

FANDOM AND CO-PRODUCTION IN KING OF THE DOT'S BATTLE RAP SCENE

SEAN ROBERTSON-PALMER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

AUGUST, 2022

© SEAN ROBERTSON-PALMER, 2022

Abstract

This interdisciplinary dissertation documents the performances of fans of the professional battle rap league King of the Dot (KOTD), the biggest battle rap league in Canada and one of the highest viewed platforms for battle rap in the world. By collectively tracing and articulating battle rap's aesthetics, practices, formats, and community standards in digital spaces such as social media sites and fan forums, fans document the scene's histories while driving innovation and shaping the culture they participate in. I argue that fans play a central role in the meaning-making of battle rap's cultural practices through their participation in a digital battle rap scene. Through live and digital performance analyses, archival interviews, and oral testimonies, this dissertation prioritizes the voices of the participants in the scene, emphasizing the labour and agency present in battle rap fandom.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to those in the battle rap scene, in Toronto and abroad, who knowingly and unknowingly helped guide me through this process. To my brother Simon who made me my first mix tapes, and to my parents Katharine and David for not confiscating those tapes. Finally, to my academic mentors Mary Fogarty, Laura Levin, Murray Forman and Danielle Robinson who kept the belief that this work was important enough to share.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Battle Rap’s Material and Digital Spectatorial Conditions.....	47
Chapter Two: TalkBack as a Cypher: The Role of Fans in Battle Rap’s Virtual Scene.....	90
Chapter Three: TalkBack, Social Commerce and Hu-fan-itarianism.....	120
Chapter Four: Gender, Expectation and Resistance in Battle Rap Fandom.....	149
Conclusion.....	182
Works Cited.....	200

Introduction

Battle rap (also known as “rap battles” or “rap battling”) is the competitive format of rapping, or “emceeing/MCing,” that was an early fixture of Hip Hop culture alongside the other foundational elements of DJ’ing, writing (or graffiti) and breaking (or b-boying.)¹ Battle rap has many different formats, rules, and aesthetics in a contemporary context. The most common structure in professional battle rap under investigation in this dissertation is a battle of three rounds of an agreed upon length (usually ranging between three-ten minutes) where emcees alternate rounds of pre-written, original material, to display a superior style of emceeing over one’s opponent. An emcee usually achieves these goals using humorous, insulting, and lyrically complex material combined with a compelling performative presence.

While competition is a fundamental aspect of battle rap culture, the process of battling is communal in nature. For a battle to garner interest from fans, it requires the skillful execution of rounds by both emcees so that a call-and-response, back-and-forth exchange can properly occur. A dominant, one-sided performance from one emcee often garners less interest from battle rap fans than a closely contested, well-executed battle by both emcees. The energy of a battle is not exchanged between the two emcees exclusively. It is also passed to the fans invested in the ritual of the battle, who reciprocate this energy back to the emcees. What may initially appear to be a one-on-one competition is instead a triangulated, collaborative process with many stakeholders. The most frequently forgotten stakeholders in this process, the fans, are the focus of this dissertation.

¹ Dimitriadis (2004) highlights on pg. 498 that battling was an “intrinsic part of hip hop almost from its inception” and mentions seminal battles such as the Cold Crush Brothers vs. The Fantastic Five and Busy Bee vs. Kool Moe Dee.

My dissertation highlights the fandom and fan performances at the centre of Toronto-based battle rap league King of the Dot (KOTD). KOTD is the highest-profile battle rap league in Canada and one of the most viewed online platforms for English-language battle rap in the world.² My three primary research questions are as follows:

- 1) In what ways do fans co-produce meaning in battle rap culture?
- 2) How do fans blur the lines between producer, performer, and audience?
- 3) How has the recording and distribution of King of the Dot's digital content created new forms of spectatorship and fandom?

My analysis of King of the Dot's battle rap scene explores the processes and conditions that reveal King of the Dot's events, artists, and fans as participants of a globalized culture that has recast battle rap performance in digital spaces. At the core of this analysis is how King of the Dot's battle rap fans actively participate in practices of creation, collaboration, and bodily knowledge. I also analyze how fans disseminate battle rap's traditions and practices through a devoted and complicated online battle rap scene. King of the Dot has helped cultivate a uniquely local battle rap scene because of its location of flagship events, its focus on the development of local battle rap talent, and its alignment with Canadian cultural funding institutions such as Factor³. Paradoxically, King of the Dot has also become ground zero for the globalization of battle rap because of their increased digital presence and international popularity. With events and tours now reaching multiple cities in Canada, King of the Dot has expanded a once localized battle rap scene into a national brand that has come to define the aesthetic values and commercial

² This is based off statistics from YouTube, which has been the primary mode of spectatorship for battle rapper over the past decade. As of Aug. 11, 2021, KOTD's YouTube page has 860,000 subscribers and 47 videos with over 1 million views. These number are second only to The Ultimate Rap League (URL) who have 1.35 million subscribers and 154 videos with over a million views.

³ Factor describes themselves as "a public/private partnership that supports the production of sound recordings by Canadian musicians and helps Canadian music companies make recordings available to a wider public", however through their 'Collective Initiatives' program they also support various music industry showcases and events.

possibilities of battle rap in Canada.

Additionally, King of the Dot has become one of the frontrunners in the creation and distribution of online battle rap pay-per-view (PPV) events and videos on platforms such as YouTube, which has exposed Toronto and Canadian emcees to international audiences while also expanding the reach and influence of the King of the Dot brand. Lastly, King of the Dot's official partnership with UK-based Smoked Out Battles League beginning in 2018 has further established a business presence outside of North America, further cementing the international reach of the brand beyond their online scene. Thus, all at once, King of the Dot is a fiercely local scene, the nucleus of Canada's national battle rap culture and a leading example of battle rap's globalization. This firmly positions King of the Dot's battle rap scene as the most important example of the global/local circulation of battle rap culture over the past decade, both of which are absent in the current literature on Hip Hop scenes.

My own journey exploring Hip Hop, from stealing my brother's mixtapes in the late 80s, to recording late-night college radio shows throughout the 90s on my Emerson twin-deck cassette player, to watching battle rap videos on YouTube during the 2000s, was largely an isolated and mediated experience. Like many of the fans I describe in this dissertation, I forged relationships and found Hip Hop communities on various online battle rap forums and websites. I was instantly taken by the fact that countless other people from vastly different backgrounds shared my interests, and that these people were welcoming and helpful. Many of them became crucial in guiding me through the politics and histories of the art form I loved so much. They were also intensely productive about their appreciation of battle rap, sharing hard-to-find videos, creating fan art, producing compilation videos, just to name a few. These were vibrant and engaged fans and my first Hip Hop communities outside of my childhood friends. A move from

suburban Ottawa to Toronto as a nineteen-year-old changed my relationship with Hip Hop profoundly. I attended shows, clubs, battles, and I forged new relationships with people who shared similar material spaces. We went to the same shows, waited in line at the same clubs, shopped at the same record stores, and ate at the same late-night spots. Battle rap in Toronto was an especially welcoming space full of people that put in countless hours of labour teaching me about the craft, the histories, and the builders.

Each chapter of this dissertation evolved from the labour of these fans, often sparked by casual conversations with other members of the battle rap scene. Topics have been marked for inclusion in this dissertation because they are an extension of the casual discourses of the scene. Issues such as fan production, technology, race, gender, capitalism, and consumerism are topics of conversation that seemed to constantly re-emerge, enough so that I believe they deserve adequate space to be discussed. Much like those casual conversations, my goal is to ensure my white, male voice is just one of many in the exegesis of a topic.

In some moments of this dissertation, my personal experience is explicitly centred, while in other moments it is as absent as it can be in my writing. In both instances, my own experiences colour my view. My own life experience is also directly informed by the people who have helped to shape it. Since emerging from my childhood experience of isolation with Hip Hop, a chorus of voices and an array of identities have placed countless hours of labour into shaping who I am and what my relationship to Hip Hop is. In some instances, this has been an intimate process with friends and acquaintances where ignorance was revealed, lessons were taught, and apologies and mending took place. Other instances are documented explicitly in this study. Others occurred in a unidirectional way, with no knowledge or consent on the part of the teachers. Important voices in Toronto Hip Hop such as Mark V. Campbell, Del Cowie, Motion,

Dalton Higgins, and many, many more have shaped, and continue to shape, the way I navigate Hip Hop and my city. And I feel a responsibility to ensure their teachings are present in this dissertation.

When I am analyzing the aesthetics and practices of battle rap, and Hip Hop more broadly, I aim to be a steward of the art form, a caretaker of the property of others, rather than attempting to assert a singular “expertise” or claim ownership. Although academia has a competitive and individualistic perspective on the ownership of ideas, particularly for young scholars who feel a crushing pressure to make a unique mark on their field, this dissertation aims to build up voices other than mine, particularly those of fans, rather than claiming individual authority on the topic. At the same time, Hip Hop culture’s relationship to dominant culture requires a deep interrogation of the whiteness that occupies its space, particularly when whiteness has the potential to defuse the sociopolitical vitality of the art form. When I am analyzing Hip Hop, I am not only analyzing a Black diasporic culture, but I am also analyzing a white dominant culture that I participate in; one that has attempted to subdue, criminalize, and exploit the politics and practices of Hip Hop. Rather than offloading the responsibility of critiquing dominant culture onto Black scholars, artists, journalists, and fans alone (a practice that has been too common for too long), I feel a responsibility to do my part in highlighting the systems of inequity that have historically occurred when people who looked like me take up an interest in Black diasporic performance. Although I believe it is possible for a sincere and respectful treatment of Hip Hop’s politics and aesthetics outside of its original cultural context, it is important to acknowledge the fundamental changes that occur when Hip Hop culture is reimagined in geographically and culturally disparate locales.

A wealth of literature on Hip Hop culture has emerged in academia since the 1980s,

discussing Hip Hop's politics, aesthetics, pedagogical processes, and geography in disciplines such as African American Studies, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Theatre, Dance, Education and Media Studies, just to name a few. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Hip Hop studies, this dissertation will continue the lineages of Hip Hop analysis from several disciplines, including literature on scenes and subcultures in Cultural Studies, authenticity and race in American and African American Studies, and audiences/spectatorship in Theatre and Performance Studies. Additionally, interdisciplinary research on online fandom and fan cultures helps me to analyze the ways in which battle rap's digital conditions work in conjunction with its material conditions to facilitate a global exchange of battle rap's aesthetics and practices. Although my work is rooted in the field of Performance Studies, I have divided the literature relevant to my research into six intersecting categories with the intent to dodge the trap of disciplinary silos:

- 1) Historicizing Battle Rap
- 2) Battle Rap and the Academy
- 3) Hip Hop and Performance Studies
- 4) Fandom, Liveness and Digital Technologies in Performance Studies
- 5) Scenes, Community and Culture
- 6) Race and Authenticity
- 7) Battle Rap Fandom

Historicizing Battle Rap

Alim, Lee and Carris describe traditional rap battles as “improvisational verbal duels that often emerge from cyphers, or competitive circular arrangements of emcees who take turns

rapping with each other.”⁴ The improvisation aspect that Alim, Lee and Carris highlight was particularly important in early battle rap, when the focus of the art form was to establish superiority over ones battle opponent by spontaneously devising a series of lyrically complicated rhymes on the spot, frequently referred to as “freestyling.” For many rappers and scholars alike, freestyling and improvisation have become synonymous. The 2005 documentary *Freestyle: The Art of the Rhyme*, which features many prominent artists such as The Roots, Notorious B.I.G and Jurassic 5, positions the improvisational aspect of rapping as the heart of freestyling.⁵ The most salient example of this position in the film is the interview with Los Angeles-based rapper Supernatural, whose success as a battle rapper helped to launch his commercial music career. Scholars such as Pihel (1996), Bennett (2004) and Cutler (2007) also highlight the importance of improvisation in freestyling. Pihel defines freestyling as “rapping spontaneously with no prewritten materials”⁶ while Bennett describes it as “verbally improvising a series of ideas and points of view around the chosen theme.”⁷ Within the context of battle rap, Cutler emphasizes the competitive aspect of freestyling alongside its improvisatory nature by claiming “the goal is for each rapper to insult or *dis* (sic) his or her opponent with spontaneous rhymes for a fixed length of time...”⁸

Although freestyling has become tethered to improvisation by practitioners and academics alike, the term “freestyling” is not without controversy and interpretation. This is highlighted by Shawn Setaro’s 2017 article for complex.com that details the critical reception of emcee Eminem’s “freestyle” lampooning of United States President Donald Trump on the BET

⁴ Alim, Lee and Carris (2011) pg. 425.

⁵ *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*, 2005, Funimation! Unidisc.

⁶ Pihel (1996) pg. 252.

⁷ Bennett in Forman and Anthony Neal (2004), pg. 196

⁸ Cutler (2007) pg. 9

Hip Hop Awards broadcast. Setaro highlights how the term “freestyle” is geographically specific, and that the meaning of freestyle as it pertains to structure is centered primarily around who is using it and where it is used. Setaro describes an alternative use of the term “freestyle” by legendary East Coast emcees such as Big Daddy Kane and Kool Moe Dee, who claim its initial use from a New York context was centered around the notion of rapping without a particular theme, form, or style, hence the term “freestyle” or “free of style.”⁹ In this instance, improvisation can be an aspect of one’s freestyle that fits along other pre-written material, but not a required component of the rhyming sequence.

To what extent improvisation factors into one’s freestyle may be affected by the time one is rapping and one’s own geographical location. Michael “Myka 9” Troy of the seminal Los Angeles-based Freestyle Fellowship takes credit for the shift in the meaning of the term. Myka 9 claims that the preferred method of improvisational rapping that Freestyle Fellowship employed helped to shift the meaning of the term both on the west coast and in east coast cities like New York through their tours in the early 1990s.¹⁰ For Philadelphian emcee Black Thought, who began rapping in the late-80’s, the shift in the definition of freestyle occurred in direct opposition to Myka 9’s claims. In a December 2017 interview for rollingstone.com, Black Thought describes his perspective on the shift of freestyling’s meaning:

“I think the definition of “freestyle” has definitely changed. When I was coming up, a freestyle wasn’t a freestyle unless everything was completely improvised, in-the-moment and right there, and you had to incorporate various elements of what was going on in the room on the day. That’s still a part of it. But I feel like it’s evolved into something more,

⁹ Setaro (2017)

¹⁰ Setaro (2017)

where you have to have the improv element, but you also have to have a certain script.”¹¹

For the purposes of this dissertation, the etymology of the term “freestyle” and the lack of consistency in its colloquial use may not be such an important concern, if there is an accepted use of the term within the circles that are using it. Among the organizers, fans, and battlers that account for much of the dialogue on King of the Dot’s online communication, “freestyle” is most used to describe material that is improvised on the spot, while “writtens” continue to be described as the pre-written material which makes up the bulk of contemporary battle rap performances. As contemporary battle rap has continued to morph into a professionalized art form, emcees, events, and organizations have altered the art form from a series of improvised bars over music that were prioritized in seminal events such as Scribble Jam as recently as the late 2000s, to an a cappella, pre-written format made popular by battle rap events and organizations such as The World Rap Championships, Grindtime Now, Ultimate Rap League (URL), and King of the Dot, just to name a few. Canada’s contribution to this transition is significant, as the Halifax-based Elements League is colloquially referenced by fans as one of the first openly pre-written a cappella battle rap leagues in the world.

The emphasis on battle rap’s transition from freestyle rapping over music to the professionalized, a cappella model typified by most contemporary battle rap leagues will take precedence in this analysis. Battles may be judged by a panel of pre-selected judges, usually peers within the battle rap scene in question. However, as the breadth of approaches, aesthetics, and styles of emceeing have continued to increase, the subjective nature of judging has become a point of contention in the battle rap world. Thus, in addition to judged battles, it has also become increasingly common for a battle to be booked by promoters as a promotional battle, or “promo.”

¹¹ Black Thought in Reeves (2017)

A promo battle is not judged in any formal sense but is informally judged via a thorough process of colloquial analysis and criticism by other emcees, fans, promoters, and participants in the battle rap scene. This informal analysis of a promo battle is but one of the plethora of ways in which the emcees, fans, and media actively collaborate in the increasingly popular globalized battle rap scene, which will be the major focus of analysis in this dissertation.

The era of battle rap histories I examine will begin in 2008, when the YouTube era of KOTD began and the global growth and dissemination of KOTD's battle rap scene occurred.¹² Rather than emphasize a singular history, I will emphasize the voices of the participants in shaping battle rap's histories by blending academic inquiry into the internal scholarship that occurs within the battle rap scene. This research will emphasize the live and ephemeral experiences of the participants, thus giving priority to the practitioners, promoters, and audiences who themselves have created a set of cultural traditions that continue to be taught and shared through oral and corporeal practices. What I argue throughout this dissertation is that battle rap scenes have their own internal discourses concerning the art form's histories, and it is important to consider how and where they manifest to understand how tastes and practices change. Specifically, online fan pages dedicated to battle rap have become important archives of its history, as members freely share interviews from seminal rappers and organizers, videos of important battles, and stories from past events, all of which help to shape a larger historical narrative from voices within the scene. Aside from identifying and categorizing the kinds of fan activity that articulates KOTD's histories and aesthetic principles, this dissertation considers how the archival activity in these digital spaces shape the future of the art form.

Battle Rap in the Academy

¹² The first battle uploaded to YouTube by KOTD, featuring rappers Lavish Language and Young Blood, occurred on August 19th, 2008.

According to emcee Grandmaster Caz, the original emcees were companion voices to the DJ, who was primarily responsible for organizing and executing early Hip Hop events.¹³ Caz notes that by the late '70s, "the MC had become a fixture in every hip-hop crew," and as the number of emcees proliferated, competition began to increase and battles to see who could most effectively move the crowd soon followed: "Just as the DJs had battled and raised the standards of excellence, turning their hobby into an art form, so began the MC craft."¹⁴ The productiveness of competition in the context of emceeing cannot be overstated when it comes to the rapid increase in approaches and innovations during emceeing's fledgling years.

Early rap battles have become common lore in Hip Hop culture's origin story. The rivalry between the Fantastic Five and The Cold Crush Brothers is well documented in Hip Hop's oral history, and the final battle between the groups in 1981 at Harlem World is still considered a seminal event in Hip Hop history.¹⁵ Battling was a tool for gaining respect and building a reputation in the early New York Hip Hop scene, and approaches ranged from boasting about one's crews to performing call-and-response lyrics with the crowd. Although Caz notes the emphasis on rocking the crowd, the famous battle between emcee Busy Bee Starski and Kool Moe Dee in 1981 presented a more antagonistic relationship between emcees in a battle. Rather than addressing the crowd with his rhymes, Kool Moe Dee's tactic was to address Busy Bee directly, unpacking and insulting Busy Bee's skill and style.¹⁶ Importantly, Kool Moe Dee's focus on his opponent, which has largely framed the approach of contemporary battle rappers,

¹³ Grandmaster Caz "The MC, Master of Ceremonies to Mic Controller." Originally commissioned by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999 for rockhall.com, retrieved on *Davey D's Hip Hop Corner* March 31, 2017, <http://www.daveyd.com/historyemceegmcaz.html>

¹⁴ Grandmaster Caz "The MC, Master of Ceremonies to Mic Controller." Originally commissioned by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999 for rockhall.com, retrieved on *Davey D's Hip Hop Corner* March 31, 2017, <http://www.daveyd.com/historyemceegmcaz.html>

¹⁵ To highlight how oral history has its limitations, the Cold Crush Brothers and Grandmaster Caz have differing accounts of what day the event was held on.

¹⁶ Dimitriadis (2004) pg.499.

was not at the cost of entertaining the audience. Instead, he dispersed his lyrical focus in a way that simultaneously dismantled his opponent and provoked the crowd to respond to his rounds, a tactic that influenced emcees of the era and remains influential in how battle rap is performed today.

In terms of historical impact, Elijah Wald notes that audio recordings of the battle made their way around New York, and in turn solidified freestyle battling as an important test of an emcee's skill.¹⁷ KRS-One refers to the reverberation the battle had across New York City as an "atomic explosion" and interprets the battle as a "changing of the guard" from the old style of battling to the new.¹⁸ In his interview with popular Hip Hop YouTube channel VladTV, Grandmaster Caz calls the battle "the first definitive battle: me against you" and credits Kool Moe Dee for "upping the standard" with his approach.¹⁹ Referencing the lasting effect of Kool Moe Dee's approach, Shingi Mavima points to elements present in the battle such as "braggadocio; crowd rapport, representing your neighborhood" as key elements that continue to inform contemporary battle rap today.²⁰ The elements mentioned by Mavima are not exclusive to battle rap but can also be found in Afro-Caribbean performances that pre-date Hip Hop. Elijah Wald makes the connection between the improvised, insult-laden approach of Kool Moe Dee and "the dozens." The dozens is a game/vernacular practice from the African diaspora that carries many cultural and regional variances but often consists of two people dueling verbally using rhyming insults.²¹ The connection between battle rap and the dozens is also made by Shingi Mavima, who emphasizes the connection between the dozens and battle rap's competitive

¹⁷ Wald (2012) pg. 195-196.

¹⁸ Bazzgiar102, "Beef 1- Busy Bee vs Kool Moe Doe (sic)," 0:18-6:26.

¹⁹ VladTV, "Grandmaster Caz: Kool Moe Dee Upped Standard for Battle Rap," 1:28.

²⁰ Mavima (2016) pg. 6.

²¹ Wald (2012) claims the difficulty in defining the dozens based on its varied and shifting traditions, noting that "every authoritative statement has tended to provoke equally authoritative and contradictory critiques." (pg. 5)

elements.²²

As Tricia Rose notes, the emcee's role as the storyteller of Hip Hop culture "ensured that rapping would become the central expression in hip hop culture."²³ Coupled with Hip Hop's integration into the mainstream music industry, the emcee emerged as the highly profitable figure of Hip Hop culture, no longer tied to a single DJ or corporeal Hip Hop events. This shift is generally marked by the release of the Sugar Hill Gang's single "Rapper's Delight," which not only gave emcees the lasting moniker of the "rapper" but also highlighted the commercial viability of Hip Hop.²⁴ Considering the commercial success of Hip Hop and the emergence of emcees as cultural trendsetters and tastemakers, it comes as no surprise that current scholarship has favoured the analysis of the emcee in music industries, while effectively silencing and ignoring battle rap as a line of enquiry when discussing emcees or rapping.

The vast economic and social currency that recording artists have accumulated is further accentuated by the plethora of materials, both tangible and digital, they leave because of their creative process, thus making rap music the most widely accessible and consumable form of Hip Hop culture to analyze. The analysis of song lyrics, album covers, liner notes, music videos, and other rap music materials have long been favoured over analyses of more ephemeral aspects of emcee culture such as concerts or battle rap events. This recalls the historical preference that academic enquiry has for analyzing the material over the ephemeral, particularly in my home discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies.

Aston and Savona (1991) highlight this historical preference by emphasizing the institutional focus of theatre as a subset of Literary Studies prior to the shift in literary criticism

²² Mavima (2016) pg. 5

²³ Rose (1994) pg. 55.

²⁴ Brewster and Broughton (2009) pg. 260-261. The importance of the song is also mentioned in Chang (2005) and Rose (1993).

that sought to include semiotic approaches to theatre in the twentieth century.²⁵ Taking a step further from the primacy of the written text, scholars Paul Allain and Jen Harvie (2006) note that the field of Performance Studies “began to explore non-theatrical cultural practices that shared performance characteristics with theatre.”²⁶ By displacing lyrics and other products of the rap music industry as the primary areas of inquiry in emcee culture and focusing more on an emcee’s performance, new areas of research on rap can begin to take shape. Specifically, this shift encourages a focus on the tension between the ephemeral nature of battle rap and its increasingly mediated dramaturgy as the art form continues to evolve in digital spaces.

Whether we attribute the focus of research on the rap music industry as a product of its popularity, a result of a materialist approach to academic inquiry, or as a factor of circumstances as disparate and unique as the scholars who have written about rap music, the outcome has been a lack of canonical texts about battle rap. Nor are there any substantial blueprints for analyzing battle rap culture. This is not to imply that there is no scholarship specifically focusing on battle rap as its own practice within Hip Hop. Cecelia Cutler’s 2007 article “The Co-construction of Whiteness in an MC Battle” discusses the sociolinguistic co-construction of whiteness by Black and white emcees in freestyles battles from the 2000s. Focusing specifically on the now-deceased Minnesota-based emcee Eyedea, Cutler reveals the various ways that Eyedea and his opponents work to co-construct whiteness through Eyedea’s linguistic repertoire, his avoidance of “ingroup forms of address” such as the n-word, and his opponents’ discursive methods that connect Eyedea to a broader white culture.²⁷ Cutler argues that a reversal of W.E.B. Dubois’ “double consciousness” occurs in Hip Hop, where white emcees “are forced to see themselves

²⁵Aston and Savona (1991) pg. 3-4.

²⁶Allain and Jen Harvie (2006)

²⁷ Cutler (2007) pg. 17.

through the eyes of Black people and who must try to measure up to the standards of authenticity, achievement and knowledge established by the collective of individuals who lead the Hip Hop Nation.”²⁸ Despite this process of differentiation, Cutler concludes that the emcees “reference cultural differences in their performances in ways that reveal shared cultural knowledge and practices, binding them in important ways that often supersede (sic) cultural and ethnic differences.”²⁹

Cutler’s observations about the processes that co-create whiteness in battle rap are still accurate and relevant, but the phenomenon of reverse double-consciousness and the claim that Hip Hop practices can supersede cultural or ethnic difference requires more evidence. One may argue that Blackness is normative in Hip Hop culture and that whiteness is perceived as “the other.” But this racial essentializing ignores geographically specific scenes where most participants may not be Black (or Black people may not be present at all) and white people authenticate themselves without the presence of Black arbiters. Blackness will be a part of Hip Hop regardless of who is present, but one’s ability to construct one’s identity concerning Hip Hop changes depending on who is in the room and where in the world that room happens to be. It is, in fact, a criticism of the scene I am studying in this dissertation, and a topic I address further in chapter two.

Cutler’s positioning of whiteness as “the other” also seems to ignore larger power structures in western societies that are still hegemonically white. As Rodman notes, white artists have long been able to “separate their authenticity from the real lives”, meaning often times a white participant’s performance of authenticity does not carry with it broader societal

²⁸ Cutler (2007) pg. 10

²⁹ Cutler (2007) pg. 21.

ramifications.³⁰ White participants in Hip Hop do not have the potential to negatively shift western society's ideas of what it means to be white or create lasting (and potentially dangerous) stereotypes pertaining to acts or behaviours that are associated with whiteness in Hip Hop. At best, the notion of reverse double consciousness feels like an outdated concept, and at worst, evokes the same problematic feelings as the erroneous concept of "reverse racism."

In other academic enquiries, battle rap culture is dissected to highlight one specific aspect of the art form to serve a particular academic discipline or as a portion of a larger study on rap music and the music industry. There are two examples of scholarship that analyze battle rap as a scene and cultural product. Jooyoung Lee (2016) and Marcyliena Morgan (2009) each dedicate a section of their respective books to freestyle battle rap in the context of Los Angeles' underground Hip Hop mecca Project Blowed. In his book *Blowin' Up: Rap Dreams in South Central*, Lee analyzes the codes and conduct of street culture to analyze how battles function as a convention for solving conflict, as well as a system "through which young men negotiate perceived disrespect."³¹ Lee deftly unpacks the competitive format of battles in Project Blowed's scene while highlighting the verbal and emotional superiority that emcees pursue through the art form. His fourth chapter is especially helpful for understanding the informal collective nature of street cyphers, how street battles are initiated, as well as the potential for battles to escalate into physical conflict. Lee also discusses the challenges battle rappers encounter when attempting to transition their skill set as an emcee into mainstream musical success. This reinforces fundamental differences between the emcee-as-battle-rapper and the emcee-as-music-star, which include, among other things, distinguishing between being respected as a battle rapper and being

³⁰ Rodman (2006) pg. 106.

³¹ Lee (2016) pg. 101.

marketable in the music industry.³²

Relevant to this dissertation is Lee's acknowledgment of the importance of the internet as a driving force in shifting battle rap's aesthetics and practices. Referencing battle leagues such as Grindtime and KOTD, Lee notes that these leagues played a role in transitioning some of Project Blowed's artists from freestyling to written battle rap competitions. Because battle rap leagues are not a primary area of research for Lee's book, his writing on the topic is a brief one-page. As a result of this brevity, his characterization of Grindtime and KOTD as "online leagues"³³ ignores the live event component of both leagues in questions, as well as the environmental changes that emerge in the art form when a league chooses to record their live events. However, Lee's acknowledgement of artists and events that bridge the eras between spontaneous battles that occurred outside of Project Blowed and the professionalized, written, a cappella leagues such as KOTD is an important connection in tracing the histories of battle rap's forms and structures.

Morgan makes helpful distinctions between "organized battles" and "spontaneous battles" that occur at Project Blowed, which highlight how the format of battling can differ within a single scene based on one's acceptance (or denial) of the scene's cultural practices, rules, and discourses.³⁴ Morgan's analysis of Project Blowed's battle formats provide one model of analyzing how the art form can play a key role within a larger Hip Hop scene. Morgan also focuses on aspects of wordplay, traditions, and strategies emcees use in battle rap.³⁵ Although both Lee and Morgan's work make important contributions in parsing out the specificities of battle rap culture from rap music's industry, the format of battle rap at Project Blowed is not reflective of the a cappella format that currently informs the traditions, strategies, and aesthetics

³² Lee (2016) pg. 104.

³³ Lee (2016) pg. 220.

³⁴ Morgan (2009) pg. 98.

³⁵ Morgan (2009) pg.85-129.

of the professionalized battle rap scene, and thus the wider evolution of contemporary, professionalized events.

More recently, Shingi Mavima's 2016 article "Bigger by the Dozens: The Prevalence of Afro-Based Tradition in Battle Rap" is an excellent study of battle rap's Afro-based storytelling traditions and cultural practices. It productively addresses battle rap's verbal and non-verbal performances, as Mavima skillfully interrogates the role of language, vernacular, clothing, and gesture to situate contemporary, professionalized battle rap in a lineage of Afro-diasporic performance traditions. Beyond the significance of situating battle rap in a continuum of Afro-diasporic oral and physical performances, Mavima's article also attempts to trace a historical thread of battle rap formats from the 1980s to professionalized battle leagues such as King of the Dot. The scope of the article is impressive considering its brevity (it is 20 pages), however it only touches briefly on the contributions of fans, the material conditions of performance and reception, or the format of battle rap events.

Despite these examples, the volume of material published on battle rap still pales in comparison to other aspects of Hip Hop culture. Perhaps the most telling sign that the academy has mostly ignored battle rap is the omission of a chapter on battle rap in the major academic Hip Hop studies anthologies.³⁶ This omission is a curious one, considering battle rap's significance in Hip Hop culture's development, and its potential to contribute to many areas of inquiry within the Fine Arts and Humanities disciplines, including gender, race, and spectatorship, just to name a few. To fill this gap in the scholarship, my dissertation will be the most comprehensive analysis of professionalized battle rap culture to date, and will draw from scholarship across multiple disciplines, including Hip Hop studies, Cultural Studies, Performance Studies, and

³⁶ Influential anthologies such as *That's the Joint!* and *The Cambridge Companion to Hip Hop* only include chapters on emceeing in relation to rap music or the music industry, with a minimal focus on battle rap.

Theatre Studies.

Hip Hop and Performance Studies

In my home discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies, most of the scholarship on Hip Hop can be broadly categorized into two intersecting streams of analysis: 1) Hip Hop performance as an extension of western theatrical practices, and 2) Hip Hop performance as a sociopolitical critique. The initial use of the term “Hip Hop Theatre” is often attributed to UK performer Jonzi D and is further synthesized as an extension of western theatrical practices by American performer Holly Bass in her 1999 *American Theatre* article “Blowin’ up the Set.” Bass’ article detailed the presence of various Hip Hop artists fusing Hip Hop aesthetics with traditional western theatrical practices at the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In 2006, one of the artists mentioned in Bass’ 1999 article, Danny Hoch, attempted to further define the aesthetic properties of Hip Hop theatre by analyzing the history, conditions, and practices of Hip Hop culture through the lens of productions at his then-fledgling theatre festival, The Hip Hop Theatre Festival in New York City.³⁷

More recently Daniel Banks’s introduction to the Hip Hop theatre anthology *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theatre* traces Hip Hop theatre’s history and positions Hip Hop theatre as “the theatre of now,” citing its interculturality and “ethic of inclusion” for “the genre’s effectiveness in uniting people and promoting understanding between and among cultural groups.”³⁸ These three texts map out a general pattern of analysis when discussing Hip Hop performance as an extension of western theatre/western theatrical practices, where scholars and artists focus on examples of theatrical productions that fuse the elements/aesthetics of Hip Hop

³⁷ Hoch’s chapter on Hip Hop Aesthetics and Theatre can be found in Jeff Chang’s 2006 anthology *Total Chaos*, pg. 349-363.

³⁸ Banks (2011) pg. 20.

with traditional western theatrical practices to address sociopolitical issues such as racism, classism and/or sexism, just to name a few.

