

Bigger By the Dozens: The Prevalence of Afro-Based Tradition in Battle Rap

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This paper interrogates the linguistic grounding of battle rap in Afro-based cultural practices, and the transformative power the understated art form possesses within the African American community. An integral part of hip-hop from the beginning, 'battling' has grown into a distinct subculture in recent years. Because of its oft-unmitigated rawness, it is often viewed as a lesser artistic form that embodies the worst of the violence, misogyny and other societal ills that hip-hop is accused of promoting. This paper argues that battle rap is not a corruption of Black culture: it is the modern incarnation of long-held oral, competitive, and communal traditions that can be traced throughout the African American experience and, in many cases, to Africa. Understanding the deep-rooted cultural significance of battle rap allows it to be recognized for its nuanced intricacies, as well as its didactic and restorative potential within our communities.

The creative use of language has always been a defining feature of Afro-based communities the world over. From the venerated Griots of West Africa to the crowd-rocking chanters of Jamaica, the battle-ready *Toyi-Toyi* warriors of South Africa and animated American Southern Baptist preachers, men (and women) of words have also held an important place in African communities on the continent and in the diaspora. Today, nowhere is this more visible than in hip-hop culture, in which the artists have become the ambassadors of a community, generation and culture through their stories, dress, demeanor and overall use of language.

Artistic competition has been a part of hip-hop from its very inception. Whether it is the braggadocio-laced lyrics of Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight*, widely considered to be the first commercial hip-hop song, or the territorial graffiti, DJ, and breakdance wars of the late 1970s and 1980s in New York, the culture as a whole attributes its birth and growth to that raw friendly competitive element. Although the culture was birthed in predominantly African American communities, it is important to recognize the contribution of Puerto Rican, Chinese, and other minority populations in hip-hop's early days, particularly in the realms of breakdance and graffiti.¹ Despite the ethnic diversity in the various elements during hip-hop's early days, Mcing was largely the domain of African American rappers, and thus the literal voice of the culture has been laced with storytelling and rhythmic traditions preserved and re-imagined from the African continent and African Diaspora, combined eclectically with the environmental influences of the eclectic big city. With its growth, hip-hop has developed to have its own sub-genres and sub-cultures, and one such prominent example is battle rap. Battles will typically pit two rappers taking turns to rap in an attempt to outwit, outflow, and demean the other, usually before an engaging audience.

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador St. Martin's Press, 2005), 110.

This paper will focus on the subculture that is battle rap, paying attention to its use of language- verbal and nonverbal- and in what ways these cultural and linguistic elements are extensions of traditional Afro-based forms of expression. The study will explore aspects of dress, performance, language use, and the essential interactions between the rappers, their entourages, and the crowd as a whole. While battles now exist in several forms ranging from the organic neighborhood variety to those incorporated into several TV shows, I have centered my research on battles organized by battle rap leagues, for several reasons. Unlike battles on TV, these are not censored and thus showcase the rappers and the audience more authentically. Secondly, a league battle typically lasts anywhere between 25 minutes and an hour (compared to the five-minute battles on TV shows), which allows the rapper to display personality and the crowd to identify with him. Finally, these battles are religiously posted online a few days after they take place, so they're readily accessible.

Literature Review

In examining the revered role of wordsmith in African tradition, I have spent time looking at the enduring history of Griots in West Africa. I incorporated the abridged explanations of the Griot profession provided by the Griot Institute of Africana Studies at Bucknell University. I have also looked at African stories in print and unwritten folktales told to me growing up, and the familial importance of whoever the community's most apt storyteller was.

I have depended on several texts to hone in on the development of the African American language over the centuries and its retention of Afro-based elements while navigating the interaction and imposition of other languages in the USA. *Spoken Soul* by Rickford and Rickford explores African American Language (henceforth referred to as AAL) through the eyes of the 21st century efforts to get it recognized as a language variety in American academia and society as a whole. Geneva Smitherman's *Word from the Mother* provides a deeper cultural context and definition to the different Afro-based language elements, several of which form the core of battle rap. Having established AAL's larger cultural and linguistic context, I focus on Hip-Hop texts. Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* and *Hip-Hop Wars* explain the culture of hip-hop, its criticism and praise.

Despite its presence from the very onset of hip-hop, battle rap has only grown as its own lucrative and increasingly popular sub-genre in the past ten to fifteen years, so formal scholarship dedicated specifically to it is still barely existent. As such, most of my research on the culture and language of battle rap has involved watching actual battles, drawing from over twenty match-ups that took place between 2004 and 2014. While the majority of them were held in the USA, some were held by the King of the Dot (KOTD) league in Canada, and Don't Flop league in the United Kingdom - both bringing in American rappers to face off with local favorites. Furthermore, I have relied heavily on the budding arena of blogs and video logs (vlogs) dedicated to battle rap for rapper interviews and commentary from fans and battle organizers. I have also had the pleasure of interviewing three battle rappers: Pharaoh Soul of Detroit group Awkward

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Theory, Chicago-born and Grand Rapids-based BARZ, and Rave of Grand Rapids as well. I also interviewed D. Jones, a veteran battle host from Youngstown, Ohio. Finally, I spoke with three battle rap culture enthusiasts: Nosa Osaretin from Nigeria, Gregory Graves from Detroit, Michigan, David James of Grand Rapids, Michigan and Anthony Elbert of Jacksonville, Florida.

With the insightful assistance of these sources and a few other relevant readings and viewings, I hope to provide a starting point in appreciating battle rap not only as an art-form unto its own, but as an incarnation of a vivacious, witty, and community centered Afro-based tradition.

A Storytelling Tradition

“Africans are rooted in oral cultures and traditions; therefore they have admired good stories and storytellers”²

Allen and Boykin (2000) described the “nine interrelated dimensions of African American culture,” and among them were movement expressiveness, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, and orality,”³ all essential ingredients in battle rap culture, as we shall see.

