronger than a team, you know? A team going full force, like, nothing can stop it… Like there's a feeling that everybody around us has. Everybody has that drive and passion and yeah there's like this feeling that we could do this.
The collective of artist Big A is a part of includes various rappers, audio engineers, videographers, and other artists – all of whom seem to share Big A’s identities as young latino man coming from Chicago’s Southwest side. As told by Big A, this collective of artists, many of which have become heavily associated with the House on Knox studio, was formed through a process where artists who were at least aware of one another, and perhaps had mutual relationships, reached out to one another. This network-building seems to be built around two important qualities: that everyone on the team be an artist and that they all be similarly driven to succeed as an artist. Big A emphasizes the benefits of having a team, demonstrating an individual awareness surrounding the importance of having a team despite the cultural norms of this scene being seemingly more individualistic. In other words, Big A’s account may be showing us that while artists desire to be a part of teams and artist collectives, given their obvious benefits to sustaining an artists’ motivations, the cultural norms of this scene – which includes a degree of animosity between one another for seemingly no apparent reason, as an innate Chicago quality, and which can generally be discouraging of collaboration – keep many artists from joining such groups. Nonetheless, Big A has found his team and we might see this collective, composed of artists who want to “break through together,” as a positive indication for future community-building opportunities and artistic collaboration within this music scene.

To my surprise, Capo finds himself in a similar relationship with the informal collective of artists Big A considers himself to be a part of. Capo’s perspective on this artist collective: “we have a big ol team just full of Latino, Mexican, artists and we’re all just trying to bring something different to the table and, like, just basically trying to inspire and come up and build an empire.” Like Big A, Capo finds that this team of artists are deadset on making a name for themselves and flourishing in the industry together, evident by Capo’s description of their goal
being to “come up and build an empire.” Additionally, we see here the re-emergence of the theme of difference – a desire to set oneself apart from other artists and/or the greater Mexican community they come from – which I explored at great length in Chapter 5. What’s most interesting about Capo characterizing the team’s goals as “to bring something different to the table,” is that it emphasizes this goal of seeking difference in a collective sense, as opposed to an individual one, and presumably in relation to some greater community that these artists are a part of. While we can’t know for sure what community this “table” is meant to symbolize, we can speculate that Capo most likely meant Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop scene, larger Chicago underground hip hop scene or the, even larger, underground hip hop movement. The point being that Capo understands the sounds, and artistry more generally, of his team to be unique in some way and both worthy of and destined for greater success and recognition. As in Big A’s account, Capo’s characterization of this team and the supportive and encouraging environment they’ve produced for artists frames the future of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene in an overwhelmingly positive light.

While Sergio does not formally belong to an artists collective or team of the same magnitude as Big A and Capo, he indicates a desire to build or contribute to the development of such a team in the near future. Sergio says:

Eventually as I continue to grow I want to be able to bring… like I see artists in my area that are super talented that I’m genuinely, i’m like bro like just, like anybody who's doubting them, like, just wait till they pop off, like, I see it, you know what I mean?... As I continue to grow, I want to bring others up. There's a saying that goes ‘a candle loses nothing by lighting another’ so it's like…. If I'm up, I want to be able to bring somebody else up that I believe in.
What’s clear by Sergio’s orientation to other artists and the possibility of collaboration is that he encourages it and intends on supporting other artists. In particular, Sergio seeks to promote the talent of artists in his area whose works are presumably undervalued. Sergio clearly feels a connection and devotion to such artists, as an up-and-coming artist himself, and uses this beautiful analogy about lighting candles to exemplify that the animosity present between artists in the scene is unnecessary. The message of the analogy being that artists only stand to benefit from supporting and collaborating with one another – which, again, contrasts the individualistic and hostile scene culture described by these artists.

It seems that the peer to peer networking unfolding across this music scene shares a positive correlation with the development of space for these artists to be growing in. It’s unclear, in this case, whether spaces influence the development of networks, if networks influence the development of spaces, or if both networks and spaces develop coincidently; however, it’s clear that both are serving this scene and its community in significant ways. The House on Knox studio, located in Chicago’s West Lawn neighborhood on the city’s Southwest side, serves as one such space for artists. Big A, an audio engineer working at the studio, described the important function of the House on Knox during his interview:

Especially like our Mexican artists like we have a studio located over here in Westlawn and like a lot of Mexican artists come here to just record with us because they know that we care more about our people and our communities and, like, people just love to see it. Like, they know that this spot right here is for our people to come and make music and it's just for us, like our own spot, you know what I mean?