For Performance Studies scholars that analyze Hip Hop's aesthetics and practices outside of a western theatre context, Hip Hop's potential to interrogate important sociopolitical issues remains a key area of analysis, but the modes of performance are broader in scope. For scholars such as Anna B. Scott, live performance, performance on film and the audience reception of Hip Hop performance are all equally analyzed to reveal the ways that Hip Hop's adaptive practices can subvert and manipulate "white normative aesthetic and linguistic production."³⁹ Race and performance conditions are also the foundation of Naila Keleta-Mae's analysis of the relatively recent institutional interest in performance poetry such as spoken word, dub poetry and rap poetry in Canada.⁴⁰ Keleta-Mae critiques the lack of rigour in scholarly analyses of performance poetry while highlighting the historical lack of inclusion in academic and public institutions when interfacing with new fields of study. Scott's observations of Hip Hop performance's subversive properties and Keleta-Mae's call for a "rigorously interdisciplinary methodology that locates practitioners and audiences within the specific contexts that inform its creation, production, and reception"⁴¹ are particularly important for this dissertation. More specifically, this dissertation's methodological ethos heeds to Keleta-Mae's call for inclusion and academic rigour by prioritizing the members of KOTD's battle rap scene and their own social histories within my scholarly framework.

Deciding which Hip Hop scholarship fits into the field of Performance Studies can be difficult based on disciplinary boundaries. In discussing methodologies, disciplinary genealogies,

³⁹ Scott (2010) pg. 86.

⁴⁰ Keleta-Mae (2012).

⁴¹ Keleta-Mae (2012) pg. 78.

and the current landscape of Performance Studies as a discipline in Canada, Levin and Schweitzer (2017) highlight the profound intersections between the concerns of Performance Studies scholars and scholars in Canadian Cultural Studies.⁴² Although my dissertation highlights that association (particularly in its echoing of Levin and Schweitzer's views on cultural materialism as a bridge between the two disciplines)⁴³ I also want to highlight the profound affect that Dance Studies has on the landscape of Hip Hop scholarship, both domestically and abroad.

If Performance Studies in Canada has “generally distinguished itself from cognate fields like communication studies by taking performance as its primary object of study,”⁴⁴ it could be argued that dance scholarship on Hip Hop performance is methodologically tethered to Performance Studies with its emphasis on Hip Hop's social and artistic performances. Whether it is foundational American Hip Hop dance scholarship such as Sally Banes' 1981 analysis of breaking in *The Village Voice*, and subsequently *Contact Quarterly*, or more contemporary Canadian scholarship on Hip Hop dance such as Mary Fogarty's analysis of movement lineages and “imagined affinities” in globalized breaking culture, Dance Studies' analysis of Hip Hop performance has been rigorously focused on bodies and identities in performance, which I believe to be philosophically and methodologically in tune with the ethos of current Canadian Performance Studies scholarship. This becomes especially relevant to my dissertation considering scholars that write about Hip Hop dance such as Mary Fogarty and Joseph Schloss have intentionally focused on Hip Hop communities and scenes through the lenses of popular music and sociology in a way that Performance Studies scholars have yet to do. Both Dance

⁴² Levin and Schweitzer (2017) pg. 20-23.

⁴³ Levin and Schweitzer (2017) pg. 20-23.

⁴⁴ Levin and Schweitzer (2017) pg. 22.

Studies and Performance Studies have also contributed significantly to discourses on digital performance and reception as well, which is fundamental to my analysis of battle rap audiences.

Fandom, Liveness and Digital Technologies in Performance Studies

As Bay-Cheng et al. note in the introduction to their 2015 book *Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field*, the integration of performance and media has been understood and defined through a number of labels since the mid-1980s, including “intermedial theatre”, “digital performance” and “virtual theatre” just to name a few.⁴⁵ These definitions and those who employ them have produced countless anthologies, historical surveys, and journal issues on the topic over the past few decades as scholars attempt to define the boundaries and criterion of media-influenced and/or media-intergraded performance.⁴⁶ Bay-Cheng et al. provide a helpful outline of scholarly approaches including early media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and his emphasis on the televisual, as well as scholars of digital culture and performance such as Charlie Gere and Andy Lavender who consider the digital affordances that connect performance with technology.⁴⁷ Digital affordances, that is to say the digital features or conditions that prompt particular modes of action, are featured heavily in my dissertation, particularly in reference to online forums such as TalkBack.

In Canadian Theatre and Performance Studies, analyses involving technology and performance can be traced through three separate editions of the Canadian Theatre Review journal in 1994, 2006 and 2014 entitled *Computing Theatre, Liveness and Mediatized Performance*, and *Digital Performance in Canada* respectively.⁴⁸ The introduction to the 2014

⁴⁵ Bay-Cheng et al. (2015) 1.

⁴⁶ For a thorough survey on performance and digital technologies publications, see the “Texts and Contexts” section of Bay-Cheng et al. (2015) pg. 11-27.

⁴⁷ Bay-Cheng et al. (2015) pg. 12-13.

⁴⁸ Kuling and Levin (2015) pg. 5.

edition edited by Peter Kuling and Laura Levin articulates the primary interests of the three editions as it relates to the technological innovations of their respective decades. From the reciprocal effects that computers and performance had on each's form and function in the 1994 edition, through to questions surrounding "liveness" and the compatibility of technology and live performance in the 2006 edition, Levin and Kuling build off of the two previous issues by pushing the conversation beyond the technical and into "social, political, and epistemic changes that unfold via technological innovation."⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, the most current of the issues and their focus on the social/political/epistemic is most relevant to my research, however as I read through the three issues, what struck me as relevant to my work was the threads of discussion that connect the collaborative building practices of participants and the digital spaces that make digital performance possible.

In the 1994 issue, listservs and email discussions groups that serve as points of connection for those interested in various aspects of performance strikes me as an obvious predecessor to the digital fan groups I discuss in this dissertation. Edward Mullaly's marveling at "the network" as both a "knowledge-management system" and a product of human labour felt particularly relevant.⁵⁰ As its name suggest, the "Guide to Theater Resources on the INTERNET" that Mullaly is indebted to for his research, digitally catalogues internet activity in relation to theatre, and is ideologically tethered to the types of archival processes that fans undertook during the 1990s in spaces such as AOL chat rooms or multi-author Geocities fan pages/archives. Although acknowledging the collaboration of Deborah Torres and Martha Vander Kolk on their e-guide to theatre, Mullaly does not go so far as to explore how the collaborators shape the discourse or carve out digital space for their archival practices, both of which they are most

⁴⁹ Levin and Kuling (2015) pg. 6.

⁵⁰ Mullaly (1994) pg. 2-3.

certainly doing. My dissertation emphasizes the collaborative processes at play with digital documentation and tracks how some of the collaborators play key roles in driving discourse within the scene.

In the 2006 issue, Kathleen Irwin foregrounds the notion of the internet as a “venue” where performers and spectators meet to conduct an event, in this case the game-performance *Blur Street*. In *Blur Street*, students in Regina (Canada), Tallinn (Estonia), Helsinki (Finland) and Belgrade (Serbia) collaborate to be each other’s performers and audiences via a “game scenario, using camcorders and web-based technology to situate each other in specific locations in each city.”⁵¹ Although there are tangential relationships between this type of digital, circular audience/performer relationship with the “cyphering” that I discuss in Chapter 3, it is this foregrounding of the internet as a space for performance that relates most saliently to my dissertation. The specific micro-spaces (in Irwin’s case, a purpose-built website) that emerge to facilitate specific types of performance that can be either synchronous (Irwin’s project) or asynchronous (fan performances on TalkBack) provides an understanding of how technology sets specific “stages” on which fans perform. This is key to examining how the parameters/contours of specific digital spaces impact how fans enact their various modes of participation.

Importantly, Kuling and Levin highlight the notion that the formats and structures of digital technologies are not a “neutral set of computing tools” and instead “requires a rethinking of spectatorial agency.”⁵² Because spectatorship is analyzed throughout my dissertation, the notion of “spectatorial agency” dovetails well with other writing that foregrounds the relationship between web 2.0 technologies and audiences and/or fandom. In his book entitled *Media Audiences*, John L. Sullivan conceptualizes media fandom as communities that “extend

⁵¹ Irwin (2006) pg. 44.

⁵² Levin and Kuling (2015) pg. 6.

their interactions with media texts by logging on to discussions on the Internet, collecting artifacts associated with their media interests, and even by participating in fan conventions and other related social activities.”⁵³ Sullivan’s broad definition is relevant to this dissertation because it suggests certain activities that may define fan performances without prescribing a set of essentialist behaviours for fandom.

In an editorial for their 2015 issue of *Transformative Works and Culture*, Lucy Bennett and Paul J. Booth suggest a way of conceiving the performance of fandom as “the characteristics of *being* that permeate a fannish identity”, troubling the notion that fandom is a “particular behaviour.”⁵⁴ This lens seems particularly productive in battle rap, which shares many behavioural traits with other fan groups, yet has unique characteristics when it comes to fans and their performative conditions. Identifying these characteristics, both common and unique, is a primary objective of this dissertation, while laying bare the labour of digital battle rap fandom that might otherwise be obscured. How the contributions of fans are displayed, documented, organized, and valued both in person and online are key questions in this dissertation.

Considering the breadth of fandom that is performed in battle rap communities and taking to heart Bennett and Booth’s assertion (or warning?) that when analyzing online fandom “everything fans post, create, or share could be considered a type of performance”⁵⁵, it was a particularly difficult task to identify what performances of fandom had substantial value to a reader of this dissertation. The question of “value” in relation to fan or audience activity is essential to the study of audiences and fans but is often difficult to discern considering the sheer volume of undocumented labour that is required to build and maintain digital spaces of fan

⁵³ Sullivan (2012) pg. 191.

⁵⁴ Bennett and Booth (2015)

⁵⁵ Bennett and Booth (2015)

activity. Within the pages of Bennett and Booth's issue of *Transformative Works and Culture*, DeKosnik insists that fan activity that (re)uses existing materials (in her case, the writing of fan fiction) is a performance genre that cannot be categorized as a derivative product, but should rather be considered "as extensions and versions and augmentations of source material."⁵⁶ This pseudo-dramaturgical process is particularly relevant to battle rap fans, whose labour often involves the repurposing of existing digital ephemera to create new or original materials. Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation will expand significantly on this area of enquiry.

Because much of the labour regarding the documentation and education of battle rap communities is performed online by fans and spectators of battle rap, investigating battle rap's modes of spectatorship and consumption is also important. In the introduction to their edited issue of *Performance Matters*, Jacobson et al speculate that the "twenty-first-century turn" on common themes in Performance Studies such as ethics, participation and liveness may be a "deliberate and distinct addition of the spectatorial perspective."⁵⁷ I believe that the spectatorial perspective in this dissertation yields new ways of thinking about theoretical debates in Performance Studies, particularly around the value of liveness. Rather than focus purely on the distinctions or erosions of production and reproduction, the focus of my dissertation is to articulate how these distinctions are being reworked and redefined online by battle rap fans, who create their own definitions of terms such as "live" without adhering to the binary conception of media and/or liveness.

This dissertation benefits from a comparison between live and mediatized audiences, however I am not interested in rehashing the academic debates between the cultural value of liveness vs. mediatization. Questions involving the value of both have been thoroughly

⁵⁶ De Kosnik (2015)

⁵⁷ Jacobson et al (2019) pg. 2.

examined within performance studies by Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan, among many others in various disciplines. Although it is important to not dismiss the theoretical value of these scholars' work, this dissertation will search to move past these conceptual frameworks by emphasizing the values inherent in battle rap culture's specific use of live and mediated modes of performance and reception.

KOTD's battle rap scene appears to reject Auslander's impression that the polarization between live and the mediated is one of competition that is tied to cultural economy.⁵⁸ Battle rap audiences speak clearly of the benefits of both spectatorial experiences, while simultaneously withholding any significant gains in cultural currency for attending a live event. Phelan's privileging of the live over the mediated that tethers performance's value to ephemerality, that "performance's being becomes itself through disappearance,"⁵⁹ also appears to be extraneous to the values of KOTD's battle rap scene, since the documentation, distribution and consumption of recorded battles continue to be honoured as a primary mode of consumption for battle rap spectators. As productive as the distinctions between the live and mediated have been in Theatre and Performance Studies, it is important to reflect on Sarah Bay-Cheng's sentiment that the swift changes in media and technology mean that "the distinction between reproduction and production has eroded" and that "the distinction between ontology and reproduction...no longer serves a contemporary understanding of relations among media and liveness, or between commodity and performance."⁶⁰

One concern that Bay-Cheng expresses about the performance landscape of contemporary media is the potential for spaces of digital performance to "displace critical action

⁵⁸ Auslander (2008) pg. 11.

⁵⁹ Phelan (1993) pg.146.

⁶⁰ Bay-Cheng (2014) pg. 44.

and usurp all prior modes of resistance.”⁶¹ Citing activist movements such as the Youth Participatory Politics Survey Project and the global Occupy movement that created substantial performative activist activity on social media, Bay-Cheng notes that “most empirical data suggests that digital gestures have limited if any material effects.”⁶² The gestures of “liking” or reposting activist material online, a part of what Bay-Cheng describes as “Slacktivism”, may be largely ineffectual in a political sense and may even “become the very tools to limit real political change” as Bay-Cheng suggests.⁶³

But what this dissertation aims to explain is that important exceptions to Bay-Cheng’s claims exist, and that fans can create real-world, transformative impacts on the culture they participate in by accessing and participating in digital fan spaces such as battle rap forums and Facebook groups. The impact that fans have, I argue, is contingent on the digital spaces they create and curate for themselves and that their interventions into the culture would not be possible without this digital stage on which they perform. By describing the unique spectatorial ethos of battle rap fans, their acts of digital pedagogy and archiving, and the economic impact that digital fan performances have on the culture, this dissertation will examine and acknowledge the specific characteristics of experience, the differences, and intersections of audiences, to identify how their digital performances help to shape KOTD’s battle rap scene.

Scenes, Community and Culture

Fundamentally this dissertation is the study of King of the Dot’s battle rap scene. In their survey of scenes, Woo, Rennie and Poyntz note the importance of early scholarship from Popular Music Studies, specifically Barry Shank and Will Straw’s work that analyzed the role of

⁶¹ Bay-Cheng (2014) pg. 44.

⁶² Bay-Cheng (2014) pg. 45-46.

⁶³ Bay-Cheng (2014) pg. 45-46.

geographical space, participation, and circulation in popular music scenes.⁶⁴ More specific to international Hip Hop scenes, Andy Bennett links authenticity to geography, languages and socio-political contexts when analyzing Frankfurt's local Hip Hop scene.⁶⁵ This focus on geographically specific scenes is important to my analysis of live battle rap events in Toronto, where local conditions work in consort with battle rap's histories to create a localized battle rap scene. I also look to scholarship on translocal and virtual scenes to discuss how the cultural practices of King of the Dot influence, and is influenced by, a more geographically disparate, globalized battle rap scene. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson's definition of a "translocal scene," which has attributes of a scene but transcends geographical specificity⁶⁶, is relevant to this dissertation because the connections between participants in various geographically disparate scenes help map the performances of KOTD fans beyond Toronto.

A key example of scholarly work that discusses Toronto's Hip Hop scene is Murray Forman's analysis of rap's "diasporic potential" through the lens of Canadian rap duo Dream Warriors. Forman describes Toronto's spatial context by quoting Paul Gilroy's analysis of London, England as an "important junction point or crossroads on the webbed pathways of black Atlantic political culture."⁶⁷ In emphasizing Toronto's "informality of racial segregation" and its "contingency of linguistic practices"⁶⁸ Forman discusses the fusion of Dream Warrior's diasporic linguistic content with a local Canadian context, which in turn "positions the Dream Warriors within a global/local system of circulation."⁶⁹ Although an important piece of early Hip Hop scholarship and helpful in situating Toronto's Hip Hop scene as a site of diasporic Hip Hop

⁶⁴Woo, Rennie and Poyntz (2014) pg. 285-297.

⁶⁵ Bennett (1999)

⁶⁶ Bennett and Peterson (2004) pg. 9.

⁶⁷ Gilroy in Forman (2004) pg. 242.

⁶⁸ Gilroy in Forman (2004) pg. 242.

⁶⁹ Forman (2004) pg. 242.

practices, Forman's work is a larger spatial analysis of Hip Hop practices that covers a variety of geospatial contexts and conceptual spaces rather than focusing on Toronto Hip Hop specifically.

Toronto's Hip Hop scholars and practitioners often use outlets of expression beyond academic publishing that are helpful contributions to the documentation of Canadian Hip Hop history. This is evident in the work of Dr. Mark V. Campbell, Canada's most prolific historian and archivist of Canadian Hip Hop, and his creation of the Northside Hip Hop Archive. The Northside Hip Hop Archive characterizes itself as a "digital collection of Hip Hop history and culture"⁷⁰ and relies on Hip Hop artists, journalists, promoters, and other members of the Toronto Hip Hop scene to contribute documentation. Campbell's work with the Northside Hip Hop Archive reveals the fundamental role that Toronto's Hip Hop practitioners and supporters have played in the documenting and historicizing of Toronto Hip Hop while emphasizing the need to honour the social histories of a scene as diverse as Toronto's Hip Hop scene. This includes multiple gallery exhibitions on the history of Hip Hop in Canada.

The 2019 exhibition *For the Record: An Idea of the North* in collaboration with the Toronto Public Library billed itself as "an interactive mixed media exhibition illuminating the role Soundsystems, radio shows and DJs, as the backbone of hip hop culture, played in the emergence of Toronto's now globally successful popular music scene."⁷¹ The exhibition featured Hip Hop materials and artifacts such as records, concert flyers and artists' awards, while also highlighting early DJ culture and Hip Hop journalism in related programming at the library.

Archival photographs took center stage in Campbell's 2018 *...Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto's Hip Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital* at the McMichael Gallery,

⁷⁰ The definitions of the Northside Hip Hop Archive and its mandate can be found at: <http://www.nshharchive.ca/about/our-story/>

⁷¹ "For the Record: An Idea of the North," Toronto Public Library, web, accessed Jan. 5, 2020. <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/programs-and-classes/exhibits/for-the-record.jsp>

where the works of photographers, video artists and graffiti artists “challenge the archival classifications that dismiss or devalue the importance of hip hop as part of Canada’s cultural fabric.”⁷² ...*Everything Remains Raw* highlights the ambitions and ethos of the Northside Hip Hop Archive. By positioning itself as a “digital home of Canadian Hip Hop History that both archives and disrupt practices of archiving,”⁷³ Northside Hip Hop Archive is also a space of activism that usurps the traditional hierarchy of institutionalized archives by situating the participants at the centre of its pedagogical purpose.

The podcast *Views Before the Six* can also be interpreted as an example of an archive that challenges traditional archival practices. Hosted by DJ/Producer Anthony “Big Tweeze” Corsi and Toronto rap legend Chris “Thrust” France, *Views...* centers the voices of the participants by interviewing pioneers of the Toronto scene including Michie Mee, DTS & Johnbronski, and Mastermind, which in turn produces a rich oral history of the early years of Toronto Hip Hop. Journalist Del Cowie’s forthcoming *This is a Throwdown: A Toronto Hip-Hop History from Maestro Fresh to Drake* on ECW Press promises to be an exciting new addition to the documentation of Toronto Hip Hop from one of Toronto’s most prolific and respected music journalists. The work of Cowie and other journalists in the city cannot be overlooked. Although much of the current and emerging scholarly work on Toronto Hip Hop is exciting and promising, it is important to note that the documentation of Toronto Hip Hop, as evidenced by the archival work of Campbell, has been alive and well for decades. Throughout this dissertation, you will see a variety of references to journalistic sources such as newspapers, blogs, websites, and other forms of media. This is a shout-out to the tireless work that the journalists in our city have put in

⁷² “...Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto’s Hip Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital,” McMichael Canadian Art Collection, web, accessed Jan. 5, 2020 <http://mcmichael.com/event/everything-remains-raw-photographing-torontos-hip-hop-culture-from-analogue-to-digital/>

⁷³ “Our Story,” Northside Hip Hop, web, accessed Jan. 5, 2020, <http://www.nshharchive.ca/about/our-story/>

to ensure that Hip Hop in this city gets the recognition it deserves, particularly during the pre-Drake decades when Toronto had less attention from outside markets.

Canadian Hip Hop scholarship has frequently focused on the relationship between community and Hip Hop through the lens of social work and pedagogy. The impact that community-based Hip Hop programming has on identity formation is a common theme that links much of this scholarship together. Scholars such as Charity Marsh and Brett Lashua describe how community-based Hip Hop programming in Indigenous communities helped Indigenous youth discover their voice within and outside a colonial/settler cultural framework.⁷⁴ For Marsh, community programming rooted in Hip Hop prioritizes the narratives and subjectivities Indigenous youth create using Hip Hop⁷⁵ while also helping to reframe their identity through Hip Hop's representational practice.⁷⁶ Lashua notes the productiveness of Hip Hop's representational practices for Indigenous youth in his study on the school-based community program "The Beat of Boyle Street" in Edmonton, Alberta, where Indigenous youth used Hip Hop as a storytelling method to share their personal struggles.⁷⁷

Lashua illustrates the relationship between Hip Hop's conceptual framework of the "remix" and notions of hybridity in identity, represented most saliently through a young rapper in his article, Kree-Azn, whose process of negotiating his Cree First Nations and Vietnamese heritage is facilitated through his rap moniker.⁷⁸ Hybrid identities are of significance in Quebecois Hip Hop culture as well, where scholars Mila Sarkar and Dawn Allen argue that Montreal's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Hip Hop community "is an active and dynamic site for the

⁷⁴ Marsh (2009)

⁷⁵ Marsh (2011)

⁷⁶ Marsh (2009)

⁷⁷ Lashua (2016)

⁷⁸ Lashua (2016)

development of an oppositional community that encourages the formation of new, hybrid identities.”⁷⁹ Importantly, Sarkar and Allen illustrate how hybrid identities in Quebec are not simply a matter of language, but also reveal the how transnational, pluralistic notions of identity challenges inequality and monocultural norms while spawning new social discourses on racism and social consciousness.⁸⁰

Although Sarkar and Allen clearly articulate the progressive and conscious ways that Hip Hop and identity formation intersect, Hip Hop can also be a default association thrust upon one from the prejudicial cultural assumptions of a dominant culture. In the case of continental African students in Ottawa, Awad Ibrahim notes that the tendency for English as Second Language (ESL) students from Africa to adopt the linguistic practices of Hip Hop is the result of entering a society that “asks them to racially fit somewhere.”⁸¹ Thus, the adoption of Hip Hop vernacular when learning English becomes a tool of racial identity formation, and are “articulations of the youths’ desire to belong to a location, a politics, a memory, a history, and hence a representation.”⁸²

Race and Authenticity in Hip Hop

Authenticity-as-power in Hip Hop scholarship is often associated with race. Anthony Kwame Harrison’s survey of racial authenticity in Hip Hop scholarship notes that the concept of “authenticity,” particularly concerning racial identity, has been a primary focus of Hip Hop Studies since the early 1990s.⁸³ For Harrison, the most common frameworks for defining authenticity in Hip Hop revolve around the narrative of “essential blackness, and critical

⁷⁹ Sarkar and Allen (2007) pg. 117.

⁸⁰ Sarkar and Allen (2007) pg. 117-130.

⁸¹ Ibrahim (1999) pg. 353.

⁸² Ibrahim (1999) pg. 353.

⁸³ Harrison (2008) pg. 1783.

interrogations of white hip hop legitimacy."⁸⁴ At the core of this narrative is a black-white racial binary that has defined how authenticity is created and disseminated in Hip Hop culture. The binary nature of these analyses has at times ignored the various models of authenticity that are reframed and re-contextualized in the wake of Hip Hop's globalization. Situating geographically specific subcultures within a larger sociological analysis helps to illuminate nuances that occur, which Dick Hebdige addresses concerning youth cultures in general.⁸⁵ Hebdige's analysis involves the historical dialectic between white and black culture, as he continually marks how they influence, contradict, and affect each other. By situating youth subcultures within a larger sociological context, Hebdige captures the significance that class and race play when defining the ideologies, geography, and sociopolitical context surrounding subcultural movements.

Questions of race are further complicated by the global proliferation of Hip Hop culture. Tony Mitchell's anthology on international rap and Hip Hop argues that Hip Hop cannot be perceived as a singularly African American cultural practice, but rather a tool that "reworks local identities" by combining "distinctive syncretic manifestations of African American influences and local indigenized elements."⁸⁶ Although the syncretism of American Hip Hop culture with various geographically specific practices produces important localized specificities, it is crucial that the African American origins of Hip Hop are not obscured and that Blackness is not fetishized in the process. Whether it be the racial structures of the white-controlled music industry (Potter 1995, Kitwana 2005, Heaggans 2009), the patterns of white consumption of Black performances (Baraka 1963, Rose 1994) or the appropriation of Hip Hop's linguistic practices (Cutler 1999/2014, Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003), Hip Hop culture has been in a

⁸⁴ Harrison (2008) pg. 1783-84.

⁸⁵ Hebdige (1979)

⁸⁶ Mitchell (2001) pg. 2-3.

perpetual state of defense against assimilation and appropriation by a dominant white culture. Does battle rap risk being whitewashed in the same way cultural critics claim other Black cultural practices within Hip Hop culture have been? This is particularly important to address considering my position to Hip Hop culture as a white fan and researcher. In my research, I found myself constantly calling back to Antonia Randolph's assertion that white dominant culture (and in my personal case, a white fan/researcher more specifically) has the power to author narratives of essentialized blackness, and thus determine the types of coded racial performances that may garner critical or commercial success.⁸⁷ As with any research where people and their behaviours are observed and analyzed, my fingerprints, my whiteness, and my masculinity are all over this dissertation. Tony Mitchell's conceptualizing of Hip Hop as a syncretic practice may help frame productive local specificities, however, it is our role as adopters of these traditions and practices to ensure localized changes don't amount to an erasure of Hip Hop's politics or social context. Scholars outside of the Black diaspora should take seriously Reiland Rabaka's request that the Hip Hop movement be conceived as "the accumulated politics and aesthetics of each and every African American movement and musical form that preceded it"⁸⁸ and be sure to understand the weight attached to this lineage.

Battle Rap Fandom

Outside of Hip Hop's African American cultural context, Roland Robertson's term "glocal" has been useful for scholars such as Tony Mitchell to highlight how globalized and localized Hip Hop cultures intersect and work in conjunction to define one another.⁸⁹ One of the

⁸⁷ Randolph (2006) focuses specifically on lyrical narratives/presentations of masculinity that are constructed and performed to appease white audiences and a male-dominated rap industry; however, these theories can be extended to battle rap due to the importance of persona in battle rap culture.

⁸⁸ Rabaka (2013) pg. 285.

⁸⁹ Mitchell (2001) pg.11.

biggest affordances of a glocal/local system of production/reception is the internet. The archiving and analysis of battle rap culture not only leaves battle rap with an active digital footprint for potential new audiences to discover, but it also helps to create a timeline within an art form that has very little documentation of its early years. As Bethan Jones notes in her study of *X Files* fandom and social media, the participatory elements of social media platforms such as Facebook bridge the gap between fan and producer, giving substantial space for content producers to collaborate while also repositioning some fans as critics or gatekeepers.⁹⁰ Jones' work is a part of a larger focus on fandom in Media Studies that analyzes the role of fan production in digital spaces.

Anthologies such as Gray et. al (2007) and Booth's (2018) reveal the range of histories and methodologies associated with mass media and popular culture fandom. Of particular relevance to my research is Henry Jenkins' concept of the "Acafan": a hybrid scholar/fan who "sought to distinguish themselves from the previous generation by signalling their own affiliations with and accountability to the communities they were studying."⁹¹ This term resonates with my approach to this research, considering my involvement in Toronto's battle rap scene predates my graduate studies, and will continue long after this research is complete. Paul Booth highlights how the digital ecosystem allows for collaborative creations between fans, emphasizing that "it is not just individual texts that hold meaning, but also vast intertextual networks of connected texts—some of which can be fan created."⁹² The connection between fan texts and the meanings they produce is analyzed at length throughout this dissertation, particularly in chapter 2.

⁹⁰ Jones (2014) pg. 92-104.

⁹¹ Jenkins (2011).

⁹² Booth (2010) pg. 34.

In *Popular Music Studies*, Lee and Peterson analyze how virtual fan scenes can shape a genre of music.⁹³ A significant portion of this formation process is tethered to the types of participants in the online scene. Yet despite the processes of shaping that occur in KOTD's online spaces, it cannot be considered an exclusively virtual scene, as Toronto's local histories and corporeal spaces continue to influence KOTD's online discourses. As I discuss in chapter 1, the corporeal venues and material conditions of Toronto's battle rap scene frame the rituals of KOTD for online audiences, thus presenting a unique set of circumstances for the scene to continue developing through the labour of both local and virtual members of the scene.

The ability of a digital fan scene to influence the art form is contingent on the presence of "tastemakers" within the online scene (i.e., music industry insiders, journalists, record store employees, etc.), much like a local scene.⁹⁴ An analysis of how fans of King of the Dot communicate online via the official Facebook fan group "TalkBack" will reveal how fans position themselves as educators and gatekeepers of battle rap culture. This will also illustrate how fans can become content producers themselves by creating YouTube videos or creative memes that highlight specific rappers, battles, or trends in the scene. Perhaps most importantly, an analysis of Talkback reveals the significant role that online communities play in influencing a battle rap scene through the informal communication between fans, rappers and promoters that occurs on the fan page.

Online fan communities were crucial early educational systems, informally helping to create databases and archives during professional battle rap's fledgling years. Originally developed as an homage to old battle forms, Talkback has since evolved into a space where fans, battle rappers and promoters can exchange ideas, thoughts, videos, and insults. This dissertation

⁹³ Lee and Peterson in Bennett and Peterson (2004).

⁹⁴ Lee and Peterson in Bennett and Peterson (2004) pg. 201.

will investigate how rappers, promoters and fans participate and communicate with each other within the fan group. I will also explain the influence and capital accumulated in fan-dominated digital spaces, as well as Talkback's potential as a pedagogical tool for battle rap fans.

By analyzing the concept of capital in the battle scene, I am following a lineage of scholarship that considers how one accumulates forms of capital beyond the monetary or economic sense of the term. Perhaps most famously, Pierre Bourdieu describes how social capital and cultural capital are assets that a group member accumulates through one's labour and practices.⁹⁵ For Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three states: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutional state.⁹⁶ My dissertation deals primarily with the embodied state, which for Bourdieu "implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time that must be invested personally by the investor."⁹⁷ This is particularly relevant to the forms of cultural capital one accrues in battle rap's digital spaces, specifically regarding the spectatorial practices one learns to be an accepted member of the scene, which I unpack in chapter 1.

Bourdieu has a specific emphasis on the transmission of cultural capital, referring to transmission as "the most powerful principle of the symbolic efficacy of cultural capital."⁹⁸ In respect to this transmission, Tony Bennett notes that Bourdieu emphasizes how cultural capital is taught and inherited from generation to generation, thus creating a mechanism that is "as much an asset as economic forms of capital."⁹⁹ As Bourdieu's theory suggests, cultural capital does create an organizing principle among fans in battle rap, particularly in its digital spaces. In chapter 3 of my dissertation, the transmission of cultural codes and practices is a particularly

⁹⁵ Bourdieu (1986)

⁹⁶ Bourdieu (1986) pg. 79.

⁹⁷ Bourdieu (1986) pg. 80.

⁹⁸ Bourdieu (1986) pg. 82.

⁹⁹ Bennett in Bourdieu (2010) pg. xvii.

salient connection to Bourdieu's theories, since battle rap, and Hip Hop culture more broadly, have their own informal pedagogical processes where distinction and cultural capital manifest in the scene.

Bourdieu's theories have been taken up by several scholars who analyze music scenes, including Sarah Thornton in her 1996 book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Drawing heavily from Bourdieu's theories of taste and cultural capital, Thornton parses out the different aspects of "subcultural capital" that re-frame Bourdieu's theoretical structure, using subcultural capital as the crux of distinction between the social ideologies of youth cultures and the "undifferentiated mass."¹⁰⁰ Thornton also employs the dichotomy of the authentic versus the phony concerning the accumulation of subcultural capital.¹⁰¹ The authentic functions as an assertion of power within a subculture and creates a hierarchy of participants who distinguish themselves vis a vis their successful adoption of subcultural distinctions. Although chapter 3 of my dissertation discusses subcultural distinctions in similar ways as Thornton describes, specifically related to authenticity, I also emphasize how the process of distinction in battle rap fandom is constantly challenged and contested, a factor I contend is crucial to the vibrancy of the scene.

Although the committed and knowledgeable fans of battle rap have traditionally served as informal educators and mavens for the next generation of fans, important questions concerning their influence remain: Whose voice is heard in mediated environments? How democratic is the dissemination of materials through these channels? What censorship or editing (if any) is done to keep these spaces productive? How do cultures that emphasize oral accounts of history (such as battle rap) continue to negotiate recorded images as markers of authenticity? How do we

¹⁰⁰ Thornton (1996) pg. 10.

