On Hip-Hop

“What Would I Look Like?”: How Exposure to Concentrated Disadvantage Shapes Hip-Hop Artists’ Connections to Community

Sarah Becker1 and Castel Sweet2

Abstract
Hip-hop has deep historical ties to disadvantaged communities. Resounding success in mainstream and global music markets potentially disrupts those connections. The authors use in-depth interviews with 25 self-defined rap/hip-hop artists to explore the significance of place in modern hip-hop. Bringing together historical studies of hip-hop and sociological neighborhood studies, the authors examine hip-hop artists’ community connections. Findings reveal that exposure to concentrated racial and economic disadvantage shapes how artists interpret community, artistic impact, and social responsibility. This supports the “black placemaking” framework, which highlights how black urban neighborhood residents creatively build community amid structural disadvantage. The analysis also elucidates the role specific types of physical places play in black placemaking processes.

Keywords
hip-hop, rap, community, black placemaking

Since its inception in the 1970s in the Bronx, hip-hop has been tied to communities characterized by concentrated disadvantage (Chang 2005; Ogbar 2007; Watkins 2006). As it flourished in 1980s mainstream markets and quickly saturated American and global cultures, those connections arguably faltered, while ties to capitalist market demands grew (Mitchell 2002; Quinn 2004). Academic inquiry on hip-hop’s impact (Collins 2006; Perry 2004; Watkins 2006), especially on listeners (Johnson and Adams 1995; Miranda and Claes 2004), also expanded. Many hip-hop scholars examine representation and authenticity, exploring issues such as white appropriation (Kitwana 2005; McCormick and Rodriguez 2009), crime (Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2009), or blackness and masculinity (Oware 2011). In this study, we forefront hip-hop artists’ own lived experiences. Inspired by the centrality of disadvantaged places in hip-hop and sociology, we focus on how place affects artists’ lives. Bringing together hip-hop history and studies of neighborhood inequality, we ask how exposure to concentrated disadvantage affects artists’ community ties. Using data from a sample of 25 southern U.S. artists, we argue the “black placemaking” framework is a powerful tool for understanding hip-hop artists’ community connections in ways that elucidate the role specific physical spaces play in placemaking processes.

1Department of Sociology/Women’s and Gender Studies Program, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA
2Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sarah Becker, Louisiana State University, Department of Sociology/Women’s and Gender Studies Program, 141 Stubbs Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA
Email: sbecker@lsu.edu
HIP-HOP AND GEOGRAPHICALLY CONCENTRATED DISADVANTAGE

Hip-hop is rooted in specific aspects of 1970s New York: the Black Power movement, Puerto Rican nationalism, and deindustrialization (Ogbar 2007). As Black Power and Puerto Rican activist efforts lost steam in the 1970s, deindustrialization caused a sharp decrease in jobs, pushing many people of color into poverty. At the same time, Cross-Bronx Expressway construction destabilized and divided neighborhoods (Chang 2005). The poorest section of New York, the South Bronx, was deeply affected by these changes. Residents’ dissatisfaction with discrimination and economic struggle there gave birth to hip-hop.

Fueled by dire economic conditions and frustration with slow civil rights advancement, some inner-city residents turned to violence and gangs as a means of resistance, despite Black Panther Party and Nation of Islam efforts to channel people’s discontent into political progress (Ogbar 2007). Recognizing that violence left root problems unaddressed, reformed gang members began using hip-hop music and dance to express themselves and unify people. As hip-hop caught on outside the Bronx, others joined in, forming crews representing and bonding area residents. “Hip-hop created a voice and a vehicle for the young and the dispossessed, giving them both hope and inspiration” (Watkins 2006:7). It allowed youth, even those previously gang affiliated, an outlet for creative expression through music, dance, and graffiti (McQuillar 2007).

Hip-hop quickly became a source of local community uplift and reformation (Universal Zulu Nation 2014). Expanding to inner cities nationally, it was a culturally prominent voice for youth mainstream institutions disregarded (Jones 1994). Artists exposed community conditions, such as Grandmaster Flash in “The Message” (Fletsher, Melle Mel, and Robinson 1982), which vividly documents inner-city living conditions: a destitute apartment complex (broken glass, unbearable stench, and pest infestation) and frustration with limited resources to pursue better living conditions. Such music critiquing urban black social and economic struggles often in support of black nationalist ideologies became known as conscious rap (Mohammed-Akinyela 2012). Widely popularized in Los Angeles during the 1980s, gangsta rap framed crime as a consequence of economic deprivation (Chang 2005; Harkness 2014; Quinn 2004) and highlighted street gangs, guns, harsh crack cocaine sentencing, and mass incarceration dominating inner-cities (Harkness 2014; Quinn 2004). Through it, Los Angeles youth developed a survival culture (Glasgow 1980), joining gangs, selling drugs, and working toward social mobility by creating music centered around their daily realities (Harkness 2014; Lee 2016). Similarly, 1990s southern rap gave birth to trap rap, which soundtracks activity associated with disadvantaged neighborhoods (Adaso 2017). Trap and gangsta rap distinctions are sometimes unclear because both reference inner-city experiences. However, trap rap is typically characterized by its distinctive beat with Roland TR-808 drum machines, kick drums, synthesizers, and hi-hats (Adaso 2017).