The point I would like to highlight here is Big A’s emphasis on caring for one’s own community. In his eyes, this care radiates in a way that attracts Mexican artists and keeps them coming to this
studio in particular, as opposed to going elsewhere. There is a comparison that Big A continuously raises in this excerpt, and while it’s unclear whether the point of reference is just other artist-led music studios and “creative clubs” or longer-established professional studios in the city, there’s a level of personalized attention and care towards Mexican artists that Big A understands this studio and its staff to be possessing that can’t be easily found elsewhere. Like developing peer to peer networks, House on Knox is a prime example of what kinds of spaces are developing which serve to provide more supportive and encouraging environments, and thus conditions, for artists to thrive in. That this space, and coinciding networks, are initiated by members of this scene – as opposed to city-led, NGO/CBO-led, or industry-led projects – is especially important to note. In this sense, we see that House on Knox emerges as a “by the community, for the community” kind of space and organization of artists.

Finally, the spatialization of such resources like House on Knox, and its implications on the underground movement in Chicago’s Mexican community is also worthy of discussion. Big A, who has connections with spaces in this scene as an audio engineer in ways that Capo and Sergio may not, seemingly connects the necessity of spaces like House on Knox to meeting a need unique to the city’s Mexican community:

This is its own scene in itself. Like there’s a lot of Mexicans making music, a lot of Mexican producers coming together right now, like a lot of Mexican cameramen. It’s just a very strong force coming right now of just a lot of Mexicans just trying to make music, you know what I mean? And we’re not even trying to separate ourselves but I feel like that’s just what we had to do. Just the way the city is, because the way the city is very segregated itself. So like just us we had to find our own way. And for us to come together to find our own way, that's the only way that we can do it.
That Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene is perceivably separate from other underground scenes in the city is, by Big A’s account, reflective of Chicago’s notoriously high degree of racial segregation. Big A’s assertion that Mexican artists “had to find our own way” reflects a few important possible conclusions about this scene: that this underground music scene finds itself isolated from resources that underground artists in other parts of the city, and presumably other economically or racial/ethnically homogenous communities, have access to; that other studios and “creative clubs,” and presumably those that aren’t initiated or led by members of Chicago’s underground music scene already, aren’t as welcoming to Mexican artists; and/or that the Mexican underground hip-hop scene just finds itself in a moment of immense growth and development. Either way, it’s clear by Big A’s account that the city’s base of underground Mexican artists was being severely or relatively un-or under-served in some way. Spaces like House on Knox, and teams that artists like Big A and Capo consider themselves to be a part of, are thus meeting that need – filling some void and offering support in ways that members of this scene haven’t been able to experience for various reasons, including but not limited to the city’s residential segregation.
CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Limits to Creative Liberties & Demanding Recognition

These artists’ narratives of their communities being sites of adversity, hardship, and violence – both in their interviews and in the lyrics of their music – are not uncommon among Mexican rappers. McFarland (2008) finds that “the socialization of young urban Chicanas/os within a larger culture of violence in the United States has led to representations of violence in a significant proportion of Chicano rap expressions” (p. 94). Whether violence in one’s community is under or over emphasized is not the focus of my study or McFarland’s work, rather that Mexican, or Chicanas/os, are situated in a culture where representations of violence are prevalent thus attributing symbolic value to this violence. These representations of violent communities then get reproduced in the works of Mexican rappers, regardless of their lived experience or personal connections to this kind of adversity and hardship.

Violent narratives thus makes their way into these rappers’ works, sometimes as a reflection of their lived experiences, and many times as a reflection of what’s deemed valuable and circulated by commercial and corporate entities (e.g. recording labels and radio stations) who “prefer to sell violent and consumerist images to our youth rather than images that challenge the imperialist hypermasculinity of U.S. life and culture” (McFarland 2008, p. 100). These violent representations have become so widespread, accepted, and valued in hip-hop/rap that they’ve led “youth to consider violence as fashionable and easy” and, in turn, leave Mexican rappers with little option but to also engage in the reproduction of such representations as a means for achieving success in this field (McFarland 2008, p. 100). In the same way that Capo and Big A can critique the dominance of drill music’s violent representations and still create music that reinforces its dominance, McFarland makes sense of this when he writes that “these
rappers are socialized in our violent culture… and they recognize that many young Chicanas/os are also” (Mcfarland 2008, p. 102).

Additionally, we can take the perpetuation of these violent narratives of one’s own community to be one way that artists practice what Harkness (2012) calls “situational authenticity.” Harkness’ framework can help us understand how artists engage in a process of using violence in their work symbolically as a vehicle to gain social capital which can attribute some level of authenticity, “hardness” or “realness” to their public persona, scoring points with other artists and fans of this music scene alike.

