Rahmaan Barnes asks: What will you paint on your life's canvas?

Because Chicago's strident and self-conscious "anti-racism" seems to lead nowhere good, it's more crucial than ever to know and embrace real black power. Imbued with agency, possibility, and accomplishment. Meet an exemplar of all that: the successful mural and multimedia artist Rahmaan Statik.

Photo By Matt Rosenberg. Original Mural Art By Rahmaan Statik. Mural Sponsored By City Of Chicago Department Of Cultural Affairs And Special Events, And Alderman Howard B. Brookins.

by Matt Rosenberg

Black Chicagoland politicians like Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot often frame black Chicago as a place fraught with inequity, disparities, disinvestment and institutional racism. Similarly, administrators, faculty, and students at Chicagoland campuses up the ante on racialization to compelling or restraining speech. It doesn't stop there. Leaders of Chicago Public Schools accent a toxic thing called

"whiteness."

Yet Chicago remains fraught with violence, corruption, failing courts, and failing schools. Blacks bear much of the brunt. Because Chicago's strident and self-conscious "anti-racism" seems to lead nowhere good, it's more crucial than ever to know and embrace real black power. Meaning: black agency, black possibility, and black accomplishment. And sometimes a picture is worth a few thousand words. This is the story of how a striking street mural on Chicago's South Side led me into the life of a black power exemplar named Rahmaan Statik.

In the autumn of 2020 I returned to Chicago. It's where I was raised, came of age, and got married. By a Cook County Divorce Court Judge named Kaufman who said at the end of the ceremony, "I don't want to see you again." A blessing. Now, more than 30 years hence, the city was blowing up and I was riding the CTA Number 8 bus down Halsted to 79th Street. I was on my way to an interview for my book about Chicago's troubled present and uncertain future.

A black man a few rows back says, "Hey." I turn, and he raises his hands vertically to chest level to form a diamond shape with thumbs and pinkies extended. The inner three fingers on each hand are crisscrossed in a sort of an upraised "X" formation. He's middle-aged and looks straight-up, so I don't suspect this crown-on-a-coat-hook shape is a gang hand signal.

Inter-connectivity, I decide. Or the whole is greater than the parts. I give him a thumbs up which he returns. As I stand to get off the bus he raises both fists clenched and pumps them in the air several times. Stand strong. I salute him and debark.

Soon, I'm at 79th and Halsted in a tiny bodega owned by a Lebanese family. I'm looking for water and single dollar bills before walking about two more miles, by design, to my interview. First via a desolate stretch of Halsted where

commerce is only periodic liquor stores with “Black-Owned” signs in the front windows. The bodega’s cramped entrance is filled by a bunch of forty-something black men in various states of mid-day inebriation. I say, “Excuse me” and slip past. The manager comes out to berate them for blocking the entrance. There’s some back and forth. None of it heated. It’s a practiced routine.

Later I learn the hand signal flashed at me by the guy on the bus is very close to one variation of what the Black Disciples sign. Maybe he wanted to let me know where I was. And how to pass? As if. Still, his positivity was clear.

A manifesto without words

Soon I came across a vividly-painted street tapestry running on the commuter train viaduct along South Vincennes Avenue at 87th Street. The faces of the black figures depicted were wise and thoughtful. They looked nothing like victims. Piercing questions and insights seemed to be on the tongues of several of the faces. Exultant declarations were ready to issue from others. These figures were not despairing, violent, or marginalized. They were full of hope, resolve, and joy.

Here along a South Side arterial street up against the Metra train tracks was a manifesto and a declaration without words. One of black striving and capability. I would learn later from the artist, Rahmaan Statik – real name Rahmaan Barnes – that this was no accident.

Barnes paints in a style he calls “Afro-Constructivism.” He says, “what I’m selling you is inspiration, and a better view of yourself…to help those parts of my community that are lost, that need to find their path, and life.”

It’s a timely aim in a city with an estimated 100,000 or more young black and Latino men in street gangs, who impose a violent tyranny of the minority on the law-abiding majority. An 18-year-old Chicago man recently told police after being

charged with three robberies on CTA trains, “I’m f***** up. I have no way in life.” He’d only a month prior been released from one year of juvenile detention for an earlier robbery.

