



Rapping Blackness

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As a biracial man, there's something visceral about being in a room full of black people of all shades, from across the United States—all of whom have dressed up to experience a space of music, intellectualism, indulgence, and fun—that makes you stand up straighter. Hip hop is an exemplary black space, and its constituent cultural activities exist in widespread and influential opposition to the systems and ideologies enacted by the powerful that propagate white ways of being at the expense of colored realities. Rap music as the primary vocal expression of hip hop culture has been uniquely poised for creating these black spaces.

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Battle rap—rapped, verbal competition—is a particularly rich site for studying knowledge production in black spaces. Fundamental to the experience of attending a rap battle is the communicative play engaged in by rappers. Battle rap verses are typically rapped a cappella—without musical accompaniment. Consequently, rappers must rely on their

lyricism, creativity, and intellect as tools for besting one another in performance. Battle rappers actively construct local conceptions of racial categories by performing themselves and performing others in meaningful ways (see for example, [Alim, Lee, and Carris, 2010](#)). While much of the United States remains hostile to black and brown bodies, in these spaces, our realities thrive. Through their practices offstage and the black normativity of their verses onstage, battle rappers act as both cultural organizers and representatives.

In May 2019, I walked into an event space—a nondescript boxing gym in Brooklyn, New York; part of a contiguous agglomeration of storefronts, businesses, and private residences that lined both sides of the block. As I walked through the front door I noticed only two things: a check-in table and a partition. About six feet tall, this temporary wall was enough to obscure most people's view into the venue from the outside and vice versa. It may have been meant as a visual obstruction, but I found this small detail symbolically weighty—a break between the white-dominated exterior and the black space that I would experience inside.

As I moved past the partition and into the physical interior, this shift in social environment stood out. Battle rappers are quasi-celebrities, elevated literally and figuratively above the audience, but only partially. They also represent and are deeply implicated in the people and standards of the battle rap community. As the artists at the center of this rap subgenre, battlers carry the responsibilities of interpretation, representation, and performance carried by rappers elsewhere. On event days, battlers conduct interviews with hip hop media outlets in which they recap battles, discuss their own future projects, and speak about the culture (battle rap culture or hip hop culture). While their actions directly inform local realities, they mediate between this particular physical event space and the larger battle rap and hip hop communities by way of these

commentaries. The elevated boxing ring in which battlers performed at the event that I attended, located centrally in the room, symbolizes this idea. The ring—in which only battlers, hosts, and camera people are allowed—represents their privileged statuses as the leaders of the business and community of battle rap.

Yet battlers, far from being celebrity figureheads around which communities form, are themselves enmeshed in the battle rap community. While many casual or first-time attendees like myself watched the battles alone or chatted casually with other fans, larger groups of people who were longer-time members of battle rap's in-person community came together with each other and the battlers as a reunion. As I waited for the event to start, I sat in that boxing gym watching battlers that I had watched on YouTube for years, in the flesh, feet away from me. No one was ushered around by security, instead roaming freely in this space that is a comfortable home for all who attend these events regularly. For most battle rappers, battle rap is not the sole means of subsistence. Battlers also subsist through day jobs, mainstream music careers, and street life, among other things. Yet in this space, this world created at events, they are central—spatially and socially. Battle rap is a black space not only because black people are a quantitative majority, but also because they are qualitatively central to the creation and functioning of blackness in this world.

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The system of race that battle rappers and fans traffic in is polyvalent—drawing from a number of intersecting experiences inside and outside of

battle rap—and in constant flux as black and, increasingly, Latinx experiences in the world are brought into the conversations of this unique performance space (one need only look at the uptick in bars about Mexico, walls, and immigration to see this flux in real time). Thus, it is no surprise that artistic modes that draw from lived experiences factor heavily into the construction of battle rap as a black space.

Schemes—intentionally multilayered sections of a verse containing one or more unifying themes—exemplify the delicate balance between performance-as-entertainment and incorporating normalizing racial discourse into verses. In [a 2014 battle on Queen of the Ring](#), Cee the Boss's first round against opponent Deisel opened with a 16-bar phrase in which she employed no less than nine song titles and one album title from the corpus of famed Brooklyn rapper Jay Z as an ancillary theme. For example, in her 6th, 7th, and 8th bars Cee proclaimed "I ain't gotta call my niggas point 'em out, we rock boys/ act tough I'm in your face like nigga what, nigga who?/ no hook, straight bullets comin' right for your crew" where "Roc Boys", "Nigga What? Nigga Who?", and "No Hook" are all Jay Z song titles. In such schemes, race is performed in various ways simultaneously.

The importance of these lyrical expressions to the formation of race lies in their normative use of people and experiences which are externally iconic to blackness. When academics regularly engage in intellectual conversation with other academics—contemporary and historical—the process of canonization makes these conventions unremarkable or normative. Similarly, battle rappers create black realities in these spaces by artistically engaging with black practices and prominent figures; often without marking them as distinctly *black* athletes, *black* musicians, or *black* experiences. In doing so, battle rappers actively contribute to the foregrounding of black people and black worlds as normative. These

lyrical expressions unify rapper and audience in shared cultural competency. The audience must have a degree of familiarity with what's being rapped about to fully appreciate them. Demonstrating an intimate knowledge of Jay-Z's corpus exemplifies the use of a prominent black figure in this normative way. His name isn't even mentioned until after the scheme, and even then he is referred to colloquially by his nickname Hov. Within the bars themselves, the narrative built on hip hop and the norms of street life—spaces influenced greatly by black people—also normalizes blackness in a society that takes blackness as abnormal. Even the term “nigga,” elsewhere a topic of heated debate, is used normally as an expression of experiential proximity. We're all in on it because we've all been through it. Together, these practices along with rappers' practices offstage help to create a true black space.

Rap music and hip hop culture are vital to the study of the black experience in the United States both musically, and for the role that both have played as spaces for developing and maintaining emic systems of value, meaning, and ideology for the black community amid constant onslaught by the dominant social order. As the creators and leaders of this space, battle rappers are also organic intellectuals. Their practices on and off stage, contribute to the local constructions of blackness. It follows that hip hop, rap music, and battle rap are prime sites for academic inquiry into self-governed systems of knowledge production in black America.

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