¹⁰¹ Thornton (1996) pg. 3-4.

negotiate the meaningful intersections between battle rap culture's material and digital conditions? Since KOTD promoters use the site to gauge fan reaction to events, potential matchups, promotional materials and so on, Talkback also provokes several questions. First and foremost, how does Talkback being an official entity of King of The Dot affect the materials that appear on the fan page? What are the power dynamics between informed and uninformed fans in battle rap's digital spaces? And who gets to decide which voices gain priority in this digital space? Once again race plays a major role here, since the cultural understandings of race and racial differences that are present offline shape and inform how racial hierarchies emerge online.¹⁰²

Methodologies

To accentuate the wide breadth of experiences in Toronto's battle rap scene, the primary methodologies used in this dissertation include participant observation and qualitative interviews with audience members and performers. For this dissertation I attended five different King of the Dot events from 2016 to 2019 for the purposes of participant observation. Professional battle rap benefits from the fact that it is a relatively new art form, and many of the performers from its developing years are still alive and active in the scene. King of the Dot events bring together various generations of emcees and fans to perform and discuss the state of battle rap culture. Bringing outside voices to the analysis helped to identify the subjectivity in my personal interpretation of the performance and reception of battle rap, while clarifying techniques and identifying aspects of battle culture that may have been neglected in my participant observation.

Additionally, materialist semiotics was used to investigate the meanings that are created and/or performed in relation to the Toronto battle rap scene's cultural, geographical, and

¹⁰² In their introduction to the edited book *Race in Cyberspace*, Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman assert that "we can't help but bring our own knowledge, experiences and values with us when we log on" (5)

performative contexts. As Knowles discusses in *Reading the Material Theatre*, the evolution of theatre semiotics in the 1990s by scholars such as Marvin Carlson further considered the material conditions of theatrical productions as a “part of its semiotic” positing that elements such as the auditorium, the lobby and the programs (combined with the onstage performance) all shape audience reception.¹⁰³ Knowles prioritizes the cultural and theatrical conditions into a working model of performance analysis he refers to as “materialist semiotics” which aims to consider “the roles of all aspects of theatrical production and reception in the production and meaning in contemporary English language theatre.”¹⁰⁴ This triangulated approach emphasizes how the meaning of a performance is made via the relationship between the performance itself, the conditions of production, and the conditions of reception.¹⁰⁵ This was particularly useful in unpacking battle rap’s recent use of traditional performance spaces such as theatres and concert halls, which in turn changes battle rap’s relationship between the performer and the audience.

Susan Bennett also uses materialist methodologies in investigating the conditions of production and reception in her seminal book *Theatre Audiences*, emphasizing the role that the audience’s culturally determined expectations play in their reception of a performance. By positioning the audience as a cultural phenomenon, Bennett emphasizes the productive role of theatre audiences and their centrality in contemporary theatre events.¹⁰⁶ The emphasis on the centrality of audiences has been echoed by other Theatre and Performance Studies scholars such as Caroline Heim. Heim’s work is particularly relevant to this dissertation, as she helps to further define the audience as “co-authors.” Heim defines “co-authorship” in the context of audiences as the influences or impacts the audience has on the meaning of the performance

¹⁰³ Carlson in Knowles (2004) pg. 17.

¹⁰⁴ Knowles (2004) pg. 3-4.

¹⁰⁵ Knowles (2004) pg. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Bennett (1997) pg.1.

through their participation.¹⁰⁷ Heim also expands on Sartre's notion that a dialogic "authorship" between the audience and the actors occurs during the performance.¹⁰⁸ This theory builds on Bennett's assertion that the audience is not a purely reactionary member of the theatrical event, and instead has the agency to collaborate with the on-stage performers in the meaning-making of the event. It is through Bennett and Heim's lens of collaboration that my work will address the role of the audience in Toronto's battle rap scene, as their importance both as witnesses to the ritual of the event and as co-creators of the performance will be investigated.

One concern that emerged in using materialist semiotics is that it is ultimately an exercise in interpretation. In saying that, the body, culture, and history of the interpreter can never be taken out of the equation, particularly when the researcher is a white, privileged Canadian male whose relationship to Hip Hop is first and foremost about aesthetic appreciation and a political affinity, rather than as a reflection of one's own historical or cultural experience. It is crucial to acknowledge how the intersections of race, gender, class, amongst other social factors have influenced my interactions and interpretations at battle rap events. It is also important to concede the likelihood of human fallibility and subjectivity in any interpretive methodology. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that I am studying a scene I regularly participate in, where one might consider my position that of an "insider" because of my relative access to participants and spaces in which the scene operates.

To mitigate these positional variables, the voice and interpretations of the researcher is only a part of the larger methodological puzzle of this dissertation, analyzed in conjunction with other participant's accounts of events, interpretations of meaning and reviews of performances. In this dissertation, I avoid any attempts to articulate a single universal meaning of events or

¹⁰⁷ Heim (2016) pg. 147.

¹⁰⁸ Heim (2016) pg. 148.

performances through my voice or any other interpretation, but rather follow Knowles in interpreting the multiple viewpoints of a performance as the “evidence of meanings and responses that specific performances in particular locations made available.”¹⁰⁹

Participant observation was used to analyze the various ways that battle rap audiences participate at live events. King of the Dot events bring together various generations of battle rappers and fans to perform, observe and discuss the art form. This corporeal experience with other members of Toronto’s battle rap scene allowed for outside voices to filter into my analysis, helping to identify the subjectivity in my personal interpretation of the performance and reception of battle rap. This close engagement with fans, promoters, and emcees, while important, was not a methodological stretch considering my involvement in the scene before undertaking this research. In many ways, the participant observation used in this study was similar to my usual fan participation in the scene. Although I hesitate to refer to myself as an “insider” in Toronto’s battle rap scene, insofar as the term may erroneously inflate my importance in the scene, I most certainly have access to both online and corporeal spaces of fandom and am familiar or friendly with many participants in the scene. Thus, this study did not require the same navigation of barriers that typically face a researcher studying a scene that is less familiar to them. This level of access and familiarity with the scene in which one studies has been common in Popular Music research since the 2000s when researchers such as Deena Weinstein (2000) and Paul Hodkinson (2002) brought their personal experiences with the cultures/subcultures they researched (heavy metal and goth, respectively.) But as I explain in Chapter 4, simply because one is intimately familiar with a scene, it does not mean that one has unfettered access to all its participants, particularly when looking to perform qualitative

¹⁰⁹ Knowles (2004) pg. 21.

interviews.

Qualitative interview methods were crucial to gain greater insight into Toronto's battle rap scene. The initial small sample of participants were recruited through members of Toronto's battle rap scene that were already known to me. This predominantly consists of other battle rap fans that I informally communicate with on social media outlets such as Facebook. Recruitment also occurred through the snowball technique, and through my participation as an audience member at KOTD events in Toronto. The social nature of battle rap events, where fans frequently introduce themselves to each other, allowed for informal conversation with other fans about the art form that resulted in their formal participation in the research. Online battle rap communities, such as King of the Dot's "Talkback" Facebook group, also served as an important recruitment source, as it allows me to easily meet and communicate with a large pool (30,209 members as of May 15, 2021) of potential participants. Interviews also assisted in clarifying techniques and identifying aspects of battle culture that were neglected in my participant observation.

Aside from emphasizing the formal role the audience plays at battle rap events, this study will also draw focus to the social performances that occur at KOTD events. Utilizing methods of close reading and thick description, this dissertation analyzes the various social performances of battle rap audiences that reveal their aesthetic tastes, the implications of their performance on the outcome of the event and their collective practices of scene building. It is important to note that the close reading and thick description methods were applied not only to the live events I attended, but also in analyzing the digital material that occurred on fan forums such as King of the Dot's Facebook group "TalkBack." Online fan forums such as these have long been spaces of fan production, and yield a wealth of information about the trends, aesthetics, and practices of battle rap culture.

An Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 offers insight into the spectatorial experience of King of the Dot events, with a particular focus on the material and digital conditions of performance and reception. Aside from detailing my own experiences as an audience member online and in person, Chapter 1 also takes a historical approach in order to situate KOTD in a broader lineage of battle rap performance. The goal of these analyses is to situate the reader in the world of battle rap fandom by providing context for where, when, and how fans participate in the meaning-making of battle rap events. It also aims to explain the various forms of audience participation and the role of space in battle rap.

In Chapter 2 I focus on the undocumented labour of fans that engage in processes of documentation and archiving. By conceptualizing “TalkBack” as a knowledge repository, this chapter reveals how fans engage in a cyclical process of creation and documentation that become productive acts of connection and scene building. These acts, in turn, produce tangible social and pedagogical outcomes that play a fundamental role in the development, interpretation and maintenance of battle rap’s histories. Importantly, it also identifies oversights in the fan-generated histories that obscure important narratives.

In Chapter 3 I introduce the concept of “hu-fan-itarianism”, a collection of fan-driven social enterprises that benefit from the capitalist, entrepreneurial frameworks that are inherent in battle rap, but ultimately serves a humanitarian purpose for the culture. By defining and tracking social commerce activities that are present in battle rap’s digital spaces, I will walk the reader through both financially motivated and humanitarian examples of economic collaboration between organizations, emcees, and fans. In doing so, I make the case that capitalism is an intrinsic and important part of battle rap’s cultural ethos, and that questions of access, purpose,

and privilege should prompt the field of Performance Studies to rethink the relationship between capitalist practices and the arts.

Although markers of identity, particularly race, are discussed in each chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 4 explicitly focuses on the participation of women in the battle rap scene. I aim to highlight disparities between the treatment of women online versus at events. By doing so, I attempt to name and analyze the structures and conditions that have the potential to silence the fan contributions of women, while calling attention to the ways in which women push back against sexism in battle rap.

Along with a summary of my research, my conclusion will also discuss battle rap's current relationship with live performance and digital culture in 2021, as a global pandemic has altered the relationship between battle rap, space, and its audiences. Lastly, I have included some reflections on the increasingly wider profile that battle rap as a format has achieved in popular culture during the time of this research. From viral YouTube skits to late-night talk shows on cable television, the aesthetics and practices of battle rap are hot right now. This, I argue, may not be such a good thing for battle rap culture.

Chapter #1- Battle Rap’s Material and Digital Spectatorial Conditions

This chapter aims to unpack the audience experience at KOTD events. At the core of this analysis is the constant interplay between the conditions of performance and reception at King of the Dot events and the conditions of the digital spectator. I argue that the spectatorship and interaction of both the corporeal and the pay-per-view (PPV) experiences are symbiotic, with various degree of interplay between the two. This symbiotic relationship between the two audiences questions the categorical divisions between the live and the mediated, while positioning the KOTD events as a unified fan experience regardless of the fan’s locale. It is my assertion that KOTD’s PPV model is contingent on their technologically savvy fans, their enthusiasm for digital spectatorship, and a communal ethos that values each specific spectatorial condition equally. Additionally, I will show how notions of “liveness” are defined by the scene itself rather than following any ontology, which provides autonomy to the fan in terms of the value of their spectatorial experiences. Ultimately this undermines any hierarchies that may traditionally be associated with a spectator’s corporeal presence at an event, while underscoring the importance of temporally live digital engagement in the performing arts.

It has been twenty years since Greg Dimitriadis observed that the performative processes of Hip Hop had been largely ignored in Hip Hop Studies,¹¹⁰ and not much has changed regarding the field’s preferential methodologies of lyrical analysis and broad social, political, and historical analyses. Studies on Hip Hop spectatorship remain vastly understudied, especially outside of studies on commercial rap music. In response to this gap in scholarship, this chapter aims to trace how battle rap audiences observe, listen, perform, connect, and contribute. In doing so, I will articulate the vital role that audiences play in the ritual of battle rap events, and the ways in

¹¹⁰ Dimitriadis (1999) pg.

which their adaptability to digital technologies allow for greater possibilities for the integration of corporeal and digital spectatorship. Aside from my desire to elevate the role of the audience in battle rap, I aim for this to be one piece of material in a future mosaic of studies that ideologically prioritize Hip Hop audiences as crucial performers and contributors in the production of Hip Hop culture.

The selected case studies articulate the unique material conditions of Toronto battle rap events to analyze the rituals and practices of KOTD events. Then, through the close reading of media texts as a PPV spectator, I will investigate the connections and the shift that occurs when “The Dot” is removed from its geospatial locale. First, I investigate two King of the Dot events hosted in Toronto, 2015’s Blackout 5 and 2016’s Blackout 6ix, as case studies to show how each space functioned to shape the participation of the audience. With Blackout 5, we will see how the ideological coding of a traditional theatre space clashes with the learned behaviour of the audience, while with Blackout 6ix, I will explain how the PPV audience shapes both the structure of the event and the experience for the corporeal audience members. At the core of this analysis are the various ways in which the material and digital conditions of rap battles implicate these audiences within the ritual of the performance, while identifying how audience members themselves become integral performers within the world of the events.

Then, I will mark the conditions of spectatorship when watching a battle rap event remotely, while highlighting the ways that the PPV audience member engages with the live event occurring in a disparate location. Central to this analysis is the continued participation that occurs even when a spectator is not physically at the event, the ways that digital participation functions during an event, and the ways that PPV spectatorship changes the literal view of the spectator.

Space and Spectatorship

In framing my discussion of live performance, I will be applying the theory of Paterson and Stevens's "Superbowl Dramaturgy" that extends the meaning of live beyond the scope of proxemics. That is to say the presence of one's body in the same space as the event is not the sole marker of liveness in this study, but also includes "a live screening where the spectator can view the performance in the same temporal moment that it occurs, though they may be separated by vast spatial distances."¹¹¹ To develop consistent language to frame the multiple versions of liveness present in this chapter, I will be referring to the act of physical attendance of an event as "corporeal" and the spectatorship online as "PPV." Although there might be a myriad of reasons why one might decide on this framing of liveness, this expanded definition of live is most appropriate for this study because it falls in line with the fan discourse on battle rap forums that prioritize the temporal over the corporeal in relation to liveness. When fans use the term "live", it often refers to time rather than a material place.

This includes the description of one's presence at the event. Common discourse might position one as "watching live" if they are watching the PPV of an event in the same temporal moment it is occurring in, while one might specify, they are "in the building" if they are physically attending an event. It also extends beyond the categorization of spectatorial experience, as emcees, fans, and staff of KOTD refer to the live streaming of a blog or prediction video as "going live" as well. This colloquial categorization made by members of the battle rap scene actively includes the temporal nature of liveness while specifying language such as "in the building" to frame the corporeal experience. This categorization is the most salient example that underscores the absence of hierarchy placed on one's corporeal presence at an event,

¹¹¹ Paterson and Stevens (2013) pg. 155.

undermining the notion that attending an event provides any specific cultural capital in this context. As I will unpack throughout the dissertation, I also believe that it undermines a false binary that occurs when attempting the categorization of corporeal and mediated experiences. This is particularly important when analyzing the public, commercial, and mediated spaces that battle rap has occupied in Toronto in its various formats throughout history.

The Public, Commercial and Mediated Spaces of Early Battle Rap

The “Dot” in KOTD’s name is derived from Toronto’s nickname, the “T-Dot O-Dot” coined by Shawn “K4CE” Morrison or the abbreviated version the “T-dot” popularized by Toronto rapper Kardinal Offishall.¹¹² Along with the more recent Toronto moniker “The 6” or “The 6ix”,¹¹³ Toronto’s nicknames have become a geographical reference as well as an appellation that simultaneously unifies and differentiates those who use the terms. From the alleyways around the corner from Toronto’s shopping mecca The Eaton’s Centre to nightclubs in what was once Toronto’s club-centric Entertainment District, to a theatre in the historic Exhibition Place, KOTD has organized events in several downtown Toronto neighbourhoods since their inception in 2008. The “Dot” in King of the Dot plays a representational role in identifying the physical place that spawned the league, but also functions as a space that marks the specific aesthetic and social practices that are performed within it.

As Murray Forman notes in his 2002 book *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, “Space and place figure prominently as organizing concepts delineating a vast range of imaginary or actual social practices” that in turn produce

¹¹² In the *Views B4 the 6* episode featuring Tony D and Brother Different of the Sunshine Crew, they note that the “T-Dot O-Dot” was coined by Shawn “K4ce” Morrison. In a 2015 interview for *Now Magazine*, K4ce credits Kardinal Offishall for popularizing it, as his 2001 hit *BaKardi Slang* makes frequent references to the “T-dot.” <https://nowtoronto.com/news/tdot-vs-the-6/>

¹¹³ Although popularized by Drake, various sources, including Higgins’ *Now Magazine* article “TDot vs the 6”, credit Jimmy Prime for coining the term.

geographically-specific aesthetics and performances.¹¹⁴ The “Dot” as a space, that is to say the creator of its own unique aesthetics and practices, is most saliently on display as the league grows into new markets, producing events in England and the United States that require Toronto-based audiences to watch events that were once exclusive locally via a live streamed pay per view (PPV) service. In these moments, “The Dot” is removed from its geospatial location and transported to a new locale.

Although a comprehensive historical analysis of battle rap in Toronto is outside of the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note that a rich tradition of organized battle rap, in its various states, has existed in Toronto since the 1980s. In fact, battle rap was a key fixture in some of Toronto’s early Hip Hop events, albeit in different iterations. Events organized by Ron Nelson, Toronto’s first prominent Hip Hop promotor who organized many of the early seminal Hip Hop shows at venues such as The Concert Hall, are a good example of this. Nelson’s event posters list emcee battles that occurred within the context of larger Hip Hop events, alongside break battles and DJ battles, featuring prominent figures of Hip Hop such as Roxanne Shante and Michie Mee.

The Concert Hall and Ron Nelson’s events were crucial for the early Hip Hop scene in Toronto, and mostly attended by Black Caribbean youth from across Toronto. Disco or Funk clubs such as 14 Hagerman were also crucial spaces for early Hip Hop events until rap-focal clubs such as Kensington Market’s the Dub Club emerged in the 1980s to offer predominantly Hip Hop programming. The cultural memory of Toronto Hip Hop is not fixed to the downtown scene, but rather scattered across the city in neighbourhoods with their own histories with the culture. In Andrew Munger’s 1994 documentary *Make Some Noise*, various Toronto neighbourhoods are featured via the artists that represent them including Ghetto Concept and

¹¹⁴ Forman (2002) pg. 3.

Jelleestone in Rexdale, as well as music promotor and artist manager Farley Flex and rap group MVP who freestyle in front of Woburn Collegiate Institute in Scarborough. In Frankie Payne aka Jugganot's interview with Big Tweeze on *Views...*, he highlights the vibrant battle culture that existed in the 1990s on the Jane Strip.¹¹⁵ Payne describes weekly cyphers that would occur at the Upwood Park Co-ops, where one emcee would battle multiple other emcees back-to-back in what they called "Battle Drills."¹¹⁶

Thus, the geocultural evolution of Toronto Hip Hop didn't only occur downtown, but also in the inner suburbs that surround the city's core. By acknowledging this, it foregrounds the importance of neighbourhoods that are frequently obscured when it comes to the importance of their cultural production; neighbourhoods that are/were home to large communities of new Canadians and people of colour, and are frequently underserved and over-policed areas of the city.¹¹⁷ In the exhibition catalogue that accompanies...*Everything Remains Raw*, Campbell reflects on the power of "re-spatialization" in Toronto's Hip Hop community, a phenomenon that he explains through the documentation of Hip Hop artists that highlights "how physical spaces in Toronto are made and remade to suit the specificities of hip hop communities." In an October 11, 2018, interview with redbull.com, Campbell elaborates on the notion of re-spatialization:

"I'm thinking about how hip-hop allows you to rep a particular area [and] make it home, so that you're not alienated, spatially... It creates a central home so that you can live comfortably in a place that doesn't want you, that's dehumanizing [you at every juncture]. Other people can

¹¹⁵ The "Jane Strip" refers to a series of neighbourhoods and co-op homes that branched off Jane St in Toronto's west end.

¹¹⁶ Frankie Payne's episode of *Views B4 the 6*, 35:00.

¹¹⁷ The neighbourhoods of Toronto's inner suburbs such as Jane-Finch, Rexdale and Oakridge were highlighted in the United Way's "Poverty by Postal Code", while the City of Toronto's "Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020" still mark many of these spaces as "priority neighbourhoods." <http://www.urbancentre.toronto.ca/pdfs/gtuo/PovertybyPostalCodeFinal.pdf>, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2017/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-108051.pdf>

read it as “ghettoizing” it or “over-centralizing the ghetto,” but you can also see it as hip-hop making physical spaces — like Toronto — home.”¹¹⁸

Campbell’s statement underlines a crucial issue with the conceptualization of space when it comes to notions of access to venues for events. Whether it be formal commercial venues or temporary, DIY “pop up” spaces of cultural practice, Hip Hop has traditionally been forced to claim physical space in a sociopolitical environment that hasn’t been fond of its presence. In a 2018 article for *Now Magazine*, Lidia Abraha highlights the increasing difficulty that Hip Hop promoters have in finding venues for their events, citing costly Hip Hop-specific rules such as extra security or an outright refusal to host shows in the genre.¹¹⁹ Campbell acknowledges the history of exclusion for Hip Hop shows as well, noting that Hip Hop friendly venues such as the Concert Hall became legendary because “venues in Toronto did not always welcome this largely unknown music genre.”¹²⁰ This is particularly important when we consider the impact that spaces like The Concert Hall had in the conceptualization of community and networking. In his article “The Nightly Round: Space, Social Capital, and Urban Black Nightlife”, Marcus Anthony Hunter describes the ways in which nightlife for urban black communities can “mitigate the effects of social and spatial isolation .”¹²¹ This sentiment is echoed by the Dream Warriors member King Lou: “The Concert Hall became the ideology of growth for people in project neighbourhoods. That’s where we all went to meet other people like us from other environments.”¹²²

The idea of genre-specific booking procedures and prohibitively difficult venue operators

¹¹⁸ Campbell in Shikhan (2018)

¹¹⁹ Abraha (2018)

¹²⁰ Campbell (2018) pg. 20.

¹²¹ Hunter (2010) pg. 166.

¹²² Richie (2017)

highlights Hip Hop’s constant struggle with an erroneously perceived danger that accompanies groups of young people of colour gathering, and in many ways re-enforces institutionalized racism and over-policing of Black bodies in Toronto. In a city where the 2018 *Interim report on the inquiry into racial profiling and racial discrimination of Black persons by the Toronto Police Service* lead by Dr. Scot Wortley has confirmed the bias against Black Torontonians that the community has been aware of for decades, it is sadly predictable that this bias extends to the redlining of Hip Hop promoters by venue operators.¹²³ As Toronto promotor Abel Lulseged notes, “When they say, ‘We don’t do hip-hop shows,’ it’s code for, ‘We don’t want Black people in our establishment.’”¹²⁴

The coding of Hip Hop spaces as “Black” and therefore “dangerous” takes an interesting turn when we consider that KOTD’s executive staff are predominantly white men who reside in suburban neighbourhoods outside of Toronto. The figurehead of the organization, Travis “Organik” Fleetwood, is from Bolton, Ontario, approximately 50 kilometers north of the downtown core. Although the suburbs of Toronto have played a crucial role in the vitality of Toronto’s Hip Hop culture (vibrant Hip Hop communities in Etobicoke, North York and Scarborough only became a part of Toronto *administratively* after the 1998 amalgamation) the racial and economic conditions of these spaces are substantially different, as well as the general privileges one is afforded navigating space as a white man.¹²⁵

¹²³ Wortley’s report can be found at this link: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/public-interest-inquiry-racial-profiling-and-discrimination-toronto-police-service/collective-impact-interim-report-inquiry-racial-profiling-and-racial-discrimination-black#IV.%20Findings>

¹²⁴ Abraha (2018)

¹²⁵ In stark opposition to the multicultural make up of Scarborough, Bolton has historically been a white, European suburb of Toronto, with an overwhelming 69% of its new immigrant population coming from Europe, with over half coming from Italy. The most current demographics from Bolton can be found at <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=POPC&Code1=0080&Geo2=PR&Code2=35&SearchText=Bolton&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=0080&TABID=1&type=0>

As Sara Ahmed notes, one's whiteness "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" as well as being "an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies 'can do'."¹²⁶ Whiteness, Hip Hop, and space then weave a difficult narrative to parse out considering the embodied signifiers of whiteness and associative signifiers of Hip Hop's Blackness collide. In an interview with *Vice*, Organik discusses the early challenges with both official and unofficial spaces, as his intent to film the first KOTD battle in at the Toronto tourism epicenter Yonge and Dundas Square in 2008 was thwarted by security.¹²⁷ How big a role Hip Hop or the group of racially diverse, mostly male, emcees and audience members played in their ejection from that site is difficult to quantify. However, it continues the theme of access, or lack thereof, when it comes to Hip Hop and its perception in white-controlled public spaces, even with a white face as the figurehead.

Public space continued to be important for KOTD, and the eventual shift to the lower profile Alexandra Park led to KOTD's first twenty battles posted on YouTube occurring in public spaces. Tied to the historically poor access to both public and commercial spaces for Hip Hop is the economic aspect of venue access. In the same interview with *Vice*, Organik mentions that financial issues prevented access from formal venues, and that only through a personal connection was KOTD able to secure a venue.¹²⁸ The shift from various outdoor spaces, and eventually to official venues, highlights the flexible and transient nature of DIY scenes like battle rap. Early KOTD events navigated various geospatial locations of downtown Toronto, never establishing a fixed neighbourhood or location that came to represent the league, even when a modicum of success afforded KOTD the luxury of booking commercial space. Rather, the

¹²⁶ Ahmed (2007) pg. 152.

¹²⁷ Williams (2015).

¹²⁸ Williams (2015).

traditions and practices of King of The Dot, and thus its cultural memory, was born in liminal spaces, and influenced by the various material conditions and spaces it occupied in its earliest years.

Although Hip Hop has evolved through a plethora of physical spaces in Toronto, perhaps no space has been more important to the proliferation of Toronto Hip Hop than the radio waves radiating through the city. During the 1980s, at a time when the only accessible urban commercial radio station was WBLK 93.7 out of Buffalo, New York, college radio stations such as CKLN 88.1 FM (Ryerson University), CIUT 89.5 FM (University of Toronto), and CHRY 105.5 FM (York University) emerged as early mavers of Hip Hop music on Toronto's airwaves. Starting with Ron Nelson's "Fantastic Voyage Show", and later the "The Masterplan Show" featuring DJ Power, DJ DTS, Motion and Johnbronski, and DJ X's "The Power Move Show", college radio gave voice not only to Hip Hop in Toronto, but to generations of broadcasters and artists of colour that were vastly underrepresented in the radio space of the city. As Motion notes of herself and her college radio contemporaries, they were "first generations born of migration or transplanted in the Northside, changing the face, sound, and culture of both the city and 'O Canada.'" ¹²⁹

Early formats of emcee battles in Toronto were also mediated at times. DJ X's "The Powermove Show" on CKLN 88.1 FM featured a call-in segment called "Eat the Beat," where emcees phoned in to freestyle live on the radio, with a champion being named at the end of each episode. On the "We Love Hip Hop" podcast with veteran Toronto emcee Friday Ricky Dred and PK Herc, former KOTD staff member Bishop Brigante recalls battling in the freestyle format on a variety of radio stations in the city, including "Eat the Beat" and the "Cutthroat Island"

¹²⁹ Motion in Campbell (2018) pg. 63.

segment of the Circle Research show on CKLN 88.1¹³⁰ Brigante also credits “Eat the Beat” as the primary vehicle for showcasing his talent and garnering respect in Toronto’s Hip Hop scene.¹³¹ “Eat the Beat” has also played host to moments that have become folklore in Toronto Hip Hop history, such as when Frankie Payne (going by Jugganot at the time) called into the show from prison to compete. Aside from actual battles that occurred on radio shows, radio personality Mastermind describes the battle ethos as a part of his education as a DJ: “I studied all the rap battles in the states, rap battles on record, the radio wars, so I was a product of that.”¹³²

The influence of early Hip Hop radio shows and the fondness with which the pioneers of the scene speak of them highlights a level of reverence for digital forms of Hip Hop in Toronto. Early radio shows were at once Hip Hop tastemakers for the city, platforms for emerging local artists, and served a large, geographically disparate audience of Toronto that otherwise had little access to rap music. The inclusion of battle rap on radio shows via segments such as “Eat the Beat” is a reminder that battle rap in Toronto has valued mediated forms of performance long before KOTD. As explained on his episode of *Views...*, Frankie Payne perceived the freestyle battles on “Eat the Beat” as an extension of the freestyle battle culture he came up in on the Jane Strip, and subsequently carried over into his time in prison.¹³³

By framing “Eat the Beat” as an extension of live battle culture, we recognize how the battle rap ethos, the desire to display a superior style of emceeing over one’s opponent to earn respect, shed its usual corporal forms but keeps intact the foundational principals of the performance. This can be read as a precursor to the KOTD model, which attempts to place equal

¹³⁰ “We Love Hip Hop” podcast YouTube video at 3:25.

¹³¹ Brigante describes being discovered as an artist on Eat the Beat at 3:00 on the “We Love Hip Hop” podcast YouTube video.

¹³² Mastermind on *Views Before The 6* podcast, 49:48 mins.

¹³³ Frankie Payne episode of *Views Before the 6* podcast, 33:39

emphasis on the corporeal events and its mediated format. However, what is rarely documented in the history of Toronto's battle rap culture is the viewpoint of the audience, who themselves play a crucial role as an active participant in the meaning-making of the performance.

The Active Spectator

Before beginning my analysis, it is important to define a few key terms: the "active audience", "material conditions" and "co-authorship." By conceptualizing battle rap audiences as active participants in battle rap events, I am continuing a lineage of scholarship in Theatre and Performances Studies that have understood the audiences or the reader as productive participants in the meaning-making of art.

Ien Ang's *The Nature of the Audience* (1995) emphasizes audiences of media as an active collective of participants, as opposed to scholarly frameworks that envisioned audiences as either passive and anonymous "masses" or targeted "markets" by media industries.¹³⁴ The concept of the "active audience" is then taken up in Abercrombie and Longhurst's *Audiences* (1998), which unpacks the dichotomy of the Dominant Text/Dominant Audience positions that are common in analyses of audiences within the field of Cultural Studies.¹³⁵ For Abercrombie and Longhurst, these polarized positions are the extreme versions of working within the "Incorporation/Resistance" research paradigm, which investigates the audience member's agency in relation to media texts.¹³⁶ The Dominant Text position renders the audience passive, as the "text is seen as monolithic, containing well-marked preferred meaning making it difficult for alternative readings to emerge."¹³⁷ The Dominant Audience position on the other hand discusses the text as "polysemic, containing a number of possible meanings and therefore allowing a range

¹³⁴ Ang (1995) pg. 219.

¹³⁵ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 18.

¹³⁶ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 15-16.

¹³⁷ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 18.

of audience interpretation.”¹³⁸ As a result, the audience is more active in their analysis, acceptance or rejection of the text.¹³⁹

Longhurst and Abercrombie also identify a “middling position” which argues that the audience is “active in making its own meanings but only within the constraints offered by the texts.”¹⁴⁰ This “middling position” becomes useful when analyzing how the idea of the “active audience” is applied to live performance, as theorists in dance, theatre, music and performance studies expand on the notion of “performance-as-texts” by factoring in material elements of performance such as the venue, the geographical location of the performance, and the written materials associated with the performance (programs, advertising, and etiquette manuals to name a few).¹⁴¹ It is not surprising, then, that the material conditions of performing arts events are the focus of analysis for many scholars when discussing the “active audience.” The venue and its dedicated spaces for audiences and performers is one of the most common areas of investigation for performance studies scholars.

For Lynne Conner, the shifting conditions of the production and reception of art works in relation to the site of performance has slowly taken agency from audiences in the meaning-making of the event. Conner notes that current trends in cultural programming limit the emotional and intellectual responses that audiences were once afforded.¹⁴² To support this theory, Conner turns to historical examples of cultural and artistic environments that promoted the audience’s active participation in the arts event, before identifying the shifts in production that placed the audience in a more passive role.

¹³⁸ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 18.

¹³⁹ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 18.

¹⁴⁰ Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 18.

¹⁴¹ These elements are most explicitly articulated in relation to theatre and performance studies in Knowles (2004).

¹⁴² Conner (2007) pg. 80.

First turning to Ancient Greece, Conner notes how engrained the community was in the production of plays for the City Dionysus festival.¹⁴³ Not only were many of the performers “amateur members of the community” but the adjudication of the three-day competition of plays was greatly determined by the audience, who selected a panel of judges to vote for the best tragedy.¹⁴⁴ Conner also points to historical evidence that audiences were quite vocal during the performances, and that formal discussion would continue afterward. Conner posits that the audiences’ interpretations of the performances were held in high regard and were part of a larger dialogue surrounding the meaning of the event.¹⁴⁵ Rather than a unidirectional process of performance and reception, theatre in Ancient Greece was a launching pad for “the exchange of ideas, opinions, and passions that are the fundamental criteria of useful civic conversation” which implicated the audience as co-authors of the event.”¹⁴⁶

The physical architecture of the building and the placement of the audience created the opportunity for the active audiences. Referencing the theatre architecture of 18th century England and France, Conner notes that the physical division of separate audience spaces facilitated a variety of social interactions beyond silent, sustained spectatorship.¹⁴⁷ The inclusion of seats on stage for the wealthy, the working-class audiences’ raucous behaviour in the pit, and the social performances of aristocratic audiences in the boxes show how various areas of reception within the theatre all facilitated different ways in which audience members affected the onstage performance.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Conner (2007) pg. 81.