From the beginning, hip-hop was deeply connected to communities marked by geographically concentrated disadvantage, a concept sociologists typically conceptualize as high levels of neighborhood poverty, unemployment, welfare receipt, racial segregation, female-headed households, children per household, and/or low educational attainment (Merolla, Hunt, and Serpe 2011; Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2011). Sociological measures parallel hip-hop narratives of concentrated disadvantage. Conscious, gangsta rap, and trap artists often highlight racism, segregation, economic deprivation, mass incarceration, poor schools, high crime, and lack of legal economic opportunity in black urban neighborhoods. An artist’s proximity to such spaces remains an important marker of meaning and authenticity (Forman 2002; Lee 2016).

NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Sociological studies of disadvantaged neighborhoods grew for decades after hip-hop emerged from the South Bronx. In the 1990s, as deindustrialization’s fallout solidified and the social safety net receded, studies of neighborhood socioeconomic context and quality of life proliferated (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997). Scholars have been of two minds when interpreting these geographic effects, especially when studying black communities. They typically use a “deficit frame,” emphasizing negative impacts of structural disadvantage, or an “asset frame,” emphasizing marginalized peoples’ resilience in the face of hardship (Hunter and Robinson 2016).

Research on community attachment is no exception. Some studies explicate residents’ resourceful community-building strategies for combating disadvantage. Most use a deficit frame, identifying
neighborhood disadvantages’ negative impact on community attachment. For example, “broken windows” philosophy suggests neighborhood disorder leads residents to believe that social control has broken down, weakening willingness to invest in solutions (Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2001; Wilson and Kelling 1982). Although broken windows theory is contested (Harcourt 2001), studies consistently demonstrate that perceived neighborhood disorder and disadvantage produce distress, dissatisfaction (Hill, Ross, and Angel 2005; Latkin and Curry 2003), anxiety, and anger (Ross and Mirowsky 2009; Schieman, Pearl, and Meersman 2006).

Disorder also causes residents to experience “greater subjective powerlessness” (Geis and Ross 1998), eroding their sense of control (Massey 1996) and feeding the belief that neighborhood disadvantage cannot be overcome through individual effort (Kim and Conley 2011; Ross and Mirowsky 2009). Living with geographically concentrated disadvantage can foster the impression that state actors have forsaken residents, weakening trust for authority (Kim and Conley 2011). These effects are not felt equally. Poor residents, racial minorities, and less educated persons disproportionately experience neighborhood disorder’s negative effects because they have fewer resources to combat it (Kim and Conley 2011). Residents of urban areas characterized by “physical, social, and cultural deterioration” (Gieryn 2000:475) encounter more challenges when attempting to improve living environment (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wilson 1996). Economically, socially, and racially privileged residents have resources to combat stress, even if living in the same structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Privileged residents often emerge as instrumental in asset frame community cohesion studies (Hunter and Robinson 2016). For example, recent work on community reactions to crime illustrates how wealthier residents can lobby for outside services to prevent or reduce perceived neighborhood disorder (Becker 2013; Pattillo-McCoy 2007) or use network ties to cultivate safety (Browning 2009; Pattillo 1998). Social characteristics of disadvantaged neighborhoods are also assets for social change. For example, places characterized by mutual trust, shared values, and willingness to intervene have less crime than otherwise similar neighborhoods (Maimon and Browning 2010; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). In addition, geographically isolated ethnic communities sometimes create solidarity, ethnic unity, and economic development for residents (Gieryn 2000).

The “black placemaking” framework sidesteps pitfalls of asset/deficit frame-based studies of black urban American life, teasing out asset/deficit tensions by analytically centering place and acknowledging the interdependent relationship between structural forces and human agency’s resistive potential (Hunter et al. 2016; Hunter and Robinson 2016; Nieves 2008). It does not ignore structural factors such as “external assaults on black spaces” (e.g., destructive urban planning) or “internal dangers that can make everyday life difficult” (e.g., homophobia, harassment, homicide) (Hunter et al. 2016:31–32), nor does it present a simplistic, feel-good narrative of urban black life. Instead, it provides a “corrective to the imbalanced social science scholarship on black communities” that typically emphasizes deficits associated with blackness rather than “the agency, intent, and even spontaneity of urban black residents—across genders, sexualities, ages, classes, and politics—in creating places that are sustaining, affirming, and pleasurable” (Hunter et al. 2016:51).

Place and placemaking have long sociological histories. Typically, they are conceived of in terms of geographical location, material form, and symbolic meaning and value (Gieryn 2000). Black placemaking enhances these conceptualizations by emphasizing how black Americans use agency to “create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance, through social interaction” (Hunter et al. 2016:31), often by privileging “the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experience of being black and being around other black people” (Hunter et al. 2016:32). Black people have historically made and remade locales by forging unique connections to and cultural interpretations of the physical settings they occupy (Hunter et al. 2016; Hunter and Robinson 2016; Nieves 2008). In reclaiming urban spaces as their own, black residents produce a sense of belonging and use culture to influence conceptions of citizenship and community (Nieves 2008).

**HIP-HOP AND BLACK PLACEMAKING**

Black placemaking sheds light on cohesion and meaning-making possibilities in spaces such as those hip-hop emerged from. Hip-hop artists are part of this tradition, having historically used creativity to transform repressive settings into places of celebration and significance (Lee 2016). They articulate “spatially oriented conditions of existence” by “express[ing] how individuals or communities in [urban] locales live, how the
mircroworlds they constitute are experienced, or how specifically located social relationships are negotiated” (Forman 2002:8). Since its inception among marginalized Bronx youth, however, hip-hop has become commodified and is mass-marketed to diverse audiences outside the places it emerged from (Kitwana 2005; Quinn 2004). Popularization potentially disentangled hip-hop from its geographic, historical, and social roots.

