Preface

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On a warm September evening in 2012, eighteen-year-old Joseph Coleman rode a bike down a tree-lined street on Chicago's South Side. A nondescript Ford sedan slowly approached. Without warning, someone inside the car fired seven shots at the young man, striking him as he tried to flee. Pronounced dead at a nearby hospital, Coleman had become the latest victim in the city's infamous gang violence.

I first heard about Coleman's death two years later, during conversations with Chicago teenagers. At the time, I was directing an after-school program designed to help South Side youth cope with neighborhood violence. Coleman's murder was just one of the local shootings they shared with me. The more I dug into the details, however, the more I knew something was different. As I would learn, the attack on Coleman had escalated on social media, across platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Over several months, Coleman—an aspiring rapper known as "Lil JoJo"—had been embroiled in an online, musical war of words with a rival gang. He sparked hostilities when he uploaded a homemade music video to YouTube. The grainy footage features the teen and a dozen shirtless friends holding a small arsenal of pistols and machine guns, taunting their rivals. Then, Coleman uploaded a second video. This one showed him driving through rival gang territory, taunting his enemies through the open window of a passing car. As the death threats poured in, Coleman brazenly advertised his physical location on Twitter, daring his enemies to come find him and make good on their word. Four hours later, he was dead. His rivals used social media to celebrate the killing, kicking off more rounds of retaliatory shootings that continue to this day.

Even more surprising than the role of social media in Coleman's death were local teens' responses to it. They were simultaneously terrified and enthralled. In one moment, they worried about getting trapped in the crossfire of this new brand of gang warfare. But in the next moment, they devoured any and every piece of related digital content. Teens huddled around their phones, debating which gang was "really" the most violent. They kept a running "score," tallying who had buried the most bodies. I noticed a morbid similarity between their giddy discussions of gang violence and their debates about favorite professional basketball players. But

instead of comparing stat lines and three-point percentages, they discussed gunplay and homicide.

These teens are far from unique in their obsession. As the details surrounding Coleman's murder went public, audiences across Chicago, the United States, and the globe flocked to social media to witness the still-raging rivalry for themselves.[1] The half dozen videos bearing Coleman's name drew tens of millions of views, "likes," and comments. Practically overnight, dozens of websites and blogs sprang up to chronicle online feuds and forecast the next street-corner battle. Hoping to claim some of that attention for themselves, scores of Chicago youth—particularly gang-associated teens—began emulating Coleman's online content.[2] Consider this: Of the estimated 45 gang factions in the six square miles surrounding Coleman's Englewood neighborhood, a staggering 31 of them—roughly 69 percent—had uploaded one of these inflammatory music videos to YouTube by 2016.[3] This means that for every two blocks there is at least one group of teens creating violent, gang-related content. The race to attract clicks didn't stay confined to Chicago for very long. Media outlets in New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, and other global hubs report similar trends.[4] Some of these cities have responded by launching "social media policing units," arresting young people based (sometimes solely) on their social media activity.[5] National intelligence agencies, including the FBI, are developing artificial intelligence (AI) and digital surveillance tools to aggressively investigate and incarcerate them.

As I watched these audiences variously consume, celebrate, and decry this online content, I couldn't help but ask: How had this all begun? Who were these young men, and why were they so willing to risk death and arrest for something as fleeting as a YouTube video or Instagram photo? Why did their online behavior so captivate the public? And how was it affecting social life in their surrounding communities?

In 2014, I set out to find answers. I started interviewing young people in my after-school program, and in communities across the South Side. As enlightening as these initial conversations were about the dynamics of teenage consumption, it was a frustratingly partial picture. After hundreds of conversations, I still didn't know much at all about the whys and hows of production. I still hadn't spoken to a single one of the young men who were creating such startling content. This would all change one afternoon, during a fortuitous interview with a young man named Ryan, who had been enrolled in my program. Ryan disclosed that his nineteen-year-old brother, known on the street as Zebo, was a member of a gang faction responsible for filming and uploading some of Chicago's most watched

music videos. They called themselves CBE, short for Corner Boys Entertainment, or simply the Corner Boys.[6] The thirty or so young men controlled a roughly four-block territory located a couple of miles away in the Taylor Park neighborhood. Over the span of just two years, the Corner Boys had attracted millions of views and tens of thousands of social media followers from around the world. I was already familiar with CBE's online content; their videos were a constant topic of conversation in my after-school program. I knew that if I truly wanted to get my head around this issue, I had to go to the source. I had to talk to the Corner Boys.

I asked Ryan to broker a meeting.

Three months later, I sat in the living room of one of the Corner Boys' central figures—a dreadlocked, fast-talking nineteen-year-old named AJ. For nearly four hours, we discussed a range of topics—from AJ's initial decision to upload violent content to how it had transformed his daily life. He introduced me to other key members of CBE, encouraging them to talk about their own experiences with social media, gang life, and violence. I met Dominik, a stoic teen who likes to flash the latest street wear trends on his Instagram account. I spoke with Adam, known in the neighborhood for his quick wit and controversial Twitter profile. I sat down with Xavier, the most well known of the Corner Boys. The lanky twenty-year-old was quick to show off his recent YouTube music video, which had surpassed two million views. After the introductions, AJ encouraged me to stick around for a few more hours to watch them record their newest music video. As they wrapped up for the evening, he invited me to come back the next day.