The African tradition that places storytellers at the center of community is inseparable from the story of the continent and her people the world over. While written word had developed in various parts of Africa in pre-colonial times, the vast majority of the continent still depended on the communal and intimate nature of oral narration to communicate. The storyteller held, and continues to hold, a venerated yet and often ambiguous role in society. Because storytellers would speak of tales that had been told before or referenced places, animals, people and things that everyone knew, it was crucial that one separates himself from the others through creative use of language, accompanying music, audience involvement, as well as overall presentation. Across the continent, these larger-than-life wordsmiths would gather people in the community to teach, entertain, and relate stories from generations gone by.

Waiting for the Rain, one of Zimbabwe’s most celebrated works of fiction, gives insight into this dynamic through the characters of two brothers: Lucifer and Garabha. Lucifer is a city-educated artist (drawer) who has just received a scholarship to a Western university overseas, and thus bears the stigma of “the good child.” Garabha, on the other hand, never left the rural home and, instead, is famed for going around the countryside with his drum, singing and telling stories. While, in comparison to his brother, Garabha superficially appears to have disappointed his family through his lack of ambition, he is ultimately far more in touch with his community and its various characters and problems, as opposed to the aloof Lucifer, who is openly embarrassed by

² Octavia Utley, “Keeping the Tradition of African Storytelling Alive.” *Yale-New Haven Teacher’s Institute* <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/nationalcurriculum/units/2009/1/09.01.08.x.html>.

³ Serie McDougal, *Methodology in Africana Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 48.

his parents and other village folk in the presence of the white priest who is supposed to take him overseas⁴. Such a dichotomy, whereby material and outward success often hold lower rank to one's ability to speak to and behalf of their community, exists today in Afro-based communities around the world.

In West Africa, the continental region directly linked to the heritage of most African Americans, this culture of wordsmiths who are definitive figures is best exemplified in the Griot tradition. While no English word fully encapsulates the essence of a griot, they are largely described as storytellers with such diverse roles as 'genealogists, historians, spokespeople, ambassadors, musicians, teachers, warriors, interpreters, praise-singers, masters of ceremonies, advisors' among others⁵. This venerated tradition survived the African holocaust and, although it has been diluted by centuries of concerted efforts to rob African Americans of their culture, it endures in abundance. Comedians, preachers, singers, rappers, and poets are integral to the African American experience, and it is no surprise that despite being a minority and perpetually marginalized group in the USA, Black America has consistently produced the most notable and influential of these. For all the groundbreaking endeavors, the legacies of Barack Obama and Martin Luther King will- for better or worse- always be defined in large part by their mesmerizing oration. Muhammad Ali is equally renowned for his exploits in the ring as he is for his "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" braggadocio outside the ring. Even institutions such as the church and fraternities, whose modern incarnation has Eurocentric overtones, differentiates itself from their mainstream counterparts through the distinct Afro-based rituals of song, dance, and colorful wordsmithery.

Thus when hip-hop culture came to life in the late 1970s, although it may have seemed a novelty to the unwitting eye, it was merely a continuation in the African-American wordsmith culture and a manifestation of its marginalized existence. Born out of New York ghettos beleaguered by joblessness, poverty and housing problems, hip-hop became a way for "alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished."⁶ The generally low income, multiethnic convergence that resulted in the birth of hip-hop gave it both its gritty and eclectic character. While the various cultures brought different elements to hip-hop, the MCing (or rap) element was largely synonymous with African Americans. Thus from the onset, the vocal component of the culture was laced with storytelling elements that have survived from as far back as West African griots, and re-imagined and sustained through such African American traditions as the blues, the dozens, and roasts, as well as influenced from the Afro-Caribbean rhythms that were commonplace in 1970s New York. The defensive pride borne thus was evident in the braggadocio-layered lyrics and names of rappers from the beginning, as well as the

⁴ Charles Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain*. (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1975), 179.

⁵ "What is a Griot?" Accessed November 10, 2014.

<https://www.bucknell.edu/Documents/GriotInstitute/What%20is%20a%20Griot>.

⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 34.

territorial battles of rappers, graffiti artists, break-dancers and DJs. It was through DJ Battles that some of hip-hop's pioneers emerged, bringing their neighborhoods and posses to the limelight with them: Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation commanding the Bronx River East, Kool Herc in the West Bronx, among others. Hip-hop's early connection with the African continent, however, consisted of more than just retained or re-imagined practices. One of the culture's most influential figures and founder of the Zulu nation, Afrika Bambaataa, imagined a culture of Black unity grounded on African symbols and figureheads. In 1975, the year the Zulu Nation was founded, Bambaataa won a UNICEF essay contest that took him to Africa, spending time in Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast and Nigeria. The experience was essential to how he would approach and help shape hip-hop in its infancy. He explained that it "was a big inspiration (on the Zulu Nation), seeing black people controlling their own destiny, seeing them get up and go to their own work."⁷

Of course, the repartee of wit and art existed among African American culture from the beginning. One has to look no further than the vintage verbal play of "the dozens" defined as a "verbal game of talking about someone's mother (or sometimes other relatives), using highly exaggerated, sometimes sexually loaded, humorous ritualized insults."⁸ This game played among close African American friends of all ages, forebears the competition in hip-hop, and specifically battle rap. Another form of verbal play that predates hip-hop yet lends its hand directly to the culture is "signifyin," wherein a speaker denigrates another through witty play on words and irony. Much like the dozens, it has been a staple of Afrodiasporic communities since time immemorial, and is ever present in hip-hop and a defining pillar of battle rap.

