

Beatlab: How a Hip-Hop Digital Space Became an Outlet for Political Dialogue
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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of a project called “Beatlab,” a digital music studio that was created at Chestnut Hill College as a gathering place to craft music (beats) and write personal reflections (rhymes). I document how Beatlab emerged as a safe space for expression and self-exploration and in turn, became a hub for conversation around complex political issues for the College and beyond.

Keywords: hip-hop, beats, rhymes, politics, safe-space, civic engagement

Introduction

This article illustrates how political dialogue was fostered among a college community through “Beatlab,” a student-led organization at Chestnut Hill College, who began meeting in a 10 foot by 5 foot unused office to play music and discuss hip-hop culture. After a few meetings, the group began to share their own creations, musically (in the form of beats) and rhymes (most were lyrics already written but some lyrics were “freestyled” or made up on the spot). After a few months, the group would grow and involve the participation of other colleges and universities in the Philadelphia region.

Inspired by a room in the National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington DC that housed hip-hop memorabilia, the meeting space was renovated to pay homage to hip-hop. “Beatlab” is now known as both a place and a group of people. Its conversations were initially light-hearted, but as time progressed, they became serious and reflected important matters in the group’s lives and the world around them. This article explains how and why Beatlab emerged as a “safe space” for expression and self-exploration and in turn, became a hub for conversation for complex political issues.

The Message: Hip-Hop and Politics

Hip-Hop has just celebrated its 45th birthday and its impact is ubiquitous. Its origins are traced to 1973 and Clive Campbell (known as DJ Kool Herc) who threw parties with his sister in the recreational room in the building where they lived, 1520 E. Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, New York City. DJ Kool Herc would move these parties outside to the public parks to accommodate his party's growing crowds. Eventually, other DJ's would create their own parties and like Kool Herc, heavily utilize the NYC Parks and Recreation system to spread the parties throughout the other boroughs. Over time, a unique subculture emerged from these gatherings that possessed four interconnected elements: DJing, MCing, breakdancing, and graffiti¹. The primary function of the MC was to interact with the crowd and to serve as a promotor for the DJ². The MC would integrate "call and response" as a way to engage audiences and eventually, their performances were delivered in rhyme form³. The term "hip-hop" itself came from a random mish-mosh of words used in a rhyme by Keith Cowboy, an MC in the group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and DJ Lovebug Starski, a DJ who was known for rapping and DJing at the same time. By the time MC Wonder Mike rapped his famous line from Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979 (Sugarhill Records), "I said a hip-hop, hippie to the hippie, the hip, hip a hop and you don't stop," the term was already well established in the culture's ever-expanding lexicon.

Over the years, hip-hop culture would amass a large array of vocabulary, phrases, and slang. The breadth of its subject matter is also expansive and vary from the playful rhymes that originated in the NYC parks to the sincere reflection of MC's lives that were recorded via major

¹ The four elements are sometimes called "means of expression" with DJing as the "musical expression", breakdancing as the "physical expression", graffiti as the "visual expression", and mcing as the "lyrical expression." Initially, MCing was playful and linguistically uncomplicated.

² MC is an acronym for "Master of Ceremonies"

³ Which would become known as "rapping."

record labels. Most acknowledge that the root of hip-hop's turn to serious, societal subject matter began with the song "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five recorded on Sugar Hill Records in 1982. MC Melle Mel, one of the group's MC's, introduced the world to his view of New York City at the time, a bleak description of poverty and hopelessness:

*The bill collectors, they ring my phone
And scare my wife when I'm not home
Got a bum education, double digit inflation
Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station.*

Since "The Message", much of the hip-hop community has called on MC's to convey authenticity in their rhymes, an approach embedded into one of hip-hop's well-known sayings, "keep it real." This is a rallying cry for MC's to offer honest observation about their lives. It is also an urging for them to be responsible for their portrayed identities. Given that MCing is a free form of lyrical expression, it does not possess boundaries to its subject matter. As MC's shed light on their personal realities, however, subject matter naturally delves into politically oriented topics. "The Message" is an example of that and exemplifies how culture can act as Neumann and Nexon (2006) describe as a "mirror" of the real-world, an effective "analogical tool that illuminates concepts about society." To Neumann and Nexon, culture is important in providing context to historical events and a means of interpretation of them (p. 11). To the hip-hop community, MC's are the primary actors in capturing snapshots of time and place to communities that have received little attention. Chuck D, MC from the group Public Enemy, once proclaimed that hip-hop was the "CNN of the Hood."⁴