Hip-hop arguably retained its critical energy amid massive commercialization. Referred to as “the black CNN” by Public Enemy’s Chuck D (Muhammad 2008), hip-hop continues to provide marginalized populations space to critically dialogue about lived experiences. Hip-hop amplifies a new generation of activist voices (Clay 2012; Nasir 2015). Listeners promote change through hip-hop culture, music, and lyrics. Artists are also change makers engaging in social commentary, pursuing community transformation (Muhammad 2008), and doing gender and sexuality (Armstead 2007; Wilson 2007), religious (Banbury 2016; Nasir 2015), political, economic (Schneidermann 2014), and human rights (Morgan and Warren 2011; Nasir 2015) activism. “Conscious” or “politically progressive and racially conscious” art makers (McCorkel and Rodriguez 2009:367) are particularly likely to educate, empower, and inspire change via art (Mohammed-Akinyela 2012).

Context shapes artists’ interpretation of opportunities for change via music (Forman 2002; Harkness 2014). Individuals from lower social classes typically personify rap hustler tropes, using hip-hop’s commercial success to achieve social mobility with existential urgency (Lee 2016; Harkness 2014). Message-oriented rappers often exhibit connections to middle-class spaces and ideologies (Harkness 2014). Divergent freedoms class statuses provide to create music for meaning rather than income help explain these patterns (Sweet 2017; Young 2013). However, hip-hop’s historical ties to geographically concentrated disadvantage could powerfully influence artists’ engagement to local communities above and beyond their artistic “wokeness” (McCann 2012). We examine this by looking at how place-based experiences affect hip-hop artists’ articulations of, connections to, and responsibility for “community.” Drawing on data from an economically and ideologically diverse sample of artists, we examine how geography, class, and race influence definitions of community and motivations to uplift it.

METHODS

Long critiqued for being male dominated and hostile to multiply marginalized voices (Armstead 2007; Morgan 1995; Wilson 2007), hip-hop has nonetheless provided minority populations opportunity to articulate unique social perspectives (Chang 2005; Wright 2004). Inspired by this tradition, we use in-depth interviewing to allow 25 hip-hop artists in the southern United States to self-define and articulate connections to “community.” Flyers calling for self-identified hip-hop artists interested in participating in a study of hip-hop artists and their communities were posted in libraries, in bars, at open mics, at music events, and on Craigslist. We recruited participants via flyers, in person at hip-hop functions, and by word-of-mouth referrals. Nine participants responded to flyers. Eight were recruited at events or referred by people in our social networks and another eight through snowball sampling. All were between 18 and 53 years of age, with an average age of 26. A majority (20 of 25) were black men. One white man, one white woman, and three black women are also in the sample. Twenty respondents resided in Louisiana, two in Tennessee, one in Arkansas, one in Georgia, and one in Florida. Interviews were voluntary. No participants were compensated. Names were changed for confidentiality.

Castel conducted 24 of 25 in-depth interviews at local coffee shops or in public library meeting rooms in 2013 and 2014. Sarah conducted one interview with a contact from her social network. Interviews used a semistructured interview guide covering community attachment, community involvement, perceived connection between music and community, and definitions of “community,” in addition to background questions about making music. They ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. In 2017, Castel conducted follow-up interviews with eight subjects whose first interviews did not provide sufficient data on their childhood or current neighborhoods.

Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and transferred into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. Analysis took place in three stages. First, Castel conducted extensive line-by-line open coding, searching for themes relevant to community. Second, we met to discuss emergent patterns. Sarah conducted a second round of focused coding on how artists defined “community” and viewed their roles in it. In this stage,
Sarah coded and thematically categorized respondents’ (1) descriptions of hometown and current neighborhoods, (2) definitions of “community,” (3) beliefs about how their music affects community, and (4) perceived responsibility to community.

We put artists into three residential history groups according to neighborhood experiences: concentrated disadvantage (artists who spent considerable time exposed to areas of geographically concentrated disadvantage), lower middle class/working class/mixed income (people who grew up and currently lived in such areas), and middle class (people who grew up and currently lived in middle-class areas and those who grew up in lower middle-class or working-class areas but experienced upward mobility as adults). In the last stage of analysis, we divided transcripts into Atlast.ti document groups by residential history and race/gender. This facilitated examination of how community definitions, self-perceived impact, and community responsibility varied by residential experience and race/gender.

HOW RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCES SHAPE HIP-HOP ARTISTS’ CONCEPTIONS OF AND CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNITY

Artists grew up in largely middle-class areas and continued to live in similar places as adults; spent most of their lives in primarily lower middle-class, working-class, or mixed-income neighborhoods; or had extensive exposure to neighborhoods characterized by geographically concentrated structural disadvantage (i.e., high poverty, unemployment, single-parent households, crime, and low educational levels). Each residential experience group captures closeness to or distance from lived effects of co-occurring, concentrated racial and economic disadvantage (hereafter referred to as concentrated disadvantage). Which group an artist fell into affected how he or she viewed community and his or her ties to it. Some artists defined community geographically, naming their cities or neighborhoods as their communities. They were also disproportionately likely to see their responsibility to community in terms of direct engagement or financial investment.