¹⁴⁴ Conner (2007) pg. 81.

¹⁴⁵ Conner (2007) pg. 83

¹⁴⁶ Conner (2007) pg. 83.

¹⁴⁷ Conner (2007) pg. 82.

¹⁴⁸ Conner (2007) pg. 82.

Caroline Heim also discusses the role of onstage seating in the meaning-making of the event, claiming that onstage seating didn't mean that audience members were simply co-authors of the event, but rather they were so central to the performance that they also became co-performers.¹⁴⁹ Not only did these audience members play a proxemic role by obstructing entrances and exits, but they also injected their voices into the production with audible dialogues and interjections during the performance. However crucial a role the audience played in these historical contexts, the centrality of the audience to the meaning-making of the performance would begin to wane in the latter half of the 19th century, as theatre managers and cultural critics began re-articulating what it meant for audiences to participate in the theatre.¹⁵⁰

As Conner points out, the shift from a physically and vocally active audience to a more silent and passive audience is the result of a confluence of cultural, economic and technological shifts.¹⁵¹ Heim envisions the audience as a unified troupe of performers¹⁵² that "only actualize as a troupe of performers in the presence of their co-troupe, the actors."¹⁵³ By darkening the auditorium, the relationship between the two troupes diminishes, as the focus of the audience turns away from each other and towards the only lit space, the stage. For Heim, the audiences' ability to perform was greatly impacted by this shift in lighting that made the audience less visible to both its collective members and the actors. Not only does this obscure the symbiotic relationship between audience and actor, but it subsequently suppresses the collective

¹⁴⁹ Heim (2016) pg. 45.

¹⁵⁰ Both Heim (2016) pg. 66 and Conner (2007) pg. 87-88 make frequent references to theatre managers such as Benjamin Franklin Keith and cultural tastemakers such as Frances Milton Trollope playing a central role in establishing more passive audience conditions.

¹⁵¹ Connor (2007) pg. 85.

¹⁵² Heim (2016) pg. 65.

¹⁵³ Heim (2016) pg. 20.

performance that occurs between audience members, limiting their physical and vocal participation.¹⁵⁴

Referencing the work of Richard Butsch, Conner expands on the idea of crowd silence, claiming that by privatizing an audience member's experience through darkness and silence, the theatre loses its ability to facilitate collective action, thus greatly reducing its political capacity.¹⁵⁵ Restraining vocal participation through darkness, in conjunction with a more fixed location of reception in contemporary auditoriums, creates what Susan Bennett refers to as a "social contract" of predetermined behaviours that are deemed acceptable within the role of the spectator.¹⁵⁶ For Bennett this contract traditionally implicates the audience member as a reactive member of the theatrical event whose presence is simply to witness and interpret the action presented to them.¹⁵⁷

Bennett pushes back against the notion of theatre audiences as passive or reactive agents in the theatrical event, choosing instead to situate the audience's experience within two interconnected frames: an outer frame which positions theatre as a cultural construct bound to specific texts and performative expectations, and an inner frame which "encompasses production strategies, ideological overcoding, and the material conditions of performances."¹⁵⁸ When analyzed in conjunction, these two frames have the ability to unpack nuanced ideas concerning the relationship between production and reception, while highlighting specific ways in which the spectator plays an active role within an event.

¹⁵⁴ Heim (2016) pg. 55-56.

¹⁵⁵ Butsch in Conner (2007) pg. 86.

¹⁵⁶ Bennett (1997) pg. 204.

¹⁵⁷ Bennett (1997) pg. 204.

¹⁵⁸ Bennett (1990) pg. 1-2.

Echoing the process to passivity that Bennett highlights through the “social contract”, Abercrombie and Longhurst quote Baz Kershaw to show how the material conditions and the conventions of theatre combine to signal an environment of rigidity for the audience: “To gain access to the performance we agreed to be channelled through an even more limiting physical regime until we are seated to focus within a narrow angle of vision, normally to remain there for a period we do not determine.”¹⁵⁹ Kershaw goes on to explain the social pressures that come with being seated in a dark, fixed location when one wants to leave during the course of a performance. These conventions are the direct result of the emphasis on new forms of audience etiquette emerging in Europe and North America during the latter half of the 19th century.¹⁶⁰

Conner notes that the rise of audience etiquette coincided with the widening chasm between popular culture and high culture in relation to artistic production, or what Conner (in reference to Lawrence Levine’s seminal book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*) referred to as the “sacralization” of the arts.¹⁶¹ Connor marks the effect that Arnoldian cultural values had on separating art forms by their perceived aesthetic and cultural value, raising the authority and social position of the artist, and standardizing a “reeducation of American audiences in how to behave while in the presence of high cultural products.”¹⁶² This subsequently created a larger divide between the audiences and the artists, as audiences were expected to hold the artists and their new-found social prestige in high reverence, thus relinquishing some of their power in co-authoring the performance.

This new social order for performance reception rapidly spread to populist performances venues, evidenced by the codes of conduct that were present in performance venues such as

¹⁵⁹ Kershaw in Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 51.

¹⁶⁰ Kershaw in Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) pg. 51.

¹⁶¹ Conner (2008) pg. 87.

¹⁶² Conner (2008) pg. 87.

vaudeville houses.¹⁶³ Behavioural requests rooted in silence, such as “Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor” and “Please don’t talk during the acts, as it annoys those about you, and prevents a perfect hearing of the entertainment” clearly show how audience etiquette began to limit the physical and vocal responses from the audience in order to prioritize the performance on stage.¹⁶⁴

This chapter responds to Bennett’s call for further investigation on the relationship between the conditions of production and reception for specific cultural environments.¹⁶⁵ In addition to her two frames of analysis, I will also be emphasizing the important role that audience etiquette plays in constructing battle rap’s spectatorial environment, as well as identify how KOTD attempts to create a performance environment that is suited to both corporeal and PPV audiences.

Audience Participation in Battle Rap

On the weekend of February 19-20, 2016, Toronto-based battle rap league King of the Dot presented the 6th edition of their Blackout event, Blackout 6ix, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. With veteran battlers Iron Solomon (Brooklyn) and Dizaster (Los Angeles) headlining on Day 1, the venue, the gallery at 99 Sudbury, was sold out weeks in advance in anticipation of what has become one of King of the Dot’s flagship events. Headlining that same event one year earlier at the palatial Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Toronto was a battle between Brooklyn-based Conceited vs LA’s Dumbfounded, which eclipsed the 4 million view mark on YouTube just slightly more than a year after its upload.

The Blackout events are a prime example of the two distinct but intersecting audiences

¹⁶³ Conner (2008) pg. 88.

¹⁶⁴ Conner (2008) pg. 88.

¹⁶⁵ Bennett (1990) pg. 114.

that consume King of the Dot's battle rap events: the live audience and the digital audience.

Alim, Lee and Carris, describe the relationship between the audiences and the performers within battle rap as a dialogic, multi-partied discourse.¹⁶⁶ Although their analysis centers primarily on race and linguistics, the influence of this dialogic relationship can be extended far beyond these discourses to identify other ways that audiences and rappers collaborate to create a set of rituals and shape the performance space. Traditionally, battle rap spaces are marked by the "cypher," which is comprised of competing emcees and various audience members who physically create the circular performance space with their bodies. These cyphers frequently took place in venues such as alleyways, communities centres, parking lots and nightclubs. Due to the informal and collective nature of the cypher, identifying who raps and who observes was nearly impossible until one differentiated themselves by rapping. As a result, the audience plays a large role in the meaning-making of this cypher, both as witnesses to the ritual and as co-creators of the performance space. As battle rap culture grew and became professionalized, King of the Dot has utilized a variety of iterations of the cypher format, which is now commonly referred to as a "pit" in professional battle rap circles.

Many of their early venues maintained the intimate, circular crowd arrangement that evoked battle cyphers of the past. But as King of the Dot continued to expand into mainstream popular culture, promoters began to employ more traditional performance spaces such as theatres and concert halls, thus changing battle rap's modes of presentation and reception, the space the performance occupies and the relationship between the performer and the audience. Battle rap super fan Minnesota Luke Mueller attempts to track audience participation throughout the history of battle rap on his YouTube channel and has begun to touch on how the shifts in space

¹⁶⁶ Alim, Lee and Carris (2011).

and the format of the live performance has influenced how an audience reacts.

In his video, Mueller notes that street cyphers and early rap battle contests were initially performed to a beat provided by the DJ or beatboxer. Thus, emcees were forced to keep a specific musical timing within their rhyming schemes. This meant that the audience's reaction was kept to a minimum, rarely interrupting, or influencing the rapper's bars. Also, the emcee did not have the luxury of pausing after a particularly successful bar, as they needed to ensure they remained on beat. As the format shifts from freestyle rhyming over music in the 1980s and 90s to the pre-written, a cappella battles we see in contemporary professional battle rap, the absence of music presents moments where audiences can inject their influence. Due to the change in format, crowd reaction to particularly powerful lines or verses had the space to increase substantially, and we begin to see a more vocal audience in battle rap emerge.

What Mueller identifies in the video are three broad traditions of emcee/audience communication: rapping over beats with minimal crowd participation, rapping a cappella with slightly more audience participation, and rapping a cappella with substantial audience participation. Mueller also notes that as the level of participation from the audiences increase, emcees evolve from rapping overtop of the crowd's reaction, to pausing for the crowd's reaction, and finally to anticipating the crowd's reaction. Therefore, the method of emceeing becomes immediately influenced by the reception of the audience, as the emcees are having to adjust their writing and performance for audiences that are more vocal. In addition to the effect the audience's reaction has on the current aesthetic practices of the art form, the proxemic relationship between the performers and audiences plays a substantial role as well.

Although KOTD occupied a myriad of spaces during its fledgling years, it most frequently found refuge in bars and nightclubs such as the defunct Blue Moon Pub at Queen St.

East and Broadview Ave., or Club XS on Richmond Street West in what was the heart of the now mostly shuttered and gentrified Entertainment District of Toronto. Nightclubs functioned well for early KOTD events for a variety of reasons, including their central location, proximity to transit, technical capabilities for sound, their ability to support large audiences, and their pre-existing security processes. Perhaps most importantly, these venues also provided flexible performance spaces, which allowed KOTD to maintain the traditional cypher arrangement for their battles, even as risers and other forms of audience accommodations were integrated into the venue. As the events grew larger and as KOTD began to understand the effects that audiences have on the performances, events began to occupy spaces that prescribed different modes of reception for the audience.

Blackout 5

At the Blackout 5 event, the approximately 1400-seat Queen Elizabeth Theatre represented the organization's attempt to move towards a traditional theatrical setting. King of the Dot promotor Travis "Organik" Fleetwood seemed keenly aware of the ideological coding that exists in traditional theatres and their ability to shape audience reaction. In a 2015 interview with BattleRap.com prior to Blackout 5, Organik states his reason for choosing a more traditional performance space:

"A big issue in all these battles is people talking. Because they become disinterested quickly on what they see, and they form groups of circles of people and talk. When you have a seated venue, you're limited to who you can talk to — the person on your right, the person on your left ... your primary focus is going to continually be on that stage."¹⁶⁷

As Markusen and Brown have noted in their 2013 article "From Audience to

¹⁶⁷ Fleetwood in Felman (2015)

Participants,” traditional Western performances that occupy theatres and concert halls such as classical music, theatre and ballet tend to strictly delineate and segregate the roles of performers and viewers. This occurs most frequently in the use of the proscenium stage, which physically separates the audience and the performer through a raised stage and clearly defined audience and performance areas. Apart from physically separating the audience and the performers, there is a secondary distancing effect that occurs through the lighting design, where the performers are lit with stage lighting and the audience placed in the dark. As Lynne Conner argues in her article “In and Out of the Dark” the combination of the dark auditorium and mandated audience etiquette effectively quieted the audiences of live performance around the turn of the 19th century.¹⁶⁸ By the early twentieth century people of all social classes were expected to treat performing arts events in traditional theatre venues as quiet, private experiences.¹⁶⁹

By selecting the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Organik was intentionally attempting to condition the audience into being a more passive, more attentive audience through the space they occupied. The desired silencing affect was never really achieved. While reviewing YouTube footage from the event, I noticed examples where the audience’s learned behaviours and the coding of the venue clash. During the Daylyt vs Madchild battle, the audience continues talking through the start of Daylyt’s round, causing Organik to attempt to quiet the audience. When Organik’s attempt to silence to crowd does not work, Daylyt himself engages the crowd in another clear failure of the proscenium stage’s attempt to create divisions and reformat the relationship between the audience and performer. The audience’s learned behaviour, or what Knowles would call the “lived experience,” usurps the notion of the more passive audience that the Queen Elizabeth Theatre evokes, creating a confusing and hybridized viewing experience rife

¹⁶⁸ Conner (2008).

¹⁶⁹ Conner (2008).

with ideological coding from a traditional theatre setting in tension with an audience who carries with them a set of culturally specific, learned behaviours.

As Ric Knowles summarizes in ‘Reading the Material Theatre,’ cultural spaces and events do not unilaterally contain meaning but meaning is produced through the relationships within the interpretive community, their lived experience, and the performances at hand.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, the recording and distribution of meaning-making practices in cultural spaces can have effects far beyond the material space of the event. Shumway (1992) describes the images of fan reactions in Rock and Roll media as tools for the structuring of fan responses to rock acts.¹⁷¹

By reading Blackout 5 through the lens of Knowles and Shumway’s theories, the event serves as a reminder that you can take the battle rap audience out of the pit, but you can’t take the pit out of the battle rap audience. The learned behaviour of battle rap audiences, honed through countless hours of watching battles both in-person and online, has shaped their performance as an audience. Not only have battle rap spectators learned how a battle rap spectator is meant to behave through their own corporeal experience, but they have also learned through observing other battle audiences, a task that is primarily done through the consumption of online battle videos. When taken out of a context that has become familiar to their modes of spectating, and the displays of audience performance that they have witnessed through observing other battles, the audience understandably becomes confused with the switch in venue arrangement that appears to be incongruent with their learned behaviour.

Blackout 6ix

In addition to the audience’s inability to conform to the traditional theatre setting, Organik’s impetus to shift back to the pit format for Blackout 6ix reveals how the digital

¹⁷⁰ Knowles (2004) pg. 17.

¹⁷¹ Shumway (1992) pg. 149.

audience has a substantial effect on how the event was produced. Although Organik was clear that the venue choice was motivated by the live audience's experience of Blackout 5, he also hinted at the role the digital audience played in choosing a pit. The live fan experience is at the top of the promoter's mind, but it is crucial that the digital experience does not suffer. When discussing the needs of both the corporeal and PPV audiences during our interview, Organik insisted that "you have to juggle both of them and treat them as equal entities."¹⁷² The pit, Organik believes, is the best accommodation, since it allows for a more intimate experience for both audiences than the stage.¹⁷³ He also notes that the PPV audience has a better understanding of the corporeal crowd's response to the battle when the venue is set up in the pit, as the corporeal audience is taken out of the dark and included in the filming.¹⁷⁴

What Organik touches on here is an interesting intersection of the two audiences. The PPV audience, watching both the emcees and the corporeal audience, rely on the live audience to help frame their own digital spectatorship, frequently monitoring corporeal crowd reaction as a part of their at-home judgement of the battle. In this sense, the corporeal audience finds themselves as both spectator and performer. As corporeal audience members, they are witnessing the battle and are in dialogue with the emcee through their reactions to each verse, and as performers, they find themselves "performing" the role of the audience for the PPV broadcast, a role that fundamentally shapes the event for the PPV audience. The act of performing as an audience member helped to shape my experience attending Blackout 6ix, which occurred on February 19th and 20th of 2016.

The now-defunct venue that hosted Blackout 6ix, 99 Sudbury, was sandwiched in

¹⁷² Fleetwood (2016).

¹⁷³ Fleetwood (2016).

¹⁷⁴ Fleetwood (2016).

between the trendy West Queen West neighbourhood and the condo mecca of Liberty Village. A popular event space for weddings, corporate events and pop-up art and food endeavors, 99 Sudbury promptly closed in April of 2019 in what was the latest addition to the epidemic of event venue closures that have plagued Toronto for the better part of the 2010s. The condo boom, rapid gentrification of neighbourhoods, and prohibitively high rents have largely been blamed for forcing a number of venues across the city to close, from the intimate, queer-friendly Holy Oak in my neighbourhood of Bloordale to the lakefront nightclub haven The Guvernment.¹⁷⁵ No area has been hit harder than the Entertainment District, where over 70 clubs have closed in the last decade,¹⁷⁶ including KOTD staple venue Club XS, which hosted the original Blackout event in 2011.

Upon arriving at 99 Sudbury for day two of the event, the outdoor coding of the space is not unlike the clubs and concert halls that have previously hosted KOTD events. Designated waiting lines and overly enthusiastic security guards frame the entrance to the venue. Loud chatter and wafts of cannabis permeate the space as a diverse group of fans mingle in anticipation of the doors opening. The poster states that the event starts at 7pm. It is well past 7pm. No one in line is surprised, nor seems to care. Battle rap fan forums often reference the more than casual approach to time management at events.

The inevitable scheduling delays that are so common in battle rap unintentionally promote the social environment that is the hallmark of KOTD events. The proximity of the fans in line and the inability (or lack of desire) for anyone to maintain single file creates an unofficial pre-party to the battles. Within minutes of arriving in line, I am being asked by strangers what my opinions on certain battles are, given advice as to where the best viewing angles are, and

¹⁷⁵ Gillis (2017)

¹⁷⁶ Gillis (2017)

suggestions for where I can stash my bulky coat. Some who are familiar with the delays have brought along an extra beer or two to pass the time in line, and it is not uncommon for cigarettes or joints to be passed around to friends old and new. This is not the first time I arrived alone to a KOTD event and quickly made friends for the night. The atmosphere has very little pretense and very few fans are putting on airs. It appears as if most in line are happy to meet new people, and our communal investment in battle rap fandom is an easy entry point for those looking to converse with strangers.

As I look around, I am not sure what to make of the racially diverse crowd. Respected journalist and Toronto Hip Hop fixture Dalton Higgins once posited that “silos between genres-which tend to break down along race/culture/class lines-is the pink elephant in the room” when it came to the Toronto music scene, and that those genres frequently exist in geographically disparate spaces.¹⁷⁷ Understanding that race can be difficult to discern by simply scanning a crowd, white-presenting people made up roughly half of those in line. The venue was also in a trendy downtown location, and each of us have spent a minimum of \$40 for a ticket. If we understand Higgins’ statement to mean that Hip Hop is a genre that is racially coded as Black, and white people (male-presenting people, specifically) are the most visually represented demographic in line, my assertion is that geography and one’s financial means play as large a role as race in terms of who is occupying this line.

When tracing the evolution of KOTD’s events, from free, outdoor venues to trendy event centres such as 99 Sudbury, the question of access begins to take on a different meaning.

Initially, to attend a KOTD battle at a public venue like Alexandra Park, one would need to be intimately connected to the scene to have insider knowledge as to when and where the battles

¹⁷⁷ <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2014/04/22/torontos-music-scene-segregated-race-class-geography-nice-show-hopes-change/>

would take place. In our current moment, the most pronounced barriers appear to be economics and geography. While in line I met people from far flung destinations such as Massachusetts, California, and British Columbia, as well as several fans from various towns and cities in Ontario and Quebec who also commuted to the event, highlighting the reach that KOTD events have beyond the local Toronto battle rap scene. Aside from the ticket price, one's ability to pay for travel, accommodations, food, and other incidental costs of attending the event factor into the demographics of the line. In online fan groups, an often-discussed challenge for Americans attempting to compete in or attend battle rap events in Canada is the strict boarder laws that deem many with criminal records as "criminally inadmissible." Perhaps not surprisingly this factor appears to be racialized as well, as many fans and rappers who draw attention to this issue online are people of colour.

The factors of economy continue upon entrance to the venue, where tables of merchandise and a (expensive) cash bar provides further ways in which one can participate monetarily in the event. Some fans are eager to purchase and display their KOTD merchandise as a badge of honour or a sign of their fandom, including a subsection of fans who keep their unsuitably warm KOTD sweatshirts on throughout the event despite the sweltering temperatures in the venue and their obvious discomfort. Perhaps the most egregious example of the class disparity within the venue is the divide between the VIP area and the general admission area. The VIP area, guarded by a security guard, is a series of barriers that create a circle around the raised platform stage, providing guaranteed prime spectating space for the fans who have paid roughly three times the amount of a general admission ticket. The VIP ticket is primarily about proximity: the VIP fans' proximity to the stage, their proximity to the camera lens of the PPV, and their proximity to the emcees and staff that are also stationed within the VIP. This proximity

can be read as a multi-layered symbol that simultaneously highlights a fan's commitment to the culture, their level of disposable income, and their desire to be seen by other fans. The performance of a VIP fan transcends being seen in the VIP space by the venue, as the amount of PPV screen time increases the closer one can get to the hosts.

Throughout Blackout 6ix, the live audience heard Kyle "Avocado" Gray, the head of digital production for KOTD, barking commands, counting down to broadcast time for battles, and calling for breaks to manage the technical requirements for the PPV. These actions made the live audience keenly aware of their participation in a PPV event and speaks to a concurrent spectatorial experience of the event beyond the venue. The hosts of the event, Organik, Gully TK, and Bishop Brigante actively orchestrate the audience's participation depending on the needs of the PPV. Prior to going live for the PPV, the audience is told to be quiet as the production team counts the hosts down to going live. Immediately upon doing introductions, the hosts then prompt the audience to cheer for the emcees, eliciting a predictable response of cheering from the audience. Prior to the battle beginning, the audience is then told again to control their volume, as the emcees need to be clearly heard on camera. This delicate act of prompting and silencing audience members was a tenuous balance at times within the event, especially since alcohol is served throughout the evening and the crowd grew rowdier as the night continued.

However, because many members of the audience understand the ritual of spectatorship from being PPV audiences themselves, there is an embodied understanding of the appropriate audience behaviour at the event. Throughout the event there are a variety of ways the live audience contributes vocally without disrupting or negatively affecting the ritual of the event. For instance, during emcee introductions it is common for an emcee to have a slogan that

becomes a part of their branding. For the more established emcees, this has become a choral moment with the audience, as the audience performs the slogan in tandem or in a call-and-response format with the emcee. The more established the emcee, and the larger their fan base, the more this tradition has evolved into moments where an established emcee can begin their slogan, and then allow the audience to finish it. This may also occur at the end of an emcee's round, where they use their slogan in consummation.

The slogans have become a tradition embedded in the battle rap ritual, complete with a dedicated space in the programming for it, an informal script, and a knowledgeable and committed audience to perform it. Although not carefully choreographed, these quasi-improvised moments of audience participation require the audience to be familiar enough with the emcee to remember their slogan and its usual placement. One's participation in the choral act of a slogan also signifies to some a level of commitment to the culture, as it demonstrates a fan's familiarity with the traditions associated with a particular emcee and the ritual of fan performance within the context of the event. At Blackout6ix, examples of audience participation in the slogan occur when KOTD co-host Bishop Brigante is introduced, when title challenger Rone is introduced, and at the end of Brooklyn emcee Cortez's rounds. The response and reactions of the audience differs slightly with each emcee, but in each instance the emcee's slogan elicit a reaction of familiarity with the crowd and garners some form of choral response.

To a certain extent, the various levels of participation among fans differentiates the informed fans from the uninformed fan within the corporeal spectatorial experience. These are learned behaviours that are partially formed from the spectator's time at events, but often is forged through hours of watching other audiences perform on online videos. During my casual conversations with fellow audience members at Blackout6ix, many of the audience members

stated that they had only attended a handful of events, while the hours logged online watching and re-watching battle after battle was too large for them to even estimate. It stands to reason that these fans learned their role within the ritual of the event by watching other audiences perform their spectatorship. For my own part as an audience member that night, I realized how keenly aware of the camera's presence I was. Retroactively looking at the footage from the event, I can see myself performing the role of the audience member, as well as ensuring I didn't do anything that could live on in internet infamy. There was a feeling of being watched, a social pressure to perform as a "good" audience member, and an understanding of the important role I played for a PPV audience.

By watching my own performance as a spectator online, I came to understand just how concretized my behaviour as an audience member is, and the ways in which my own personal PPV spectatorship has been crucial in my development as a battle rap fan. My ability to follow the cues that are embedded in the spectatorial experience were a direct result of my experiences watching battles on YouTube. I understood the value that a loud and boisterous crowd has on drawing the PPV spectator into the world of the event. I also simultaneously understood the delicate balance that a corporeal audience member must achieve, since any disruptions or distractions during a battle greatly diminish its replay value online by extending the length of the battle, obscuring certain bars, or disrupting the flow of the emcees participating in the battle.

The experience also calls to mind the amount of delegated labour that audiences are frequently expected to perform at battle rap events. In her 2013 book *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Jen Harvie investigates the various ways in which contemporary audiences assume delegated labour within the contexts of performances, which in

turn may exploit or empower individuals and have larger effects on social power dynamics.¹⁷⁸ This often occurs when the audience is asked to assume a “role” within the world of the performance that is critical to the execution of the event, as highlighted in her analysis of immersive theatre and singular audience theatre.¹⁷⁹ The main distinction that should be made when parsing out the differences between Harvie’s examples and a corporeal battle rap audience is the relative permanence that an audience’s performance may have. If one considers that recorded footage of KOTD events have a life on YouTube that far exceeds the time of the event, the stakes are much higher for battle rap audiences whose responses and reactions have the potential to inform hundreds of thousands of future digital spectators well after the event took place.

In my experience at Blackout6ix, the general sense of audience participation appeared overwhelmingly empowering, as audience members revelled in their opportunity to actively participate. However, that does obscure the tremendous amount of spectatorial labour that informed audience members contributed to the development of their culturally embodied knowledge of battle rap spectatorship. This could be viewed as exploitative in the sense that fans are simultaneously honed as “good” audience members while providing a monetary stream for the company via YouTube views. It also obscures the fact that much of the participation is in fact delegated, underscored by the constant prompting and silencing of the crowd. The participation also runs the risk of creating a dynamic of social disparity. It values the performances of fans that are steeped in the traditions of battle rap’s spectatorship while mitigating the participation of the casual fan who lacks the embedded knowledge of crowd participation at these events.

Bridging the Live and PPV Audiences

¹⁷⁸ Harvie (2013) pg. 29.

¹⁷⁹ Harvie (2013) pg. 28-61.

Lucy Bennett is one of the early popular music scholars that addresses the communication between corporeal and digital audiences via Twitter, Facebook, and text messaging in her research on fans of singer-songwriter Tori Amos. Bennett articulates a shift in engagement for fans attending the live concerts as they communicate details of the event to fan forums online, thus disrupting their singular focus on the performance and the physical space they occupy.¹⁸⁰ Bennett argues that this form of communication creates “a tension for the fans who want to serve and communicate with the online fan groups while also experience an uninterrupted, corporeal spectatorial experience.”¹⁸¹ Bennett’s work productively articulates the connections between the two audiences that are a part of live performance, which shrinks the purported chasm that some scholars discuss when analyzing the corporeal and the digital. It also situates the processes of documentation by music fans as a form of archiving, as fan labour assists in “the preservation of important historical moments within the fan community that may otherwise not be chronicled.”¹⁸²

Where KOTD fans diverge from the fans in Bennett’s study is that they benefit from a PPV broadcast of the event. The nature of relaying information from the live event to an online fan group differs since battle rap’s PPV audience is more informed than the online audiences of Bennett’s study because of their ability to watch the event broadcast. This alleviates any responsibility from a corporeal spectator to keep digital fans abreast of the minute-to-minute action at the event, and a more casual approach can be taken to corporeal-digital fan communication. KOTD events also have more natural breaks in the performance than traditional concerts, where fans at the event can communicate with fans online without disrupting their own

¹⁸⁰ Bennett (2014) pg. 90-91.

¹⁸¹ Bennett (2014) pg. 90.

¹⁸² Bennett ???? pg. 98.

enjoyment of the battles. The relationship between the two audience also differs in that the audience at the event can significantly affect a PPV spectator's interpretation of the battle they are watching.

A frequent thread topic on TalkBack is the judgement of the corporeal audience in relation to the experience of the digital spectator. Because the corporeal audience is a part of the visual spectrum for the PPV audience, the PPV audience relies in part on the reaction of the crowd to gauge how effective a particular bar or verse is. Additionally, because PPV spectatorship is either a singular experience or a much less populated group experience, the PPV audience relies on the sonic contributions of the corporeal audience to create the illusion of atmosphere for the PPV spectator who is occupying a more controlled environment. A quiet corporeal audience can mute the excitement and energy of the battle for a PPV spectator. In fact, one of the more common complaints about an event from PPV audiences is the performance of the crowd, not the performance of the emcees.

In a perfect example of Longhurst and Abercrombie's "middling position", the PPV audience's participation is contingent on the conditions of the battle being streamed, including the corporeal audience who provides performative context for the ritual of the event. The PPV audience may feel constrained by corporeal audiences that are perceived as "passive" and tend to favour a more stereotypically active corporeal audience to be able to interpret the successes and failures of the emcees. When a corporeal audience does not fulfill the performative requirements for the PPV audience to feel sufficiently involved, PPV audiences will lash out on forums about the poor performance of the audience, often referred to as "sleeping". When an audience "sleeps" on a bar, verse, or an entire battle, it is perceived that the audience is not participating actively enough, or do not understand the ritual of the event, and thus fail to create a dynamic battle rap

environment for the PPV audience.

This is a critique that is most levied against corporeal audiences in Toronto, who are notoriously pensive and reserved in their reactions to battle rap. It is not that Toronto audiences are uninformed or less enthusiastic about battle rap. Rather, it is my position that Toronto audiences question what it might mean to be “active” within the context of battle rap culture. This calls to mind the work of Rancière, who sees no benefit in connecting the act of listening to passivity, calling instead for scholars and cultural critics to rethink the various ways in which we set up dichotomies of experience.¹⁸³ In many ways the Toronto audience highlights the ways in which audiences who appear to be more passive are in fact intrinsically engaged in the performance. This is perfectly suitable for those in KOTD’s corporeal audiences in Toronto, who have a particular style of spectating that is rarely, if ever, critiqued within the world of the corporeal event. But this less explicit form of active spectatorship often does not translate well on to recordings and leaves much to be desired for PPV audiences who require a more traditional performance of “active” to ensure that they feel included in the ritual of the event.

This in turn reveals Toronto’s culturally specific form of spectatorship in battle rap, one that when read against other more active forms of spectatorship in battle rap culture, frustrates PPV audiences who are not familiar with audience participation at Toronto events. In my various conversations about crowd performance at KOTD events in Toronto, the general sentiment among fans at the event is that the atmosphere and the crowd reaction is appropriate and exciting. That is to say: Toronto audiences find their spectatorial experience of KOTD events to be dynamic and enjoyable while remaining true to the etiquette and traditions of battle rap events. Regardless of the experience of Toronto’s corporeal fans, it is clear from analyzing

¹⁸³ Ranciere (2009) pg. 12.

threads on TalkBack that the PPV fans disagree. This is primarily because the types of performances that Toronto audiences provide at KOTD events are not conducive to extending the ritual of the event to digital spectators in the same way as other audiences that are more active in the traditional sense. It is my assertion that for the PPV spectator to fully understand the atmospheric qualities of the event, they rely on two intersecting factors: 1) a visual spectrum that includes them as a part of the cypher via the camera lens, and 2) an audience that is sonically active enough to remind them that they are part of a collective audience.

KOTD's Visual and Sonic Spectrum

Where KOTD gains a substantial amount of control over the PPV experience is in the visual spectrum that they present to their digital audiences. This is achieved by structuring the event space to integrate the camera in a way that replicates the intimacy of the cypher. In this sense, the PPV audience has the best seat in the house, as the camera is not obstructed by other fans or equipment, which is quite common in the corporeal fan experience. The chosen visual spectrum that does some of the leg work in elevating the digital experience could be interpreted as a democratizing of spectatorship, as those who are unable to attend because of finances, distance, or any other factor are rewarded for their patronage with an intimate, unobstructed view. The visual spectrum of the digital spectator, however, is relatively fixed, providing a less autonomous spectatorial experience because their gaze is focused by the camera. For instance, if the camera operator decides to focus on the emcee, the digital audience member cannot turn their focus on the other emcees' reactions since the camera is dictating their view.

When watching online, it is difficult at times to discern how the corporeal crowd valued a specific round because of the limited visual scope of the PPV camera. This is particularly the case when the crowd is not sonically responsive, but rather reacts in less resonant ways such as

nodding or gesturing positively. In this sense, being a corporeal spectator allows you to understand the nuances of the corporeal crowd's reactions to each battle, rather than PPV spectators that rely on vocal modes of reception to gauge audience reactions in the building. Although this may seem like a disadvantage to the PPV spectator, it simply renders a different spectatorial experience. The PPV spectator benefits from the modes of streaming technologies in ways the corporeal audience cannot.