For young men at risk in Chicago, finding a better path can be a minefield. Yet there are ways through it all. That’s something Barnes wants to talk about when we meet in the late winter of 2022. We’re in his Bridgeport Arts Center studio, at 35th and Racine.

He’s surrounded by four computer monitors filled with web design projects in a brick-walled nook opening onto a view looking north toward Chicago’s Loop skyline. Bright art is everywhere on the studio’s walls. He smokes Parliaments – more than a few – and sounds off about stuff we’re scared to say out loud in Chicago.

Barnes speaks of Democratic politicians and neglectful young parents who’ve paved the way for a Mad Max streetscape. Of how elected officials stoke voter apathy in Chicago with words and promises made meaningless through inaction. Of the importance of black elders, and having a code. He even calls out Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union, specifically fingering the union’s liberal right to strike that has so often disrupted learning. It’s a management problem, he says, in a city beset with management problems which extend from homes and neighborhoods to the highest reaches of officialdom.

From “scratch-bomber” to city arts contractor, and entrepreneur

Barnes was raised on Chicago’s Southeast Side. His mother was a nurse and his stepfather an emergency room doctor. Barnes is 41 and the married father of a six-year-old daughter. He was busted as a teenage graffiti artist in Chicago. He recalls, “I had no qualms about defacing public property, private property. I made it so you couldn’t see out of the bus windows in the 90s. I started off as a scratch-bomber. I was

scratching on the bus windows. I was that asshole, right? In broad daylight. I caught a case for that. I spent a day in jail, then probation."

But Barnes as a contractor taught art in Chicago Public Schools, and ran mural-painting workshops for the city-funded non-profit named After School Matters, founded by then-First Lady Maggie Daley. A four-year graduate of the renowned American Academy of Art in Chicago's South Loop, Barnes minored in fine art painting and majored in multimedia web design. That and digital illustrations are now a major source of income for him.

Barnes attended Joseph Warren Elementary School at 92nd and Jeffrey. That's in a part of Chicago's Calumet Heights neighborhood known as Pill Hill, for all the hospitals once located there, and the black medical professionals who lived nearby.

Every step of the way, Barnes says, elders including parents, relatives, and teachers helped steer him toward a career path. Reading and art were building blocks.

At Warren Elementary, "there was one teacher named Mr. Johnson, a middle-aged white guy married to a black female police officer. He had a policy where you couldn't graduate unless you read a hundred books, wrote a report about (each one), and passed a test…You had to prove you read that book."

Barnes says that "set me up for the challenges that were to come from college, making me the artist I am today. During college, had I not already done that, I would not have been able to read entire dictionary-sized art history books." It was no academic exercise, he says. Barnes was inspired by DaVinci's integration of engineering sensibilities with fine art and by Caravaggio's "chiaroscuro" technique of fashioning light from darkness, strikingly conveyed through oil paints on canvas.

Barnes' stepfather was Dr. Ricky Johnson. "He graduated from UIC med school. He worked as an emergency room doctor through the 80s, 90s, early 2000s. During the entire 90s he worked in Gary, Indiana during their crime peak, including Friday nights in the ER. He would come back home on Saturday mornings, I would be watching cartoons, he would tell me these wild stories, of the things he'd seen in the ER which got him closer to God…He loved his job. He was the first person to fund my art career, him and my uncle Rich, a screenplay writer…They helped me pursue my path, opened doors, introduced me to people, at a young age."

"I had my mind made up already when I was 13 years old that I was going to be doing this," building a career as an artist. "That came from having elders around me. They cared. They cared about my future. They wanted to see me have a chance and they knew that me having a life goal and a path would give me a chance."

The violent culture surrounding Chicago "Drill"

Barnes celebrates the arts, and becomes expansive talking about the flowering of hip-hop music. But he's deeply dismayed by "Chicago Drill" style rap videos which are posted on social media and help fuel deadly violence. There's real artistic legitimacy to hip-hop, says Barnes. He was there when it first flowered in Chicago, after school arts programs were cut back. Hip-hop was "built on ghetto creative ingenuity" such as the sampling of canonic funk and soul song fragments by artists such as James Brown and Rick James into new beats. "You're taking scraps of a previous art movement, from the generation before, and making new art, for that generation." But now social media has flipped violence into a performative realm which intersects with art, says Barnes, and so sadly "drill rap is connected to homicides."