The age-old flexing of verbal and artistic prowess in more than a part of hip-hop; it is responsible in a large way for its being. This culture of competition has led to several of hip-hop's defining moments: from NWA's fallout and subsequent diss tracks, to Kanye West and Fifty Cent's 2007 bet which involved releasing their albums on the same day to see who would sell more, with the vanquished promising to stop rapping (a bet Fifty has obviously not honored!). At its worst, the competitive element has led to unresolved beefs and even contributed to deaths (RIP 2pac, Biggie,) and at its usual best, it has given us several classic songs, realigned rappers into exciting crews and rivals.

Aside from the DJ battles mentioned earlier, MC battles were integral to the birth and early growth of hip-hop. One of the culture's earliest talking points was the famed battle between Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee Starsky at Harlem World in 1981.⁹ At the time, battles had not adopted the face-off, confrontational format that is common today. Instead, they focused more on who could rock the crowd the most on a given beat. Typically, several MCs would take to the stage in a night, and then the crowd would

⁷ Afrika Bambaataa, "Afrika Bambaataa," interviewed by Frank Broughton. DJhistory.com, June 6, 1998. Accessed December 5, 2015. <http://www.djhistory.com/interviews/afrika-bambaataa>.

⁸ Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

⁹ Dziurawe Sample. "Kool Moe Dee vs. Busy Bee @ Harlem World '81," YouTube Video, 12:24, January 16 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShpDIWK5F7Y>.

decide on who won by virtue of applause. In this instance, consensus has it that Kool Moe Dee won.¹⁰ Although the format of the battle is hardly recognizable in today's battle arena, it is important to note how several elements that mattered then are still contemporarily definitive: braggadocio; crowd rapport, representing your neighborhood, among other things. As time went on, battles were transferred to wax and became more personal. In 1985, for example, Queens, New York rapper MC Shan released "The Bridge," a brazen track declaring that Queens had, in fact, been the birthplace of battle rap (despite incontrovertible evidence that the culture actually came out of Bronx). Incensed by the claim, Bronx MC KRS One retaliated by dropping "The Bridge is Over," famously rhyming that: "Manhattan keeps on makin' it / Brooklyn keeps on takin' it / Bronx keeps creatin' it, and Queens keeps on fakin' it."¹¹ The battle not only strengthened KRS One's status as one of the premier MCs of his time, but also contributed to the ongoing culture of standing up for your neighborhood in battle.

As hip-hop asserted its presence across the country, MC battles were growing in popularity. One of the early predecessors of the contemporary, more confrontational variation of battle rap was the 1994 face-off between Craig G and Supernatural. The battle happened organically, by virtue of Supernatural calling out Craig G while he was performing. As it so happened, Craig G was in the crowd, and the host invited him to the stage. Craig G won the battle that evening. The two would go on to meet on two other occasions during the 1990s, thereby establishing a place in battle rap as one of the earliest and most exciting sagas in the subculture.¹² It also helped set the stage for shows and festivals that centered on battles and began attracting audiences in the thousands. One of the more notable examples thereof is Scribble Jam, a Cincinnati-based event dubbed "America's Largest Hip-hop Festival."¹³ In its inaugural year, 1996, there were three Scribble Jams, and the second one (held in June) introduced the MC battle. Since then, several winners of the annual MC battle have gone on to achieve mainstream success, while some have become staples in the battle circuit. Notable alumni include Chicago native and Kanye West collaborator Rhymefest, and battle icons The Saurus and Illmaculate. It was, however, not until the 21st century that that subculture would experience the explosion that would catapult battle rappers and leagues to international notoriety.

A Culture within a Culture: The Explosion of Battle Rap

As we have established, battling has been a part of hip-hop from its inception. Several of hip-hop's biggest stars including Jay Z, DMX, and Eminem got their start

¹⁰ QD3Ent. "Busy Bee vs Kool Moe Dee from the BEEF DVD," YouTube Video, 3:14; February 11 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kps6XyuWMQ>.

¹¹ Kathy Iandola, "Top Rap Feuds: KRS-One vs. MC Shan," *The Drop FM*. (Accessed December 3, 2015.)

¹² *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*, Film, directed by Kevin Fitzgerald (2000; Los Angeles: Bowery Films, 2000), DVD.

¹³ <http://www.scribblejam.com>. (Accessed December 3, 2015).

battling. The latter, however, would have special impact in the sub-genre's explosion and growth into the standalone culture that it has become through the release of his 2002 semi-biographic movie *8 Mile*. Up until then, battle rap had been an underground culture reserved for exclusive groups who frequented rap halls and were part of immediate communities that battled. *8 Mile*, by focusing on Eminem's battle rapping as the impetus in the American cinematic "Against all odds" cliché, brought the art form onto screens across the nation and world at large. Immediately thereafter, TV stations coopted this "novel" art form into their programming, with MTV introducing both Nick Cannon's *Wild 'N' Out* variety show in 2005 which featured a "Wild Style" segment in which contestants would rap a couple to a few lines with the intention of being funny, and 2006's *Yo Mama*, which was essentially just a dozens competition televised and performed before a judging audience. BET also incorporated battling into their seminal music show *106 and Park* through a segment called Freestyle Fridays, in which two rappers would battle each other for thirty seconds at a time, albeit keeping it family friendly for their audience. Despite its brevity and censorship, several participants in Freestyle Fridays went on to become pivotal figures in battle rap's boom. Battle icons Loaded Lux, Jin, and Hollow Da Don are a few such examples.