The social sciences have long used modern culture to inform its respective disciplines and in the last 10 years, hip-hop has slowly integrated into the academy. Hill (2009) and Hill

⁴ Perry, T. (2016). "Hamilton Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda Freestyles with the President." *Good*.
<https://www.good.is/articles/hip-hop-is-back-at-the-white-house>

and Petcheur (2013) are two playbooks for educators to utilize hip-hop as a pedagogical tool and are scholarly defenses for hip-hop as a legitimate means of study. As it stands, hip-hop based literature that intersects with government and politics is relatively small but growing and includes an analysis of political rap music as a reflection of African-American political attitudes (Bonnette 2015), a documentation of how youth have utilized hip-hop as a means of framing social justice issues (Clay 2012), an investigation of the tension between “pop culture rhymes” and the organically made rhymes “from the streets” (Watkins 2006), lyrical analysis that exposes social-economic conditions (Perry 2004), and a comparative study of how MC diction is deployed in different settings (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook 2008). Notable literature that studies how hip-hop is employed as a teaching and learning tool include the utilization of hip-hop videos to prompt dialogue on racial issues (Stein 2011) and the participation in hip-hop culture as a means of spurring civic engagement (Kuttner 2016). The work written here which reflects on Beatlab argues that hip-hop should be considered alongside other applications of modern culture as a political science teaching and learning tools.

Beatlab

The seeds for Beatlab were planted from an after-class discussion between a faculty member and students about hip-hop. The first few conversations focused mostly on music (especially the influence of technology in shaping how hip-hop sounds⁵) but subsequent ones would include other hip-hop centric topics including fashion trends, the evolution of dance, and graffiti. A few members of the group practiced hip-hop production and shared their creations. This prompted

⁵ Political Science, has a lengthy tradition of using various cultural medium such as film, television, books, music, and even social media as teaching and learning tools. Please see Hunt (2019), Wells (2018), Carpenter (2016), Stump (2013).

⁶ Given that hip-hop has utilized electronic tools to provide the musical backdrop of the culture, technology has had an impact of how it sounds. How hip-hop music sounds is sometimes called its “sonics.”

the desire for other students who did not know how to make hip-hop music to learn. The College graciously provided a space for these meetings, an unused 10 foot by 6 foot office located in the College's music corridor.

After a year of meeting, permission was granted by the College to “reclaim the space” and guided by the faculty member that received a small grant, it was transformed into a proper digital music studio. To that end, three computer stations equipped with Digital Audio Workstation software (Logic, FL Studio, and Akai Midi) and MIDI hardware was added to the room. A few members of the group had just visited the National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington DC and was awed by “The Musical Crossroads” exhibit that possessed hip-hop memorabilia. The group would mimic that room by hanging pictures of notable hip-hop producers (like J Dilla whose iconic Akai MPC machine is in the National Museum of African-American History and Culture) and collages of album covers from hip-hop's “golden age” (late 1980's to early 2000's) as well as influential 1950's to 1980's jazz, soul, and funk albums that were well-known for hip-hop samples. Finally, a large banner that pays homage to one of hip-hop's most significant mantras, “Knowledge of Self,” was printed and hung⁷.

Shortly after the space was renovated, the community would grow quickly and had the participation to file as a student organization recognized by the College⁸. From here, the number of regular meetings would increase and the group would elect a formal leadership structure.

Creating a “Safe Space” for Political Dialogue

⁷ The idea that the culture is open to self-expression and self-awareness is a foundational idea of hip-hop and one that pioneer Afrika Bambaataa calls the “fifth element” or “the knowledge of self.”

⁸ See Appendix A for pictures of the Beatlab before and after renovation.

This paper employs semi-structured interviews of the Beatlab's founding members to assess how the community was formed and how it became a "safe space" to discuss politically sensitive content. This paper also dissects the themes on the Beatlab's first project, *Mics Ain't Free*, a hip-hop album.

In August 2018, Beatlab became an official student organization with 11 founding members: 5 men and 6 women, 5 music majors and 6 in humanities or social science, 2 seniors, 2 juniors, 2 sophomores, 4 freshman and 1 alum. Five members are African-American and 6 members are White. The Beatlab's advisor is a faculty member who is male, a social scientist who is in his 40's and is Pacific Islander.