Chicago Drill has its defenders who say it's a form of narrative focused on survival and real life. Yet like other

rappers, drill artists from Chicago have a knack for getting shot to death. Like Lil' Pappy, King Von, and FBG Brick.

After a federal racketeering indictment last October against five South Side men for the slaying of drill rapper FBG Duck downtown on Oak Street near Michigan Avenue, U.S. Attorney for Northern Illinois John Lausch said, "Generally speaking, what's happening on social media, and what's happening in music videos that are on YouTube, particularly in the drill-rap genre, it shows you what's happening in this city…which is that people are threatening to commit acts of violence, and then either bragging about acts of violence or talking about how they're going to retaliate for other violence, it's happening on a regular basis…"

Barnes says, look at the broader context. Too many black Chicago kids buy into "false ideas" like…"the only way out of the 'hood is rapping, playing basketball or selling dope. That trope…is still strong. If it wasn't still strong, social media, and the drill rap s*** wouldn't be what it is. You wouldn't have this cycle of revenge murders…The brazenness of the criminality is new. No generation before then was as brazen…where you openly confess to your crime via song and via social media, for 'Likes'." He adds, "there was no incentive prior to social media to commit crimes or make bad decisions, for an audience."

Revenge killings here have Barnes convinced Chicago is living through its own extended *City Of God* moment. That's a critically-acclaimed film about the conscience-less young thugs in Rio de Janierio's slums, or *favelas*, wrapped up in sociopathic thrill-killings of innocents during robberies, and revenge slayings. And one who escapes. Through photography.

Data bears out Barnes' concerns. Homicides in Cook County in 2021 reached a level not seen for 28 years, of greater than 1,000. Chicago murders in 2021 reached a 25-year high of 797, and carjackings tripled to 1,852 in two short years.

Meanwhile, state lawmakers have floundered on their crime response and quite arguably, made things worse.

Things seem to be flying apart in Chicago and Barnes doesn't mince words: "We've got some borderline Mad Max-Wild West s*** going on right now. You got dudes shooting assault rifles from cars, the carjackings…(it's) Mad Max with cleaner clothes. Kind of, society falling apart, pre-apocalypse…Black Chicago is operating like a third world country."

He's not alone in framing Chicago's violence as a third world problem. Among the 18 Chicagoans killed in one day on May 31, 2020 as riots and looting spread citywide in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis were Darius Jelks, 31, and his cousin Maurice Jelks, 39. They were driving and at a stoplight on 95th Street near Stony Island Avenue. Suddenly shooters fired at them from an SUV and killed them both. Maurice was a construction worker who'd recently bought a home and Darius a truck driver who worked long hours. Each was a father of two children.

Darius' brother Dionte, then forty-two, was a principal at a school in British Columbia on Vancouver Island. He told the Chicago Sun-Times that he talked to his mother and "couldn't even find the words to comfort her. I keep asking myself, 'Who?' Why?' My wife is from El Salvador. I feel more safe in El Salvador than I felt on the South Side of Chicago. And that's a third-world country."

I ask Barnes, how do we get our hands around Chicago's ongoing violence? Stop it, change it? Turn things back the right way?

He doesn't talk about more grants for violence prevention programs, or new laws in Springfield.

It goes back to the home

He answers, "the systematic predatory behavior" of young men in Chicago "goes back to the family, goes back to the home,

goes back to the individual parents egos, goes back to the individual parent, the way they see themselves. That parent does not have a code. Any kind of code. Religious code. Legal code." Without a moral code for guidance, says Barnes, your world shrinks away from the promise and possibilities of life. Straight to a point where anything goes. Where life might not last much longer. But, so what?

"You see downtown as being a whole separate Emerald City. Your reality becomes the bubble of your neighborhood, and you don't see a way out. In all reality, and from personal experience, there is a way out…my thing was art. It doesn't have to be art for everybody. It's America, though, right? If you're good at something, you can make money off of it here. You can sell that here, bro!"