Artists with Middle-class Neighborhood Experiences: “I Think I Am the Light around Here”

Five artists had largely middle-class residential experiences. Two white and three black artists grew up and remained in predominantly white middle-class neighborhoods or grew up in white lower middle-class or working-class neighborhoods and moved into middle-class communities as adults. They described their neighborhoods with middle-class markers such as comparatively high median incomes, educational attainment, homeownership, two-parent families, and low crime. Joseph, a black artist, described his childhood neighborhood as a lower middle-class/working-class white neighborhood:

Most of the people in my neighborhood were plant workers or elderly. The black families there were all two-parent homes, parents mostly college educated. It’s hard to say we were living in poverty, but I’d say the majority of the people there had 3–5 person households with a median income between $40,000–$60,000 a year.

In adulthood, he moved to a middle-class black Baton Rouge neighborhood. Lauren, a 25-year-old white artist, “grew up in a middle-class [Nashville] neighborhood” where “no percentage [of people were] in real poverty.” It had “a lot of strip malls” and “a suburbs quality” to it. Tiffany, a 21-year-old black artist, grew up in “a very, very small” predominantly white Louisiana town with relatively low poverty and many two-parent households.

All but one person in this category defined community socially or emotionally. Lauren, for example, felt membership in a “community of young people making challenging art”:

I feel like my community is online. My day-to-day life is pretty reclusive…as an artist, I don’t interact much with the [local] community. There are a handful of people who are kind of scattered across the globe, but we all hang out on the Internet together and we are all making art.

Tiffany also defined community socially: “the people that I am around. Specifically, my community would be like myself and my artists and my
organization that I am in because we are like a huge family that is constantly growing.” Travis, a black artist who grew up and lived in a middle-class neighborhood, spoke similarly: “If I were to have a community, it would spread love. That’s all I can say honestly, is to spread love. A lot of guys like to act hard, but nobody really wants all the stupid shit to happen.”

Joseph also defined community socially and emotionally, but for him, shared blackness tied him to “the black underground hip-hop community,” trying “to stay true to the culture of hip-hop as we see it,” unlike the white hip-hop community. They want to party. They don’t give a damn, like they turn up—like they got their own version of turn up. As long as it’s some good hip-hop going on and the music is loud, they don’t care.

Zachary was the only artist in this group to define community geographically and socially: “To sum me up, I am just a Jesus representor and a Louisiana representor, you know. Lafayette, Louisiana representor. That’s me and that’s my community.” Zachary and Joseph shared another characteristic: they made conscious music “with trap beats.” As Joseph said, “I’m a nontraditional conscious rapper who in the past has made a pro-Black revolutionary project over trap beats. My music is equally as street as it is conscious/militant.” Zachary said his lyrics are “definitely conscious,” “but as far as the beats and the style you would probably say trap because I grew up on all that.”

Zachary and Joseph’s community definitions and trap beat affinity can be linked to their residential experiences. Joseph grew up in an “85 percent white, 14 percent black, 1 percent Native American” neighborhood. Other black artists in this residential group grew up differently. Travis’s parents were in the military, so he moved during childhood. Although not free from racism by any means, “the daily work life of service members is not segregated and differentiated by race as it is in civilian life” (Teachman and Tedrow 2008). Tiffany’s small hometown was not as predominantly white. Although they both likely faced discrimination associated with being black in mostly white communities (Becker 2014; McCabe 2009), hip-hop’s gendered and racialized networks could have meant that Joseph bonded to black male artists while making sense of such experiences (Shabazz 2014) in ways Tiffany could not. Zachary was the only artist in this category who grew up poor in a white middle-class neighborhood. He spent most of his youth there in trailer parks or apartments with his single mother. Growing up poor in a middle-class area could have sensitized Zachary to structural disadvantage’s impact in a way that made his vision of community contrast with his peers’ elastic, individually centered, and geographically unrooted conceptions.

When asked to speak on impact and responsibility to community, all five artists reported positive impact and emphasized role modeling. Lauren spoke of role-modeling for her musician community:

I have had several people tell me that they have been inspired by me to pick up their own art again or to pick it up just to begin with, or to rejuvenate their artist expression just because I stay so busy.

Zachary and Tiffany talked about role modeling generally. Tiffany said she hopes people can hear her music and think:

“Oh, her song says that she went through this, but when I see her, it doesn’t come off that she went through such a hard time” and they can see that I didn’t let it affect me. I don’t let it make who I am or create who I am. I just let it kind of inspire me to push through and I hope that my music can be an inspiration to others.

Role modeling was also common when speaking of community responsibility. Zachary, for example, said, “I think I am the light around here for my community. I’m part of just bringing more positive in it, the music scene and everything.” Tiffany similarly articulated,

As an artist, I feel like it’s my job to kind of be the voice for my community…. Sometimes they may just come to me with a problem that they are having and I can just translate that into a song.

In sum, most artists with middle-class residential experiences defined communities socially or emotionally, reported positive community impact, and expressed a sense of responsibility involving role-modeling by living their artist lives. Because all five made conscious art, role-modeling seamlessly aligned with their creative ventures. These flexible, individualistic ideas about community, impact, and responsibility contrast to artists with other residential experiences.
Artists with Lower Middle-class, Working-class, and Mixed-income Neighborhood Experiences: “It’s Almost Like Being a Prophet”

Five black artists grew up in working-class white, lower middle-class black, or mixed-income neighborhoods, often socially or geographically proximate to ghettos or high-poverty rural communities (Massey and Denton 1998; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Malcolm, a black artist, had a “lower working-class/working-class” home neighborhood but distinguished between his street and the broader area. “My street was—it had people who worked, there was families. I don’t know. I just think the environment was, it just wasn’t conducive to defiant behavior.” In nearby areas, “it was the exact opposite. Unemployment might have been high. A lot of single-parent families. Households with a lot kids that may have lacked supervision from time to time.” John, another black artist, grew up in a mixed-income part of St. Louis: “You kind of get everything there. You catch people that are like super broke and then you will get people that have stupid money. So, it definitely varies but you get a taste of everything from that.” Keith, a black Baton Rouge artist in his 30s, grew up in a “lower middle-class neighborhood” with “a lot of plant workers, a lot of state workers, a lot of people that worked for the post office.” Most homes were dual-income black households that “had just moved from a place in town that was considered pretty bad.” A move to his neighborhood was “a step up.” All five artists lived in similar neighborhoods as adults.