Beatlab's official grand opening to the college community was in December 2018. The group screened their project, *Mics Ain't Free*, and participated in a moderated panel discussion which reflected on their experiences in forming the Beatlab and their contributions to the project. The students would remark repeatedly that it was a "safe space" where they "free to be themselves" and "allowed them to speak on difficult topics." How did this happen? Interviews revealed two emergent themes that shed light on this question: 1) the traits of the "creative space" and 2) identity and mission formation.

Traits of the Creative Space

The interviews revealed that a level of comfort was cultivated by the existence of the Beatlab, both as a physical space and as a group of people. Students appreciated that the Beatlab space was small and that it felt "private" and "intimate." They felt that most spaces at the College were crowded and that there was a severe lack of common spaces to relax and commiserate with other students. The Beatlab provided an environment that was relatively free

of distraction and felt welcoming. They believed that they were free to “make noise” if they wanted, which they felt did not exist anywhere else on campus.

One interviewee remarked that recruitment into the group was seamless as students are generally aware of the talents among their classmates, a benefit of being in a small college. The original core pulled in others who had some interest in hip-hop and “made beats” or “wrote rhymes or poetry” or was “good at editing” or was “nice with the camera.” Overall, the group was enthusiastic about being in a collective with other people that considered themselves “creative.” The students formed bonds because they were like-minded in their sensibilities and felt that that they had ownership over the environment, two elements that they felt were generally not present in other spaces around the College. In a sense, the Beatlab became their creative refuge.

Interviewees consistently mentioned that Beatlab brought a level of informality that was not present in other spaces around the College and was diametrically opposed to the rigidity of the classroom. Students felt comfortable in hanging out in the Beatlab and exchanging ideas with others without the anxiety of critical peer scrutiny. It is peer scrutiny that they feel inhibits their talents and that the classroom, in particular, is a common setting for the potential for embarrassment. The feeling of being “on-edge” in the classroom hinders their creative, intellectual exploration.

Several interviewees also mentioned that the power dynamic in the Beatlab is different than other spaces around the College. The faculty member, for example, is seen in a different light when in the Beatlab and although a power dynamic exists, they are seen as a fellow creative, an “alter-ego” of sorts to their “normal” role as a teacher/scholar. This was evident as more non-student members of the college community participated in Beatlab sessions. Over

time, students felt comfortable with their presence as these other members were “entering their space” as “co-creatives.” Students reflect on Beatlab’s atmosphere:

The space is important, you could have this be all online, you know, everybody knows each other. But when everybody comes into the same room at the same time with the intention of telling a story that they want to tell, they all kind of get expressed at the same time. It all kinds of gels together and finds a place.

I think we made each other safe to deliver a message... So by everyone coming together and having this small community within each other, like whatever external world that existed beyond them, I think we made each other more brave to speak up because we saw each other doing it.

I feel like everything that was already in that room that day that I first entered was all I needed to spark my creativity. At that point, I knew that there was a space on campus for exactly that purpose, it was already meaningful. I just knew that. All right, this is home now. I can go somewhere on campus, do what I love doing with people who love doing the same thing.

You go in this room and you these doors close and you’re in here with this group of people and it’s like..... it’s like a breath, like a deep breath. Like I don’t gotta be so, you know, stressed or upright, I can chill. I can say what I’m thinking. It’s not so much pressure on me to be a perfect student right now or to be, you know, to hold to this standard of, you know, somebody that’s thinking constantly about what they’re doing and what it looks like, what it’s going to look like to other people and everything. You just go in there and all of that leaves you at the door.

Identity and Mission Formation

Filing to become a student organization formally recognized by the College prompted the Beatlab to create a leadership structure and articulate its primary function. Over the course of a year, the bonds between the group strengthened, but it was not until a need to complete the filing requirements that the group was forced to articulate what Beatlab actually *is*. Beatlab knew that it was a collective of creatives with a general interest in hip-hop, but how do they articulate who they are? Also, what are its goals? The group stressed the importance of forming a mission, an action heavily embedded in the identity of their College. It is an ever-present part of the College’s atmosphere and is deeply rooted in its history.⁹

⁹ Chestnut Hill College prides itself in being a “mission based institution,” rooted in its history as a school funded by the Sisters of St. Joseph, a progressive Catholic nun order who founded 9 institutions of higher education in the 1920’s. The mission of Chestnut Hill College is “to provide students with holistic education in an inclusive Catholic