Barnes became a parent later in life. He says that was a good move. "I had my daughter at the age of 36. Had I had my daughter when I was 18, or 19, she would have had a different childhood. I wasn't the same person I was at 36 as I was at 19. Now you take that, with kids having kids. A lot of grandmothers in their 30s. Where are the elders to provide a code? To give insight?…

His own stepfather shaped his life, he says. "I was fortunate enough to have a stepfather that actually had some kind of

code…I thank him for being a step-dad to this day. It's a huge undertaking to be a man to someone else's kid…That doesn't exist within a household when…the mother is a teenager and the Dad is running the streets. He's basically a kid, with a man's problems. Both these individuals are children with adult problems." It results "in a system of neglect. Willful neglect."

Young parents unwilling to lay down a code of conduct in the home to their young children pave the way for those children to run amok as teenagers and young adults, Barnes says.

"It starts with your four-year-old cursing and you saying it's cute; your five-year-old being an obvious bully, and you victim-blame right there. Your 12-year-old son being accused of sexual assault, and you say, 'she wore the wrong clothes.' Your kid could never be wrong and you could never be wrong. You cling on to anything because you have no code, no future, you don't see a future for yourself. So therefore you start feuds over miniscule things. You start having five-dollar arguments. You shoot a person because you couldn't cut in front of them in traffic. That's hot, delusional entitlement right there."

Barnes says that anger and entitlement drives crime now spreading across Chicago to white neighborhoods where thugs go to find softer targets for carjacking, armed robbery, and theft.

Places like downtown, Hyde Park, River North, Lincoln Park, and Lakeview.

It's a phenomenon called out by Lance Williams, a professor of urban community studies at Northeastern Illinois University, last autumn as downtown Chicago crime began to skyrocket.

Williams said, "The violence has gotten so bad in our communities that those in the streets are moving to what they perceive to be safe areas to hang out. The mentality in the

streets is that it’s too dangerous to do crime in these communities because the reaction is immediate. People don’t depend on the police. People protect themselves. Every man has to have a gun. It’s a Wild West mentality. People in Hyde Park and downtown are easier targets. We said it was going to spill over in the downtown tourist districts. We knew the dam was going to break.”

Barnes puts it this way: “A monster in one community is a monster for everybody’s community. I’ve seen that anti-Asian stuff going down, a bunch of black dudes beating up old Asian women, right? But that dude goes back to his neighborhood, probably beats up his grandmother, kills dogs, by the time he reaches the old Asian lady he’s already reached a threshold of disrespecting senior citizens. It didn’t start with the Asian lady, this dude was a scumbag everywhere.”

Barnes says there are economic consequences to sociopathy.

“Gangbangers f*** up property values. No one wants to live around no high-ass homicide rate and s**** schools. Period.”

Holding Chicago’s elected class responsible

But Barnes doesn’t pin the city’s crime troubles entirely on parents. He also traces responsibility back to Democratic politicians.

He says, “It’s the entire Democratic Party.” Barnes calls out Cook County States Attorney Kim Foxx, the Democratic Party, voters and judges for “their incompetence.”

He describes it as a lack of “logistical foresight in their policies, and accepting any kind of responsibility for their mishaps. All I see is finger-pointing: the district attorney points to the judge, the judge points to the mayor, and the mayor points. A lot of finger-pointing there, no one doing their job right there.”

And it's clear the cascade of "corrections" gone awry won't stop soon.

A man finally charged in March of this year for a Lakeview carjacking a year ago, turns out to be on probation for seven armed robberies. Nobody blinks.

A pair of 12-year-olds are among the five juveniles charged for robbing and stabbing a man at a CTA station, as transit crime in Chicago reaches an apex under Cook County's "catch and release" court system.

An 18-year-old charged for carjacking a Lyft driver turns out to have a remarkable pedigree. He is also identified by Chicago Police as having carjacked another vehicle last year directly in front of Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's Gold Coast mansion. As a juvenile he had one prior felony arrest and two misdemeanor arrests on car theft-related charges.

Out on cash bail and an ankle bracelet, a charged carjacking suspect with four prior felony convictions is busted again. This time for selling heroin.

Of Chicago Democrats, Barnes says, "their intention was to help black people, poor people, against injustice. They didn't think their ideas all the way through. A lot of their policies sound good on paper, at the coffee table conversation, but in reality, it didn't work. It's not working. It's obviously not working right. Letting murder cases out on low cash bail, unsupervised ankle bracelets. Their incompetence and lack of management is creating a platform in the next political cycle for the opposite party to campaign on everything they did wrong and claim they're going to make it right. Therefore, they're giving their opposition the torch."