Away from the cleaned-up, watered down TV versions, the gritty battle rap scene was taking shape. Several battle rap leagues emerged, including the likes of *Let's Beef* and *Grind Time*, both of which gave an opportunity for rappers from different neighborhoods and cities to face off. While many creative minds were battling and organizing battles in the early 2000s, one entrepreneur in particular is synonymous with the advent of organized league battle rap: Tony "Smack" Mitchell of Queens New York. Gathering battle rappers of hood renown including Serius Jones of New Jersey and Loaded Lux, Murda Mook and Jae Millz of Harlem, Smack began recording battles, printing and hand-selling the DVDs—a cutting edge technological and artistic hustle at the time. While the first set of 1000 DVDS printed in 2004 took a while to catch on since they were all sold by hand, Smack was selling upwards of 40,000 DVDs nationwide by 2007, and by 2009, he had formally organized the growing stable of rappers into a league, which he called the Ultimate Rap League (URL).¹⁴ Rappers now earned thousands of dollars to participate in battles ranging anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour in front of packed halls, and attended by high profile rap names (Busta Rhymes, Diddy, Drake, Q-Tip, Method Man are all fixtures at battles now). Soon, the league model was being duplicated around the country and abroad, with King of the Dot (KOTD) and Don't Flop leagues in Canada and the United Kingdom, respectively. This explosion has been, in a mighty way, propagated by the advent of YouTube, which allows leagues to upload battles in their aftermath so fans around the world can watch and debate online. Thus, we see the evolution of battles from when it consisted of just the crews battling on street corners, to the hundreds of captive fans filling up rap halls,

¹⁴ Maurice Garland, "From Street DVDs to Reviving Battle Rap: How Tony 'SMACK' Mitchell Monetized Both." *Black Enterprise*. October 12, 2012. <http://www.blackenterprise.com/money/tony-smack-mitchell-urltv-battle-rap-smack/>.

to the 50,000 that got their hands on the SMACK DVDs, and now the millions that get to see the videos.

As Hip-hop has continued to grow, vocal performance (i.e. MCing in all its forms; battling included) has emerged from among the culture's various elements as the one most deemed synonymous with the culture as a whole. It thus bears investigating how different cultural components have been and continue to be integrated into MCing, and particularly in the booming sub-culture that is battle rap. In the face of such growth and exposure, and oftentimes without any deliberate intentionality on the part of the battlers, the subculture has been able to retain and repurpose several linguistic and performance traditions that have roots in Africa and have survived and reincarnated in various forms in the African diaspora over time. . In the next section, I look at several enduring elements of Afro-based storytelling and performance and how they permeate battle rap.

The Language of Battle Rap

A rap battle can be defined as a rap contest, almost always performed before a crowd, between two individuals in which the objective is to outwit, outflow and out-diss one's opponent. Born of the African American tradition of storytelling and communal competition, the art form has endured and grown while retaining this Afro-based essence through its reliance on several elements. There are two essential components that are on display during a battle rap: one's linguistic and witty ability, as represented by what one says; and one's profile as an artist, often showcased by one's overall presentation and performance in battle.

Key to Afrodiasporic linguistic practices are the nonverbal elements of communication. Griot storytelling was laced with dance and music, and one has to take one look at the Black church to see the inseparability of performance and verbal delivery. One of the rappers I spoke to, Pharaoh Soul of Detroit, listed stage presence as the most important element in a battle, explaining that "you can't be on stage talking all the tough stuff, yet be standing in a shy position...looking not confident."¹⁵ Thus, rappers will typically adopt what Tricia would describe as a "cool pose," a tough-looking physical stance ideally meant to intimidate your opponent and make your own boastful claims seem credible to the audience. Similarly, how one dresses is essential in establishing their stage presence and swaying the crowd. This Afro-based tradition, known in AAL as *stylin and profilin*, is also evident in the elaborate dress of traditional storytellers both in the motherland and in the diaspora. For example, an informal poll conducted by the author asked six respondents to name their favorite white stand-up comics, to which folks responded with comedians ranging from Dane Cook to Louis C.K. The follow-up inquired what attire they are typically associated with, and the responses were overwhelmingly inconspicuous (Black T-Shirt and jeans etc.). Black stand-up comedians, on the other hand, routinely become synonymous with their

¹⁵ Pharaoh Soul, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

striking outfits. Cosby's sweaters, Eddie Murphy's purple and red leather outfits from his 1980s specials *Raw* and *Delirious* (the latter of which was probably inspired by Richard Pryor's red suit in his 1982 special, *Live on the Sunset Strip*), and Katt Williams's shiny green jacket in *Pimp Chronicles* are examples of how a specific moment in a performance of words becomes defined by the orators' clothes. Battlers are no exception to this ostentatious culture. For example, at 2012's URL signature event "Summer Madness," veteran rapper Loaded Lux dressed up in a full three piece black suit for his battle against a much younger Calicoe. In addition, a flock of women in seeming funeral gowns and some of his entourage carrying a mock coffin escorted him to the stage. In doing so, he was bringing to life the metaphor of "killing your opponent" in a battle, while also asserting his seniority by equating himself to a reverend; a much venerated figure in the black community and commissioner of funerals.

Another nonverbal communicative component central to battles is the crew. The posse and crew have meant more in hip-hop culture in terms of identity than it does for most other genres. Hip-hop's most influential artists have either been groups, part of a group, or been affiliated with crew at some point in their career. Some, including famed mainstream rappers like Snoop Dogg and Lil Wayne, claiming allegiance to street gangs. More than anything, the concept of community is definitive of Afrodiasporic communities. From the totem-based clans to the Black Church, street gangs to civil rights organizations, Black people around the world have always self-identified as part of their community, both for emotional and functional purposes. Even as African history was being interrupted during the Middle Passage, there is evidence of enslaved Africans developing a sense of community and enduring bonds while they were on the ship. This is best represented by the creation of a new class of kin by the enslaved Africans: "Malungo," essentially meaning my brother from the ship."¹⁶ While the purpose of community would have undoubtedly evolved with space and time, it has endured in the global African community. Thus, in its raw form, the rappers' crews are often important to their success. On stage, the crew will serve to cheer your punchlines and are often incorporated into the battle. One of today's foremost battlers, Hitman Holla of St. Louis, has established a style in which he theatrically dialogs with his (non-rapper) brother, Show Out, during a verse, much to the crowd's delight. For example, in a battle against Harlem's Charlie Clips earlier this year, Holla had the following interchange with his brother;

Hitman Holla: *You had the nerve to get a Kennedy Drop?*

Show Out: *What's a Kennedy Drop?*

Hitman Holla: *Something that's gon give him (Clips) what Kennedy got!*

Show out: *What if he shows up with his crew?*

Hitman Holla: *Then his friend will get popped.*

Show out: *What if he shows up in his truck?*

¹⁶ James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the Afro-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2003), 33.