Conversations about how to align Beatlab's mission with the College's mission raised questions of how to stay true to the group's individual, artistic identities. The group decided that any projects that would be created as a group would have a unifying voice surrounding themes of social justice. They felt that Beatlab and its root in hip-hop served as an ideal "sounding board" to creatively comment on societal issues. However, it was also decided, in the words of Beatlab's president, to "bring our full selves to the Beatlab" and encourage all creativity even if it was not rooted in social justice. This decision was particularly important as it provided an opportunity to leverage their newfound platform toward topics that they considered important, but to also maintain Beatlab's informal, organic, and playful spirit. The meetings from this point on, then, would be multifaceted and entail multiple groups working on different projects. Some were learning hip-hop production, others would be writing or reciting rhymes and poems, and some would be creating visualizations. Like a true hip-hop function, it was a simultaneous jumble of highly energized, creative activity. Their efforts toward one cohesive project would be inspired by a deadline, December 6, which was the official debut of the Beatlab to the College community and when they would showcase their work. Students reflect on Beatlab's mission:

It gave me chances to say exactly what I was going through and seeing this, it could potentially be someone else's story, you always got to think about what it can do for someone else. If I made something just for me, it wouldn't be as therapeutic to me, it wouldn't make a difference and that's what I needed to do, I need to make a difference. I needed a voice and it gave me a voice.

We all have certain identities that are shunned. And by knowing this and by seeing each other speak up, it really created a sense of community. It's like we, in a way, we're always trying to protect each other when we know in a world where just having our identities, um, is this threatening in itself? You're probably off to protect each other by speaking up.

community marked by academic excellence, shared responsibility, personal and professional growth, service to one another and to the global community, and concern for the Earth." The College's mission is formulated and preserved by the Sisters of St. Joseph (SSJ), a progressive congregation of women religious whose roots are traced to LePuy, France. The other SSJ colleges and universities are: Avila College (Kansas City, MO), College of Our Lady of the Elms (Chickopee, MA), Fontbonne University (St. Louis, MO), Mount St. Mary University (Los Angeles, CA), Regis College (Weston, MA), St. Catherine University (St. Paul, MN), St. Joseph's College (Brooklyn, NY), The College of St. Rose (Albany, NY).

Mics Ain't Free

Mics Ain't Free is the Beatlab's first project, a 9 track, 26 minute hip-hop album. It has an overarching theme based on speech and expression and subthemes that include #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo¹⁰. The following section will provide a brief summary of these themes followed by some reflection from those who created it. Overall, the interviews convey that their contributions were influenced heavily by identity and was their personalized response to the country's current political climate.

Speech and Expression

Mics Ain't Free began with one of the most spirited conversations in Beatlab: should the group allow profanity on their project? The group wanted their project to be as "honest" and "raw" as possible while recognizing that a vast majority of hip-hop music contains profanity. In some ways, there is a link between profanity and authenticity in hop-hop; can the creative pieces exclude language if were to serve as an unfiltered example of honest speech? The group discussed profanity's role in hip-hop and debated its presence in the culture. The group discussed specific placement of profanity on records (from the most vulgar forms to subtle additions for emphasis) and how the profanity debate has played out among hip-hop artists themselves¹¹. Up to this point, there was no policy among the group in prohibiting profanity within the Beatlab. There was a mutual understanding, however, that profanity is not to be used as a form of disrespect and that distasteful subject matter is unacceptable. Common rules of civility is part of Beatlab's atmosphere and blatantly profane content is not tolerated. The group struggled with how the dynamics of speech changed in their "safe-space" when these conversations were

¹⁰ The album is available on all major streaming platforms under "CHC Beatlab" and at www.micsaintfree.com.

¹¹ The conversation about the role of profanity in hip-hop has long been debated and after decades of conversation, the debate continues on appropriate means of use. There are many MCs, such as Rakim (considered to be the greatest MC of all time), who have taken pleasure to refrain from the use of profanity in their lyrics.

brought to the larger public. Would it be possible to be “raw and honest” (in other words, use profanity if needed for emphasis) while shedding light on important issues? Would their creative work maintain authenticity or would it be considered “watered down”?