Martinez-Morrison (2014) finds this same relationship in her ethnographic field work in the Bay Area’s underground Black and Latinx “hyphy” hip-hop/rap microscene. Here, artists use “hardcore” to “describe a realm of hip-hop culture rooted in ‘the ‘hood,’” which “connotes overlapping meanings” (p. 24) The first of these meanings, as described by Martinez-Morrison, being “the experience of hardship, harsh or “hard” realities, difficult life experiences, economic privations and obstacles –” which is exemplified in Chicago by Mexican artists’ descriptions of adversity and hardship in their neighborhoods (Martinez-Morrison 2014, p. 24). What “hardcore” characteristic artists in the Bay Area are using in their “own authenticating system organized primarily around one’s experience in “the ‘hood” and “the streets,” is thus also found in Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene (Martinez-Morrison 2014, p. 14). We see then that artists from urban low-income Black and brown communities are often wrapped into a process of having to prove their “hood” or “street” identities. Again, these artists’ worth, value, and popularity amongst other artists and their fans, can be contingent upon how they demonstrate authenticity in their proximity to hardship and violence in their communities. Capo, Big A, and Sergio largely critique the use of these violent representations in drill music, and rap
more generally. By their accounts, it’s clear that many artists a part of this music scene are fed up with the violent representations that have become so popular and valued in this music scene and would prefer to make music that touches you, that pulls at the heartstrings, or in the words of Capo: music that “hugs you.”

Artists’ focus on bilingualism and symbolic representations of Mexican identity are also found in the literature. Martinez-Morrison (2014) finds Chicano artists to be “cultural hybridizers” who code switch and fuse “Spanglish, Black English, [and] urban street slang” in their work (p. 3). Although Capo is the only artist of the participants in this study to have used Spanish or Spanglish in their artwork, the use and importance of speaking Spanish resonates with Sergio in his relations to white residents of his community. Both of their accounts serve to illustrate the salience of their bilingualism in their sense of identity, and their pride, as Mexican artists which further supports Martinez-Morrison’s (2014) characterization of Chicano (and/or Mexican) artists as “cultural hybridizers.” Whether artists are aware of this hybridizing of cultural forms and practices – and if so what their intentions and hopes are – remains an area that should be explored in the future. By studying this fusion and hybridization that Mexican artists engage in, we can enhance our understanding of inter-racial and cultural relations in Chicago, as well as how artistic cultural forms and practices are enhanced by diasporic communities.

Finally, we can understand symbolic representations of Mexican identity (e.g. use of Mexican flags in music videos) as artists laying claims to, at least partial, ownership of the cultural and social spheres that comprise Chicago’s underground hip-hop/rap music scene. The use of Mexican flags, as well as other symbolic representations of Mexican identity, are Mexican artists laying claims to ownership of art and art forms in this particular music scene through an unmistakable display of this artistic community’s presence. The use of these symbols ultimately
propagate a notion that Mexican rappers exist and that their histories and impact on the music scene matters. The reoccurrence of such displays in this music scene suggest that while the “influence of Mexican Americans in hip-hop remains underexplored,” it’s not because there aren’t many Mexicans engaging in hip-hop’s cultural forms – rather, it’s because their visibility as Mexicans is rejected and/or ignored and their influence is thus obscured (Martinez-Morrison 2014, p. 5). If “Chicano hip hop narratives symbolically reterritorialize their colonized urban places” and “music becomes a means for claiming and occupying space,” then the visual dimensions of Mexican artists’ work, and specifically instances where their Mexican pride is symbolically represented, accompanies the audible dimension of their artwork as a means for claiming and occupying space (McFarland 2017, p. 50-51). It’s common for artists to include images and videos of identifiable landmarks in their community – such as the Little Village Arch – or street signs. These depictions demarcate space and geographies as belonging to these artists, or the organizations they may be representing (e.g. street gangs), making clear, at least to Chicagoans, what space “belongs” to them. In the same vein, the use of distinctly Mexican symbols, like the Mexican flag, in music videos does the same thing by demanding acknowledgement and recognition of Mexicans’ artistic contributions to Chicago’s underground hip-hop/rap music scene, and to hip-hop/rap culture more generally.