In this group, two artists defined community as hometown neighborhoods, and three did not. Christopher, a young black artist, said, “The community that I grew up in, it could be better, you know?” In contrast, Keith said,

I think of like a melting pot of various communities is what I think of myself. I don’t think of the community that I live in or the community that I grew up in or the academic community, or this community or that community. You know, based on city lines or race or anything like that. I don’t really think of that, so I guess my answer would be kind of a mixture of communities would be my community.

At first glance, answers such as Keith’s being more common in this group seems to echo middle-class answers. However, two artists in this group stressing broad human connection placed particular emphasis on geographic spaces or people facing inequality in ways the middle-class group did not.

For example, Keith said, “I think that in some way I represent all of them [communities in Baton Rouge], I have a probably bigger voice or a bigger desire to represent some of the underdogs in some of the inner-city communities.” John, who said his “community is the world,” also felt “a community is a group of people who share some commonality,” including, “the same struggle, they have the same ZIP code.” He added, “so if I really looked at this, I would say that my community is probably like anybody I have come across, anyone who has a story similar to mine, anybody who probably shares my skin color or socio-economic status.”

Keith and John’s residential experiences uniquely shaped what community they felt tied to. They grew up in mixed-income areas of Baton Rouge and St. Louis where some streets held lower middle-class black families bonded to one another, other streets wealthy white families, and both were nearby predominantly black, high-poverty, high-crime areas. Exposure to concentrated disadvantage could explain why Keith and John defined community socially and emotionally, but later claimed connection to disadvantaged black neighborhoods. In addition, Kenneth and Christopher, black artists who defined community geographically, grew up in similar areas. This suggests exposure to concentrated disadvantage in black spaces uniquely influenced their community connections.

When asked about impact and responsibility, most of this group focused on messaging. Four made conscious hip-hop, one trap. All five, however, spoke of their music’s message or relatability as impact. Again, they seemed to echo middle-class artists who framed artistic work as fulfilling community responsibility. However, these artists placed emphasis on their music and social change. For example, Malcolm said,

I think an artist has to be provocative…you have to spark something in people to cause them to do something. So, I think it’s my role to be a spark. It’s almost like, like being a prophet, like when a prophet come, he gives a word and it can be something people want to hear or it can be something people don’t want to hear, but it’s going to cause a reaction.

Malcolm stands distinct from artists in the middle-class category when highlighting hopes his of music “causing [people] to do something.”

John put it directly: “I think I have a responsibility to evoke change.” When asked about
responsibility to his childhood neighborhood, he identified an “even greater responsibility to positively impact it.” Keith answered similarly: “For the underrepresented communities, I think I have a responsibility, whether—not that anybody put that on me, necessarily.” Christopher, a trap artist, also spoke of messaging and social change as his responsibility to community, but rather than making music with conscious lyrics, he directly interacted with youth in his childhood mixed-income Baton Rouge neighborhood, situated close to areas of concentrated disadvantage:

I just feel like, man, make the youngins in that community know the stuff that they see don’t have to be the stuff that they do. Take other choices or other routes, you know? You can do better than that, though. It’s not all about what you see. You don’t have to be a follower, you can be a leader. That’s why I try to tell the community, the youngins, growing up man: don’t follow—be a leader.

Christopher’s approach to managing community responsibility stands out in this group, more closely aligning with artists in the final residential experience category, who espouse strong views of responsibility to geographic communities and see that work happening outside musical creativity and entrepreneurship.

Artists with Experiences in Neighborhoods Characterized by Concentrated Disadvantage: “What Would I Look Like?”

Fifteen black artists spent significant time in urban or small-town neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage. Some grew up and continued to live there (or similar places) as adults \((n = 5)\), some grew up there but moved to places they described as better \((n = 8)\), and some lived in black lower middle-class or mixed-income neighborhoods and structurally under-resourced areas in their lifetimes \((n = 2)\). They described their neighborhoods as predominantly black spaces marked by strains associated with exposure to geographically concentrated racial and economic inequality. For example, Walter, a black 20-year-old, said of his childhood New Orleans neighborhood,

Not an exaggeration. We heard gunshots—and this was like the early mid- to late 90s. So, I mean this was when it was really out of control. It was just poverty. There were people begging for money. It was just a troubled area, drugs around but just the typical inner-city activity in an urban area. It was just bad.

Ashley, a 22-year-old black artist, spoke similarly of her childhood Baton Rouge neighborhood:

I was exposed to more than just drug deals, but a lot of gun violence. I remember vividly in elementary school the conversation the other kids and I would have about who was killed and how they were killed. I had to be around seven when I witnessed and man being shot right across the street from the home we lived in. There was a brief altercation between he and his group of friends and another group of guys. A few minutes later, the guys ran down the street and fired their weapons five times. Car tires screeched and then more gunshots and then more screeching tires. I don’t know if that gentleman lived or died.