Ultimately, the group decided against using profanity on their project. After several conversations, the group was concerned that even if the profanity was “artistically appropriate,” “well-placed” and “accepted among hip-hop heads,” it would damage the project’s impact. The most dominant voices among the group were convinced that allowing profanity on the project would result in many rebuking it, no matter how competent the expression may be. They acknowledged that the group was already working against pre-conceived notions and skepticism about hip-hop, which would be exacerbated by the inclusion of savory language. In order to expose hip-hop to new audiences, Beatlab felt that it needed to focus on a delivery that would appeal to all. The group concluded that having a platform for speech and expression like Beatlab has consequences and that there is responsibility when its creations are moved from the “private” to the “public” domain. This album was essentially their debut to the public. The project would carry this tension of speech and expression throughout its creation and would become the name of the project: “Mics Ain’t Free.”

Students began the album by addressing this running conversation in their first three songs, the title track “Mics Ain’t Free,” the song “So Free” and the spoken word interlude called “The Story Begins.” In “So Free,” there are multiple references to the conundrum of speaking up when one has a platform and the backlash that might come with it, making a clear reference to the controversy surrounding NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his kneeling anthem protest.

*They said mics ain't free
Mos def they ain't free enough
Think they got the keys*

*No locks could keep this tucked
Quiet on one knee
They still tell you to not speak up
Land of the free
Now that's where fact becomes a bluff*

“The Story Begins” is influenced by Martin Luther King Jr. and the violence that took his life:

*Our story begins with Martin Luther King
shot in the cheek on his hotel balcony
Enjoying the sun on April 4th evening he never saw it comin', how could he?
King's murder tells a story of jealousy and hatred
For King was the nation's patron
Commanding peace while police brutality and racist economics increased frugality
It's not easy to be on stage.
Famous people have a reason to be afraid
How could we ever be safe from..... dis-crim-in-nation
When I only pretend to be me....and mics ain't free.*

Parts of “Mics Ain't Free” vents about materialism and their battle with speaking up against it:

*Couldn't save for a rainy day bought a gold chain,
See, The thing about that chain
It comes in different pains
Oh you know them new kicks, those Gucci belts
Tell em what's left?
You a mental slave
Couldn't pave a way
So you clinged to waves
Whose to blame
Well look in the mirror
It couldn't be any clearer
Cuz I'm agitated, matter fact aggravated
Why can't I speak my piece
Man I miss my peace
Cuz I'm livid
Man
And my brothers keep that dream vivid*

Student reflect on speech and expression as a theme:

I also started writing a log injuries about mental illness and politics and stuff like that...Mics Ain't Free – I just kind of took that, thought of people who were famous and were killed or killed themselves specifically because were on a stage and people heard what they had to say and did not like it.

We shouldn't have to sensitize our expression. It was about the message and this was a way for letting people know what the "Mic" stands for – nothing we do is free. Everything we do has some type of cause – I wonder when we start getting our "money back" in a way, we've been paying all this time. I just want to know when, when is our's coming – pay out, pay back.

You've been yearning for this, you've been yearning for this opportunity to be able to stay with what's on your heart. You've been yearning for this opportunity to be able to speak. I feel like that's what each already – but "Mics Ain't Free", you're able to advocate for a wide range of people who may not have the ability or skill to rap or sing or whatever. Like they can listen to you, their therapist.

#BlackLivesMatter

Like many colleges and universities across the nation, finding opportunities to productively discuss the Black experience in America are few and far between. The Beatlab became a setting where crucial conversations about it occurred which in turn, heavily informed the contributions on *Mics Ain't Free*. The Beatlab interviews revealed that the "safe" environment allowed one to speak on topics like race that were not only politically tense, but personal. They consistently remarked that they were able to "fully bring themselves," and felt that their identity (and the different facets of it) were appreciated. For a subset of the group, conveying injustice of the Black experience in America was most pressing and would prove to be the foundation for their creative pieces.

#BlackLivesMatter was heavily influential in spurring conversation as some of its main tenets such as police violence, incarceration, and profiling were discussed at length. #BlackLivesMatter also served as teaching moments in hip-hop history as many of its themes have been part of hip-hop since its infancy. As a related matter, a dialogue about how MC's are traditionally perceived and how much attention on race is palatable among hip-hop fans ensued. Beatlab also discussed the nature of the "conscious MC" and some of the unfortunate stigma that comes with them. There was a mutual appreciation for those that are competent MC's technically, but can also address the intricacies of a complicated subject such as race. Favorite

MCs among the group are Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole, who seem to fit this mold well. This is important because the MCs that are creating much of the lyrical expression on *Mics Ain't Free* are heavily influenced by MCs whose content and identity is tied heavily to the Black identity and speaking on Black injustice.

