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An Analysis of Chicago’s Culture As Defined Through Chance the Rapper’s *Everybody’s Something*

It is not uncommon for music artists to use their craft to call attention to pressing social issues. In 1979, Pink Floyd produced a song called *Another Brick in the Wall* to expose issues pertaining to the American education system.¹ In 2000, Bruce Springsteen released the song *American Skin* to draw attention to subject of police brutality.² Whether the message in the song is hidden in the lyrics or forthright, artists continue to use their musical talents to publicize issues that resonate with them. One artist known for calling attention to social issues while developing a drastically new style of music in the process in the city of Chicago goes by the name of Chance the Rapper also known as Chance. Prior to Chance’s rise to fame, Chicago was known for their “Chopper” style of rap music that involved “spittin bars” at an incredibly fast speed and “heavy” rhymes. Further down the evolutionary time line, Kanye West gained his fame from the south side of Chicago with the “chipmunk soul” style of rap that he popularized and would become the staple of his own music and others in the rap game.³ However, Chance’s style significantly differs from the styles developed in Chicago. In 2013, when he released his second album *Acid Rap*, he created original rhymes and wordplay with instrumentals that resembled those of calm and mellow jazz, gospel, and blues beats. However, in that same album, he produced a song titled *Everybody’s Something* that diverges significantly from the rest of his album in style that calls attention to pressing social issues in the city of Chicago. Although the title of the song hints towards the meaning of the song that everybody has a purpose in this life, the lyrics also allude to the issues in inner city Chicago.

from his point of view. The artistic devices used in the accompanying music video accentuate the beauty and the pain that encapsulates his hometown.

However, the question of whether the message in accompanying music video to *Everybody Something* deviates to far from Chicago’s unique style of music and too harsh on Chicago respectively becomes an issue when one man creates his own definition for a city. Writers like Keith Eggener and Douglas Powell have made arguments using the term “critical regionalism” to analyze artist and scholars who attempt to define a region through geography or culture. Chance uses visual devices in the music video of *Everybody’s Something* to harshly define the city of Chicago through the violence and corruption, but encourages a new progressive culture that rejects the evils that plague Chicago and enquires the city’s people to become “something”.

Different writers have their own definition of critical regionalism that serve as the basis for their arguments; however, the overall goal of critical regionalism is to make people feel at home within their own environment by creating art or scholarly text that incorporates the peculiarities of the specific region’s culture with modern culture. Keith Eggener argues that infusing modern art with a local culture tends to oversimplify the regional culture or force a culture among the people in the defined space. Eggener believes that infusing modern culture with regional culture is “an extremely fine balance” and threatens tradition; moreover, in order to successfully capture the image of the region, the artist attempting to define the space must attune their self to the “state of mind” of the people. Conversely, Douglas Powell believes that once the artist fully understands the regional culture, he or she can understand exactly what to resist about the regional culture emulated through the art, rather than resisting the idea of globalization and modernization as a whole. Powell argues that “looking critically at a story or a place provides a crucial starting place for understanding how the identity of the place is rooted in

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4 Eggener, 235
conflict and change as much as in permanence, stability, and continuity.” Rather than jeopardizing cultural tradition, Powell understands critical regionalism as a vehicle for social change and progress.

Chance focuses his definition of place on social structures, conflicts in particular. Throughout the music video, Chance displays news clippings, various images and videos in the moving outline of his body. Some of the clips include old schools blues, and gospel artists singing; however, far more images include bags of money, guns, children, and news footage of recent shootings. According to Powell, for Chance to display certain aspects of his upbringing within the streets of Chicago, and how the greed and money – indicated through the pictures of money and business men shaking hands – played a role in his upbringing adds to the regional definition of Chicago because he understands the regional culture and each clip and image presents a part of his own individual experience (Figure 2).

Because Chance and the video producers designed the video to illustrate the struggles that Chance had to overcome in order to become “something”, signified by the title of the song Everybody’s Something, it is easy to assume that the images of money do not go beyond personal struggle. Money and corporate greed have beleaguered Chicago for many years, and the exponential rise in debt only exacerbates the issue.

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5 Reichert, 14
7 Reichert, 14
Recently the Mondelez/Nabisco food company laid off 600 workers in Chicago and moved their jobs to Mexico in an attempt to save money, which put those men and women out of work. A move of this nature can be justifiable if a company is going into bankruptcy; however, the CEO of Mondelez/Nabisco has made 20 million dollars a year for the last nine years. Although Eggener believes critical regionalism belittles cultural tradition, he fails to acknowledge when the attempt to modify the regional culture encourages positive social change. Chicago thrives of its working class and developed as an industrial city sometimes dubbed the city of “broad shoulders”. In situations like the one involving the 600 workers of Nabisco where the value of life of Chicago citizens is jeopardized due to greed, the art and music should reflect the struggle even if it harshly criticizes the city and does not portray the view of all of Chicago’s citizens. However, Powell utilizes the idea of continuity with progress in his definition of critical regionalism. Although the Chance’s music video gratingly exposes the issues in Chicago, he calls upon the concerns in hopes that Chicago will move past the problems and towards a progressive culture.