Hitman Holla: *His Infinity's shot!*¹⁷

Other rappers will incorporate their crews differently. In one of the earlier, and what is often argued as one of the best, URL battles between Serius Jones and Murda Mook, the battle had been fairly matched lyrically, but Jones had brought none of his crew with him, and his demeanor was less and less confident as the battle went on, while Mook was flanked by a dozen of his boys who were hyping up anything he said. Famously, the battle ended with Murda Mook's camp simulating a gun attack on Jones and chanting "dot! dot! dot dot dot!" - dots in Jones's body after the attack. That ending alone made the otherwise even battle seem to have gone in Mook's favor. The three battlers I interviewed recognized the functionality of the crew, albeit to different extents in their own experience. BARZ went as far as calling it his "lifeline, especially if you aren't from the area (battle venue)," and compared having the crew to a boxing ring corner to which fighters retreat after each round for solace, encouragement and advice.¹⁸ In July of 2014, Eminem's Shady Records hosted *Total Slaughter*, a battle event that, among many other things, pitted battler-turned-industry rapper Joe Budden against *Freestyle Friday* hall of famer and arguably the best battle rapper on the current scene, Hollow Da Don of Queens, New York. Aside from an overall anticlimactic showing on the part of the rappers, several fans also criticized the event's stage setup. In an attempt to cater to television aesthetics, the rappers did not have their crews on stage and were largely removed from the audience, taking away from the sense of communal and competitive festivity that fans have grown to associate with the art form.¹⁹

Not divorced from the communal recognition element of African culture is the importance of paying homage to the land and those who have either passed on or those who have succeeded in endeavors to which we aspire. This reverence for that which has brought us to this point is evident in a plethora of ceremonial ways: from ancestral worship to libations practiced widely on the continent and the diaspora, and the totem culture in which families and individuals are assigned an animal or force of life spirit such as heart or river, practiced chiefly by Southern African ethnic groups such as the Shona, Ndebele, Zulu, and Herero. Some of these cultures have survived in the diaspora, while some have taken on a different form. Hip-hop is a quintessential exercise in homage-paying: from sampling famous songs to the adaptation of canonical lyrics, the unmistakable regionalization of the genre and the countless songs dedicated to deceased fellow artists. Paying homage to one's hood is standard across battle rap, with virtually all of them incorporating their neighborhood and city into their defining rhymes. For example, Hitman Holla began his battle against Conceited by declaring, "I'm from St Louis, where all year it's Chrome season," while fellow URL battler Tsu

¹⁷ Go-rilla Warfare. "GO-RILLA WARFARE PRESENTS: CHARLIE CLIPS VS HITMAN HOLLA," YouTube video, 23:29, April 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPJMYvpSKm8>.

¹⁸ BARZ, in personal communication with author, November 2014.

¹⁹ Unbias Review, "Total Slaughter Event Recap ((UnbiasReview.))" YouTube, July 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z4pF7-hhrM>.

Surf's slogan is merely "Jersey" in honor of his home state. Routinely, battlers will reference not only lyrics from famous mainstream rappers, but some that may have been used by others in previous battles, albeit adding their own flavor to the lyrics. Consider, for example, the following scheme from Serious Jones in his battle against Charlie Clips at URL's Summer Madness 2

*Since you're a dead rapper, and ain't no way around it
So all the dead rappers watching over us, what you think they have to say about it?
Well Biggie said 'huh, he hit that nigga up more than they hit up me,
And Pac said (in affected Pac tone) 'Yeeeah, that's how you ride up on your enemies...
Eazy E said, that nigga's sick as me...'²⁰*

He also went on to incorporate Pimp C, Heavy D and other well-known deceased rappers. In evoking their memory, Jones simultaneously pays homage to them while giving the audience familiar references to which they can hold on. In her book, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Monica Coleman explores the idea of ancestral worship and homage to the dead among African Americans and other parts of the diaspora. She explains it as a Yoruba tradition that survived the Middle Passage and has been retained and reimagined as a pillar of Afrodiasporic communities, including "Haitian Vodun, Cuba's Santeria, Brazil's Candomble, and Trinidad's Shango and Orisha worship."²¹ Most critically, however, she notes that communities in the diaspora did not need "a history of Black religion" to live out these retained practices as many of them have become engrained and reinvented in cultural performance, as seen in battling.²²

The language of battle rap is an intertwined exercise in braggadocio, signifyin and storytelling. As Tricia Rose explains, "Rap Tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film video and television characters, and little known black heroes."²³ A pillar of AAL interaction, signifyin is a "style of verbal play in which a speaker puts down, needles, talks about a person, event, situation... Depends on double meaning and irony, exploits the unexpected and uses quick verbal surprise and humor."²⁴ It is often represented in traditional African folklore through the mischief of such characters as the hare, fox and signifyin monkey. Subjects of signifyin range from physical appearance to Black institutions to current global affairs, and everything in between. For example, when Hollow Da Don battles the slightly heavy set Big-T, he rapped "I've heard of Big and

²⁰ Ultimate Rap League, "SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIOUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS," YouTube, October 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llBpHV0OAnM>.