For instance, if there is a substantial sonic crowd reaction for a particular bar or verse, it is sometimes difficult for the live audience to capture each word of the subsequent bar or verse if the crowd noise is reverberating in the building. The PPV audience, however, benefits from the fact that their primary sonic experience is usually the emcee's microphone. This obscures the crowd noise for the PPV audience and allows them to hear the emcee more clearly at times. The trade-off for PPV audiences is a dampening of the atmosphere in favour of a clearer and more focused spectatorial experience. This is exacerbated by the conditions of one's PPV context as well, since the PPV spectator has more control over their spectatorial environment than the corporeal audience member. This means that the dialogic relationship between corporeal audience and performer extends beyond the event's physical space and resonates with the PPV audience. The corporeal audience and the emcee must work in consort for the PPV audience to capture the environmental essence of the event. Although there are constant attempts to incite and quell excitement throughout the event, the corporeal audience's random misfires of participation have consequences to the overall quality of everyone's experience and ultimately produces an outcome that KOTD has a difficult time regulating.

The PPV visual spectrum often flattens out any geospatial specificity. What we end up with is a bar, nightclub or event hall that is reconfigured and recoded to read as a battle rap

venue. There is very little difference from one event space to another, whether it is in Oakland, Toronto, or Vancouver. There are some exceptions, such as unique architectural details in a venue that marks a space as unique or provides a distinct backdrop to the audience. The venue for World Domination 8, the Steel Yard nightclub in London, England, provides an industrial feel with steel beams and pillars, as well as brick walls and archways. The venue played a key role in how the event was filmed, as the camera prioritized expansive shots from the stage that captured the venue's ornate and cavernous interior alongside the emcees and audience. The architecture was further accentuated by the lighting design, which cast a series of blue spotlights from the grid onto the audience, and from the floor to the ceiling, creating a spectral glow in the venue. This was in sharp contrast with the bright white lighting that focused on the emcees, which along with the raised performance space and steel barricades, emphasized the division of space between the emcees and the fans.

As a result of these choices, the PPV audience is reminded that KOTD is not in one of their usual venues. The air of difference in the visual spectrum emphasizes a break from the norm, which is quite fitting for the organization's first World Domination event outside of North America. A seemingly unintended outcome of this choice to capture the architecture through lighting and a wider frame was that a larger portion of the audience is lit and in focus. This allows the PPV audience to see a greater variety of non-sonic responses, and thus get a fuller picture of the crowd's reaction.

I believe that the combination of a visual spectrum that integrates the audience in the configuration of the corporeal audience space and the prioritizing of the sonic activity in the space by the event producers could be a useful model beyond battle rap. From my personal experience, the filming of live performance outside of high budget productions is often plagued

with a feeling of distance or removal, usually the result of fixed, poorly placed cameras and an overemphasis on amplifying the performers (the latter a valiant goal, but often poorly executed.) Although technique cannot always close the gap on budgets, an increased focus on the relationship between the corporeal and digital audience, their imagined proximity and potential moments of symbiosis could go a long way in bridging the gap between the two forms of spectatorship.

PPV Fan Connections

Although many of the conversations I have had with other fans described their PPV spectatorship as a solo experience, there are several ways that fans make virtual connections during the event. PPV audiences will frequently find ways to remain active throughout the live streaming of the event with audience members that are at the events, as well as other PPV spectators. In these communicative instances, TalkBack acts as a hub for dialogue that serves to connect a variety of audiences in geographically disparate locations. Using event-specific comment threads, most frequently initiated by a fan, corporeal audience members can provide instant information as to the happenings of the event that PPV spectators may otherwise not be privileged to. This can include insight on the arrangement of the audience space that is not present on camera, live updates on the status of battles or potential cancelations, as well as the description of the general climate of the corporeal fan experience.

Fans also have the tendency to use Talkback as a space for time-sensitive debate, providing critiques and insight after each round of an ongoing battle. In this sense Talkback transforms from a reflective space to a time-specific space of analysis from battle rap fans. Because the PPV and the corporeal audiences are all witnessing the event in near simultaneity, the ability for fan interaction to be temporally specific, yet geographically disparate, creates a

unique set of spectatorial conditions for everyone involved. On one hand, we have fans occupying the same physical space as the emcees, but also shifting their focus into the digital space to connect with fans outside of their immediate proximity. On the other hand, we have a digital audience that remains autonomous regarding their spatial relationship with the venue but is keeping pace with the event through the PPV live-stream and the unique insights from the corporeal audience.

Perhaps most interesting is the dialogue that differentiates the two spectatorial experiences when it comes to adjudicating a battle. As mentioned in the introduction, debates involving the value of live and mediated spectatorship are extraneous to the values of fans. Very little social value is put into one's ability to attend an event or one's ability to watch a PPV at its initial time of streaming. Rather, battle rap fans understand the advantages of both spectatorial experiences and judge the quality of battles accordingly. A common phrase one would read on Talkback when assessing a battle might read something like this: "I had rapper "A" winning the battle in the building, but I will have to watch it on cam to be sure." These types of responses productively frame a fan's experience vis-a-vis their spectatorial conditions and foregrounds the fan's understanding of each spectatorial experience as unique within its context. The corporeal audience plays such a substantial role in adjudicating battles in person that some fans present at the event require a second viewing online, where the crowd plays a somewhat mitigated role in influencing one's opinion of the outcome. It is possible, particularly when a hometown emcee is battling an emcee from elsewhere, for the crowd to disproportionately celebrate or overreact to the material of the local emcee, a phenomenon known as "gassing" an emcee.

When one gasses an emcee, they inevitably play a role in affecting the public perception of which emcee performed better. Re-watching a battle online allows a corporeal spectator to

remember the experience in the venue and challenge those experiences against the footage that is viewed in a more controlled environment. Conversely, there are PPV audiences that have a hard time trusting that what they see online captures the full experience of the battle they are adjudicating. PPV fans may go as far as to request updates from corporeal audience members in real time to get a sense of what the opinion in the building is. The affirmation provided by someone who is at the event, or even just the affirmation of another digital fan who holds the same opinion, serves as an outside eye to one's own experiences and ensures that the fan is not missing something in their analysis.

These examples of the communication between fans throughout the event throws into question just how solo an experience watching a PPV truly is. Continually communicating throughout the event, as some PPV fans are apt to do, replicates certain aspects of the collective practices of spectatorship that are common in more corporeally focused performance mediums. Although one could never argue that the social experience of PPV audiences is the same as those who are at the venue, there are intrinsic values in both experiences that are not at all contingent on cultural economy or the value of ephemerality, as scholars such as Auslander and Phelan have respectively suggested. Rather, battle rap audiences have developed a nuanced understanding of the spectatorial conditions of battle rap events, one that highlights and values multiple approaches to spectatorship.

Their communication during events supports the need for audience studies to push back on the notion that live and mediated experiences are mutually exclusive, in conflict or hierarchical in nature. The audience's philosophy toward the "liveness debate" is crucial for an art form such as battle rap, who rely on a fanbase to follow them through the growing pains of DIY technological experimentation and integration. This is particularly the case as newer,

emerging technologies will continue to blur the boundaries of live and mediated activity.

Possible Directions for Battle Rap Spectatorship

It is my belief that as technologies continue to develop and become more accessible to the end user, we will continue to see more ambitious integrations of digital elements into live performance. I also believe the key to successfully integrating new technologies into performance is an enthusiasm from the core audience/fan/consumers to engage with a wider variety of viewership experiences. If battle rap fans are currently thinking beyond the dichotomy of live and mediated, I think it is reasonable to believe that as a fan base they are prepared to adopt and value new, more experimental modes of spectatorship as emerging technologies become available.

Although battle rap PPV currently relies mostly on the digital streaming, recording, and observing of performances by emcees and fans, one must ponder what directions battle rap will go with its fans' willingness to adapt to technology. In terms of bridging the gap between the digital and the corporeal, Virtual Reality (VR) and 360-degree cameras allow for more mobility and autonomy for the digital fan experience. In 2017, British-based battle league Don't Flop partnered with content and production company 1turn360 to experiment with VR and 360-degree filming in their battles. Although the attempt didn't fully explore the capabilities of the technology, the implementation of virtual reality and 360-degree cameras has the potential to allow a digital spectator to move throughout the performance space as one would if they were there in person. Is there a particular angle that is not suiting your fancy? Do you have a desire to see the emcee from the viewpoint of their opponent? This technology, which is already low-cost enough to be used at weddings and corporate events, will allow the digital spectator to simply shift to whichever spectatorial position they desire. From a production standpoint, this also

allows for a more flexible venue configuration for the organization to play with, as they no longer must cater to a PPV audience in a fixed position.

Other technologies battle rap can integrate are less obvious but equally as intriguing. As sports leagues such as the National Hockey League (NHL) partner with gaming entities such as MGM Resorts International and FanDuel to provide data and analytics for integrated live sports betting, it is easy to see how a battle rap league such as KOTD could make a similar arrangement.¹⁸⁴ Pairing with a gaming operator to provide odds, create prop bets, and allow for in-battle wagering for judged battles has potential to open up new interactive fan connections for both corporeal and PPV audiences, while creating a new revenue stream for the league.

Aside from the various developments that may occur within the fan experience, it is tempting to ponder how the continued merging of the body and technology in a pseudo-cyborg direction could fundamentally change the art form itself. I must admit that during the ethnographic portion of my research, the primary reaction to this area of enquiry from members of the scene was either confusion or complete disinterest. Although emcees are quick to articulate the role and influence of the corporeal and mediated audiences, as well as their reliance on technology to present and distribute their work, they weren't particularly interested in a thought experiment on the possibility of increased symbiosis between technology and the emcee in the future. Because this line of thinking is not currently prevalent in the scene, I will not self-indulgently engage in a prediction of its future. But I do want to mark that as the proxemics of bodies and technology continue to shrink, and as battle rap fans continue to be enthusiastic participants in the increasing use of technology, the binary between live and mediated that battle

¹⁸⁴More details on in-game analytics and gambling can be found here: <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/hockey/nhl/nhl-sports-gambling-partnerships-1.4882268> ,<https://www.cbc.ca/sports/hockey/nhl/fanduel-nhl-sports-gambling-partnership-1.4892404>

rap already rejects could grow to include the merging of the body and technology in ways that change the performance and reception of the art form.

The possibility of future models of fusing the corporeal and mediated is particularly interesting because of the willingness of the scene to adapt to new models when it comes to technology's influence on battle rap's traditions. Although the applications of technology I mention seem plausible within years, or even months, of writing this dissertation, it cannot be overstated how important the fans' growth mindset around technology is for the evolution of battle rap's future applications of technology. The bridging of the corporeal and the digital in any form of performance is contingent on a fan base full of enthusiastic early adopters of technology and willing participants in the growing pains of such ventures. As I will explain in the following chapter, battle rap fans have harnessed emerging technologies and integrated them into the culture in productive ways for decades. From early battle rap message boards to text battles, to fan-driven content on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, battle rap fans have a history of buying into new technological offerings. I believe that this history of engagement with technology and their philosophical position on the "liveness" debate make battle rap fans ideal collaborators to push forward new approaches to technology and performance.

Chapter #2- TalkBack as a Cypher

In the previous chapter, I explained how the digital conditions of battle rap performance reveal the important role that KOTD's online presence plays in shaping the traditions of the art form, connecting with their audience, and distributing their content. But the distribution of battle rap videos is only one of many varied activities that occur via KOTD's active digital footprint, and with over 32,000 members, KOTD's official Facebook discussion group "TalkBack" is the nucleus of their online presence. Created on May 29th, 2014, TalkBack describes itself as "The Official KOTD Facebook Discussion Group." Talkback is the largest league-specific discussion group of any battle organization and features a mix of members including battle rappers, battle rap fans, and KOTD employees.¹⁸⁵

In this chapter I position TalkBack as the nucleus of a virtual battle rap scene that not only connects a variety of geographically disparate fans and emcees to each other but also shapes how a localized battle scene is influenced by the globalization of their product. I will do so by re-imagining the notion of "the cypher", a spatial and theoretical staple of Hip Hop culture that has largely been discussed in relation to the practices of Hip Hop practitioners in the physical world, as a digital fan practice. I aim to move the concept of cyphering away from the analyses of corporeal, fleshy bodies in material space that Hip Hop studies has historically prioritized to conceptualize it as a generative fan practice for the ongoing documentation of a digital scene. In transferring this concept to the digital space, I am marking how cyphering on digital platforms destabilize hierarchies by prioritizing the voices of the many, rather than the few. This is a shift from previous studies on the cypher primarily because of its participants in a digital context.

¹⁸⁵ This number is determined by searching the membership numbers from the Facebook fan/discussion groups of other prominent battle rap leagues such as URL, Flip Top, Rare Breed Entertainment, Udubb, and Don't Flop during the month of December 2019.

Whereas fans and audiences are implicit in the corporeal cyphers that prioritize the role of the artist, digital cyphers flatten the imbalance of the traditional cypher by putting fans on an equal ground with artists. In turn, the audience takes the role of the performer in this context, highlighted by the competitive nature of fan-driven cyphering.

To begin, I will build off Diana Taylor and Abigail De Kosnik's analysis of the connections, distinctions and labour related to the concepts of the archive and the repertoire to provide a brief overview of the important role that online forums, fan pages, messaging boards and other forms of knowledge repositories have plays in the global proliferation of battle rap. I will then integrate the concept of the cypher by tracing the ways that fans assist in carefully tending to the development, interpretation, and maintenance of TalkBack's digital presence, while also discussing a cyclical process of creation and documentation that takes place in the Facebook group. This fan activity is articulated in three intersecting categories: 1) TalkBack as a performance space for competitive debate, 2) TalkBack and Scene Pedagogy and 3) Fan Cyphering, Free Speech and Race. To conclude, I will provide some thoughts on the productive boundaries of fan cyphering to articulate how it can omit or ignore certain portions of the fan base.

From Archive to Repertoire to Cypher

As Derrida articulates in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive.'"¹⁸⁶ This is particularly true in the field of Performance Studies where archives have been increasingly analyzed and scrutinized. Perhaps most famously, Diana Taylor deftly highlighted the tension between the "archive" (texts, documents and other forms of tangible materials) and the "repertoire" (oral traditions, rituals, somatic/movement practices,

¹⁸⁶ Derrida (1995) pg. 57.

etc.)¹⁸⁷ Taylor’s major contention is that a hierarchy of knowledge and preservation in cultural memory often exists, “with the written and archival constituting hegemonic power and the repertoire providing the antihegemonic challenge.”¹⁸⁸ Taylor is clear that there is a false binary that is often created between the archive and the repertoire, and that digital conditions specifically trouble this false binary.¹⁸⁹

De Kosnik expands on the concept of the archive and the repertoire in relation to digital archives, and superbly defines the parameters for how the repertoire functions in the world of digital archives.¹⁹⁰ De Kosnik highlights how the endless labour that amateur internet archivists put into creating and maintaining their archives is in fact a repertoire, “a series of actions that they must perform over and over” and that regardless of the temporal nature of digital archives “the repertoire of digital archive building that has been pioneered over the past few decades will likely outlast any actual archives that have been built.”¹⁹¹ De Kosnik’s contextualizing of the repertoire in the digital space and her emphasis on labour creates a helpful launching pad for framing the digital contributions that fans make on TalkBack.

I imagine TalkBack as an active, collaborative repertoire that yields social, pedagogical, and performative outcomes in battle rap culture. In the vein of Richards’ assertion that the archive is “a utopian space of comprehensive knowledge ... not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable”¹⁹², I would like to evoke the Hip Hop term “the cypher” to highlight the ways in which the contestation and exchange of ideas and knowledge re-contextualizes TalkBack as site for repertoires that

¹⁸⁷ Taylor (2002) pg. 19.

¹⁸⁸ Taylor (2002) pg. 22.

¹⁸⁹ Taylor (2002) pg. 22.

¹⁹⁰ De Kosnik (2016).

¹⁹¹ De Kosnik (2016) pg. 6-7.

¹⁹² Richards (1992) pg. 104.

privileges the labour and the voices of the participants, while allowing for multiple narratives to shape and influence the art form of battle rap.

In Hip Hop culture, the cypher is typically a term reserved for breaking or emceeing and is comprised of competing artists and various audience members forming a circular arrangement to create a performing space. As a result of the proxemic arrangement between performers and spectators in the cypher, the audience, who physically create the cypher with their bodies, play a large role in the meaning making of the performance. The symbiotic relationship of the performer and audience in the cypher is discussed in a variety of Hip Hop scholarship, most notably when the audiences and emcees engaged in the coproduction of narratives relating to race (Cutler 2007, Alim et al. 2011) or when the audience becomes an important contributor to the construction and adherence of the cypher's social practices and ideologies (Lee 2009, Scott 2010.)

By channeling Imani Kai Johnson's definition of the cypher as "the act of building collectively through the back-and-forth exchange in the circle"¹⁹³ I will highlight how fans contribute significantly to the construction of KOTD's cultural practices, social histories, and pedagogical processes through the act of cyphering on TalkBack, which in many ways continues a tradition of battle-related blogs and message boards that existed in the pre-Facebook era.

Online Battle Forums and YouTube Archivists

In a March 24th, 2016, interview I conducted with Organik, he was quick to emphasize that "battle rap runs in close circles" and that TalkBack as a discussion group was founded as an homage to previous battle rap forum and messaging boards.¹⁹⁴ Like fans of various popular cultures, this comparatively small fan base has thrived online. In the early 2000s, online fan

¹⁹³ Johnson (2009) pg. 5.

¹⁹⁴ Fleetwood (2016).

communities were a key point of connection and crucial to battle rap in its fledgling years, as fans traded videos, lyrics, and stories on various online forms such as mcbattles.com and rapmusic.com. These forums served as both databases and communication vehicles that connected geographically disparate battle rap communities across the world, helping to forge relationships between promoters and rappers, while also allowing international fans to gain access to content in what was still a very regional movement at the time.

It was through these message boards that many Hip Hop fans became aware of early organized rap battles competitions that occurred outside of their hometowns, such as Cincinnati, Ohio's Scribble Jam and the 1997 edition of the Rap Olympics in Los Angeles. By using the internet to connect various local battle rap scenes, early battle rap fan communities exhibited attributes of a translocal scene. In the introduction to *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, Peterson and Bennett contend that local scenes maintain a spotlight on geographically specific groups of participants, while translocal scenes connect these geographically specific local scenes "with groups of kindred spirits many miles away."¹⁹⁵

Hip Hop practitioner, journalist, and author of the most thorough book on the history of battle rap, Ryan O'Leary, was one of these participants, contributing to early (and in many cases, now defunct) Hip Hop message boards such as freshfinesse.com that pre-dated organized battle raps leagues:

"They would have these primitive message boards where basically you would go and, you know, it was called a freestyle board, where you would go and post verses that you would write...this is '96, '97, and as these boards developed they started doing "oh, we are going to do a battle tournament on here"...then I hear through these people about

¹⁹⁵ Bennett and Peterson (2004) pg. 9.

Scribble Jam... and it just became a word of mouth thing over the internet basically.”¹⁹⁶

As O’Leary highlights in his interview, these message boards were particularly important because the fledgling battle rap organizations of the time had very little material online and access to videos of battles was quite limited. Prior to YouTube, fans living in disparate areas of the United States and Canada relied on each other to provide updates on their local scenes and share whatever video footage may have been available from their local battle events. In turn, these battle rap fans become what Abigail De Kosnik refers to as “Rogue Archivists.”¹⁹⁷ For De Kosnik, Rogue Archivists play the role that traditional institutions such as museums and galleries usually play in a civic context, selectively preserving cultural memory that is believed to be fit for conservation, and in turn “explore the potential of digital technologies to democratize cultural memory.”¹⁹⁸ In many ways the impetus for battle rap fans taking on the task of locating and sharing information about battle rap was because no one else in Hip Hop culture seemed to deem it important enough to document online.

Although the informal archiving of battle rap videos began on various forums and message boards, it was not until the popularization of YouTube that we see a proliferation of accessible battle rap videos for fans to access. A key figure in this shift to YouTube is the founder of battle forum RMBVA and fan-turned-battler Erik Foreman, who in many ways served as the primary maven of battle rap culture in the early YouTube era of the early 2000s. During a 2015 interview with *battlerap.com*, Foreman discussed how he initially began purchasing the raw video footage of battles filmed by promoters across the US during the early 2000s and would in turn edit and publish them on YouTube.

¹⁹⁶ O’Leary (2019)

¹⁹⁷ De Kosnik (2016) pg. 2.

¹⁹⁸ De Kosnik (2016) pg. 2.

“I used to watch a lot of battles online that were on certain websites like GeoCities¹⁹⁹ and they were really hard to find, and you know...*rapmusic.com* was still up and had very few battles up...so as soon as I started making money, um...I started paying for footage from some of the camera men in New York, and they would send me raw footage and I would edit it and put it up on YouTube.”²⁰⁰

Foreman and other like-minded fans that contributed footage to YouTube in the early 2000s were ahead of their time. The informal archiving of battles from across the continent predicted the online, YouTube model of internationally distributing local battle rap content that battle rap leagues still routinely use to this day. Prior to Foreman, early battle rap video series that existed on physical media such as *2Raw for the Streets* and *Smack DVD* had very little online presence to speak of, and most certainly had not tapped into the YouTube market.

The legalities of such early endeavours by fans were dubious at best, and the choice to use a for-profit hosting site came with devastating consequences. In the same 2015 interview with battlerap.com, Foreman notes that as soon as *Smack DVD* grew into the battle rap league URL and moved into distributing online content, battles from *Smack DVD*, as well as other more rare or obscure battles, were removed from his YouTube page, many of which were never able to be recovered again. This highlights the tenuous nature of for-profit websites and hosting platforms as potential spaces for archiving fan content and shows the vulnerability and erasure of fan-driven conservancy in the constant battle for control over intellectual property and copyright infringement in the digital age.

The ownership of narratives and materials has been a contentious question when

¹⁹⁹ Founded in 1994, Geocities was an early web hosting service that was subsequently purchased by Yahoo in 1999 and had ceased North American operations by 2009.

²⁰⁰ Erik Foreman’s 2015 interview on battlerap.com’s YouTube page titled “Erik Foreman On Battling, Being An Early Uploader Of Rap Battles, Luke, Seasoning.”

discussing the histories of archival work. Although the types of work that battle rap fans like Erik Foreman engage in is like that of De Kosnik's *Rogue Archivists*, De Kosnik herself would not describe Foreman's archiving of battles on YouTube as a "Rogue Archive." Because Facebook and YouTube issues content ID claims to remove material that violates either copyright issues and/or internal company policies, their ability to restrict the types of material posted, or restrict access by certain individuals, is far greater than an internet site that is created outside of the corporate confines of social media platforms.²⁰¹ In many ways the restrictions that corporations put on the content of their users is a modern reflection of the types of control that public institutions traditionally wielded in relation to material archives.

In her introduction to *Rogue Archives* De Kosnik recalls the work of scholars Tony Bennett and Achille Mbembe to highlight how "memory institutions" such as museums and archives are an extension of the civic control over the bodies and narratives of the nation-state.²⁰² But as information has increasingly moved online, a new series of gatekeepers have entered the fray in the form of digital corporate entities that operate on behalf of the state. As John G Palfrey highlights in his article *Reluctant Gatekeepers: Corporate Ethics on a Filtered Internet*, the state is no longer an effective institution of control, and thus "requires private actors to carry out the censorship and surveillance for it."²⁰³ In most cases this manifests in the form of internet filtering and surveillance by intermediary companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, that has the possibility to limit one's access or publication of data online.²⁰⁴

Regardless of the types of restrictions that one might face on YouTube, it remains a popular hosting site for battle rap organizations to post their videos, particularly for King of the

²⁰¹ Detailed descriptions of the parameters of "Rogue Archives" are on pages 2 and 18 of De Kosnik (2016)

²⁰² De Kosnik (2016) pg. 1.

²⁰³ Palfrey (2007) pg. 73.

²⁰⁴ Palfrey (2007).

Dot, who register over 857,000 subscribers to their official YouTube page, making it the second most subscribed English-language battle rap page on YouTube.²⁰⁵

TalkBack: Defining a Facebook Group

YouTube videos are an important monetary stream for KOTD; however, most of the fan participation happens on their official Facebook battle discussion group, TalkBack. Although TalkBack’s membership is smaller than its YouTube page, it is not a surprise that Facebook has become the hub of discourse for the organization. A 2021 study by Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson for the Pew Research Institute indicates that Facebook is still the primary text-based social media site in the U.S., with 69% of U.S. adults polled using Facebook.²⁰⁶ Not only is it the number of members that are using Facebook that make it inciting for businesses looking to expand, but also the frequency with which members use it. 70% of Facebook members say they visit the site every day, while 49% of users say they visit multiple times a day.²⁰⁷ Couple this volume of use with a format that encourages the creation of online communities and communication between members, and Facebook becomes the ideal place for a burgeoning business to engage with their clientele while trying to expand their fanbase.

The use of Facebook as a social commerce tool is hardly unique to battle rap. A wide range of companies in a plethora of industries have created accounts on Facebook to communicate with fans/customers, drive traffic to their online stores and promote content. Some of these accounts are fan-driven, with very little social commerce presence, while some accounts are managed exclusively by the company for the specific purpose of social commerce activity. These are usually distinguished by their affiliation as either a Facebook “Page” or a Facebook

²⁰⁵ URL, the rebranded battle league that evolved from the SMACK DVD series is the most subscribed to English-language battle rap YouTube page at roughly 1,290,000 subscribers. All figures reported as of May 15th, 2021.

²⁰⁶ Auxier and Anderson (2021)

²⁰⁷ Auxier and Anderson (2021)

“Group.” Facebook differentiates between the two in this manner:

“While Pages were designed to be the official profiles for entities, such as celebrities, brands or businesses, Facebook Groups are the place for small group communication and for people to share their common interests and express their opinion. Groups allow people to come together around a common cause, issue or activity to organize, express objectives, discuss issues, post photos and share related content.”²⁰⁸

The “group” model is undoubtedly the more participatory of the two options for fans, as it allows the space to remain fan-driven in term of content contribution, driving the discourse on the page, and the editing of material (or lack thereof) by moderators with no affiliation to the company. In this sense, the group model is regulated, as much as possible on a for-profit social media platform, by those that created it.

TalkBack’s fan activity bridges the gap between how Facebook imagines the divide between “Pages” and “Groups.” On one hand, TalkBack was created by the company as a space for fans to discuss topics concerning their brand in a similar way as “Pages” are created by companies. However, the moderators of the group are a mixture of KOTD staff and dedicated fans, and most posts on TalkBack are from fans, whether they be praising or critical of KOTD. KOTD ultimately has a say in how TalkBack is run, what content is deemed appropriate and what posts gets deleted or edited out. In this sense it is not a “Group” as Facebook envisions.

Because fans are also a part of the moderating team, the efforts in defining the parameters of acceptance are a two-way street: fans represent the lion’s share of activity on TalkBack and have a substantial say in how the page is run in conjunction with KOTD staff, making TalkBack distinct from a “Page” by Facebook’s definition. This creates a unique environment where the

²⁰⁸ “Facebook Tips: What’s the Difference between a Facebook Page and Group?”, www.facebook.com”

fans trade in some autonomy in terms of content contribution that can be posted for the ability to directly communicate with the decision-makers of the organization. This is particularly interesting if we think of the traditional power structures associated with archives and the potential for fans to influence the decision-making of the archive's arbiters.

Cyphering on TalkBack

cipher

(also, cypher)

NOUN

1. *A secret or disguised way of writing; a code.*

2. *A zero; a figure 0.*²⁰⁹

A quick scan of the discussion page on TalkBack yields posts from fans on topics and debates such as who the greatest battles emcees are, which emcees were victorious in previous battles, what potential match ups should occur at future events, and the general state of battle rap and the league. The casual fan can sign up for Talkback, make new friends to attend battles with, and ask questions to the promoters, influential emcees, and more informed fans. The format of the discussion, where one group member creates a post on a topic or poses a question begins a thread that begins to function as a collaborative unpacking of an aspect of KOTD. If a post is related to KOTD, even peripherally, it is allowed on TalkBack. This means conversations from the practical, to the mundane, to the profound emerge throughout the various threads.

Whether it be questions involving event logistics, a battler's fashion sense, or the role of race in battle rap, TalkBack threads provide space for ideas and questions, however big or small, to be circulated, adjudicated, and debated. It is this circulation of information that digitally

²⁰⁹ English Oxford Living Dictionaries. *Cypher*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cypher>.

recreates the cypher as a performance space of battle rap's ideas and ideals, while simultaneously evoking the Oxford Dictionary's second definition of cypher, "a figure 0", a circular form of communication that allows for the collective articulation of KOTD's cultural practices and ethos.

Spady et. al proclaim the cypher as "the height of community and competition within Hip Hop Nation", noting that the cypher is a performance space where "Hip Hop cultural modes of discourse and discursive practices...converge into a fluid matrix of linguistic-cultural activity."²¹⁰ Speaking of emcee cyphers more specifically, the authors explain battling in a cypher as "a highly animated engagement where the MC's skillz (sic) are sharpened and presented to a critical circle of Hip Hop conscious beings."²¹¹ Importantly, Spady et al are clear that the cypher itself is a central innovation of Hip Hop culture and that the "ritual of rhyming is informed by the physical arrangement of Hip Hop."²¹² Although the role of the audience (the "critical circle") is mentioned by Spady et. al, it is not addressed in any comprehensive way. It is this aspect that I aim to analyze most thoroughly throughout the course of this chapter by foregrounding the importance of the fans in recreating the traditions of the cypher in a digital context.

Imani Johnson articulates two important aspects of the cypher beyond its function as a performance space. First, she highlights "the nature of the collective experience and the invisible force of their exchange" as well as "the spiritual dimension of cyphering that comes through in their collective activity."²¹³ Second, she highlights the concept of cyphers as a verb: a praxis involving the performance of the art form with other variables such as "the music, opponents, past dramas and more."²¹⁴ In both instances Johnson notes the collaborative aspects of the

²¹⁰ Spady et. al (2006) pg. 5-6.

²¹¹ Spady et. al (2006) pg. 6.

²¹² Spady et. al (2006) pg. 6.

²¹³ Johnson (2009) pg. 4.

²¹⁴ Johnson (2009) pg. 4.

cypher, while positioning the cypher as an affective space that “are not just things but acts.”²¹⁵

Following the logic set out by Spady et. al and Johnson, I aim to articulate the ways that fans on TalkBack simultaneously create a competitive and communal “cypher” (the thing) and performs the cypher (the act.) Additionally, I will position the Oxford Dictionary’s first definition of cypher, “a secret or disguised way of writing; a code” as a key aspect of scene building and signaling on TalkBack. It is my assertion that battle rap’s fan labour productively extends the principals of the cypher into a digital context precisely because of its ability to affect change in the ways that Johnson highlights above. Rather than change being thought of as an inescapable by-product of cultural transmission, the processes of change in battle rap’s digital fan cyphering is more conscious, as change is invited through the active contestation of what (and how) materials are maintained and transmitted within Hip Hop culture.

Unlike other models of online commentary that have the potential to create politically fragmented “isolated issue publics”²¹⁶ or digital fan communities that are a tenuous and/or temporary collective of individuals,²¹⁷ the collaborative, multi-directional fan labour present in battle rap’s digital spaces has played a significant role in the changing and shaping of battle rap’s aesthetic practices and the communal standards of the scene for decades now. By conceptualizing fan discourse in battle rap’s digital spaces as cyphers, an emphasis is placed on the ways fans effect tangible change in the virtual scene they participate in, and in turn subvert traditional hierarchies of knowledge transmission.

TalkBack as a performance space for competitive debate

“Who Won?” This simple prompt is one of the most shared posts on TalkBack. Usually

²¹⁵ Johnson (2009) pg. 4.

²¹⁶ Habermas (2006) pg. 423.

²¹⁷ Larson (2010) pg. 163.

linked to a video, this prompt converts a Facebook thread on TalkBack into a battleground of opinions as varied as the user submitting them. Responses range from the simple (“Battler ‘A’ won”) to long expositions of an emcee’s tone, cadence, rhyming schemes etc. to justify why a specific emcee emerged victorious in the eyes of that fan. Although a historically consistent topic of conversation in battle rap, the question of who won a particular battle has become increasingly important in online fandom due to the reformatting of KOTD’s battling events, which have eliminated judging in many of its battles, apart from championship battles and battles that have a cash prize.

By effectively eliminating the judges as a substantial part of the event, KOTD has passed along the responsibility to the audience and fans to debate the outcome in the online court of opinion. In these debates, fans take on the qualities of battle rap competitors, finding creative ways to convince other fans that their opinion is correct and disparaging fans that hold alternative opinions. Alternative opinions are not excluded, in fact it is quite the opposite. The spirit of debate is what drives fan activity on TalkBack and is a welcomed intellectual exercise for KOTD fans.