If you think Barnes is ready to jump on a hardline law-and-order Republican bandwagon, guess again. He worries deeply about an over-reaction to Chicago's current mayhem. "The

clean-up…is not going to be pretty." He urges a calibrated policy response that reclaims Chicago's streets from what he calls today's "Wild West" ethos, but which doesn't go overboard on incarceration.

Barnes also wants to see change in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). He'd like to see change begin with a lot fewer teacher strikes or walkouts, which have numbered 14 since 1969.

He says, "there is something wrong with CPS' business plan where teachers have a pattern of going on strike every three to five years. Which trade have you seen, does that? Please tell me. Which trade have you seen that goes on strike every three to five years? Something is wrong with the management."

Turning things around in Chicago will require electing politicians with different values. But that demands greater participation than the little more than one-third of registered voters who currently cast ballots in city elections. Barnes' take on voting and politics in Chicago may help explain voter apathy.

He says, "I'm done with the federal elections. The local elections..I might even be done with…too…I go out of my way, put time aside. My time is extremely valuable. I could be doing a thousand other things besides getting some a****** some government job…A lot of these politicians' campaign pitches, after a while, ain't different from some teenager trying to get laid by telling some young lady that he loves her. It's the same s***, bro. 'We care about kids. We care about education.' These dudes get elected, it's the last thing on the list."

Chicago's resilient – keep the faith

Yet with all that's gone off the rails, Barnes says, don't count Chicago out. There's an economic heft and opportunities here that will lift those who rise up to meet the challenge. He says Chicago's not about to become Detroit. He says "the

nature of Chicago, and the hustle of Chicago" along with the level of capital investment in the city and its key geographic position will pull it through its troubles over the long haul.

"We're in the Great Lakes region. There's no other place on earth like it. There's a reason why this city became Chicago right here. From the settlement wars to the meat-packing hustle. Chicago in the dawn of the 1900s to where we're at now. The overall hustle…that made this city…It's not going down without a fight. Riddle me this, man. Actual fact. Half my good friends in my adult life aren't from Chicago. They moved here. And they're still here."

I ask him, what do your friends do for work, who moved here?

He replies, "artists, they work in marketing, probably education. Basically this (stuff) is part of Chicago's economic structure. It's not that hard to land a job in marketing in this city, or being a teacher. You be around long enough, you'll get picked up. I've had it happen. Popped up in media campaigns for Leo Burnett. You know, just based on my work ethic and people knowing about my work."

The city is a draw, he says – and watch: it will remain so. "…these big events where the majority of the audience isn't even from the city or from the state. Summertime happens, people from all over the Midwest flock here. All over the world. There's a market that naturally happens here. The geography plays a role, and the overall nature of this city. All our sports teams are champions."

Barnes keeps the faith in another way. In Allah. So did his grandfather who migrated to Chicago in the early 1950s from rural North Carolina. He worked as a pharmacist, a teacher, and in warehouses. Fought in the Korean War. And joined the Nation of Islam. "He was a kid in the South in the summer of '29, he's seen my relatives get lynched…It makes sense how he would align himself with black nationalists as soon as he got

here. Out of fear. Out of trauma."

Years later Barnes himself experienced trauma close-up. Witnessing a 3 a.m. carjacking driving home to the South Loop. The carjacker was looking straight at him for a few fraught seconds. Barnes worried something bad was going to happen right then. Another time finding himself in the middle of a bloody exchange of fire between two feuding street racers who'd pulled into the gas station at 35th and Ashland. Barnes had been fueling up after a long day of work at his art studio. His truck got totaled during the conflict.

He says, "my family was Muslim but I found Allah again through those close calls." But there's more to it. His faith isn't just a safe harbor. No faith is.

He puts it this way: "When you take one step toward Allah, Allah takes 10 steps toward you. If you're out here doing community work and you intentionally want to do it, the community will demand, you're not doing enough. You need to do more."

That seems like part of the recipe for a city's recovery. Bottom-up, not top-down. And it's of a piece with the message of agency, possibility, and accomplishment that's central to Barnes work and life.

Barnes wonders, "how are we still here as a species? We are still here as a species because some higher force loves us. It sounds crazy."

In the meantime, says Rahmaan Barnes, make the most of what you're given.

Life is a canvas. What are you going to paint on it?

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