#BlackLivesMatter is a theme that appears throughout *Mics Ain't Free*, manifesting itself in different ways. The opening piece, “To Whom It Doesn’t Concern” is a spoken word introduction to the album which reflects on the deportation of Haitian immigrants as a result of the threat of ending the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) program. The piece is addressed to John F. Kelly, former Secretary of Homeland Security:

*We, the people
We, the immigrant, the brown
Hold our truths to be self-evident that not all immigrant laws are created equal
I am here John Francis Kelly, frantic about America’s underbelly
Colonization is a beast that regurgitates but still eats
The fear of deportation, the fear of vacating 7 years, however suffocating it is, does not silence me.*

“So Free” tells a story of paranoia of being followed through the store while shopping and living with a consistent fear of racial profiling:

*We only so free
I’m entitled to all my rights and my liberties
The government infected we need to prep up some remedies
Violence in my vicinity
Not a day they don’t pray to the trinity
I need equality
When I’m shopping please do not follow me
Now you think I’m stealing in your head
There’s a probably, probably not or probably so
Probably probably probably is robbery of my dignity?*

“Blackout” is an expression of long-standing frustration for violence imposed on the Black body and a call for the end of systematic inequality. Similar to other pieces on *Mics Ain't Free*, there is the enumeration of Black lives that were lost to police violence.

Terrence Crutcher, Sandra Bland
We need speed dial for an ambulance
Shot Philando till his clip was empty
Shot a therapist that was Charles Kinsey
They sick for real they was never friendly

Student reflect on #BlackLivesMatter as a theme:

We have seen immigration law mostly affect people that come from predominantly black and brown countries. It's something that's really important when we talk about social justice, when we talk about Black Lives Matter. This is what we say, black lives matter to me. All black lives matter. Black lives should also include immigrant black lives.

I was going through something. My brother had just started working in this neighborhood where he was experiencing a lot of racism and it hit me. I was like, I was on edge about that. I was worried about him every day. When asked what I'd like to talk about, I was like, I'm going to talk about the fact that it's like "no more martyrs." That's what I said. That's we came up with. The idea was no more martyrs.

Like we got to stand together in order for us to win this fight. If we're killing ourselves, then we can't win it all. We're just doing, we're just doing their job for them. Basically, we are doing what they want us to do. So if we put these guns down and we look at the people that die, innocent people that die with their hands up due to police brutality, literally people have died literally with their hands up and killed.

#MeToo

For a subset of the Beatlab, "fully bringing themselves" meant embracing womanhood and its challenges in America. Like those influenced by #BlackLivesMatter, this group was heavily influenced by the parallel social movement in #MeToo. During the time that *Mics Ain't Free* was created, #MeToo gained significant momentum and in late September 2018, Christine Blasey Ford (a psychology professor from Northern California) testified in the Senate confirmation hearing of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh who she accused of sexually assaulting her as teenagers. Media coverage of #MeToo and the Kavanaugh hearing was inescapable and provided context for Beatlab who wished to speak on sexual assault. The parallel conversation related to hip-hop that ensued in the Beatlab is the distasteful references to

mistreatment of women, sometimes from its most celebrated MC's¹². An insightful conversation was had to whether hip-hop itself is ready for its own #MeToo movement which many prominent members of the culture have been calling for¹³.

The conversations about #MeToo and sexual assault were anchored to the themes of speech and expression. There was particular emphasis on the psychology among women who have experienced sexual assault. The group found women in #MeToo to be brave, but at the expense of consistently reliving trauma. There were feelings of both admiration and grave concern for women like Christine Blasey Ford who faced some of the most vile public ridicule imaginable after publicly disclosing her story. The group discussed the anguish that women like Ford carries with them throughout their lives, a burden that the group concluded was insurmountable. Several interviewees stated that these conversations were the most difficult to process and were certainly Beatlab's "heaviest" discussions. It provided the necessary foundation for one of the most impactful pieces on *Mics Ain't Free* called "Poison Ivy," a tale of a young woman's pain and struggle to find her voice after experiencing sexual assault.

The refrain for "Poison Ivy":

*You are not silencing me
I own my body
I am not drowning my worth
I will keep fighting*

Verses from "Poison Ivy":

*But lemme hear bout the boy down the street with glasses, not very tall
Yeah it was Shane that you called him?
He did what? Forced you where?
No one better have any bright dreams for him*

¹² The academic coverage of misogyny in hip-hop is well-documented. A notable work that covers the subject is Osayande (2008).