With Chance’s allusion to corporate greed and money and its role in hindering his hometown’s growth, Chance ask his listeners to see the city's social structures as shaping individuals' lives and identities. Chance isolates children and teenager in particular throughout the video. One disconcerting series of visual aids that Chance presents through his outlines is one that shows a video clip of young female child playing (Fig. 3); followed by an image of two men shaking hands (Fig. 2); then an image of a young boy dead on the street (Fig. 4). In 2012, out of the 152 homicides that occurred in the city, 38 of the victims killed were teenagers.

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9 http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org/history-fair/history-fair-topics/subject-essays/chicago-working-class-history-topics.html
10 Reichert, 14
With the increase in gang activity and ineffective gun laws in Chicago, the amount of teens that resort to malicious activity rises steadily. However, before Chance displays the image of the dead child, he shows an image of two men shaking hands to signify that the issue that causes teens to join gangs is much more complex than the availability of guns and drugs. In a city like Chicago, where families have incomes that fall below the poverty line jobs are disappearing; and the public education systems are failing, teens resorting to gang activity as a solution to boredom and a means to make money is inevitable. Although many other factors contribute to this issue alone, the issues within the city are conducive to Chicago’s identity as a region. Powell’s definition of critical regionalism acknowledges the complexities of each culture, but understands that these same complexities may only serve as a basis upon which to improve. Chicago’s densely populated streets remain far from stable in terms of its abundant culture, and rampant gang activity and crime, but these features that Chance outlines are a small portion of what he believes makes the region what it is currently.

Even though Chance highlights the issues in Chicago throughout the video, he offers way to work against the cycle of violence and greed through his own life story. The clips and images shown are usually followed by images of death and violence that contribute heavily to his definition of the region; however, the name of the song cannot be taken out of context. The song mentions Chance conquering his

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13 Reichert, 21
demons and the issues of the city and becoming successful; moreover, the song encourages other to do the same. Towards the end of the music video, an aerial satellite map shows the geographical outline of Chicago, but then the camera slowly and dramatically zooms out of Chicago to a satellite image of the earth and then the universe; eventually, the video zooms out to Chance the Rapper’s eye and then a full moving picture of Chance.\(^{14}\) This portion of the video clip is the only one where Chance’s outline is not shown; therefore, the absence of that outline suggest that he’s speaking directly to his listeners and telling them that the amount of possibilities for them to change the world are endless. He encourages his listeners to live outside the confines of their city and culture and make their mark in the world. Chance’s style of music, his ability to break the mold of young people in Chicago, and his encouragement for others to follow his lead suggest that he’s encouraging change in the city. Eggener’s argument suggest upholding tradition serves as the best way to define a region, but ignores the fact that culture is subject to change. However, Powell suggests a culture that respects the tradition but encourages a progressive culture where specific aspects of remain in flux.\(^{15}\) Even though, Chance delimits Chicago through the richness of its music and culture and the widespread gun violence, he encourages his listeners to break boundaries and stereotypes and aim towards the goal of becoming “something”.

Eggener argues that an artist should attend more directly to these “states of mind” (referring to the mind set of those who live in the region) by heeding the voices of those responsible for building particular cultures.\(^{16}\) This statement proves problematic because no two people have the same “state of mind”.

After viewing the music video multiple times, the resemblance of Chicago and my hometown of Newark, New Jersey seemed more substantive. In Newark, New Jersey, a city that resembles Chicago in that the homicide rate remains relatively high and the availability of guns and prominence of gang activity exists in large numbers, similar problems involving teenage death arise. Although the features that characterize Chicago are similar, an individual born and raised in Chicago would not claim to be from Newark or vice


\(^{15}\) Reichert, 21

\(^{16}\) Eggener, 235
versa. As Powell states, the culmination of these individual experiences, whether their nature is blissful or sorrowful contribute to Chicago’s regional definition because they inimitably represent Chicago.\textsuperscript{17} To label Chicago solely by its geographic barriers or because the diversity in music and religion is too broad; in addition, limiting the region to a few characteristics that encompass a broad range of people oversimplifies the richness of the culture within the city. However, the genuine personal experiences of the individual can be difficult to invalidate because these stories are unique to the region; moreover, in the case of Chance the Rapper, these stories add to what makes his hometown, uniquely Chicago.

**Project Postmortem:** I’ve been interested in the way that people perceive cultures since my transition from middle school to high school. Not only because understanding culture allows people to appreciate the diversity in each other, but because of my own experience with having to adapt to what is considered “wealthy, white, suburban culture” from a predominantly black, urban culture. The idea of critical regionalism fascinated me because urban culture condemns sell outs or those who depart from urban culture to embrace a mainstream ideal; however, instances of internal reform, especially in urban environments. The different opinions set forth by different authors about critical regionalism allowed me to establish a definition for something that prior to this class was a group of unrelated thoughts.

In addition, the conference period with Nick was very helpful because I sometimes struggle with summarizing the main point in each paragraph into a topic sentence, so talking it out with you for that purpose was very helpful it making my paper more accessible to any reader especially my current audience, the Dartmouth student body.

\textsuperscript{17} Reichert, 14-15
Bibliography