To Envision Something Different

In trying to achieve success in this ever expanding field, Capo, Big A, and Sergio utilize their sense of drive and passion to set themselves apart from other artists in the music scene and members of their greater Mexican communities. These artists generally attribute success to an artists’ dedication to their artistic labor and their passion for their art – ultimately suggesting that artists who aren’t willing to commit an immense amount of time, energy, and other resources will
fail in establishing themselves as artists. As Harkness (2011b) reveals in his study of artistic labor practices in Chicago’s Hip-Hop underground, success being attributed to drive and passion are not uncommon among Chicago’s underground artists. Harkness (2011b) finds through his own ethnographic fieldwork that artists emphasized the same rhetoric surrounding the importance of strong work ethics which were then used to explain an artist's successes or failures. According to Harkness (2011b):

Hard work conveyed responsibility, skill, seriousness, high status, and middle-class values. The premium placed upon hard work also helped to deflect concerns about achieving success in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Hard work gave one an edge that supposedly lazy rappers did not enjoy, and lent a sense of order and control to a highly unpredictable occupation; hard work provided a means by which the financially struggling rapper might someday achieve upward mobility. (p. 259)

Clearly, Mexican artists’ emphasis on drive and passion’s roles in success lacked critique of the institutional and systemic barriers that underground artists experience. Conceptions surrounding achievement and prosperity, as illustrated both in Harkness’ (2011b) work and my study, are clearly linked to capitalist and meritocratic notions of work. Harkness (2011b) understands these motivations, with an implied “delayed gratification” for artists with “higher aspirations,” to be representative of an “American Dream ideology” (Harkness 2011b, p. 261). I find this particularly relevant to my study given that Big A, Capo, and Sergio are all the children or grandchildren of Mexican immigrants. These intimate connections to recent immigration, where narratives surrounding aspirations to achieve the “American Dream” are particularly popular, suggest that Mexican artists may perhaps be contending with these pressures more than your average underground artist. Although this conclusion is not found in the literature, my findings
suggest that this may be the case given how often these artists connect their strong drives and passions to the strong work ethics of their parents and/or other Mexicans in their community – which I note is a long-held stereotype about Mexicans in American culture and society.

While Mexican artists make hard work the primary means for achieving success in this music scene, which they’re generally discouraged from pursuing by their parents who suggest stabler and more lucrative occupations, they’re also contending with the ostracization they experience at the hands of the Mexican immigrant community for partaking in what’s perceived to be non-Mexican and/or Black cultural forms and practices. To be clear, the non-Black Mexican community’s rejection of Black cultural forms is often emblematic of widespread anti-Black and racist notions and should be understood as such. While artists like Big A, Capo, and Sergio argue for the inclusion and acceptance of Latinx artists in hip-hop and rap, they’re also finding that Mexicans in their community associate their art and engagement with this scene as them “‘trying to be African American.’” The relationship between non-Black Mexicans and conceptions of proximity to Blackness is explored in De Genova’s (2008) work. De Genova (2008) finds that Mexican immigrants often perceive the Chicano as a “a figure of perdition and abjection” (p. 142) frequently understood to be “‘assimilation’ process gone woefully awry” (p. 146). Furthermore, De Genova (2008) argues that “these discourses figured Chicanos—in effect, Mexican migrants’ own children—as a pivotal link in the fraught nexus between Mexicanness, as a racialized transnationality within the space of the U.S. nation-state, and the degraded status of U.S. ‘minority’ associated with African American Blackness” (p. 141). In this sense, we can see that hip-hop and rap, as a predominantly Black culture and art form, may also be associated with this perceived “degraded status” of “U.S. ‘minority’” by Mexican migrants, and thus artists’ Mexican communities more generally. Through their engagement with hip-hop/rap, Mexican
artists’ may find themselves “othered” by their own community as a result of their chosen medium of artistic expression. Although Martinez-Morrison (2014) argues that “the extensive participation of Latinos in hip-hop culture regionally as well as globally suggests that hip-hop can no longer be understood (if it ever could) narrowly as ‘a black thing’ where blackness is equated solely with African Americans in the U.S.” (p. 24), it’s clear that these associations are strong and prevalent today and woven intricately into the social fabric of Mexican Chicago.

From Chicago, For Chicago

Mexican artists’ accounts of the built and social environments that they work in makes clear that while artists feel supported by the peer to peer network they’re developing and the House on Knox – which serves as a studio, creative club, and community center of sorts – there’s still plenty of room for this landscape to improve in its overall support and encouragement of artists. Harkness’ study of artistic labor practices in Chicago’s Hip-Hop underground covers, in great detail, the issues underground artists tend to experience whilst trying to advance their artistic career. Harkness (2011b) writes that previous studies on artistic labor practices have revealed that “creative workers suffered from anxiety and frustration over unpredictable income, long working hours, heavy competition, lack of job protection, compulsory networking, and isolation” and that artists often experience “a never-ending cycle of independence and constriction.” (Harkness 2011b, p. 253). Many of the anxieties and frustrations in this list resonate with many of the topics discussed in early chapters but ultimately illustrate the precarious conditions that underground artists must endure if they are to seek a career in this field. The great independence required of artists operating within Chicago’s underground music scenes helps explain why peer to peer networks and physical spaces to support artists’ engagement with one another are so valued. The scarcity of such resources presents a challenge
for new up-and-coming artists who, without access to an existing network of artists and potential mentors, have to shoulder the anxieties of traversing such an environment on their own, likely learning as they go. It’s because of this scarcity of resources that many Mexican artists a part of this music scene are almost entirely self-taught artists.