²¹ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When we Talk about Hip Hop-and Why it Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 3.

²⁴ Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother*, 43.

Tall, but I've never heard of Big and Small/ Maybe you should open a different store called I'm fat and I can't find my dick and balls." In this, Hollow is playing on the obvious physical attribute of his rival, then referencing a store that the audience would be familiar with, before hitting him with an emasculating sexual organ reference; a poignant rhyme scheme in a competition and culture where one's manhood is often evoked as proxy for their masculinity. Or, for example, when B Magic raps, "I jump up and cap a (Kappa) nigga, step show," he plays on the homophone between the act of shooting someone and a fraternity undoubtedly popular in black culture. Similarly, references to church and black celebrities are frequent in battle rap. In another instance, Conceited was facing a competitor who kept moving around while he (Conceited) rapped to distract him, so he rapped "You keep dancing while I'm rapping (waving his fist), you gon end up puffy."²⁵ The reference here is to hip-hop producer, Sean "Puffy" Combs famous for dancing in the videos of the rappers he produces. The double entendre here, of course, is Conceited would punch his opponent, thus leaving his face "puffy." Anthony, one of the sub-cultures' fans interviewed, expressed his admiration for verbal dexterity, explaining that "the aspect of a guy coming up with a metaphor out of everyday words, or the idea that a word can be broken down, flipped into a different meaning is amazing to me."²⁶

Signifyin may also be done in "marking" fashion. Anthropologist Claudia Mitchell Kernan explains, "a common black narrative tactic in the folktale genre and in actual events is the individuation of characters through the use of direct quotation."²⁷ The marking will often be affected to portray the other as being either weak, feminine, or a fraud. For example in the Hitman Holla and Charlie Clips battle, Holla addresses an incident in which Smack owed Clips almost \$10,000, and raps "You were probably on the phone like (in exaggerated "formal" Standard English) Hi Smack, this is Charlie / Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to know when you were thinking you would pay me." By reenacting the supposed conversation in Standard English, Holla uses the alleged code-switch as proxy for Clips' fraudulence. Yet another popular Black narrative maneuver apparent in battle rap is the employment of self-deprecating humor. In a KOTD battle with White Canadian rapper Hollahan, Charlie Clips had been calling his rival frail throughout the round, and he ended it with "You wanna know how I knew he was soft? It's genetics; my family was always good at picking cotton."²⁸ Not only does he cut the ground from beneath Hollahan's feet by asserting his place in the sensitive history of slavery, he does so wittily by using the dual meaning of 'picking' as to choose and to physically pick.

²⁵ JFox209Sons, "Jungle Presents Conceited vS L-Dot R2." YouTube, February 3, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0-2wr_UN9g.

²⁶ Anthony Elbert, in personal interview with author, January 2015.

²⁷ Russell John Rickford and John Russel Rickford, *Spoken Soul : The Story of Black English*. (New York, New York: Wiley & Sons Inc, 2000), 63.

²⁸ King of the Dot Entertainment, "KOTD- Rap Battle- Hollahan vs Charlie Clips," YouTube Video, 26:03, October 1 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cX0y1dXvD4Y>.

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Such self-deprecating humor often shows up in yet another defining characteristic of Afro-based storytelling and battle rap: braggadocio. As Rickford and Rickford explain, “self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise.”²⁹ Tsu Surf, who has been criticized for “reaching” in battles; that is, mispronouncing words or making unorthodox references in the interest of wordplay, recently rapped “I don’t wanna get shot for shit / but it got so normal that I reach (motioning like he is reaching for a gun) even when I ain’t got shit.”³⁰ By recognizing his flaw and the criticism thereof, he makes it harder for his opponent to use it against him. Also, the double meaning in “reaching even when he doesn’t have shit” -whether a punchline or a gun- thrilled the crowd. Another such instance came in the Math Hoffa versus Dizaster battle. Math Hoffa, whose last battle had ended with him punching his opponent and thus getting banned from that particular league, had offered up the ridiculous explanation that he lashed out because he was irritable from not having eaten all day. Of course, nobody took his explanation seriously. Thus, when he battled Dizaster a few months later, he raps “Ooh you’re lucky KOTD made sure that we had food,” a self-deprecating reference to his absurd explanation that food was the only thing standing between him and acting violent.³¹

In the badman tradition of Shine, Muhammed Ali and many a popular rapper, braggadocio is always best tinged with wit and storytelling. When eccentric battler, Daylyt of L.A, raps “I’m nice round here, like Afro-pickin,” he does not only glorify himself; he uses AAL dialect in dropping the “a” in around, and pronouncing here to sound like “air” before drawing on the Afro-comb, an important black artifact thus responsible for “nice round hair.” In another battle, Conceited raps that his opponent’s girl has been “feelin the kid’s kicks like she pregnant.”³² Aside from the obvious implication of superior masculinity through swaying his opponent’s girlfriend’s loyalty, the wordplay here is genius. By using both the AAL vernacular for being infatuated (feelin) and shoes (kicks), and then comparing it to pregnancy wherein the mother actually “feel kicks” and tying it together with the semantically inverted use of the word “kid” to describe himself, Conceited gets the crowd hyped in all of eight words.

As battling becomes more lucrative and popular, battlers are taking up to six or seven prominent battles a year. This means that a good show takes a lot more preparation and no amount of wit will allow you to freestyle your way through more than one hundred minutes worth of battle—not efficiently anyway. That said, the ability to freestyle (that is, perform unrehearsed) is still crucial to battles, and is often necessary to rebuttal attacks. Consider, for example, the battle between Serious Jones and

²⁹ Russell John Rickford and John Russel Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York, New York: Wiley & Sons Inc, 2000), 82.