The debates on TalkBack follow a similar structural process as battles themselves. The main post starts with a question or a provocation, and then subsequent rounds of debate emerge in the comment section. On TalkBack this frequently involves two fans occupying opposing sides of the outcome of a recent KOTD battle, posting thoughts (and in many cases vulgar insults) back and forth until a natural conclusion is found. If a topic is particularly engaging several other fans will also contribute to the thread, taking one of the two sides of the debate while offering their points/counterpoints. A thread usually ends when people lose interest, or when other fans chime in to say who won (or maybe more accurately, who lost) the debate, often

using battle rap's insider language (i.e., someone getting "30'd" in reference to battle rappers who lose all three rounds of a 3-round battle.) These types of statements usually complete the cyphering of the topic, as fans move on to another topic on another thread.

Another aspect of this debate format is when fans unpack future battles on what is commonly referred to as a prediction thread. This is generally prompted in a similar way, where an original post asks fans to predict the outcome of upcoming battles. The debates can be referring to battles that are already confirmed, or it can be a hypothetical question about a battle between emcees who have not yet faced each other. At their most simple, the question "*Who Wins?*" is asked and a poll is made using the proprietary "Poll" feature on Facebook. Fans then contribute their opinion to the poll and may follow their vote up with added editorializing in the thread. At their best, prediction threads begin to reveal the deep understanding of the art form that some TalkBack fans have, as they intricately unpack each emcee's strengths and weaknesses, recall past opponents that a particular emcee succeeded or struggled against, and compare how each emcee's style either compliments or clashes with their opponents'. Within these threads, larger questions or philosophies on the art form may emerge, such as what styles make for the most exciting battles or what environments are best suited to host battles.

Much like the cypher in other forms of Hip Hop such as breaking, the space provided on Talkback does not become a cypher until someone activates it as such. The prompt to perform, whether it be stepping into the cypher in breaking or through a question or a game that elicits creative feedback on TalkBack, is the act that renders a passive circle into a cypher. This act by the fans transforms Talkback from a benign space of promotion and advertisement for KOTD to an active space of collaboration and creation between fans, emcees, and the company. Additionally, this activation innately shrinks the chasm between fan and producer, as the fan

activity becomes nearly indistinguishable from the activity of the company or the emcee.

The edges of this triangulated loop of interaction begins to soften as we see fans with a greater sense of exposure and access to the decision makers and performers within KOTD. This is solely predicated on the specific digital boundaries of TalkBack. The structure of TalkBack itself, with its specific rules, conditions, and parameters, makes it possible for this co-production to exist. If one were to take this type of fan contribution and place it in the context of a live event, one can imagine that the overt critique of an emcee's work, the criticism of the organization, or the spontaneous contribution of lyrical performance would not be a welcomed addition to battle rap's material conditions.

The structure of TalkBack also influences both the temporal nature of posts and the archiving of fan cyphering. The perpetual flow of posts and threads on TalkBack means that a video can get lost or ignored amidst the mass of posts. Thus, the videos that are posted by fans are meant to be immediately consumed, existing in the "now" as a launching pad for critique or debate. But when fans post battle videos for debate, an interesting by product occurs in the form of an accidental archive. The videos and the debates remain in abandoned threads once the hive brain of Talkback moves onto a new video, leaving a time capsule of fans' tastes, language, and opinions. This accidental archive reveals the meaningful fan contribution that emerges on topics such as race, while also creating an active footprint that helps to document KOTD's history while functioning as a pedagogical tool for its members.

TalkBack and Scene Pedagogy

In her 2012 article "Breaking Expectations: Imagine Affinities in Mediated Youth Cultures" Mary Fogarty highlights how the proliferation of breaking videos played a palpable

role in “cultural exchange and knowledge building” of the culture.²¹⁸ Similarly, battle rap has relied heavily on the distribution of videos to define its aesthetics and articulate its histories. As a central site for sharing videos of KOTD battles, TalkBack has become a space of cultural exchange where fans go to share video and contribute to an informal narrative history of KOTD. The “knowledge building” develops in the act of this exchange, where both formal and informal peer-to-peer pedagogical processes emerge in threads dedicated to fans teaching other fans about battle rap’s histories and aesthetics. Two examples of cultural exchange in this context include fan-produced videos on a particular aspect of battle rap performance or culture, as well as fans who pose questions to more knowledgeable fans in the group to gain greater insights into the history of KOTD.

The topic of KOTD’s history is featured heavily on TalkBack threads, and frequently involves emcees, fans and promoters all contributing to fill in the gaps of KOTD’s past. TalkBack benefits from the fact that many of the pioneers of Toronto’s battle rap scene are still alive. Because much of what led to KOTD’s success was established during an era where battles rarely made it onto video (or survived into the digital age) these pioneering emcees can use TalkBack to collectively share their experiences, which in turn creates a constellation of histories that form the foundation of KOTD and Toronto battle rap. Having been a successful battle emcee prior to creating KOTD, Organik is at the forefront of discussing the pre-KOTD/early KOTD history on TalkBack, highlighting the important emcees and promoters that helped to create battle rap scenes across Canada.

The clearest examples of this collective building of battle rap history occurs in threads of videos that highlight the veterans of the freestyle era that came before KOTD’s cappella battles.

²¹⁸ Fogarty (2012) pg. 453.

In these threads, we see a variety of grainy videos highlighting emcees from the freestyle Canadian scene such as Prolific, Prodigal Son and J.R. Mint. These are names that, although perhaps familiar to fans of the early 2000s freestyle battle scene in Canada, are largely obscured in the current context of a cappella battle rap, particularly outside of Canada. Early 2000s battle rap events such as Proud2BEhBattleMC in Toronto, Last Man Standing in Ottawa, and Vancouver's Rent Money freestyle competition were all important developments in Canadian battle rap and are largely forgotten due to a lack of quality footage from that era and the structural shift from the freestyle to a cappella format.

The threads that post videos from these events and explain the historical significance sparks equally parts nostalgia and curiosity from responding fans. For those who lived through that era, helpful posts that augment the video often come to fruition. Stories of forgotten emcees and events are shared, key players from the era remembered, and old drama is rehashed. For those who did not live through the era, or for whom Canada is a distant international outpost of Hip Hop culture, questions are asked for further context such as specific dates, venues, or formats of the era. The threads help to celebrate and elevate the profile of emcees that largely missed out on the digital era of battle rap, while tracing a lineage of events that existed in Canada prior to KOTD's formation in 2009. Additionally, it helps newer fans and fans from outside of Canada chart the Canadian trajectory of the art form, as the collage of stories and videos reveals a vivid transition from the freestyle era of battle rap to its current state. There are also instances where videos of emcees that made the transition from the freestyle format to KOTD are posted on threads concerning the history of Canadian battle rap, such as Knamelis and Kid Twist, who were prominently featured emcees during the rise of KOTD in the 2000s.

As productive as these threads can be, they focus on a very specific era in Canadian battle

rap, when the increased accessibility of recording technology ran parallel with the transition from freestyle to a cappella rapping. Thus, those who made it on camera, or whose footage survived, during the transition from freestyle to a cappella are often cited as pioneers by fans on TalkBack, while earlier emcees remain relatively obscure to the common battle fan. Although no Facebook thread, forum, message board, or any other site of fan activity can be perfectly comprehensive in historicizing battle rap, conspicuous omissions have the potential to reveal a power imbalance in certain practices of cultural memory. When KOTD, a white-owned league, chooses to prioritize the contributions of emcees who made it to video, they inadvertently obscure the histories of earlier emcees and battle rap practices spawned from Black diasporic communities in Canada.

To speak of Toronto's Hip Hop scene specifically, formal battle structures in live and mediated forms existed in the eras prior to those mentioned in the TalkBack threads. Hip Hop events organized by Toronto Hip Hop pioneer Ron Nelson in the 1980s at the seminal Concert Hall venue were vibrant spaces of B-boy, DJ and emcee battles that were attended by predominantly Black Caribbean youth from across the city. As I mention in the previous chapter, the 1990s saw various emcee battles on CKLN 88.1 radio call-in segments, such as the "Eat the Beat" and "Cutthroat Island" segments on DJ X's "The Powermove Show" and the "Circle Research" show respectively. Because KOTD has only a tangential connection to this history and has largely operated outside of the city's foundational scene, the histories prioritized on Talkback deemphasize this lineage of Black cultural production that shaped Toronto's Hip Hop scene. In this specific instance, fan cyphering replicates the hegemonic tendencies of more traditional archival processes, where a narrow lens of history and more tangible materials take precedent over more ephemeral and/or less institutional modes of knowledge transmission.

One way that fan cyphering works to counter the hegemonic tendencies of the archive is

to connect past battle rap scenes or events to the contemporary moment. Fans such as Luke “Minnesota Luke” Mueller have taken on the role of the historian and critic and organize the information embedded in battle rap videos in a much more intentional way. Minnesota Luke’s most significant contributions include the compiling and analyzing of historical battles, while also systematically breaking down aspects of battle rap such as audience participation and rhyming schemes. These videos simultaneously trace the history of battle rap in the YouTube era, while also highlighting the reoccurring trends within the culture. These videos have made Minnesota Luke one of the de facto historians of battle rap culture, a reputation that carries over to TalkBack. Newer fans frequently create posts asking battle rap questions that are historical in nature, and either tag Minnesota Luke in the post, or another fan quickly tags him in the thread.

With a series of videos entitled “History of Battle Rap” Minnesota Luke compiles important moments from battle rap, historically important battle rap leagues, and the unique occurrences throughout battle rap’s recorded history. These videos are hosted and publicly available on YouTube, are often shared to TalkBack, and frequently arise as references in questions or debates regarding the history of battle rap. Although these videos still emphasize digital footage over more ephemeral forms of knowledge, Minnesota Luke acknowledges the limitations of these forms of documentation in certain videos. For instance, videos such as “Lost, Unreleased, Rare and Vaulted Battles in Battle Rap” analyze the history of battle rap footage that was lost, damaged, or withheld by battle rap leagues. These videos attempt to fill in the historical gaps that exist when footage of a battle is unavailable. The videos also reveal the tenuousness of early battle rap recordings and the attempts to revive a history that could easily be forgotten in a culture that tends to prioritize visual media above all else. Fans contribute to the discourse of this undocumented history in the video’s comments by either expanding on the list that

Minnesota Luke created or adding to it with other examples of battles that lack documentation or footage. By initiating a dialogue with the video, Minnesota Luke creates a space for an under-analyzed aspect of battle rap culture to be communally unpacked by rappers and fans alike.

Other videos such as “Battle Rappers ‘Jumping In’ -A Look at a Trend” capture and analyze a trend in the early 2000s a cappella battle rap scene where battle rappers would either A) interrupt their opponent in the middle of their round or B) a person or multiple people jump in to interrupt on behalf of the opposing battler. Although now an obscure feature of current battle rap aesthetics, this once prevalent trend is explained to fledgling battle rap fans, with multiple examples from various battle leagues with analysis from Luke to guide the viewer through the different ways that “jumping in” was utilized. In this example, the video functions as a pedagogical tool for fans that may have either missed this trend in battle rap or were unaware of the various ways that “jumping in” manifested in battle rap during this era. It is this specificity on an obscure topic that endears Minnesota Luke to certain battle rap fans and reveals the depth of knowledge and analysis possible in fan production.

Minnesota Luke’s pedagogical topics range from the obscure to the pseudo-academic. In his video “Crowds - The Psychology of Battle Rap,” Luke tackles the subject of audience reaction using a variety of peer-reviewed, published articles from psychology journals. Guiding the viewer through the geographical, temporal, and material changes in battle rap events, Luke uses a theoretical grounding obtained through academic articles to situate his analysis of the evolution of spectatorship in battle rap. Although the references are tangential at times or lack sufficient explanation in their connection to battle rap, the observations made by Luke in the video are nuanced and detailed and echo some of the participant observations I have made in previous chapters. Most importantly, it walks battle rap fans through the conditions of battle rap

events from both the perspective of a fan and in relation to a broader conversation on fan experience. This in turn adds some well-thought-out substance to the frequent conversations that arise among battle fans concerning the value of (and the difference between) the live and mediated audience experience.

Battle Rap Fan Forums, Free Speech, and Race

From my own experience as a member of various online battle rap groups, the topic of race emerges in TalkBack's fan cyphering more than other groups. Although it is difficult to know exactly why this is the case, my hypothesis is that discourses on race in TalkBack is the result of KOTD being a white-owned battle rap league. Concerns of the legitimacy and authenticity of KOTD emcees or fans on TalkBack often emerge as KOTD becomes labelled as a "white league" writ large by fans from outside of the scene. As I articulated in the previous chapter, assuming race based on appearance can be a problematic approach, and critiques of KOTD's fan demographics are impossible to substantiate, especially in online spaces. But more problematic is the consequences of labelling KOTD a "white league" because of its owners, which risks erasing the work that Black hosts, emcees, and fans contribute to building the scene. To label KOTD a "white league" is to overlook the contributions of many Black, Korean, Lebanese, Indigenous, and other participants of colour who helped build KOTD from grassroots, DIY battle league to a market driver in battle rap culture.

Oakland-based emcee Alexander "Pass" Jenney, a Black emcee who has performed at numerous KOTD events in multiple cities, notes that the fan discourse around KOTD's whiteness obscures a more complicated picture of the fans and emcees involved with KOTD:

"There's obviously, like, this concept that, or this idea that King of the Dot is where the white rappers is at, I mean "look at Organik, look at the guys who run it, URL is blah,

blah, blah”, which there is some merit to that, it is somewhat true. But I think to, like, say that is to really oversimplify, like, what really is happening. Like, you go to King of the Dot “Town Bidness”, it looks like mostly Black folks there y’know what I’m saying, because it was. They have Black rappers on the card, y’know what I mean? So, y’know, while it is true to a degree, it is a little weird of an observation that is getting made by certain people and I don’t know how I feel about that shit.”²¹⁹

What Pass is addressing here is how fan cyphering can often suffer from assumptions that are specific to their spectatorial conditions. The assumptions by some fans that KOTD’s participants are predominantly white comes from one’s position of spectatorship. If one’s primary consumption of KOTD battles is online, which is the case for most fans, then one will often see two or three white KOTD staff members with two emcees flanking their sides. Regardless of the racial makeup of the two emcees, the visual spectrum highlights the whiteness of the league’s staff rather than the entire demographics of the event. This could also be the case if one attended a KOTD event in Toronto, where a substantial portion of the audience is white compared to battle rap events in New York, Los Angeles, or Oakland. Thus, it is reasonable, although erroneous, for fans to assume KOTD is a white battle rap space and convey their feelings regarding this in online fan cyphering.

But as Pass notes, if one attended an event such as KOTD’s Oakland-based “Town Bidness” event, they would understand that most participants were Black. This speaks to the importance of nuance when discussing who participates in KOTD events, especially if one has not attended an event. Pass also speaks to how the fan base that recognizes and approaches him in Oakland based on his KOTD performances reveals an audience outside of KOTD’s white

²¹⁹ Alexander “Pass” Jenney (2020)

stereotype that some fans perpetuate:

“I am always getting recognized by Black folks from the hood, it’s not many times where it’s a dorky Hip Hop guy that’s coming up to me like “Oh Pass I saw you on King of the Dot’, its brothers from the neighbourhood I grew up in like “I saw you on King of the Dot”, so they are watching everything, people are consuming it of all races, y’know?”²²⁰

There are geographical specificities at play in Pass’ experience that fans online are not privileged to because their activity is primarily digital. Thus, blanket statements about KOTD’s “whiteness” emerge despite the experiences of emcees that complicate the matter. The essentializing of KOTD along racial lines becomes particularly problematic when it dismisses the presence of racialized fans, emcees, and hosts who are central to KOTD. Battle rap leagues cannot be sequestered into racial categories based on their ownership without ignoring the fact that fans and emcees of colour have helped build KOTD into what it is today: one of the premier battle rap leagues in the world.

Because KOTD is a white-owned and operated business in an industry forged from Black diasporic practices, and because of the multiracial, multinational fan-base that follows it, race is a topic that can explode into a vortex of chaos. Despite the productive cyphering and scene pedagogy that is displayed in TalkBack, there are countless examples of negative activity that one may generally categorize as “trolling”, “flaming” or even “cyberbullying.” The analogy of fans-as-competitors does not end with debate cyphers or rap games. In fact, there are many ways that fans channel battling in the tone, vocabulary, and attitude of their writing. The clearest example of this is the name-calling and the critiquing of one’s sensitivity towards more controversial topics. This may include racial, homophobic, or ableist slurs, and often is directed

²²⁰ Alexander “Pass” Jenney (2020)

from one fan to another, outside of what one may refer to as the fictional world of a battle.

There is a prevailing sentiment that battle rap is one of the last vestiges of true free speech, and the “anything goes” ethos can extend to the conversation on TalkBack. The fans, by extension of the unbridled use of slurs and insults that occur on stage during a battle, are expected to “tough skin” in relation to sensitive topics. If one objects to a controversial sentiment expressed online, they risk social exclusion from a subsection of the scene. They may also be ridiculed using contemporary language that is traditionally affiliated with the alt-right, such as “cuck” or “SJW” (social justice warrior.) Although the actual politics of a fan is often difficult to discern online, the conversations about free speech on TalkBack tend to mirror the North American cultural discourse on free speech that has emerged in the post-Trump US and post-Peterson Canada.²²¹

Because free speech is a core tenant of battle rap, the emphasis on the topic is particularly heated, and people work hard to defend the territory of free speech. It is in spaces like Talkback that battle rap’s morals and codes of behaviour are conceptualized, articulated, and challenged. Because battle rap exists in the broader culture and histories of Hip Hop culture, race tends to dominate the conversations on the boundaries of free speech. Kolko et al. position race as an important part of constructivist digital environments such as TalkBack that encompasses “questions of power, politics and structural relations” present in our material world. Kolko et al.’s assertion that race online is either an “invisible concept because it’s simultaneously unmarked and undiscussed” or a “controversial flashpoint for angry debate and overheated rhetoric” rings particularly true in fan cyphering.²²² From the perspective of KOTD, material

²²¹ By “Post-Peterson” Canada I am referring to the cultural discourse that has emerged from the protesting of Bill C-16’s protection of gender identity and expression from discrimination by University of Toronto psychology professor Dr. Jordan B. Peterson.

²²² Kolko et al (2000) pg. 1.

perceived as racist is not tolerated in the group, racist posts will be removed, and the fan will be banned for life. One issue that arises is how one defines “racist/racism” in a scene where race is a constant source of material in the creative contexts of battles. What subjects are off-limits for emcees during a battle? What subjects are off-limits for fans on TalkBack? The answer is that the scene creates its standards and polices itself through threads that purposely or inadvertently address these topics.

The discourse on race in battle rap predictably emerges from the battles themselves. It is widely accepted within battle rap’s circles that a temporal space exists during a battle, where the boundaries of respectable language dissipate. A space where an emcee can say virtually anything and not have to deal with the repercussions that would exist outside of battle rap’s performative space. The boundaries of acceptable practices is not universal, nor are they permanent. Rather, the codes and ethics of battle rap are in constant flux and are collectively and informally established between the promoters, emcees, and fans. Alim et al. (2011) articulate how fans in freestyle battle rap help to “coproduce and contest hip hop as a black space.” Alim et al highlight “how nonblack audience members monitor and sometimes resist the racialization of non-black emcees,” which in turn shows the power that audiences have in creating the parameters of the aesthetics and discourse within battle rap performance while forcing emcees to recalibrate their approach to insulting or categorizing their opponent on racial lines.

Perhaps the clearest examples of this communal policing and contestation through online fan cyphering comes when fans analyze videos where a white emcee uses overtly racist angles against his opponent. The cypher prompt might ask if TalkBack members agree or disagree if an emcee can go “too far” in a battle, or whether they are proponents of free speech in this context. The replies to these types of posts can be divided broadly into three categories of response: those

who believe anything goes in battle rap, those who think that some topics, such as slavery, for instance, are off-limits, and those who think that every subject can be addressed, but there might be consequences, violent or otherwise, for the emcee who takes that approach. During these debates, fans often discuss previous battles where race was used in similar ways, loosely tracing the history of the topic in battle rap. An impressive nuance can emerge throughout these debates, as fans differentiate between the use of race by white emcees versus the use of race by black emcees. This highlights the disparities in power that are in line with contemporary understandings of the history of race relations in the US, as well as the social forces at play between races in contemporary North American society.

Some fans are less offended by the content of racist approaches in battle rap than the execution of the emcee's round. Fans frequently discuss the strategic use of race as a battle rap aesthetic, with differing views on whether the use of race is even appealing to the audience or effective as a tactic to win a battle. An over-reliance on race as a tactic to win a battle is seen by some as corny or uncreative and may result in a perceived lack of originality for the offending emcee. These sentiments reintroduce the topic of race as a battle rap trope, not separate from, but uniquely distanced from, cultural dialogues where the unwritten rules and strategies of an art form are not present. Pass reiterates how power structures may find themselves suspended at times during a battle, but that one's reliance on a volume of racial material by emcees with racial privilege diminishes their performance:

“Battle rap is a unique place where power structures come into play, but it's expected, I mean the whole plan is, that you are tearing down your opponent and you are supposed to use everything you can to your advantage. I think if you're a person of privilege in real life and you are spending a whole verse demeaning someone else's race...if you're a white person and you're

just spending a whole lot of raps talking about how this person is less than you because they are Black, as oppose to maybe making a couple of Black jokes here and there, I think that's a pretty significant distinction, and I also think that that (sic) is whack as fuck.”

As one of the more vocal and political emcees that battles on KOTD's platform, Pass' words carry weight when it comes to discourses on race in battle rap. But importantly, a unanimous conclusion rarely emerges from fan cyphering, even if influential emcees offer their thoughts on the matter. Rather, the meaning that is derived from the discourse is created communally, as TalkBack disrupts the notion of a singular narrative by the continuous cyphering of the topic. The topic is also bound to be brought up again with a new batch of respondents and perspectives. Unlike the freestyle cyphers of Alim et al's study, TalkBack benefits from the fact that it is not ephemeral in the same sense as live battles. Because it does not operate in the same temporal space, the discourse that helps to shape the values and ethics of the scene remains a topic of discussion that arises and dissipates as its members feel necessary; never fixed or outdated, and constantly contested.

Affective Processing in TalkBack

When analyzing the types of archiving that occur on TalkBack, I have articulated the cyphering of information that creates an archival space for debate and scene pedagogy. Another type of archiving that emerges is a less purposeful, or noticeable, form of archiving that occurs simply by participating in the group. This is the unintentional footprint that users create for KOTD and Facebook to use as archival research. This second, less conscious form of participation is a part of a larger data economy that seeks to capitalize on the behavioural and consumer patterns of internet users. Perhaps nowhere was this explained with such clarity than during the 2018 U.S. Senate hearing in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Facebook C.E.O. Mark Zuckerberg disclosed the process of monetizing Facebook user's data in these terms:

What we allow is for advertisers to tell us who they want to reach, and then we do the placement. So, if an advertiser comes to us and says, 'All right, I am a ski shop and I want to sell skis to women,' then we might have some sense, because people shared skiing-related content, or said they were interested in that, they shared whether they're a woman, and then we can show the ads to the right people without that data ever changing hands and going to the advertiser.

TalkBack users, either consciously or unconsciously, leave traces of information in this accidental archive with every post that they contribute, which in turn is used to market products back to the user. This dichotomy between autonomous content creators of the corporate archive is described by Robert Gehl as “affective processing,” whereby the use of TalkBack’s affective labour leads to “data that can be rearranged by the site owners to construct particular forms of knowledge...” Corporations benefitting off your online data may not be news for some people in 2021, it does reveal the type of digital ecosystem that TalkBack exists in, and at the very least dampens any notion that the user is exempt from a system of archiving without editors and gatekeepers.

Affective processing is not exclusive to TalkBack, since anyone participating on Facebook is leaving the same footprint. But there is a familiar feeling for many Hip Hop participants when a corporation is profiting from Hip Hop’s DIY practices. Affective processing can be interpreted as the latest in a long line of the corporate profiling of Hip Hop that includes commercial record labels creating and packaging Hip Hop groups like the Sugar Hill Gang in the 70s, to the explosion of breaking in television advertisements in the 80s, to the recent recycling of battle rap’s practices on James Corden’s “Drop the Mic” series. In these instances, the

aesthetics and practices of Hip Hop are stolen from its participants by those from outside the culture; perceived as nothing more than a segmentation variable for marketing executives whose goal is to package and profit off Hip Hop's DIY cultural labour.

This is not to imply that Hip Hop is anti-capitalist, or that it does not package and sell itself as a commodity. It is quite the opposite: Hip Hop has become a contemporary global market force by adopting capitalist practices and a DIY entrepreneurial ethos. However, there are important distinctions to be made between those from within the culture profiting off their creations, and corporate outsiders mining a culture to excavate anything potentially profitable. Beyond the cyphering and archival activity that occur on Talkback, TalkBack also functions as a promotional tool to inform fans of upcoming events/online video releases, a way to drive traffic to their online store and an informal focus group to get feedback on event-related matters.

One unintentional and undocumented outcome of the creation of TalkBack has been its emergence as a social commerce marketplace that influences outcome measures for KOTD, the fans, and the emcees that are members of the group. For emcees, it is a place to drive traffic to their videos on YouTube, advertise and sell their music and increase their fan base through conversations with a passionate collection of battle rap fans. In the case of fans, it primarily acts as a discussion board, where fans can discuss previous battles, debate the winners and losers of specific battles, and connect on a social level with other fans, emcees, and promoters. It also serves as a platform for fans to meet collaborators for battle-related projects, beta test products related to battle rap, or find participants for a Ph.D. thesis that centers the participation of the very people with a vested interest in KOTD as a brand. I will unpack this more in the following chapter by describing how capitalist practices and DIY entrepreneurialism from within the scene can strengthen communal ties, prompt acts of kindness, and promote solidarity.

Chapter #3-TalkBack, Social Commerce and Hu-fan-itarianism

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. First, I would like to articulate the official social commerce activities that occur on TalkBack that influence outcome measures for KOTD like revenue growth and customer loyalty. This will provide a clear idea how a company uses battle rap fan groups and the Facebook platform to perform typical corporate social commerce functions. Second, I will identify the auxiliary, DIY social commerce that occurs on TalkBack. This introduces the notion of peer to peer (P2P) social commerce that relies on the communication between emcees and fans, the former of whom sell their own products or merchandise which have no financial affiliation to KOTD. In this case, the promotional efforts of the individual rapper do not always affect KOTD's bottom line, but rather builds the brand of the independent contractors that star in the organization's events.

Third, I would like to introduce the concept of hu-fan-itarianism, a concept that highlights a series of fan-driven social enterprises that accesses and benefits from TalkBack's social commerce market, involves the exchange of goods and services, but is practiced through a digital humanitarian lens. By studying these examples of TalkBack's social commerce activity in conjunction, my goal is to highlight the important role that fans play in developing and maintaining the social commerce ecosystem that they participate in, while simultaneously identifying the ways in which the activities of hu-fan-itarianism extends our contemporary understanding of social commerce's boundaries to include activities that aren't necessarily financially motivated.

Social Commerce

In their introduction to the *International Journal of Electronic Commerce's* special edition on social commerce, Liang and Turban note that there is no standardized definition of social

commerce, but that it “generally refers to the delivery of e-commerce activities and transactions via the social media environment, mostly in social networks and by using Web 2.0 software.”²²³

In many instances social commerce is simply the merger of online social activity via a website or application such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, with online e-commerce activities such as the selling or purchasing of goods or services over the internet.

As Liang and Turban highlight, there are three consistent attributes of social commerce: social media technologies, community interactions, and commercial activities.²²⁴ In defining these attributes however, Liang and Turban set clear parameters around the types of community interactions that can be considered under this paradigm as those with commercial intents:

“Some activities on social networking Web sites are not commercial in nature. For instance, people share their thoughts, information about a news event, photos, and jokes for amusement. These, albeit popular, cannot be identified as social commerce because these activities do not lead to any commercial benefits such as buying or selling products or attitude changes on certain commercial events. Therefore, it is essential that information sharing or other activities of social media involve commercial intentions and implications. To define it broadly, any kind of activity that leads to commercial benefits falls into the definition of commercial activities.”²²⁵

What Liang and Turban miss in their assessment of commercial versus non-commercial social interaction is the massive volume of social activity and DIY social commerce that fans in Facebook groups such as Talkback produce that may not register as traditional forms of commercial activity for KOTD, but whose activity functions as a symbiotic, auxiliary component

²²³ Liang and Turban (2011) pg. 6.

²²⁴ Liang and Turban (2011) pg. 6.

²²⁵ Liang and Turban (2011) pg. 7.

of the official social commerce that occurs on their page. This type of co-production highlights the ways in which a social commerce marketplace such as TalkBack alters the binary notions of producer and consumer. It also reveals how the dialogue between fans that Liang and Turban deem to be “not commercial in nature” repositions the fan as a creator of value in a traditional commercial sense and as a developer of battle rap's digital cultural practices. In some instances, these activities may replicate traditional forms of corporate social commerce by selling products or services. In other instances, they deal with a social currency that reveals these engagements as performances of participant culture while indirectly strengthening the influence of the league and its participants. This is what makes TalkBack such a unique case of fan/brand collaboration.

Company/Fan Collaboration

Although billed as the “Official Battle Discussion Group” of KOTD and started by the company, KOTD’s model is conceptualized as a group where fans have the space to discuss all things KOTD. Importantly, the group was created as a separate entity from KOTD’s official Facebook page, which serves almost exclusively as a unilateral promotional vehicle with very little fan input or communication. It has also included KOTD fans (i.e., non-KOTD employees) on the moderators list, giving fans some say in enforcing the policies and editing of content that is shared on the platform.

This business-first approach to the group, in practice, has much softer edges than one might think since fans initiate most of the posts and topics of conversation that occur in the group. The company frequently asks its fans for feedback as well, giving them a better idea of who their customer is and what they want. But it does bring up questions about the role of fans within the KOTD business model. Whose voices are prioritized on TalkBack? What type of fan-driven content is deemed acceptable by the moderators? And who holds the power and control

over the discourse within the group? This is no clearer than when KOTD requests feedback from the group on which fans should be chosen as moderators for TalkBack. The company leans on fans for decision-making within the group, demonstrating how fans have a substantial voice in the structuring of the group's leadership. Aside from fans tagging other fans who they believe to be appropriate nominees to moderate the group, discourse around the types of values a moderator should have also emerged. Some of these qualities include having unbiased opinions during TalkBack debates, never trolling the posts of other fans, and having a good sense of when the fan posting is going off-topic.

KOTD continues the collaboration on the values of Talkback when they consult the fans on the kinds of rules that should govern activity on the site. Some of the suggestions that emerge are in line with the direct interests of the company (i.e., no bootleg videos, no posting content from competing leagues, etc.) and some of the suggestions speak clearly to an etiquette that is being decided by the fans themselves, not the company. Some reoccurring topics that fans want to see addressed are racism in the group, excessive trolling or bullying, and the intentional derailing of conversation. The back-and-forth exchanges that occur on TalkBack reveals the value that KOTD sees in the opinions of fans, while also shining a light on what fans value about other fans behaviour and etiquette.

KOTD's Official Social Commerce on Talkback

The choice to include fans as moderators is particularly unique because, from the perspective of KOTD, this page is still first and foremost a platform for social commerce. In my interview with KOTD's Online Operations Manager Troy "King Fly" Daniels, he was very upfront about the promotional application of Talkback, which is the most immediately evident form of KOTD's social commerce.:

“The main purpose of TalkBack has always been to use the group as a promotional tool for King of the Dot. We figured having a centralized group for KOTD fans would enable us to reach them all at once on facebook (sic).”²²⁶

Two areas tend to dominate KOTD’s promotional efforts on Talkback: the promotion of upcoming or recently released battle videos and the promotion of upcoming events. These intersecting areas of promotion reveal a variety of typical social commerce dimensions and provide clues as to how KOTD turns promotion to profit. Shadkam and O’Hara’s exploration into the potential leverage that companies get from social commerce identifies forums and communities, ratings and reviews, and social media optimization as core advertising dimensions of a social commerce business model. The promotion of recently released battles is perhaps the most evident use of all three dimensions mentioned above and has the potential to drive fans to either view videos on the company’s YouTube channel or purchase an upcoming PPV event.

To begin, a pinned post (i.e., a post that is manually programmed to remain at the top of the group’s timeline) is displayed front and centre once a fan accesses the group. This pinned post will redirect the fan to the official KOTD YouTube channel, where the recently released battle video awaits, ready for viewing. To view this simple chain of actions through a social commerce lens, KOTD uses TalkBack to advertise a video to its target market. The pinned post will garner activity on the thread below, prompting fans to share their thoughts on the battle and either advise or dissuade other fans to visit the link and watch (rate and review.) Finally, by directing the audience to YouTube, KOTD accesses another monetary platform for the video (social media optimization.) They are also hoping the viewer may subscribe to their channel if they have not already, creating another avenue to access that fan.

²²⁶ Daniels (2018).