Harkness (2011b) argues that “more must be done at the local level to assist up-and-coming musicians, including rappers” and while he offers concrete policy suggestions for urban planners and government officials in Chicago to follow and implement, there’s little discussion that addresses the capacity and agency of artists to organize resources for their own communities (p. 266). In many ways, spaces like the House on Knox are doing the important “local level” work that Harkness recommends; only this resource is organized and operated by artists for other artists. The significance of this “by artists for artists” model gets emphasized when Big A talks about the importance of caring for one’s own community and in both his and Capo’s accounts of how working with other artists has allowed them to navigate this music scene with a greater sense of security from the collective momentum they’re tapped into. I would be remiss not to mention that the description of Sergio Esparza’s professional page actually reads “from Chicago, for Chicago—” further illustrating the significance that many up-and-coming Mexican artists actually attribute to supporting and uplifting one another. Finally, I agree Harkness’ (2011b) assertion that “Chicago must recognize the cultural and financial benefits of a thriving music community, and put policies into effect that nurture the development of its musicians, including rappers,” but would add that these policies should center the voices of artists in this scene by leaving them in charge of how city resources are allocated in their communities (p. 267). This can happen by directing city resources to leaders, existing organizations, and spaces across the underground hip-hop/rap music scene who undoubtedly
have a better understanding of the social and built environments that comprise this scene and where city support would be most useful.

**Conclusion**

At its core, this paper was an exploration of my personal connection to Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene. Although I’ve only developed deep interest and investment in this scene in the past few years, the music produced by members of my community – which I say to mean members of the Mexican diaspora from Chicago’s Southwest side – has become an incredibly important resource for me as I traverse the, still unfamiliar, social and built environments of “elite” educational institutions. The art produced by members of this scene has not only helped ground me in moments when I longed for something familiar but, more importantly, has granted me access to new perspectives on the social conditions and cultural evolution of my community. As gentrification becomes a growing concern for Chicago’s Southwest side communities, I hope that my work can help illuminate the cultural identities of these communities, in this critical moment, given that their sustainability isn’t promised.

Guided by one fundamental research question – how do members of Chicago’s Mexican underground rap music scene use their art to make sense of their Mexican identities and community? – I sought to understand why members of the Mexican diaspora were drawn to hip-hop and its cultural forms, what this art conveyed about quotidian life in Mexican Chicago, and where Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene was ultimately heading. To make sense of how Mexican artists engaged hip-hop’s cultural forms, I began by situating Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene in the, relatively limited, academic literature that sought to answer questions about the evolution of Latinx Music, underground music scenes, and Mexican diaspora’s engagement with hip-hop. I then moved to situate this
scene and its cultural producers in the history of Mexican Chicago and the two Chicago neighborhoods – Little Village and Brighton Park – that two of the artists interviewed for this project had been raised in. In exploring the socioeconomic conditions of these communities, I had hoped to help illustrate how these artists’ works were informed by their lived experiences.

The bulk of this paper was dedicated to my analysis of what themes emerged from my in-depth interviews with cultural producers engaged in this scene. My findings revealed that Mexican artists are navigating complex community identities in the production of their work – these complex identities shaping everything from how artists find the motivation to do what they do to shaping how they represent themselves and their communities in their work. Furthermore, these artists make clear that there are many barriers which make contributing to this scene difficult – such as the economic pressures that come with making music, the social pressures they endure from their families and greater communities, and a general scarcity of infrastructure and other resources to support up-and-coming artists. Despite the many ways that Mexican artists feel unsupported in what has typically been a solitary artistic field, more artists are emerging in this scene than ever before – creating opportunities for the development of artist collectives, organizations, and spaces dedicated to the growth and success of this scene. Chicago’s Mexican underground hip-hop/rap music scene has a bright future ahead of it and as it continues to expand and develop, how hip-hop’s emancipatory potential gets realized should be of particular interest for hip hop, activist, and scholarly communities.
## APPENDIX

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Table 1: Latino Population in Chicago 1970-2020

*(Impacts of Latino Population Growth 2008; Acosta-Córdova 2017)*
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