³⁰ Ultimate Rap League. “Tsu Surf vs Hitman Holla Smack/URL,” YouTube, October 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PFpLKgDyTU.

³¹ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Dizaster vs Math Hoffa.” YouTube, July 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tiuudh7Q3s>.

³² King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Conceited vs Charlie Clips | #Blackout4,” YouTube Video, March 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o6c9ITG5_E.

Charlie Clips, wherein Clips went first and dedicated most of his verse to clowning how Jones is actually a local barber by profession, despite claims of being a “baller.” When Jones’ turn comes up, he begins by saying “Yes, seven years ago I was a barber, so you know I know how to handle Clips.”³³ The crowd went berserk. Not only did he accept the diss, he then flipped it on Clips through freestyled wordplay. Often, if both rappers have prepared well and bring their best to the stage, these unrehearsed portions of the battle will sway the audience’s verdict.

Men vastly dominate battle rap, much like they do the pulpit and the commercial rap scene. Like Kid of Kid-N-Play said more than twenty years ago, “women have to work twice as hard to get half the credit” in hip-hop.³⁴ The audience at major battle events is also reflective of this dynamic, with female attendance estimated at only 20% of the crowd.³⁵ In recent times, however, female battlers have been taking to the stage and negotiating their space in a patriarchal world. The 2014 URL’s Summer Madness 3 show featured one such battle between Jaz the Rapper and Ms. Hustle. While the wordplay, lyricism and energy is not unlike their male counterparts, their value-based topics were representative of their different experience. For example, Jaz raps that she had been away because she “put [her] education first, and graduated, now [she’s] back to school bitches” while Ms. Hustle raps that she had been away raising her daughter “on real bitch time.”³⁶ By declaring she had taken time off to pursue her education in an art form where the men usually distance themselves from the apparent pretension and “softness” of college and applaud the “school of hard knocks,” Jaz asserts a different type of agency as a woman than her male counterparts. Similarly, Ms. Hustle’s re-appropriation of the word “bitch” to connote responsible motherhood turns the misogyny of the word when used by the men into virtue in her hands. Such reclaiming of words is not unlike how the hip-hop community has redefined “nigga” to a term of endearment and often, a man of redoubtable character (as in “real nigga”).

Beyond the wordplay and theatrics of battle rap, it is important to recognize the importance of Afro-based storytelling lies in the impartation of the values thereof. Beyond being a battle of wits, battles are essentially a battle of who is the better man or woman. Topics often addressed are opponents’ drug use, fictional criminal personas, failure to provide for one’s children, and irresponsible criminal records. For example, Detroit’s Calicoe had risen up the ranks in large part due to, in addition to his undeniable battling skills, street cred garnered by claims that his father had been a renowned member of the notorious Black Mafia Family gang back in his day, making him a “real nigga.” Thus at URL’s Summer Madness 2, in what many pundits consider battle rap’s finest third (final) verse, Loaded Lux raps repeatedly “Your father wasn’t a gangsta; he was just another lost nigger” and goes on to condemn the destructive

³³ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIOUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS.”

³⁴ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When we Talk about Hip Hop-and Why it Matters*, 142.

³⁵ David James, in personal communication with author, December 2015.

³⁶ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS MS HUSTLE VS JAZ THE RAPPER,” YouTube, October 18, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkzFWv3PIIk>.

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virtues embodied by gang life, and questions why the father had not gotten a “9-5” like a responsible parent would instead of peddling drugs in the community and being arrested for much of Calicoe’s life.³⁷ In a KOTD battle, Cortez of Queens New York confronts Hollohan about his boasts about being a drug dealer, especially since Hollohan’s friend famously died from a drug overdose:

*Don't be mad, just be real with yourself
Coz every drug that Bruce did, you dealt it yourself
Every line on the canvass, every capsule, every tablet
You're the worst type of friend, you influenced his every habit.*³⁸

Similar themes have shown up in several other battles. In one such battle that one of my interviewee battlers, Pharaoh Soul, singled out as the best battle he had ever seen, Remy D of New Orleans called out opponent T-Dubb on his unrelenting emphasis on gunplay in battles. As Pharaoh Soul explained to me, “he stopped talking about what guns do, and started talking about what niggas do,”³⁹ that is, instead of focusing on the glamorized use of guns as an extension of one’s masculinity, and described how violence had been destructive to the hood:

“I don’t respect niggas living your life standards / coz when you categorize the victims your type adds up / they usually classified as innocent bystanders.”⁴⁰ Communal responsibility is the highest value in Afro-based communities, and the particular canonization of such verses is evidence of the values’ extension in battle rap.

Ultimately, all these linguistic and cultural facets of battle rap combine with the goal of doing one thing: moving the crowd in a rapper’s favor. Most battles are left for the crowd to decide who won, and even when judges are employed, their opinion is often based on crowd reaction. Six of the seven people I interviewed (including all three rappers) acknowledged the importance of swaying the crowd. Battle fan Gregory Graves argued, “without the crowd you have nothing. No matter what you say,”⁴¹ while Rave listed crowd control as one of the three fundamentals of battle rap, along with “aggression and lyrical content.”⁴² Veteran battle organizer D Jones explained to me “the crowd is most important second to the battlers themselves. Some battles the crowd makes the decision. They can even decide both are wack.”⁴³ A priceless crowd engagement tactic that is prevalent in hip-hop and traces its roots to African storytelling

³⁷ Ultimate Rap League. “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS LOADED LUX VS CALICOE,” YouTube, September 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1-z2hxXxKg>.

³⁸ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Hollohan vs Cortez (Co-hosted By RAEKWON).” YouTube video, 27:32, January 30, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K3SPvu6DVg>.