The promotion of upcoming events follows a similar pattern, as administrators of TalkBack create posts to advertise a future event. This post most frequently includes a visually compelling poster with the date, time and location of the event, or a video, which may be a full-length trailer or simply the promotion of a single battle from the upcoming event. The video may link back to YouTube, thus replicating the pattern described above, but more importantly, introduces an additional monetary stream in the form of a link to KOTD's e-commerce store included in the post. Once directed to the store, the fan can purchase tickets to the event, the PPV, or a variety of other KOTD merchandise such as hats and t-shirts. This choice maximizes the e-commerce traffic to multiple revenue sources, which hopefully leads to the acquisition of new fans or customers and captures new data points on the traffic driven to their various platforms.

The promotional posts for events and videos appear quite visually polished. Often using high-quality images and slick graphic design, the promotional posts from KOTD have an aesthetic that suggests they are made professionally. Even when shared from a fan's Facebook account, the structure, formatting, and design give us clues that this is official material created by KOTD, rather than a fan creation. If these promotional posts are read as direct marketing that is professional in appearance and provides tangible monetary value, there are other forms of company-driven promotion, such as the promotion of individual battlers, that take a more casual approach.

The promotion of specific battle rappers is often created using a tone that is like the posts that fans make. The post may use more casual language and will comment specifically on an element of the rapper the staff member enjoys, whether it be a particular line, verse, or approach to their opponent. This is frequently, but not always, accompanied by a video of the rapper's

previous battle or a compilation video from various battles. It may also include a provocation, that either this battler deserves a shot at a high-profile opponent or that this rapper is the best at a particular aspect of battling. This type of post is common for fans to create and accounts for a substantial amount of content shared on TalkBack. It also generates a significant amount of feedback. In these instances, the company is performing the act of the posting fan, harnessing the language and structure of fan posts to highlight a particular rapper on their roster, much like how a fan would advocate for their favourite rapper. The fact that fans are so eager to contribute to the posts that promote specific battlers shows an acceptance and willingness to engage with KOTD staff in colloquial online debate and banter.

Despite the acceptance of the staff's promotion of emcees by fans, this type of activity could very reasonably be criticized as a show of favouritism or be deemed unprofessional practice, since the emcees selected for this kind of promotion will undoubtedly see more traffic to their videos and more exposure on the platform. This underscores the slippery line between the commentary of fans and that of the league, who at its core are a group of battle rap fans themselves. Battle rap fans are bloodhounds when it comes to the genuineness of posting in TalkBack, particularly when it comes to driving discourse or if it is assumed that someone has a financial stake tethered to their commentary. Fans are so familiar with the structure and content of TalkBack's discourses that anything that is deemed amiss is either ignored or immediately called out.

As Arnold and Tapp highlight, the methods of direct marketing used by art organizations (i.e., how it advertises and sells directly to its customers) must be carefully tailored "to specific communication programs targeted to specific constituent publics."²²⁷ In TalkBack, KOTD has

²²⁷ Arnold and Tapp (2001) pg. 47.

created targeted space for their advertising methods by providing a space for collaboration and feedback, something the fans and consumers of battle rap have been fond of since the early days of online battle rap forums. But this space has also created an unsuspecting and unofficial social commerce market that has emerged, where fans and emcees mimic the typical social commerce methods of KOTD in TalkBack to carve out a commercial space for themselves.

DIY Social Commerce

Hip Hop culture's Do-it-Yourself (DIY) ethos has been a well-documented phenomenon over the past two decades of Hip Hop-related scholarship. In the context of rap music, the independent creation and distribution of physical media such as cassettes, compact disks, and videos that were occurring outside of the mainstream music industry played an important role in the development and proliferation of the art form. Harrison (2006) argues that the DIY creation and distribution of physical media (cassettes in the case of his study) not only helped to promote an emcee's music but have also served as a fundamental strategy to cultivate and maintain a following of fans.²²⁸

In addition to DIY production, the distribution channels of Hip Hop's DIY culture have also been of great importance. Mitchell (2007) identifies the DIY network of independent labels, community radio stations, and websites that created the infrastructure necessary for Australian Hip Hop to advance "its own distinctively multicultural, Indigenous and localized identities, accents, expressions and frames of reference..."²²⁹ Although unable to serve every marginalized Hip Hop artist,²³⁰ the development of local networks and the creation of alternative economies that are central to any DIY culture was instrumental in establishing Australian Hip Hop's

²²⁸ Harrison (2006) pg. 285.

²²⁹ Mitchell (2007) pg. 121.

²³⁰ Mitchell (2007) notes that Aboriginal artists are most notably underserved by the DIY network

aesthetics and principles.²³¹

The development of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms opened new, more advanced networks for DIY distribution. Hosting websites such as Bandcamp and Soundcloud have allowed DIY artists to upload and distribute their music while touring and ticketing websites such as Bandsintown and Songkick have streamlined the management of live events for DIY artists. These pieces of digital infrastructure help artists to access alternate economies that are already a part of each site's broader artistic ecosystem, while platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook function as promotional platforms that help to build one's brand, reach new audiences, and increase an emcee's profile. Navigating these promotional boundaries is but one form of entrepreneurial labour that emcees perform.

Common approaches to an emcee's brand-building on TalkBack include promotional posts for an emcee's music with links for fans to purchase, links to websites where their proprietary merchandise is for sale, and perhaps most commonly, posts that advertise their battles that are housed on YouTube to increase the view count. In the world of battle rap, view counts are currency. Although it is uncertain what role a battler's view count plays in getting booked by a league or commanding a higher performance fee, it is undeniable that view counts play a substantial role in the public perception of a battler or league's success. Thus, to increase their view count and to attract attention to their brand, it behooves an emcee to embrace the promotional opportunities that TalkBack affords them.

An active social media presence is particularly important to increase an emcee's profile if they reside in an area with less visibility. As battle rap culture becomes more defused and emcees begin to emerge from smaller markets outside of traditional battle rap hotbeds like

²³¹ Mitchell (2007) pg. 121.

Toronto, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, they must turn to social media outlets such as TalkBack to increase their visibility among battle rap fans and promotions. In my online communication with Albuquerque, New Mexico-based battle rap Ronald “Rahney” Driscoll on March 29th, 2019, he stressed the role that social media plays in increasing his exposure to new audiences and promoters outside of his small geographical market:

“I basically live in the middle of nowhere and it (social media) kinda, like, levelled the playing field as far as getting noticed, and competition with the other rappers and shit because everyone is trying to get on, and basically the internet made the world a lot smaller for me.”²³²

In addition to opening access to new markets outside of Albuquerque, Rahney’s promotional efforts online afforded him the opportunity to ingratiate himself with certain leagues or event promoters. Rahney articulates the effects his online presence has when it comes to securing battles.

“I was using that shit (social media) for, like, music before, and so it was kinda already like a nice little social media presence... but as far as getting booked, I know damn sure these people are, you know, it’s a popularity contest, you know, I hate to say it, you know, sometimes I feel like I do get booked just because they know I will promote.”²³³

Rahney’s prolific promotional activity has perceived value in the eyes of certain leagues, who can offload some of the promotional labour onto emcees who are proficient in garnering attention online. Rahney’s activity on Talkback reveals how an emcee can apply social commerce tactics to gain both social and financial capital while building his brand. Vargo and Lusch summarize a “service-centred” line of thinking in the field of marketing that posits the

²³² Driscoll (2019)

²³³ Driscoll (2019)

inherent value of a brand as the result of a collaborative process of co-creation.²³⁴ In the case of Rahney, his growing popularity as an emcee on TalkBack is the direct result of his positive engagement with the fans on the platform, where the consumer is activated as a stakeholder in the branding process. By interacting with fans on TalkBack and promoting his brand, Rahney established a following of battle rap fans outside of his geographical market, which in turn was leveraged into increased event bookings and personal sponsorships.

Rahney's assertion that fan communication via TalkBack plays a big role in the development of his brand is a testament to the power of fans in co-producing a brand in the digital space. However, it is important to note that there is not a singular path of brand development. Troy "King Fly" Daniels was quick to trouble the notion that a brand requires co-creation with the fans. After positing that fan communication on TalkBack is a helpful promotional tool, King Fly notes that it is specific to the emcees themselves:

"It really depends on the battler and how much stock they put into what people think online. For instance (Norfolk, Virginia-based KOTD veteran) Bigg K hates talkback and disses the people in it every chance he gets, but it doesnt (sic) do anything to his brand in battle rap."²³⁵

Thus, it is important to frame TalkBack as a space that holds the potential for emcees to build their brands, without it being the sole arbiter of an emcee's success.

The types of DIY social commerce that emcees engage in on TalkBack is not officially sanctioned by KOTD, but rather operates as an auxiliary aspect of KOTD's promotional work. As Rahney mentions, leagues have been attracted to his promotional pursuits when it is mutually beneficial. For obvious financial reasons, it benefits a league to work with rappers that build

²³⁴ Vargo and Lusch (2004) pg. 6.

²³⁵ Daniels (2018)

name recognition without the league having to put in the labour or financial overhead to promote them. The entrepreneurial efforts required of emcees, and the DIY nature of the process, is also socially promoted through various threads on Talkback made by emcees, fans, and staff alike. Fans encourage emcees to promote themselves, and often go to the extent of criticizing rappers for their lack of effort outside of their performances. There is an expectation fans put on an emcee to drive the interest in an event card and carry their share of the promotional weight.

While TalkBack provides a platform for promotion and the sale of merchandise for an emcee, it also normalizes the pattern of precarious labour and entrepreneurialism that has become necessary for contemporary artists within battle rap scenes and the broader ecosystem of the cultural industries. In the abstract of her article *'Just can't go to sleep': DIY cultures and alternative economies from the perspective of social theory*, Paula Guerra notes “that youth cultures can be seen as a platform through which young people acquire practical skills and competence in an era of risk, uncertainty and precarious living.”²³⁶ The expectation for an emcee to wear many hats in relation to their efforts in the battle rap scene is part and parcel of brand-building for battle rappers, but also mirrors a wider trend in the workforce where there is an expectation for workers to adapt and grow their skills in a constantly shifting job market.

This not only supports Guerra's notion that youth cultures such as battle rap can be a productive space to develop skills for the contemporary job market, but in some ways idealizes that process as the ideal training ground for precarious labour. As Jen Harvie notes, the model of artist-as-entrepreneur is embedded in political, economic and social mandates, creating what she refers to as the “artpreneur” or “culturepreneur.”²³⁷ Harvie questions the sustainability of the “artpreneur”, specifically an artist's requirement to focus on “productivity, permanent growth

²³⁶ Guerra (2017)

²³⁷ Harvie (2013) pg. 62.

and profit.”²³⁸ Harvie’s major fear, it seems, is neoliberal capitalism’s “valorization of the individual” that suggests one can improve their position through “an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade.”²³⁹ Harvie’s point is well-taken, particularly when this framework does indeed present “threats to concepts of collective good,” although I question the entire premise that individual liberty is fundamentally anti-social. I especially question this premise when discussing populations that are traditionally underserved by public services or other government initiatives that purport to be in service of the social.

Harvie states that in pushing back against neoliberal practices, she wants to “preserve principles of sociality and equality.”²⁴⁰ To “preserve” these principals suggests that sociality and equality are omnipresent western cultural practices available to everyone to begin with. Considering the insider/outsider dynamics that are present in many art scenes and the resounding failure of government funding institutions (at least in my home country of Canada) to fund marginalized artists equitably, claiming sociality and equality as existing principles of artistic practice feels somewhat utopic.

What is unique about battle rap in relation to Harvie’s “artpreneur” is that entrepreneurialism, which often shares features of Harvie’s neoliberal capitalist practices, has been a core value of Hip Hop culture rather than a pejorative word. Early pioneers that cultivated Hip Hop culture such as DJ Kool Herc and his sister Cindy Campbell were inherently entrepreneurial, and their now legendary parties at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx were early acts of Hip Hop entrepreneurship, modest admission fees and all. Since the primary goal

²³⁸ Harvie (2013) pg. 63.

²³⁹ Harvie (2007) pg. 22 in Harvie (2013) pg. 79.

²⁴⁰ Harvie (2013) pg. 77.

for throwing these parties was to raise enough money for Cindy Campbell to go back-to-school shopping at the finest stores, one could claim the earliest events as an individual pursuit. DJ Kool Herc and Cindy Campbell created a social practice (Hip Hop) through their entrepreneurship, fulfilling a need for social functions in their neighbourhood while filling their pockets, all with little mind for regulation. The scale that Herc and Campbell's parties embraced capitalist practices may be smaller than the mandates that Harvie fears, but the ethos remains the same. This ethos has evolved into the trope of the "hustle" that is so present in the mythology of commercial rap music and is contingent on capitalist structures and individual pursuits.

Whether it be a real or fabricated narrative of an emcee's rise from drug dealer to music superstar or a tale of an executive's rise from the streets to the boardroom, the notion of "the hustle" is a championed narrative precisely because it promotes notions of social and economic mobility that are tenets of capitalism. This has manifested over time in various ways within Hip Hop culture, whether it be the promoters and DJs organizing events, emcees selling mix tapes, or Ron Nelson's parents selling patties at his seminal Concert Hall events in Toronto. As Dan Charnas mentions in his 2015 article for the Financial Times, much of this entrepreneurial activity was a response to wider capitalist structures that ignored or undervalued the economic potential of Hip Hop.²⁴¹

The "rags to riches" stories of Hip Hop also highlight a set of principals "that allowed it to be hypercapitalist and the voice of the underclass at the same time."²⁴² Although Charnas positions Hip Hop's capitalism and its populism among the underclass as a "paradoxical consciousness", it is important to note that forms of capitalism, DIY entrepreneurialism more specifically, have long been a tool of collective resistance and placemaking in Black urban

²⁴¹ Charnas (2015)

²⁴² Charnas (2015)

environments. Lindemann presents community entrepreneurialism as a method of creating economic resilience from within the predominately Black neighbourhood of Kinsman in Cleveland, Ohio, while also creating a productive alternative to community development projects developed by “experts” from outside the community.²⁴³ As Lindemann notes in reference to historical moments when Black entrepreneurship flourished (such as Black Wall Street and the Harlem Renaissance), “Arts and culture were central to these entrepreneurial endeavors” and “Artists generated income and became upwardly mobile without relying on government support.”²⁴⁴ Marcus Anthony Hunter also explains how a nightclub in downtown Chicago becomes a productive space not only for expanding the spatial mobility of urban Black populations, but also for leveraging socioeconomic opportunities and greater social networks.²⁴⁵

The hustle in these examples reveal only a few of the ways in which entrepreneurship intersects with community to push back against a capitalist framework that marginalizes or outright excludes them, including government “experts” looking to gentrify neighbourhoods and/or other organizations that either lack resources or willfully withhold access for Black communities. These examples do not reject neoliberal practices, and they are not neglecting or damaging the social, as Harvie may suggest neoliberal practices do. Although there is a risk of perpetuating the exploitative practices of capitalism by wielding entrepreneurialism as a tool for change, it is important to remember that Black entrepreneurship, both in Hip Hop and battle rap more specifically, was a response to a government-controlled economy and system of public service and that never sought to include them in the first place.

The hustle in Hip Hop, as Charnas reminds us, tethers art to commerce, since

²⁴³ Lindemann (2019)

²⁴⁴ Lindemann (2019) pg. 870.

²⁴⁵ Hunter (2010)

entrepreneurs from Hip Hop earliest days could not afford the luxury of separating the two.²⁴⁶ Hip Hop has always had to be productive in the way that other art forms are having to become. The assumption that art is not required to be productive, I would argue, speaks to a certain population of artists that have the privilege to rely on systems of governmental support. In North America, these are systems teeming with exclusionary practices that historically prioritized Eurocentric values, aesthetics, and practices while obscuring, ignoring, or withholding funds for those who occupy the margins. The same governmental forces that aim to naturalize and obligate entrepreneurial activity through cuts in funding or any other measure of austerity are the same forces that never afforded early Hip Hop artists the luxury of institutionalized support to begin with. While I agree with the efficacy of entrepreneurialism as a mechanism of defense against institutionalized forces, any positioning of this trend as a recent revelation undermines the decades of instability and inaccessibility that marginalized populations have faced in accessing institutional funding.²⁴⁷

The collective entrepreneurial spaces and networks in KOTD are foregrounded most saliently during its moments of co-creation between fans, emcees, or the promotion through social commerce. In many ways, each of these stakeholders in battle rap culture works together to increase the visibility and sustainability of KOTD through online activity. Social commerce, both official and unofficial, becomes a collective practice employed due to a lack of access to larger resources and markets for artists and organizations. Fans are also subject to the forces of unpaid, undocumented work, despite their labour manifesting and functioning differently.

Social Capital and Hu-fan-intarianism

In framing the concept of social capital, I am turning to a lineage that begins with Lyda F.

²⁴⁶ Charnas (2015)

²⁴⁷ The shrinking resources Harvie mentions on pg. 76 all occurred during the 2010s.

Hanifan’s coining of the term, which emphasizes community-building and cooperative tactics to improve the livelihoods of communities and satiate an individual’s social needs.²⁴⁸ As Rae notes, Hanifan’s notion of social capital was an attempt to articulate the benefits of community-building in the dense neighbourhoods of emerging industrial cities; “dense in people, dense in social connections, dense in civic associations, dense in retail proprietorship, dense in ward politics.”²⁴⁹ Density, as it pertains to social capital, is fundamental to understanding digital fandom and fan communities. Although the corporeal density of Hanifan’s industrialized cities is absent, a new form of density emerges when a critical mass of fans congregates in a corner of cyberspace, thus circumventing the divide between the urban and the rural, the geographical centre and its margins, which Hanifan saw as a barrier to social capital for those in rural communities.

One’s ability to accrue social capital has been a concern for many theorists, most prominently Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s definition of social capital explicitly highlights the internal competition within a group to acquire and maintain a monopoly over the power and representation of that specific group.²⁵⁰ Although the network of connections is under interrogation in his work, Bourdieu’s definition inherently positions social capital as a product and/or pursuit of the individual, which is highlighted by Bourdieu’s constant use of singular terminology (“agent”) or singular pronoun (“he”), his obsession with credentials and personal titles within institutions (King, Nobility, etc.) and the subjective nature of the implied obligations of being a part of a network.²⁵¹ Social capital for Bourdieu, then, is an individual pursuit for distinction and/or symbolic power embedded in a collective network of affiliation.

When applied to the study of fandom, scholarship tends to minimize the individualistic,

²⁴⁸ Hanifan (1916) pg. 131.

²⁴⁹ Rae (2002) pg. xiii.

²⁵⁰ Bourdieu (1986) pg. 84-86.

²⁵¹ Bourdieu (1986) pg. 84-86.

competitive aspects of Bourdieu's framing of social capital that emphasizes distinction and power. Rather, many fan studies tend to emphasize the collective nature of social capital, particularly in relation to social networking sites such as Facebook. Whether it be the use of social networking sites by sports fans (Phua, 2012), music fans (Baym, 2007) or fans of a celebrity (Ellcessor, 2012), research on fan activity emphasizes the network of individuals, rather than the individual pursuit of power and distinction. This communal perspective aligns more with Hanifan's initial definition of social capital, and the work of Robert D. Putnam, whose emphasis on community groups communicates how labour, particularly volunteerism, is productively formulated in community/civic life.²⁵²

It is my view that community-activated labour that happens in scenes such as battle rap should not be conflated with exploitative practices, even if it in turn benefits a larger, corporate entity such as KOTD as a result. This is particularly the case when the scene, as I have outlined before, imagines entrepreneurialism as a collective practice rather than a system of exploitation. It is my assertion that the labour that fans provide, which may serve the interests of KOTD explicitly or as a by-product, more closely resemble an act of service to the battle rap scene rather than a service to the company directly.

Hu-fan-itarianism

This analysis channels the *Cambridge Dictionary's* definition of humanitarianism, which focuses on actions that are "involved in or connected with improving people's lives and reducing suffering."²⁵³ For the purposes of this chapter, the core of this definition is a benevolent form of outreach that focuses explicitly on improving the scene in question and away from the individual(s) performing the acts. Humanitarianism, for the purposes of this chapter, requires the

²⁵² Putnam (2000) pg. 116-133.

²⁵³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/humanitarian>

lens to be focused on the recipients of the benevolence, not the benevolent ones. This is a particularly important distinction considering the humanitarianism that is performed in KOTD's battle rap scene creates a form of social capital that I argue prioritizes the good of the scene over the benefits for the individual.

As Michael Barnett identifies in his article *Humanitarianism Transformed*, the institutionalization of humanitarianism that began to occur in the 1990s created increasingly strict regulatory systems and standardizing practices for organizations that participated in humanitarian efforts.²⁵⁴ In turn the corporate culture, argues Barnett, forced organizations to be considerably more concerned with self-preservation and much less equipped to respond to local interests.²⁵⁵ I would add to Barnett's theory that the corporatization of the field has also re-framed what the public perceives as "humanitarianism" to begin with. Local grassroots organizations such as community law offices, environmental groups, and food banks are rarely given the title of "humanitarian" while large, international governmental and non-governmental organizations tend to dominate the headlines (and funding dollars) for humanitarian efforts.

This evolution of the field towards corporatization and away from local has a trickledown effect that I believe obscures the even less official and more culturally specific examples of humanitarianism that exist in our communities. Online communities such as TalkBack are flush with examples of online micro-humanitarianism from fans that function to strengthen the battle rap scene by contributing funds and/or services distributed through grassroots means. Humanitarianism, then, is the performance of labour that fans put towards the building and strengthening of their scene.

This differs from the labour of emcees or that of official KOTD staff for a few reasons.

²⁵⁴ Barnett (2005) pg. 725.

²⁵⁵ Barnett (2005) pg. 725.

First, the fans have little to no expectation of remuneration for their participation in battle rap culture. Most of the labour is not contingent on their desire to gain monetarily from their efforts in battle rap, but rather to contribute to the strength of the scene through their unpaid and frequently undocumented efforts. Additionally, the labour put forth by fans rarely benefits a singular brand (their own or that of an organization) but rather crosses platforms to benefit the fans of a wider battle rap ecosystem. Lastly, an important distinction must be made between the delegated labour that live audiences at events may incur and the volunteered labour fans contribute outside of events. One can freely be a fan of battle rap online without the expectation that you contribute substantial forms of labour, nor does the absence of one's labour necessarily detract from the experience of others. This is not to argue that there aren't social rewards for one's volunteerism, nor that the scene wouldn't benefit from heavy involvement from all fans. Rather, it is to say that the amount of social power one generates within the group from this participation is minimal, and the personal rewards that the labour brings is closer to that of humanitarian work. This may include a feeling of moral responsibility, a feeling of religious or ideological fulfillment, or just old fashioned "feel good" emotional language rather than social or financial gain.

It is for these reasons that "hu-fan-itarianism" positions the labour of fans as extensions of the moral and altruistic philosophies of the battle scene they serve. Hu-fan-itarianism in battle rap can manifest itself in countless ways online. The two broad and intersecting categories that I explore for this chapter focus on the performative aspects of hu-fan-itarian acts and the ways they are central to the battle rap scene, regardless of if they are explicitly or tangentially associated with battle rap itself. First, I will explore the most conspicuous forms of hu-fan-itarianism by identifying instances where money was either raised or services were provided to

assist a fellow member of the battle rap scene. Then, I will analyze the more subtle forms of hu-fan-itarianism that may not be large enough acts to register as traditional humanitarianism, but I consider to be frequent and important moments of communal assistance.

Monetary Hu-fan-itarianism

In my interview with KOTD Online Operations Manager Troy “King Fly” Daniels, he highlighted the communal aspect of fan communication as the most beneficial aspect of TalkBack:

“The good parts are definitely when the community comes together in times of need for someone, because it seems despite all our differences and arguments and what have you, when push comes to shove the battle rap community sticks together and helps those in need.”²⁵⁶

King Fly describes his penchant for sharing GoFundMe or other crowd sourcing fundraisers that involve emcees or fans on TalkBack, whether it be an issue that is directly related to battle rap or not. Some of the fundraising that was done on behalf of people affiliated or tangentially affiliated with the organization include efforts to provide bail money, efforts to help provide funeral costs, and efforts to support medical bills. King Fly admires the tendency for battle rap fans to contribute financially to causes involving someone in the scene, and highlights the substantial effect that TalkBack had on fundraising efforts he shared:

“I know we have some amazing people as part of that community, that will do whatever they can to help others than need it. I know of 4 gofundmes (sic) that we got to their goal (and more) with the help of talkback. And a couple of them were 5 figures. it just shows me what a great community we have built here.”

²⁵⁶ Daniels (2018)

The collective efforts of battle rap fans echo Putnam's research that participation in a social network, and civic engagement more broadly, is a prime indicator of philanthropy.²⁵⁷ The feedback on TalkBack when a fundraising goal is set or met is one of compassion for those in need and excitement in assisting. In some instances, such as a fundraiser to assist the family of former KOTD champion Alexander "Bender" Buchanan after his passing, the connection to scene is quite clear. Bender was a KOTD mainstay and a TalkBack fan favourite, and his untimely passing at the age of 37 elicited grief and mourning from fans in TalkBack. Many fans on TalkBack stated they knew him or felt as if they knew him through communication channels online or by watching his battles. The fundraiser was a clear way for fans to show their respects to a KOTD legend and support his family, who remain involved with the broader KOTD scene.

Fundraising examples where the recipient was someone more tangentially involved in battle rap reveal the scene's ability to mobilize energies. Because fundraising efforts are posted to TalkBack by a trusted name like King Fly, the scene is quick to rally around the cause. Although the impetus for this activity on TalkBack is tethered to KOTD, the loyalty that is developed through communication in group forges a larger sense of commitment to the group. As fan Kirstie Rudy highlights when asked about the community aspects of being a battle fan: "We are there for one another always despite the bullshit and I love that about it."²⁵⁸

Fundraising efforts also bring with them a different kind of discourse in the group threads that supports the notion of loyalty. As described in Chapter 2, fans frequently become competitive, argumentative, or exhibit trolling behaviours on TalkBack when addressing a topic. The tone decidedly shifts when a fundraising effort is put forward, which in some ways pulls back the curtain on the performative aspect of fandom in TalkBack. Rather than crass exchanges

²⁵⁷ Putnam (2000) pg. 117.

²⁵⁸ Rudy (2019)

or jokes about insensitive topics, fans tend to share condolences or vulnerable stories related to the person in question. A more communal tone to the threads begins to emerge and those who might regularly find themselves in opposition share stories or sympathies instead. This dichotomy of discourse is highlighted by fan Destiny Quackenbush when I ask what she values about the battle rap scene: “We all act rough and tumble but deep down we are all caring individuals. This is shown when one of our fellow fans or a battler is in need.”²⁵⁹

In the cases of King Fly, Rudy, and Quackenbush, the notion of Talkback as a space for support are consistent. This space, although initially created by KOTD, is maintained by the labour of both staff and fans, who have cultivated a scene that supports and encourages social and monetary support for causes that exist, at times, peripherally to KOTD itself. The labour that fans put toward cultivating a supportive group and contributing tangible funds towards fundraising efforts that they may not have a personal connection with, reveals how fan labour performed through the conduit of a corporate entity benefits the larger scene more than the corporation.

Another example of hu-fan-itarianism is the growing trend of one fan or an emcee volunteering to purchase an upcoming PPV for another fan. This is frequently done when the fan purchasing the PPV sets up a post with some parameters around the type of fan that should receive the PPV. Most often the intent is to reward a loyal fan who is not in the financial situation to purchase it themselves. A thread will be created, and various fans will comment if they can't afford the PPV and would like to receive the donation. In some instances, the donation functions as a “pay it forward” system, where the recipient is expected to donate a PPV purchase to another fan in the future once they find themselves with the financial means to do so. In these

²⁵⁹ Quackenbush (2019)

situations, the giving is intended to be needs-based and is a clear form of hu-fan-itarianism through philanthropy.

In other instances, a fan might decide to donate a PPV purchase based on perceived merit. A thread is created asking fans to tag other fans who have been fixtures in the scene or are deserving of the free PPV for another reason based on their efforts as a fan. In these instances, the PPV may not be tethered to one's need and runs the risk of turning into a popularity contest. In some ways, this undermines the act as an obvious form of hu-fan-itarianism since the recipient in question may not be someone in need. However, it does not undermine the intent behind the giving, which rewards a scene member for their unpaid fan labour and commitment to the scene. This donation that is based on merit rather than need provides an opportunity for the undocumented efforts of a fan to be laid bare, while also providing a chance for the scene to celebrate the efforts of fans that otherwise aren't likely to speak of their contributions.

In the case of a fan purchasing a PPV for another fan, KOTD benefits from the transaction by selling an additional PPV. But I would argue that simply because there is a monetary gain by KOTD, it does not alter the intention of the hu-fan-itarian act, nor is KOTD a part of the primary act. The labour the purchasing fan puts into creating a post, sifting through responses, and ultimately choosing someone to receive the PPV is a larger act of support between fans, rather than a fan doing the bidding of the corporation. I assert that two things can be true at once: that KOTD reaps the benefit of fan labour, and that the fan labour is not an act of exploitation on behalf of the company. Rather, it is largely done for the benefit of the fans, without the participation of KOTD, with the company ultimately receiving another PPV purchase.

In the fundraising examples mentioned above, KOTD, although crucial in spreading the

word about the causes that are supported on TalkBack, sees very little financial compensation for it. Additionally, they could be said to be contributing undocumented, free labour through the efforts of King Fly's fundraising mavenism. It is also important to note that the only way that this type of fundraising could occur is if there were an active base of fans constantly contributing to TalkBack in a way that made Talkback a sustainable forum to begin with. Without the labour of fans to maintain a vibrant space of communication and forge a scene, the request for social or monetary contributions from the company would have a significantly diminished effect.

TalkBack as a Confessional Space: Hu-fan-itarianism and Public Address

As Denise Carter identifies in her ethnography of human relationships in the virtual space of Cybercity, significant amounts of time are invested in maintaining online friendships and forging online communities, and as a result the patterning of friendships that are cultivated online harbour many of the same features as offline, in-person relationship.²⁶⁰ Some features of friendship that are present in Talkback that help to prompt hu-fan-itarianism include reciprocal processes of intimacy and a commitment to communal values and practices, both of which Carter identifies as tenets of contemporary theories of friendship.

Where the idea of friendship in TalkBack differs is that communication with another fan is not always voluntary. If one were to post a thread on TalkBack, there is no control over who responds to said post. One has the choice to not engage any further with unsolicited responses, but much like the public square, it is difficult to control the voices and opinions that encounter your own. This creates various layers of intimacy on TalkBack, ranging from distant acquaintance to deep and meaningful digital friendships that may transition into a friendship offline. Although personal relationships are a factor in how hu-fan-itarianism occurs on

²⁶⁰ Carter (2005) pg. 164.

TalkBack, it is through broad public discourse that we see the most fascinating aspects of hu-fan-itarianism emerge.

Video blogs (or “vlogs”) are quite common on TalkBack and can take many forms. Some of the more common vlogs include live-streamed videos from events, prediction videos for upcoming events, event recap videos and freestyle rapping. In these instances, the level of intimacy or vulnerability is quite low and tends to feature relatively surface opinions on topics related to battle rap. In these instances, the energy of the video is generally focused away from the fan or emcee and towards the topic at hand and does not reveal much about the creator of the video. At times vlogs take a more confessional tone, where fans and emcees discuss challenges in their lives, such as mental health or family issues. These moments of self-reflection may also address an ongoing dispute between emcees or fans and allows the creator of the vlog to control their narrative and content creation. These videos are tangentially associated with battle rap, and in many instances, the vlogger will refer to battle rap and the battle rap scene as a therapeutic tool that has helped them overcome the challenges they are facing in their lives. This kind of fan performance is in stark contrast to the usual competitive bravado that is common with fans and stands out as unique among the more common threads mentioned in chapter 2.

The level of vulnerability that fans and emcees reveal in these vlogs is frequently disproportionate with the degree of friendship that they have obtained with the 30,000 potential readers of the post. This suggests that something about the online space of TalkBack renders it a safe space for intimacy, and perhaps most interesting, vulnerability among men. Although it is important to note that fans, and women more specifically, experience toxic forms of masculinity on TalkBack, there are also moments of vulnerability that reframe stereotypes of how men supposedly share feelings. Additionally, and perhaps equally as important, the responses to these

moments are full of sympathy and respect, rather than the negative types of responses that one might assume would happen when men publicly display vulnerability. These vulnerable and compassionate exchanges are what I would like to frame here as a less obvious, but equally important, form of hu-fan-itarianism. The threads that follow confessional-style vlogs are among the most positive responses to posts that occur on TalkBack. This includes positive feedback for the vlogger, words of encouragement, and/or words of condolences. Fans positively receive these acts of vulnerability while putting aside the competitive and confrontational discourse that is so common on TalkBack. Considering that most of these vlogs come from male-presenting fans, I believe this type of public confessional activity undermines the notion of stereotypical silent masculine suffering while revealing a unique form of homosociality in Hip Hop culture.