¹³ Murphy, K. (2019). "It's time for a #MeToo moment in hip-hop." *New York Post*.
<https://nypost.com/2019/01/26/why-hip-hop-needs-its-own-metoo-moment/>

*He belongs in a cage
Full of demonic rage
should've thought but you decided to rape
She was only a girl
When you destroyed world
And all of her thoughts began to swirl
Was it her fault?
Could she cleanse it with salt?
This was not just a somatic assault?*

*Living in an epidemic
Of sexual violence
Within a world only known
To white men and wallets
Trying to silence all of our women
Now you know that ain't no way to be living.
Come on now speak up, I need excitement
Let's hear your indictments
Gotta stop sitting back and get to some fighting*

Students reflect on #MeToo as a theme:

Being an interface between the victim and the audience – is the artist speaking from personal experience? Are you advocating for a friend? Maybe. And it's like whether it happened to you personally or not, you are aware of it. You have experienced it, whether it be you actually having experience it or you're being the reporter for your friend. And I know that this was Tupac spoke about a lot. Like yo, I never dealt drugs, I never did these types of things, but I'm the news reporter.

I mentioned faith and no guidelines and stuff from the intention of singing throughout the negativity. It was this track the there was a lot discussed about the negative things that she went through. And I loved it because at that point I was able to say, listen, we can come, we can, we can make it out of that.

Conclusion

Beatlab has had a consequential impact on the College as it has been recognized as a “safe space” where members of diverse backgrounds can develop camaraderie and speak on topics that are meaningful to them. In reflection of how Beatlab emerged, there are three primary lessons that might be employed by other institutions to replicate Beatlab's spirit and energy.

First, a dedicated physical space was critical in eventually spurring difficult conversation. The informal atmosphere created an environment in which members of the College community were unintimidated to socialize and exchange ideas. This natural exchange of concepts would stimulate collaboration and the Beatlab's members would fulfill roles organically depending on their creative skillset. Participants engage in a varying number of activities simultaneously such as learning how to make beats, writing rhymes, arranging songs, producing visualizations, or disseminating work to the public via social media. The physical space was crucial to provide a "home" for this activity and was important for Beatlab members whose sustained interactions solidified bonds between members. Over time, the gravity of conversation became heavier and by the time their project was being created, there was considerable rapport among the group. Like any collective endeavor that cultivates relationships, there is a time when participants find it easier to communicate and feel that their insight would be valued, even if it is critical. The concept of the "safe space" was earned through the trust built among the Beatlab's members who would eventually be comfortable with discussing the most personal and politically sensitive topics. The lesson learned was that the "physical space" was a necessary precursor to the "safe space."

Second, hip-hop is an exceptional vehicle for the initiation of political dialogue. Hip-Hop lyricism is akin to personal, exploratory research with the MC as the primary agent. It is a means to provide a platform for speech to all those who wish to participate but has historically been a platform for voices that have been traditionally suppressed. Beatlab's approach here is the *production of hip-hop*, a direct participation in the culture. In this vein, powerful messages are concocted from students who craft projects from their perspective and reflect on them. Students approach these creations as "artists" who wish to impose their personal distinctiveness.

Given this penchant in infusing their identity, the subject matter naturally delves into political themes. Students, then, utilize the creative platform as their vehicle to communicate their insight. These projects provide an “outlet” in which there are limited opportunities to express their attitudes on politically sensitive matters.

Last, members of the College community who are not students play a prominent role in creating and maintaining “safe spaces” like Beatlab by encouraging students to “make some noise.” When important members of the College administration approved the action to reclaim the Beatlab space, it came with a mandate: “to make some noise.” This was an approval among the powers-that-be that the clamor and commotion that usually surrounds hip-hop would be accepted. Hip-Hop has unfortunately had to confront the stereotypes that accompany it; essentially, that it is a loud, vulgar racket. Understandably, providing a “home” to this activity may be seen as a risk to administrators who wish to maintain an orderliness to the College atmosphere. Fortunately, the misconceptions of hip-hop are changing rapidly as the culture has permeated even the most formal settings and has started to solidify its place in institutions of higher education. There is a special gatekeeping role for those who have grown up in hip-hop culture and can help students contribute to it positively. They are more or less “permission givers” to students who have a great deal to express. In Beatlab’s experience, identifying and leveraging the expertise of non-student members of the College community was crucial in unlocking hip-hop’s potential. Maximizing the possibilities of cultivating politically sensitive discussion via hip-hop, then, will be dependent on what Public Enemy’s Chuck D advised in 1987 – “Bring the Noise!”