Two people relayed slightly different experiences. Bryan, a middle-aged black artist, described his childhood Baton Rouge neighborhood as a “poverty-stricken community, long generations of poverty” where “there were a lot of families, but mostly single parent households.” He said, “it was a lot of crime going on, but not always violent crime. In the neighborhood, it was like small crimes and based on the area every now and then it was violent.” Unlike Ashley and others, Bryan spoke of deep bonds between residents. When asked if people helped each other, he said: “Absolutely, back then of course you could count on one another. We really depended on one another to get by.” Simon, a 23-year-old black artist, described his home neighborhood similarly: “90 to 98 percent black,” “80 to 90 percent” of people living in poverty, and “no nuclear families, I mean, very few,” but many people lived there for generations and were bonded. When asked if people would intervene with trouble-making kids, he explained:

There would be some type of engagement with the adult and the child, especially if it’s in the middle of the day after school or on the weekend while people are outside moving around. There was a higher level of visibility of seeing if people was up to no good, in a sense. So, they would be able to engage.

Simon and Bryan benefited from residential stability, shared values, and willingness to intervene, or collective efficacy (Sampson et al. 1997) in their
neighborhoods. Most people, however, had dissimilar experiences.

A majority grew up in areas characterized by concentrated disadvantage and later moved to neighborhoods they described as better. Eric, a black artist who moved to a wealthy white New Orleans neighborhood, said, “I have moved on up.” Walter moved to Memphis, where his family has “a lot to be thankful for”: “The neighborhood is pretty quiet, there is no bad activity.” Only one person, Justin, a black artist, started out in a lower middle-class black community but moved to a high-poverty black Baton Rouge neighborhood with “lots of drugs, a lot of killing” and “gun shots every night” after Hurricane Katrina.

Most people currently residing in concentrated disadvantage areas made trap music. Most who had moved out made conscious hip-hop. Together, musical style and experiences with concentrated disadvantage affected how they viewed and engaged with community. Only a small proportion of artists—all conscious—defined community socially or emotionally. Comments such as Walter’s came mostly from conscious musicians who moved away in adulthood:

My community is, I mean, everybody. The worst thing—anything bad that I see with community living and societal interactions is that it usually causes this whole us-versus-them mentality. This is my community and we have to go against their community so our community can come up. I don’t want it to be like that…. I feel like my community is everywhere.

Simon said, “I wouldn’t separate my community with street signs and subdivisions,” concluding “anybody who is around me is a part of my community.”

The overwhelming pattern among artists exposed to concentrated disadvantage starkly contrasts with other residential experience groups. Two-thirds called home neighborhoods their communities, including a slightly higher proportion of people who remained in concentrated-disadvantage areas and all seven trap artists. Justin, who wrote trap music but sold it, preferring to produce more neutral, upbeat dance tracks himself, defined community as “the neighborhood where you stay at.” Richard, a conscious black artist who moved away, “mentioned [the] street [he grew up on] a lot” when defining community “because a lot of the people that really influenced me lived on the same street or lived right around the block.” Other artists jumped into describing home neighborhoods when asked to define community. Joshua, a black trap artist who still lived there, said, “Oh, Lord [laughs]. I ain’t lying. It’s a lot of jealousy. It’s a lot of lying. Don’t get along. It’s a small town, everybody know everybody.”

The same pattern emerged around impact and responsibility: a few spoke in ways paralleling other groups, especially conscious artists who moved out as adults. Most did not. For example, six artists spoke of influencing people via messages producing social change. Five were conscious and had moved from childhood neighborhoods. For example, Richard said that if people from his home neighborhood heard his music, they might think, “Okay, maybe this school isn’t bad if he actually made it out of it. Maybe I will be able to get out of it, make some sounds, go the same route, go to college.” David, a young black artist, remained in the same area he grew up in and was the only trap artist who highlighted messaging and social change: “I feel like my music lets you know that my community is poverty and that’s where I come from, this is how it is and this is how it’s gone be.” When asked to explain his responsibility to community, he said, Letting people know just what type of community you come, just what’s happening in these streets and just letting—what actually happens in the streets, because most people don’t get a chance to see that. And a lot of young parents and stuff don’t get a chance to see that, so I think it would help people who are raising kids to actually hear what’s going on in the streets so that they can keep their kids away from that.

A unique pattern also emerged in this group: lack of concern about music’s impact and, alternatively, worry about negative, insufficient, or no impact. Most trap artists who grew up amidst concentrated disadvantage answered this way, as did one conscious black artist, Lawrence. His music covers issues such as prison abolition and mass incarceration, but he worried it did not “[affect] the community as much as [he] would like it to” because when he is invited to perform at activist events, advertising did not reach people hardest hit by inequality, meaning his music “doesn’t have as strong of an impact as [he] would like it to.” Anthony, another black artist, and Bryan worried about negative musical impact. Bryan, who made gangsta rap in his youth, said: “It kills me when I go back today and talk to a young man. He is in trouble and he says ‘man, I listened to [one of your albums].’” These experiences are “one of the things
that actually turned [his] life around,” leading to decades of anti-violence activism. Anthony’s answers reveal a parallel worry:

It be on my mind when I write certain songs and do certain things that it might tell me in my heart that this here gone cause problems. As in violence. And it kind of stun on me for a minute, and I just ask the Lord to be with, because I don’t know.