And so began my relationship with the Corner Boys. Over the next two years, I spent virtually every day with these young men, shadowing them throughout their daily lives.[7] Each morning, I made the half-hour drive from my home near downtown to Taylor Park. We'd spend hours watching music videos, discussing gang rivalries, shooting dice, and generally hanging out until late in the evening, sometimes past sunrise. The time I had devoted to the Corner Boys' younger siblings and family members in after-school programs opened the door to their world. But remaining there, for as long as I did, required real give-and-take. These young men were providing access and information as a kind of favor to me. And they vaguely wanted something in return.

Following that first day in AJ's apartment, several of them asked me to drive them to early morning court hearings. Others approached me for rides to work, to see family, and visit probation officers. Without cars and licenses, and fearing attacks on public transportation, they had few safe

options for moving around the city. That was, until I showed up. I soon became their go-to option—a role I was happy to play. They had invited me in and entrusted me with their stories; I wanted to give back however I could. I started responding to calls at all hours of the day and night, from various young men desperate to get across town. I drove them to see grandmothers, girlfriends, and sons. I accompanied them to funerals, baby showers, and birthday parties. And as their online popularity gained momentum, we packed into my car for road trips across the United States—to cities like Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Atlanta—where they met up with online collaborators, fans, and lovers. Back in Taylor Park, we'd spend hours in my parked car, listening to music and watching online videos as we escaped the sticky summer heat and chilling winter winds. Before I knew it, my passenger seat had become something of a confessional—a place where they shared hopes and fears and dreams that they otherwise hid from the public eye. I used an audio recorder and notetaking application on my phone to preserve their words.[8]

The more entwined I became in the Corner Boys' lives, the more deeply I came to care for them. The more I cared for them, the more tension I felt between my professional and personal responsibilities. As a researcher, I was trying to understand the Corner Boys, not change them. But as a violence prevention worker, and as someone increasingly invested in their well-being, it felt irresponsible to sit idly by when they engaged in harmful and self-destructive acts. I eventually found a middle (if not entirely satisfactory) path forward. When I heard about or witnessed problematic behaviors, I refrained from judgment and paternalism. Instead I listened closely, probing their underlying feelings and rationales, allowing them to be the authorities about their own lives. Sometimes I created distractions and alternatives. One summer, I made a standing offer to pick them up and get them out of the neighborhood whenever their rivals attempted a drive-by shooting. I provided lunch, dinner, and other diversions for as long as it took for the neighborhood to cool off, returning only after their talk of retaliation had died down. As I watched online audiences applaud the Corner Boys' violent personas and encourage ever riskier behaviors, I committed to serve as a counterweight. I actively celebrated their noncriminal identities and accomplishments that they withheld from social media—a newborn son, a month of sobriety, a high grade on a school assignment. I also leveraged my social networks to find them jobs, re-enroll them in school, and help them recover from addictions, access healthcare, and fulfill family obligations. I even supported some of their efforts to abandon their violent online personas by uploading more nonviolent con-

tent. I tapped my own background in audio production and arts programming to support alternative modes of creative expression.

Across all of these moments, I found the answers I was looking for, and far more that I hadn't anticipated. The pages that follow recount what I learned. For generations, society has denied young black men a seat at the table, disregarding their voices while demonizing their mere existence. They've been labeled urban predators and menaces to society. But now, thanks to the proliferation of social media, these young people have found a new way to be seen and heard, if only by twisting these age-old stereotypes to suit their own needs. In Taylor Park and across the globe, gang-associated youth are exploiting digital platforms to commodify urban violence and cash in on the public's long-standing fascination with ghetto poverty. In the process, they're forging a new, if often dangerous, pathway toward upward mobility, self-worth, and social support. And as they jockey for online infamy, they're reshaping everyday life in their communities, forcing us to reconsider many of our taken-for-granted ideas about gangs, violence, and urban disadvantage.

It's easy to jump to conclusions when we hear stories about teens like Joseph Coleman, or when we watch videos from groups like the Corner Boys. Unfortunately, most of those conclusions are wrong. Yes, these young men brazenly celebrate crime and violence, but they're doing it for reasons we don't often consider. Behind their online bravado is a desperate attempt to build a better future for themselves, to feel loved, to be seen as someone special. In that respect, they're flocking to social media for some of the same reasons as everyone else. They're just doing it under drastically different conditions—conditions that should provoke our consternation more than these young people do. Their online behaviors are inseparable from an offline world scarred by immense structural violence. Like all youth, they're just trying to live their lives within the possibilities and limits of the world we've created for them.

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