³⁹ Pharaoh Soul, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

⁴⁰ Street Status, “STREET STATUS PRESENTS T DUBB O VS REMYD,” YouTube, December 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BwT8aTCpiY>.

⁴¹ Gregory Graves, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

⁴² Rave, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

⁴³ D Jones, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

is call-and-response. Described by Smitherman as a “manifestation of the cultural dynamic which finds audience and listener or leader and background to be a unified whole,”⁴⁴ the culture of call and response provides the counterpoint to traditional Eurocentric perceptions of audience-wordsmith/musician interaction. While European-based performances such as the opera depend on minimal participation from the audience until the end, Afro-based traditions insist on the audience participation throughout the performance, as facilitated by call and response. Consider the South African war cries, or *Toyi Toyis*, whose energy builds up as the leader continues to chant and fellow warriors chant back, or the verbal responses from the Amen corner of the church. The culture is no different in battle rap, and as battlers develop a name for themselves, the easier the crowd can identify with their calls. For example, after a Hitman Holla “haymaker” that is, an incredible punchline, the crowd will typically yell “Remix that Shit!” to which he will say the same thing repeatedly in a way similar to DJ scratching. Conceited will say something one way, then yell, “Slow it down, I just dissed you!” then break it down to reveal a double entendre. Most top billed battle rappers have similar schemes, or will develop slogans to indicate the end of their verses, such as Calicoe’s “Landslide!” or Murda Mook’s “Easy!” None of these are a novelty to Afrodiasporic storytelling. For example, comics Kevin Hart’s “Alright alright alright” or Bernie Mac’s “Y’all don’t understand, I’m not scared of you Motherfuckers!” may be almost nonsensical in the context of the story being actually told, but give the crowd a point of connection with the person on the stage. Similarly, preachers in Black churches usually distinguish themselves with tailored repeated refrains to which the congregation holds on.

In *Signifyin Rappers*, Wallace and Costell explain that “... nothing does the genre (hip-hop) have more scorn than the ‘tired’ or ‘lame,’ the quiescent or mute.”⁴⁵ Put simply, how you communicate your message is as important as the message itself. This declaration is true in hip-hop in general and battle rap in particular. Demeanor, volume, and confidence all add to the battler’s appeal. As stated earlier, battle rap’s two essential points of contest are wit and comportment: the assertion that I am better than you linguistically and as a man or woman. As with any competition, there are rules, albeit unwritten, in battle rap. Linguistically, it is a no-no to choke (forget your lines; stumble to an extent of not being able to proceed). The essence of Afro-based storytelling is to keep going, and being spontaneous should the need arise. Like rapper BARZ explained, even he would be upset if an opponent “choked or came unprepared to a battle that I have put my heart into.”⁴⁶ In one of battle rap’s most disappointing moments, veteran rapper Canibus, who made his name in large part due to his battle records, famously choked in his return to battle rap against California’s Dizaster. As if choking was not bad enough; he pulled out his notepad to rap from it! Much like BARZ

⁴⁴ Samy H. Alim, “Hip Hop Nation Language.” *Language in the USA Themes for the Twenty-First Century* (2004), 401.

⁴⁵ David Foster Wallace and Mark Costell, *Signifying Rappers* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1990), 91.

⁴⁶ BARZ, in personal communication with author, December 2014.

explained, Dizaster was visibly upset, and the battle had to be cut short.⁴⁷ “Reaching” described earlier, is yet another linguistic faux pas in battle rap, although usually more subjective than choking is.

True to the communal essence, one must also never insult the crowd. In the Serius Jones battle where Charlie Clips had been dissing him about working in the barbershop, Clips took time to rap “Enough of that, I got love for all my barbershop folks / I just thought I could help him shape up with a few barbershop jokes.”⁴⁸ While the disses were, indeed, witty and derided Jones, Clips also recognized the centrality of the barbershop to Black culture and thus the crowd: it was important to clarify that his qualms were with Jones and not the barbershop.

Culturally, it is important that the essence of community is preserved in the larger picture of the battle. For all the talk of violence in rap, the battle should never become physical. In the few instances it has happened in the major leagues, the aggressing rappers have subsequently been suspended or banned from the league. One rapper in particular, Math Hoffa, has been banned from several leagues for repeatedly initiating fights on stage. Not only does violence put the rappers at risk and scare promoters and venue providers away, it is inconsistent with the wit and community that form the backdrop of the culture. Nosa, one of the fans interviewed, described the Math Hoffa battles as the worst he has ever seen for that very reason.⁴⁹ Battle rap host D Jones narrated one such instance in which one individual had been rapping “like he was so hood and thought he could scare the crowd into liking him. We love hip hop in all its forms but the Shop don't take to kindly to wannabe gangstas trying to flex so he lost quick and had to shut his happy ass up. He acted like he wanted to fight too and we let him know that wasn't happening.”⁵⁰

To the unwitting eye, battle rap may seem like a hostility-filled contest where people square off to insult each other and earn a few dollars. On the contrary, it is a rich subculture with roots in extensive Afrodiasporic traditions and community values. You may watch one battle that appears to harbor intense animosity between the two rappers, and then see the same two cheering each other on in their next battles. As the art form grows in popularity and battlers now perform up to eight times a year (as opposed to three or four battles in previous years), there are fears from faithful fans that the quality of art will become corrupted and commoditized. While that remains to be seen, battle rap will continue to find avenues to exist in its rawest forms and, if the return of several mainstream rappers to their battling roots in recent years is anything to go by, it will continue to be held reverential in its pure form by those born and bred of the culture.

⁴⁷ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Canibus vs Dizaster - *Co-Hosted by DJ Skee*,” YouTube, June 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9KjsBIsr2g>.

⁴⁸ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS.”

⁴⁹ Nosakhare Osaretin, in personal interview with author, January 2015.

⁵⁰ D Jones, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

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