Three conscious artists echoed such concerns, framing role modeling for other artists as their responsibility. For example, a black artist named Darren argued a lot of hip-hop is materialist or misogynist and said, “I like to be able to provide a ying [sic] for that yang” by “trying to put myself out there as somebody who is leading by example with that type of the difference within the music.” Two trap artists decoupled their art from community concerns. Michael, a black artist who moved out as an adult, said “it’s just music” and did not need impact:

That’s not what it’s for. The music is meant to entertain, to convey emotion, and to have fun with. You can, you can give a message if you want change it, but that’s not my goal. My goal right now is popularity so I can get the money to help my community in a bigger way than just music can.

Justin did not feel responsibility to community as an artist but looked after his neighborhood directly: “No, ma’am. I don’t feel like I have a responsibility because I don’t take it that serious.” He clarified,

I take my music serious, but I don’t focus more on telling kids to do right. Not in music form. But if I see them, I’m gone be able to talk to them, but I never looked for it as far as music form, to direct them like that.

As Justin and Michael’s answers suggest, lack of concern about musical impact was not indicative of lack of concern for community. To the contrary, community commitment was particularly intense in this group but came in different form. Where most artists in the middle-class group focused on role modeling and most in the second group focused on messaging, a unique trend emerged here: a large proportion of respondents, especially trap artists, focused on producing social change through direct engagement or financial contributions to community. The greatest proportion of people expressing these views currently resided in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated disadvantage. Regardless of musical style, they reported more intense and qualitatively different community commitments.

For example, Carl, a black trap artist who still lived in his neighborhood, said, “The way I feel, the role is from one generation to the next is to make sure the generation after you is better or just as good as your generation was.” Lawrence resided in this type of neighborhood but made conscious music. He committed to engaging directly with youth in addition to continuing his long history of social justice activism: “I just try to have some type of relationship with the younger folks may that be the younger males—a few of them I speak to and kind of check up on them and see how they are doing.” He added,

Just being a black male and seeing other black males growing up around here, I feel like I just need to peek in some type of way and let them know that I am concerned in some type of way about their well-being.

Ashley, a conscious artist from a neighborhood her college friends fear, similarly connected to youth: “I know a lot of the little kids in [my] neighborhood because I always talk to them and see how—’what’s going on with y’all?’”

Anthony, a trap artist who moved to a better area, said his responsibility to community was “to come give back and lift up the community. To try to stop the violence and show people that you can get attention, positive, not just negative.” His role was “cleaning [himself] up fast as possible and leading the people towards positive as young black men and to keep them from trying to go to jail. You know, [right] the wrongs.” Although he spoke of “coming back” cleaned up once he made it big, he also worked on it now: “I be trying to spit positive messages even though it may not sound like that is the intent. But if you really listen, it has a positive message always.” Michael said his community is “in dire need of help” and “young people are around us at all times and just really seeing it makes me want to do something about it.”

Some focused on contributing financially. Richard, a conscious artist who moved, said,

If I was to make it big and to end up coming up on some income to where I would be able to give back, then I most definitely would. Because I would hate for anybody who grew up on
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[street name] like I did to see or go through the things that I did.

Michael felt responsibility to community “more so than most people.” He felt like a co-harbinger of peace, like a—not in the near future or whatever, but maybe in ten, 15 years when I have unmasked the funds and the resources to help my community in the way that I want to.

Walter, a conscious artist, shared that sense of responsibility: “You have to realize that enjoying the music and making music for people to relate to is not enough.” He continued, “You have to maintain a point to where you are comfortable and then people put you in a good spot, you have to give back to the people and go back to the community that you were in.” He said you should use your money to “set up things that are conducive to the growth of that community like school and hospitals in areas that don’t have medical care,” elaborating.

What would I look like signing a million-dollar check when my best friend, he is living on his own? . . . Literally this man made beats for me for free and things like that. What would I look like? What would I look like not giving the lady who bought my first CD, what would I look like not investing in her business because she invested in me when I was coming up? You have to have that—your biggest responsibility as an artist is once you get successful, if you get successful, is to give back.

Giving back is part of Walter’s “whole mantra,” because “my whole life everything I have had people have been giving to me, so. It’s only right that I give back in some kind of way.” Joshua, a trap artist still living in his home neighborhood, framed providing resources to community as a form of authenticity. He planned crawfish boils to unify people. “I don’t see no other rappers throwing no crawfish boils,” he said:

They say they in the hood and they from the hood but they ain’t doing nothing for them, you know. Real talk, I don’t see nobody giving no bikes or nothing away you know. Other than Boosie, he did it, but I’m talking about now. They not real to me.

Intense desire to give back to community stands out in these narratives. The fact that artists who currently lived in concentrated disadvantage neighborhoods disproportionately expressed strong commitment to social change through direct or financial engagement, regardless of musical style, underscores the connection between experiencing concentrated disadvantage and artists’ community ties. As Michael said, seeing neighborhood kids galvanized his desire to help. As Richard stated, his childhood street was his “community” because “a lot of the people that really influenced [him]” lived there. Although many interviewees volunteered, were activists, or created or ran non-profits, those with greatest exposure to concentrated disadvantage, especially those still in it, were disproportionately committed to community uplift through direct engagement outside their music.

DISCUSSION

This study builds on previous scholarship by analyzing how hip-hop artists’ exposure to concentrated disadvantage affects community ties. Findings indicate degree of closeness to concentrated racial and economic disadvantage influences artists’ ideas about and connections to community. Most conscious artists with middle-class residential experiences defined community socially or emotionally and saw role modeling as their impact and responsibility: “being a light,” as Zachary said. Most with lower middle-class, working-class, or mixed-income residential experiences also defined community socially or emotionally but framed messaging as their impact and responsibility: “being a prophet,” in Malcolm’s words. For both groups, community obligations seamlessly aligned with their lives: being a light (role model) or prophet (messenger) happened through art. Most artists with extensive exposure to concentrated disadvantage, however, called childhood neighborhoods their communities and, especially for those still exposed to spatial inequality, held a deep sense of obligation to it, regardless of musical style. As Walter wondered, “What would they look like” if they did not?