Note

This research was approved under the IRB ethical guidelines of Chestnut Hill College. All participants have provided their consent to participate in a pedagogical study.

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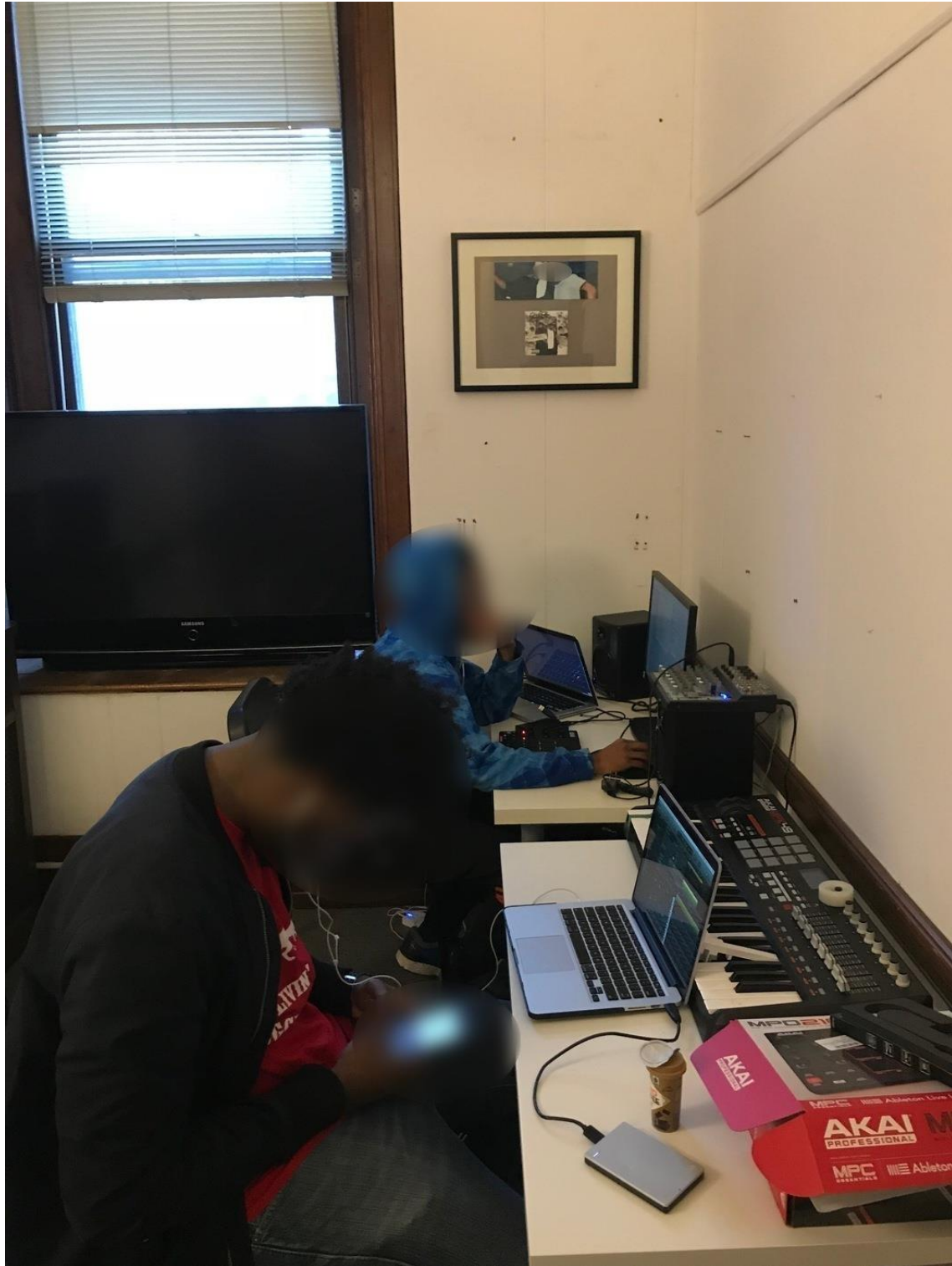
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Appendix A:

Beatlab Before Renovation



Beatlab After Renovation



Appendix B: *Mics Ain't Free* Album Cover