Working in a genre deeply rooted in community engagement (Kitwana 2003) and critical analysis of inequality (Chang 2005; Nasir 2015; Nuruddin 2004; Wright 2004) might bond hip-hop artists to disadvantaged communities. Our findings, however, suggest that genre alone does not produce hip-hop artists’ community ties. Community ties among hip-hop artists in our sample varied in ways that suggest living in racially segregated or predominantly black areas marked by concentrated disadvantage deepens artists’ connectedness to their neighborhoods. For those with longer histories of living in or near such spaces, community...
remained geographic and specific. For those who did not, community could be defined more ethereally. In addition, a greater proportion of artists exposed to neighborhood-based inequality worried about impact and expressed a strong sense of community responsibility.

The centrality of residential experiences in artists’ conceptions of and approaches to community highlights the power of specific place types in black placemaking processes (Hunter et al. 2016). Black Americans’ agentic creation of belonging and meaning in places affected by social-structural disadvantage has a long history (Gieryn 2000; Hunter et al. 2016; Nieves 2008). Our results suggest experiencing life in areas of concentrated disadvantage intensifies hip-hop artists’ sense of neighborhood connectedness, above and beyond their commitment to socially conscious art.

Recognizing this pattern risks romanticizing black resilience in the face of structural oppression, or of seeing the power hard-hit communities have to produce commitment to social change without properly acknowledging the problematic nature of those structural conditions. The black placemaking framework buffers against this risk by allowing scholars to acknowledge resilience and excellence in artists’ community connections while pointing out problems with the structural conditions giving rise to it. Although it is remarkable that artists who spent most of their lives in economically disadvantaged areas are uniquely committed to community, they occupy a challenging position: they disproportionately express connectedness and responsibility to geographic neighborhoods but have fewer social and material resources to live up to those ideals.

The tenuous intersections of structural forces producing a need for creative agency while limiting people’s available tools highlight four implications of our work. First, it is important to centralize actors such as the artists in our study when legislators and city officials are making decisions affecting their communities. Artists’ connectedness and commitment to black places and local visibility make them powerful assets in redevelopment efforts guided by within-community perspectives. Second, our findings speak to the roles race and class play in black placemaking. Although exposure to concentrated disadvantage deeply affects artists’ conceptions of and ties to community, exposure to poverty did not produce strong neighborhood attachment; exposure to concentrated disadvantage in black places did. The one white artist who grew up poor in a white middle-class area differed from others in his group, but called his city his community, not his neighborhood. In addition, artists in the lower middle-class and working-class group expressing attachment to disenfranchised neighborhoods lived near predominantly black disadvantaged areas. All concentrated disadvantage-exposed artists were raised in predominantly black areas. Furthermore, at least four artists defined community in terms of shared blackness, claiming black artists as their community. These patterns suggest that race and class, not just class, matter in producing neighborhood attachment. However, disentangling their unique intersecting effects for nonblack artists and other neighborhood types requires further study.

Our findings also highlight the historical importance of cross-class alliances in black placemaking strategies. Research shows that materially privileged neighborhood residents (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 2007) and hip-hop artists (Young 2013) are better able to engage in informal community building. Linking artists from different residential experience categories who share ideas about community could shift the structure/agency tension to support making and remaking the places artists feel connected to, through hip-hop (Hunter et al. 2016). Finally, our analysis suggests that the black placemaking framework could be powerful for future analyses of rural black places. The fact that some black artists in our sample who felt allegiance to geographic communities came from small, predominately black southern towns suggests studies of these spaces might be a fruitful line of future research for the black placemaking framework.

Our sample is mostly black men from the southern United States. To get a deeper understanding of how place shapes artists’ sense of community and responsibility, future work with other populations is necessary. Because post-civil rights southern social life carries unique spatial inequality patterns (Hendry and Edwards 2009; Hunter and Robinson 2016), interviewing artists outside the South could yield fruitful analyses. Although we found no significant gender differences, gender socialization encouraging women’s sense of responsibility for others and black women’s additional responsibility to collective “black community/ies” (Schieman 2005) and uniquely precarious position in hip-hop (Collins 2006; Fischer 2012; Perry 2004) mean that replicating this study with additional female artists could yield nuanced findings about how social status and residential experience combine to influence hip-hop artists’ community work.

Limitations notwithstanding, our findings underscore hip-hop’s social significance and unique ability to affect listeners and initiate social
change (Mohammed-Akinyela 2012; Rose 1994; Watkins 2006). It exposes the power of specific geographic spaces in black placemaking processes by illustrating how artists’ exposure to black spaces and people affected by structural inequality shapes beliefs about community and artistic responsibility. Considering known advantages of hip-hop in education, social justice, and personal and communal uplift (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Hill 2009), it could arguably be even more influential if it provided additional opportunities for artists to embrace and affect communities they claim as their own.

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REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

Sarah Becker is an associate professor of sociology and women’s and gender studies at Louisiana State University. Her primary research interests include the ethnographic study of community-based reactions to crime and disorder, intersectionality, and the relationship between social status and crime.

Castel Sweet is the coordinator for community engaged learning and scholarship in the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community at the University of Dayton. Her primary research agenda involves examining the relationships among culture, race, and community involvement.