In his analysis of homosociality and Black masculinities in gangsta rap lyrics, Oware highlights how emcees display same-sex affection through the construction and maintenance of community.²⁶¹ Oware's analysis notes that emcees express their close bonds with other men by sharing the fruits of their labour in a communal fashion and lamenting the loss of their friends and family to due death or incarceration. Oware also explains how an emcee's positioning of their friends as family allows for their intimate same-sex relationship to be more pronounced without sacrificing their masculinity.²⁶² Lastly, Oware contends that the vulnerable ways in which rappers address sorrow and loss "exhibit behaviours that undermine and overturn hegemonic masculine doctrine."²⁶³

Although the confessional nature of vlogs on Talkback follows the same logic of challenging hegemonic masculinity, I argue that the immediacy of feedback that is available

²⁶¹ Oware (2011) pg. 31.

²⁶² Oware (2011) pg. 28.

²⁶³ Oware (2011) pg. 31.

through TalkBack renders the vlog a riskier, and therefore even more vulnerable, act. Whereas emcees are rapping and recording vulnerable material that will be communicated to fans through less temporal, sonic means, the feedback to vulnerable material that fans share on Talkback can be responded to within seconds. This real-time offering of vulnerability runs the risk of damaging feedback during the vlogger's most sensitive moments. Unlike the spatial and temporal distance that exists for the emcee, the vlogger is turning to a scene of 30,000 people, some of which they have had no contact with whatsoever, for immediate feedback during their most intimate time of need.

Overwhelmingly, they are rewarded in doing so, and one may begin to understand TalkBack as a “crew”, which has been an organizing principle of same-sex bonds in Hip Hop since its inception. In certain instances, crews help to create localized identities, as a crew may be marked by neighbourhood, city, or another territorial marking, such as a digital fan group. A crew is a galvanizing force that requires trust and loyalty, and loyalty is a primary moral component of Hip Hop’s guiding principles and intersects with crews and intimacy through the maintenance of friendship in service of social support.²⁶⁴ The emotional labour that fans put into the well-being of other fans reveals the small steps that fans take to help mitigate the suffering of a fellow fan. It also positively re-enforces the behaviour of sharing vulnerabilities in this public forum, as the act of vulnerability is greeted with positive feedback.

This labour, despite being performed in the Facebook group of a private business, strengthens the battle rap scene that is participating, while also drawing positive attention to the brand of the organization that is hosting the discourse, KOTD. In both instances, the lack of truly delegated labour and the series of actions that prioritize the scene over the company override the

²⁶⁴ Harrison and Arthur (2019) pg. 8-11.

notion that fan labour is inherently exploitative. In each of these instances, fans turn their attention outward, away from themselves and the brand of KOTD, putting the larger battle rap scene above their individual interests.

Despite hu-fan-itarianism being a highly productive example of the liminal space that fans occupy between being a brand and their larger scene, it does not come without a cost. As Antonia Randolph's survey of the literature on male homosociality reveals, there is a tendency for men to simultaneously develop strong emotional bonds with each other while continuing to reinforce misogynist and/or homophobic behaviours.²⁶⁵ My emphasis on the homosocial confessional spaces of TalkBack is a result of the overwhelmingly male fan base of KOTD. Female fans also find themselves supported in similar ways, although the frequency of vlogs by female fans is considerably lower. While the lack of vlogs by women may reflect the broader demographical trend in battle rap where men greatly outnumber women, I believe it also may reflect a set of digital conditions that, intentionally or unintentionally, marginalizes the participation of women, a topic I will address in the following chapter.

²⁶⁵ Randolph (2018) pg. 394-395.

Chapter # 4- Gender, Expectation and Resistance in Battle Rap Fandom

Chapters two and three described how fans contribute to meaning-making in battle rap. That fan activity, I argue, has the potential to lead to tangible shifts in the battle rap scene. As a result, there is cause for concern that the relative dearth of women's voices in battle rap's digital spaces has the potential to create an uneven distribution of influence within battle rap fandom. The impetus for this chapter was my personal perceived disparity between how women were treated in online battle groups versus at live events. I witnessed that women, although outnumbered by men, to be sure, played substantial roles in the execution of the event. They played central roles as fans and emcees, organizers, bouncers, ticket takers, and merchandise salespeople. Furthermore, it was not immediately evident to me how sexism factored into these male-dominated spaces, as it appeared on the surface from my position of privilege that the environment was as safe for women as any male-dominated space. As a result, it became increasingly difficult for me to reconcile my observations at events with the rampant misogyny I saw online.

The goal of this chapter is to analyze the systems and barriers that female fans must overcome to participate in the scene. The spirit of this chapter is to lay bare what I see to be the biggest omission in battle rap's discourse: the treatment of women in online battle rap spaces. This is a topic that has yet to be written about in any significant way, either in journalism, academia, or any other "official" outlet of expression. Unlike other markers of identity that I address in this paper, such as race, gender is a topic in battle rap that has a much less nuanced discourse among its fan base for me to analyze yet plays a substantial role in how the contributions of fans are categorized and validated. By airing these concerns, I hope to provoke a more pointed conversation concerning the failure of online battle rap communities to prioritize

the voices of women, while setting the table for more nuanced and detailed expressions of gendered issues in the scene. This chapter may appear to diverge somewhat from my focus on fan performances to prioritize representation, but I believe that fan performance and representation are inherently connected. For the fan performances of women to register with the scene in ways that are on par with their importance, a shift in the reception of these performances by male fans must change, which ideally would create more space for women to continue contributing to the advancement in the scene. Women do indeed contribute to many of the fan activities that I have described thus far. They participate in fan cyphering in digital spaces, they are involved in battle rap's social commerce and hu-fan-itarianism activities online, and they contribute significantly to the overall meaning-making of battle rap. But it is also true that the women whose fan performances are most visible have had to overcome several challenges for their participation to be taken seriously by male battle rap fans, and thus navigate battle rap's digital conditions in significantly different ways. It is these challenges that I believe need to be articulated, and although a male researcher may seem an odd maven for these issues, I believe that it is crucial that male participants in the scene who carry power and privilege in ways I have described throughout this paper take accountability in alleviating the challenges that non-male participants may face in the scene.

First, I will explain how gender is most frequently conceptualized and performed in battle rap by describing the specific approaches to emceeing that have been codified as masculine by emcees and fans. Additionally, I will analyze how battle rap's coded behaviours affect participants such as Dallas-based emcee NoShame, who must navigate a complicated set of expectations in the battle rap scene as a Transgender woman. I will then shift my focus to discourses of gender in battle rap's online spaces, where the fan-driven criticism of female fans

and battlers creates an arbitrary gendered framework that women must navigate and contest. I argue that the boundaries of acceptable practices as a female fan or emcee, developed by male fans, continue a pattern of control through forms of inclusion and exclusion while echoing the racist practices of reception that have plagued the performances of Black women for centuries. This, in turn, impairs the productive potential of female fans and ultimately limits the growth of the culture.

Lastly, I want to trouble the notion that the culture is monolithically sexist by sharing the experiences of my interviewees who attended live events. As we will see in the final section of this chapter, there is a distinction between the discourse and acceptance of women online and at live events. I also aim to contrast the treatment of women online with the treatment of women in the context of a live event by analyzing a battle of KOTD mainstay Bonnie Godiva to interpret the feedback from male fans at the venue. This analysis aims to reveal how the experiences of female fans and emcees differ between corporeal and digital spaces. Throughout the chapter, my goal is to prioritize the voices of the emcees and fans in question by using excerpts from interviews I conducted throughout the research process.

Battle Rap and Gender Performativity

Like female fans, female emcees remain vastly underrepresented in contemporary professional battle rap leagues such as the Toronto-based King of the Dot. With over a hundred battles uploaded to King of the Dot's YouTube page over the last two calendar years, only a handful of battles feature a woman. Beyond that, in the twelve-year history of the company, not a single Canadian woman has had their battle released on the KOTD YouTube page. Furthermore, when women have performed on the biggest stages in battle rap, they have had to negotiate a

plethora of challenges regarding the cultural assumptions that fans have about the role of women in Hip Hop culture, their physical appearance, and the form and content of their performances.

Battle rap is replete with banal masculine platitudes and performances. Because the primary goal of battle rap is to show dominance and power over one's opponent, battle rap's subject matter and performative approaches evoke narratives of violence, misogyny, and other metaphors that insinuate physical superiority in both speech and gesture. Importantly, the gestures of the rappers tend to be equally aggressive as their bars. The stylistic mimicking of punching, shooting, and stabbing throughout an emcee's round helps to punctuate particularly violent bars, while adjustments of proxemic relationships, from getting up in your opponent's face to the overt dismissal and turning of ones back to their opponent, help to create a corporeal set of expressive practices that are, due to their aggression, inevitably coded as male.

In her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Judith Butler explains gender perception from the phenomenological perspective of "acts." "Acts" in the context of phenomenological theory explains the performance of gender as "the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign."²⁶⁶ The performance of gender then becomes just that, a performance, dictated by a set of various corporeal and verbal signs that constitute an illusion of gender, which in turn can be associated semantically within the social context of the time.

The social sign system is not invented strictly within a social context but is informed historically by the way gender had been previously performed. How a society distinguishes the appropriate signs for each gender is interpreted from the prior performances of that same gender.

²⁶⁶ Butler 1988, pg. 519

The gendered acts do not exist in a vacuum but have “been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.”²⁶⁷ Through vigorous repetition, this illusion becomes interpreted by a culture as a seamless set of codes that belong to, or are inherent in, the gender that is performing them. That is to say, the performance or the illusion eventually grows roots, becoming a set of beliefs believed to be intrinsic or “true” by both the social audience and the performers of the acts. The key to Butler's phenomenological perspective on gendered acts is that gender itself is not stable or intrinsic. It is the acts (the language, gesture, and other social signs) that determine the idea of gender.

In line with Butler's notion of gender performativity, it is through the repetition of these acts that standardized battle rap practices became coded as essentialist or “naturally” masculine. Battle rap's performative lexicon repeats and re-enforces societal tropes on masculinity, and through the dialogic relationship between the performer and the fans, as well as its connection to historical gender practices in broader Hip Hop culture, a hetero-binary approach to gender and gender behaviour became the norm. Thus, it could be argued that the presence of women in battle rap is already a form of gender subversion, in that they are performing in an art form that is coded as male and occupying a physical space usually reserved for men.

During my research on TalkBack's discourses of gender, I noticed that perhaps unsurprisingly, fans most frequently used a binary approach to gender. Discussions of the disparity between female and male emcees, female, and male fans, and so forth, highlighted the lack of non-binary terminology and viewpoints on TalkBack. My interviews also featured almost exclusively binary language on the topic of gender. For instance, all three of the women whose

²⁶⁷ Butler 1988, pg. 526.

interviews are featured in this chapter contrasted the behaviour of women to that of men, the reception of female emcees to male emcees, and described their experiences with other fans by highlighting them as men or women. There was also no mention in my interviews of fan identities that trouble the gender binary that is typical in dominant society. The homogeneity of language that occurred on TalkBack and in my interviews rubbed up against my preference to expand the scope of gender analysis in battle rap culture and find fans on TalkBack that may not fit into typical gender categories.

This is not to suggest that these fans do not exist, but it says something about TalkBack that only cisgender fans responded to my calls for interviews, despite my written desire to hear from genders across the spectrum. As a researcher this felt like a failure on my part, and I am left with the feeling that fans outside of the binary gender system either did not feel comfortable publicly responding to my requests and/or participating in an interview process with a white, cisgender man they did not know and trust. The initial temptation was to position battle rap culture as a conservative, homophobic, and/or transphobic cross-section of society. But there are two issues that come along with that assessment, one moral and one methodological.

Morally, the immediate homophobic/transphobic casting of battle rap, or Hip Hop more broadly, runs the risk of obscuring Queer presence in Hip Hop's history and further marginalizing other Queer participants in the scene. As Rinaldo Walcott notes, positioning Hip Hop "as an inherently anti-queer form" can be interpreted as a process where "the straightening out of hip hop colludes with a white LGBT politics that produces black cultures as always homophobic and that simultaneously makes black queers disappear too."²⁶⁸ The labelling of an entire culture, and one rooted in practices of the Black diaspora no less, would be a grand gesture

²⁶⁸ Walcott (2013) pg. 170.

of white hegemony that I am not prepared to make. Additionally, the emerging presence of battle leagues that prioritize Queer voices, such as the New York City-based Prism Battle league, underscore a small-but-thriving scene of LGBTQ2S+ emcees and events, most of whom are underserved and/or marginalized in the broader battle rap scene but continue to engage with the art form. It should also be noted that cis-gendered Queer women have gained traction in female-specific battle rap leagues, including the largest and highest-profile female-specific league Queen of the Ring, where several cis-gendered Queer women have performed.

Methodologically, my survey of threads regarding Transgender emcee Jolie “NoShame” Drake on TalkBack also troubles the notion of battle rap culture as monolithically anti-Queer. Based in Dallas, Texas by way of Phoenix, Arizona, NoShame began battling in the freestyle era of the 1990s²⁶⁹ before pursuing battles in a cappella battle leagues such as Don’t Flop and AHAT in 2012.²⁷⁰ In my survey of her posts on TalkBack and other threads that feature her name, there were multiple examples where seemingly purposeful misgendering occurred. In some instances, the pronoun “he” appeared to be used intentionally to discredit her work, and in other instances, fans referenced her previous gender in a lazy attempt at humour. Although one instance of explicit or implicit transphobia is too many, it is important to note that most posts that reference NoShame use her proper pronouns and are respectful of her talent as an emcee. In fact, it is far more often that her status as a Transgendered woman is not mentioned within the thread. This is not to excuse the anti-Queer behaviour of fans, position battle rap fans as a socially-progressive group, or TalkBack as a safe space for LGBTQ+ people. However, this survey of TalkBack threads did present an epistemological conundrum as I attempted to reconcile my research findings alongside my intuitive knowledge.

²⁶⁹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/noshame-brings-transgender-awareness-to-the-battle-rap-arena-1.3194831>

²⁷⁰ <https://versetracker.com/rapper/no-shame>

Homophobic and transphobic sentiments were common in TalkBack. In a 2015 CBC interview, NoShame herself addresses the historical lack of acceptance for LGBTQ+ emcees in battle rap culture more generally: “To be honest, a lot of these people still don’t see me as a female, so, um, y’know, that’s the harsh reality of it.”²⁷¹ However, in the same 2015 CBC interview mentioned above, NoShame discusses instances online where members of the battle rap scene have changed their minds regarding their acceptance of her: “I have already had conversations, and been on posts, where people went from complete, y’know, just lack of understanding, to not just understanding somewhat, but to accepting me, or maybe to accepting the situation a little bit more.”²⁷²

Although it is difficult to make sweeping claims about battle rap fans’ acceptance or discriminatory practices against NoShame, what is clear from analyzing the discourse online is that she simultaneously highlights and troubles the binary way of thinking that is omnipresent in the battle rap scene when it comes to gender. What is also clear is that NoShame represents the most salient example of gender performance in contemporary battle rap. In an interview on Episode 28 of The Dirtbag Dan Show, NoShame discusses how her battle rap persona takes on a more stereotypically aggressive and masculine tone: “Currently I’m not talking like I do [in battle rap] on a daily-basis or when I’m at work. When I’m out in public and I’m not in the Battle Rap world, I talk like a female.”²⁷³

What is fascinating about NoShame’s description of the doubleness of her gender performances in this interview is that she speaks in binary terms about the types of behaviour she interprets as feminine (“being dainty”²⁷⁴) and masculine (“this big, tall motherfucker there with a

²⁷¹ Quote at 11:17 in NoShame’s interview with CBC’s radio show *Q*.

²⁷² Quote starts at 9:30 in NoShame’s interview with CBC’s radio show *Q*.

²⁷³ Balfour (2014)

²⁷⁴ Balfour (2014)

deep voice.”²⁷⁵) Additionally, NoShame is quite clear that her aggressive approach was initially a tactic to gain acceptance. NoShame notes that there are aesthetic expectations in an emcee’s performance and that embodying a stereotypically aggressive approach made it easier to be accepted by other members of the battle rap scene: “I’ve had people tell me this, like, ‘We wouldn’t have accepted you if you came in dainty. If you would have come in light like that we wouldn’t have accepted you.’ I knew that going in because I’ve been in the battle culture, I knew what had to be done and I knew how it had to be done.”²⁷⁶

Regardless of the inroads that NoShame had made in terms of her acceptance in battle rap, perhaps the most telling sign of the barriers she still faces is that she has yet to be featured in a KOTD event, despite high profile battles on other leagues with former KOTD champion Pat Stay and other KOTD veterans such as Joe Cutter and Bonnie Godiva. This reveals not only the difficulties that Transgender women experience in gaining visibility in battle rap culture, but also highlights the biases that women face in general as they attempt to climb the ranks as emcees.

Support and Sexism in Battle Rap’s Digital Spaces

The systems of sexism that female-identified fans and emcees must navigate online are full of complex contradictions. Most perplexing is the simultaneous support and sexism that women in battle rap face online. This contradiction is best reflected in the fan response to female-specific battles and events. New York City-based Queen of the Ring, who brand themselves as the world’s premiere female battle rap league, have created a substantial following on YouTube since their inception in 2010, reaching over 235,000 subscribers and their videos routinely garner over a million views. Queen of the Ring has also showcased female emcees that have gone on to battle on some of battle rap’s biggest stages, including O’fficial, Ms. Hustle, and

²⁷⁵ Balfour (2014)

²⁷⁶ Balfour (2014)

Jaz the Rapper, among others. The importance of female-focal battle leagues to the development of female emcees cannot be overstated. With fewer opportunities to develop in male-dominated battle rap events, leagues such as Queen of the Ring become vital training grounds for emerging female emcees who otherwise have a dearth of stage time to hone their craft. Female-specific battle rap organizations have also been productive spaces for battle rap fans to witness a breadth of talented Black female emcees whose representation is largely self-controlled, rather than tokenized by leagues as the “female emcee.”

Despite Queen of the Ring’s success in drawing attention to female battle rap, consistent growth in fandom online has been a struggle. The league is rarely mentioned in battle rap fan groups and has very little of their own social media engagement to speak of. A recent collaboration with URL for their “Royalty” event after a lengthy hiatus from producing a high-profile event has also prompted some fans to question Queen of the Ring’s ability to put on major events without the support of a larger organization. A female emcee’s ability to “crossover” into bigger leagues once they have cemented themselves in a female-specific battle rap league is also a growing concern. Although there are plenty of examples of female emcees that emerged from female-specific battles spaces and are now thriving on bigger stages, female emcees outside of the elite few appear to have more difficulty getting booked at events that serve to propel an emcee’s career. For female emcees who cannot crossover to bigger leagues, there can be a ceiling on their development as an artist and the exposure an emcee requires to make their career economically viable. This has led to Queen of the Ring booking high profile male emcees to compete against the top women in the league, which serves as a showcase of the league’s ability to transcend female-specific battle rap, as well as a showcase for the top female emcees against some of the best competition in the world.

Outside of Queen of the Ring, female emcees face a litany of unfounded criticisms rooted in unfair stereotypes and assumptions. If one were to scour the threads on Talkback, online fan practices suggest that female battle rappers, regardless of their ability to excel within the art form, are only hesitantly and tenuously accepted. Fans appear to be involved in a complex negotiation about the nature of belonging that gravely affects the reception of female emcees. Disproportionate representation, which is frequently pointed out by the minority of female battle rappers and fans, has serious consequences since it is through online spaces like Talkback that battle rap's ethics and aesthetics are conceptualized, articulated, and challenged.

Fan activity on TalkBack primarily disparages or marginalizes female emcees through unfounded critiques of style and performance. The vitriol in these critiques tends to increase the more that a female battle rapper pushes back against the sexist behaviour that is presented in a thread. For instance, a Feb. 2018 post by a respected emcee asked the fans what female battle rappers were lacking to get bigger opportunities. Although the occasional comment from self-aware fans referenced an inherent bias against female battlers, the rest of the posts featured several tired tropes about female battle rappers: they are not talented, they do not write their own material, they have no stage presence. A common sentiment that emerged from male fans in this thread likened battle rap to boxing, mixed martial arts, and other events where they have no interest in watching women perform aggressively. To these fans, there appears to be a disconnect when the agreed-upon aesthetics and practices of battle rap are emanating from a female performer. A perceived lack of ability in writing and performance, a perceived lack of originality, and a perceived lack of believability while performing aggressive content were also reoccurring criticisms.

The lack of believability as it pertains to gender remains an understudied and under-theorized element of authenticity within Hip Hop performance. As McLeod notes, authenticity in Hip Hop manifests in several different “dimensions”, including a “gender-sexual” dimension of authenticity centred around the dichotomy of “hard versus soft.”²⁷⁷ Predictably, the masculine (hard) is considered authentic, and any sign of femininity (soft) is classified as inauthentic. This model of gendered authenticity rings true when extrapolated to battle rap, however, this dichotomy is almost strictly applied to men when analyzed in scholarship. For men, a charge of being feminine is a critique of their authenticity. However, gendered authenticity for women is much more complex than the dichotomy conceptualized by McLeod. It is not enough for women in battle rap to strictly adopt a “hard” persona rife with masculine cliché to be accepted as authentic. Rather, they must walk a tightrope of inherently contradicting expectations from fans, who in short order will fault a female battle emcee for being too feminine and another one for being not feminine enough, or one being too aggressive or not being aggressive enough.

Believability in this context is often a moving target that changes depending on one’s background and appearance. For instance, if a woman uses the “gun bar” trope, which involves a thematic performance of lyrics and body language tethered to gun violence, their appearance plays a part in how it is received. If a woman appears to be “feminine” in the traditional sense of the term, charges of inauthenticity are bound to be levelled against her online. If the bar was very well-written, the criticism may also include charges of borrowing bars from a male rapper or outright having a ghostwriter. In these instances, the female emcees are not afforded the same suspension of disbelief from the fans as male rappers or women with a less stereotypically

²⁷⁷ McLeod (1999) pp.139.

“feminine” persona would and are dismissed as being incapable of performing the fictional violent acts “in real life” or even write their own material.

Rather than understanding their distinctions between women and men’s performances of aggression as merely symbolic constructions of gender, these fans provide naturalistic explanations to justify their thinly veiled sexism by describing aggressiveness or combativeness as naturally male. These seemingly arbitrary and conflicting criticisms of female emcees in fan discourse leave the reader of these threads with a confusing set of performative expectations. What emerges, then, is a series of gender negotiations where female emcees are asked to display neither “hypermasculinity” nor “emphasized femininity” in their performances to fit the expectations male fans have about the aesthetics of battle rap and the behaviour of women generally.

Navigating and Resisting Battle Rap’s Sexist Structures

In my analysis of over fifty fan threads that feature female emcees as the primary topic, two overwhelming trends emerged as women navigated the misogynistic structures at play. The first is the tendency for some female participants to trivialize or accept the sexism in battle rap, and the second is to outright contest the sexism. I would like to parse out the ways female fans and emcees each negotiate the misogynistic structures of battle rap by analyzing two specific posts on TalkBack that elicited detailed conversation on the matter. To do so, all this activity must be read against the backdrop of the common pursuit among fans to become a “seasoned fan.” Respect among battle rap fans is frequently gained through one’s deep and thorough knowledge of all things battle rap. This includes knowing the history of each league and the emcees within it, memorizing specific battles, bars, and lyrics, and/or having a close affiliation with league promoters, staff, and rappers. Fans perform this knowledge in fan groups such as

Talkback, which in turn allows for the social promotion of their activity by other fans in the battle rap scene. The hierarchy of knowledge, or perceived knowledge, that emerges in battle rap culture creates a distinction between the informed fan and the uninformed fan can often evolve to be exclusionary in language. This is colloquially referred to on TalkBack as a “seasoned” or “unseasoned” fan.

The term “seasoned” has a contentious etymology from other battle rap message boards and forums but has come to be used as a catch-all term to broadly describe someone in battle culture with deep knowledge of the art form. The term itself has a hierarchy innately built into it, as some fans claim to know the origins/originator of the term and choose to be exclusionary in this knowledge. It should also be mentioned that the term is also hated by many fans and is not universally accepted despite its frequent use. Regardless of what a fan may think of the term, the phenomenon of the “seasoned fan,” an informed fan who is exclusionary in their parlance, exists, nonetheless. The term “seasoned” can be read as a form of what Fiske refers to as “the cultural economy of fandom.”²⁷⁸ Expanding on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Fiske highlights how fan cultures “begin to reproduce equivalents of the formal institutions of official culture” through three broad categorizations: discrimination and distinction, productivity and participation, and capital accumulation.²⁷⁹ For the purposes of this analysis, the use of distinction and discrimination creates barriers for women to become accepted in the scene, while ironically serving as a potential tactic for their eventual acceptance.

As Fiske notes, fans “discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom and what does not are sharply drawn.”²⁸⁰ For some male fans participating on

²⁷⁸ Fiske (1992)

²⁷⁹ Fiske (1992) pg. 34.

²⁸⁰ Fiske (1992) pg. 34.

TalkBack, the “anything goes” mentality of battle rap that allows for explicit and implicit sexism must extend into its practices of fandom. When criticism is levied or something serves to threaten this ethos, such as the February 2018 post mentioned earlier in this chapter, fans are quick to defend the boundaries of free speech as a tenet of their fandom and criticize those who think differently. When lines are drawn in the sand concerning a core value of battle rap culture, such as conversations involving sexism mentioned above, one tactic of female fans is to trivialize the sexism that is present and align themselves with the dominant discourse in the group.

This is most evident in the posts from female fans that trivialize sexism by justifying misogyny as part and parcel of battle rap culture, and something for women to get used to. In an October 2014 post that initially started as an appreciation thread for women in battle rap, the conversation switched to the “down women” who do not cause “drama” and do not take offence to misogyny in battle rap. The “down woman” has been a long-standing trope in Hip Hop, particularly when men misinterpret a woman's silence on misogyny as acceptance of misogyny. Some female fans in the thread echo their appreciation of “down” women and condemn those who are not.

In posts like these, sexism and male aggression are positioned again as a natural condition of battle rap culture and the onus is on the woman to comply and adapt. By extension of the unbridled use of slurs and insults on stage during a battle, female fans are expected to have as tough a skin as the battlers. In the eyes of the fans who make these posts, this is simply the price one pays for being a battle rap fan. This line of thinking also creates a difference between the women who are willing to accept the sexist parameters of battle rap and the ones that create “drama” and push back against the issue. Those who accept the sexist parameters of battle rap culture received social validation for their views. They also exhibit what Fiske would call

“empowered social behaviour”²⁸¹ by creating a narrative and social identity that functions within the world of battle rap’s accepted sexism, thus showing her “seasoned” knowledge of battle rap culture’s practices and ethos.

The phenomenon of accepted sexism is common in studies on fandom outside of popular music. Lenneis & Pfister’s research on female European football fandom notes that female fans “learn not to challenge the men’s way of doing fandom; they learn to keep silent despite affronts and accept the sexism of male fans... In these processes, female fans become accomplices of the male fan majority and cooperate in the masculinization of football.”²⁸² If one were to extend this logic to battle rap, it becomes apparent that sentiments that trivialize battle rap’s sexism fortify the vision of battle rap as naturally masculine. However, as Manase Chiweshe notes in her study of female soccer fandom in Zimbabwe, joining in on the misogyny or remaining oblivious to its repercussions is a common coping strategy that some female fans feel is necessary to participate.²⁸³

For some women in battle rap, there is a constant process of proving their participation in the culture is valid. This is particularly the case online, where there is a tendency for female fans to be dismissed or categorized as “groupies.” The “groupie” in this case is the polar opposite of the “seasoned fan” and their participation in battle rap culture is seen as casual, fleeting, and/or uncommitted. In an interview with battle rap fan Kirstie Rudy, Rudy highlights how female fandom is not taken seriously by some male fans, but rather is relegated to “groupie” status: “We are groupies no matter what... I’ve not been to an event in person but still get accused of being a groupie having never met a battler in person ever.”²⁸⁴ Rudy experiences this line of thinking

²⁸¹ Fiske (1992) pg. 35.

²⁸² Lenneis & Pfister (2015) pg. 171.

²⁸³ Manase Chiweshe (2014)

²⁸⁴ Rudy (2014)

more in battle rap culture than other spaces of fandom in her life, noting that: “If I said I liked 10 bands and all 10 had attractive men as lead singers no one would even mention it. But because it's battle rap, females must all be trying to have sex with the battlers. It makes no sense.”²⁸⁵

Although the trope of the “battle groupie” was mentioned throughout our exchange, Rudy notes that it was something that bothered her more when she was a teenager watching battles and has learned to toughen her skin as she continued participating in the scene: “If you can't handle a little of [sexism] then you shouldn't be here. It's not something that someone who is easily offended should be into in the first place.”²⁸⁶

Interviewee Alicia Mulvihill felt as if one’s knowledge or proficiency as a fan is what dictated their ability to voice opinions on TalkBack. For Mulvihill, the silencing of certain voices in online fan groups is the result of the animosity shown to the casual, less informed fan rather than the result of one’s gender:

“The downside for me is that I almost feel like a fake fan because I don't spend more time on it. Because I don't memorize everyone's names. Because I can't quote old battles. The community isn't terribly supportive of light weight or casual fans. I really hate how much disrespect there is amongst fans in the forums.”²⁸⁷

This feeling is echoed by Rudy who felt as if new women have a difficult time gaining acceptance in the culture, while noting that her acceptance grew as she developed a presence in the online scene: “when you've been a fan so long and so many of them know you it does get better. I haven't been called a groupie in years. But I see new female fans dealing with that often.”²⁸⁸ This problematic, sexualized form of gatekeeping that positions female fans as

²⁸⁵ Rudy (2019)

²⁸⁶ Rudy (2019)

²⁸⁷ Mulvihill (2019)

²⁸⁸ Rudy (2019)

groupies until proven otherwise highlights a blind spot that some male battle rap fans exhibit when judging the participation of women. This is particularly important to think about when we read these actions against the backdrop of larger cultural systems that tolerate inequality, sexism, and racism.

Structural systems of inequality are important to consider when analyzing the second trend of response that was common, which was the outright contestation of battle rap's sexist norms. This is most prevalent in threads created by the more established emcees, and NY-based Bonnie Godiva is perhaps the most vocal in contesting sexist practices in battle rap. Bonnie is a frequent contributor on TalkBack that highlights the lack of women battling on the King of Dot platform and the lack of promotion for the few that do. Bonnie frequently identifies a double standard between the lack of fan criticism for the performances of popular male battlers in the group and the overwhelming criticism of female performances. She points specifically to the lack of headlining opportunities for women to battle in a judged event for the KOTD championship. This thought is echoed by numerous women, including No Shame who notes that "it's almost like a female has to get to the top tier of the other females in order to be accepted to a male vs female battle."²⁸⁹

The online reaction from fans to Bonnie's perspective is predictably harsh, and rather than respond to the concern at hand, many of the responders choose to levy criticism at her appearance rather than her skill. This is a reoccurring trend on any post where Bonnie is critical of the gender dynamics in battle rap. The typical pattern is that Bonnie poses an intelligent question to contest sexist ideologies, only to be met with commentary about her large breasts or posterior. The language used in these posts sexualizes what is otherwise an intelligent line of

²⁸⁹ Quote starts at 10:51 in NoShame's interview on CBC's radio show *Q*.

enquiry, and one can't help but read the obsessive focus on her body as a continuation of the historical othering and controlling images of Black female bodies in hegemonic white culture. We have seen this hyper-sexualization of Black bodies in many genres of popular western entertainment throughout the centuries, from the Antebellum South through to Blacksploitation films.

As a performer, Bonnie embraces her sexually charged image. Bonnie frequently ties in sexual metaphor and violence into her rhyme schemes, which effectively takes control of her sexualized narrative while also abiding by the aesthetic practices of battle rap that emphasize violent imagery. As Tricia Rose has pointed out, this practice by female emcees can produce divergent narratives, as “they affirm black female beauty and yet often preserve the logic of female sexual objectification.”²⁹⁰ However, I firmly position the performances of Bonnie Godiva as acts of resistance that actively counter hegemonic masculine narratives through agency and empowered femininity, which Imani Kai Johnson articulates as “badass femininity.”

For Johnson, badass femininity is a term that defines the acts of marginalized femininity, a femininity “that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded of ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman’s strength.”²⁹¹ Importantly, these performances should not be interpreted as an embodiment of masculine behaviour by women, but rather a series of oppositional performances where femininity is recalibrated to include the lived experiences of marginalized female performers. In the case of Bonnie Godiva, I assert that her battles are acts of forceful expression and bodily reclamation that antagonizes battle rap’s codes and conventions that seek to simultaneously exploit her and exclude her.

²⁹⁰ Rose (1994) pg. 147.

²⁹¹ Johnson (2014) pg. 20.

In her 2016 battle with Carter Deems, we see Bonnie embracing both the violent and aggressive ethos of battle rap while simultaneously foregrounding her sexuality:

“Fuck the over joking, no over joking let's go blow for blow I'm a rope-a-dope him
Two .44's and D's will shake up his grill like he motor boating.”²⁹²

The boxing analogy in the first bar and the double meaning of “D’s” as slang for both double-barrel shotguns and her breasts in the second bar creatively play with her femininity within the aggressive context of battle rap. This exhibits what Johnson articulates as the contradiction of being a woman in Hip Hop, where women are “being used as props to buttress cliched masculinities while challenging that formulation by claiming both those so-called masculine qualities and their femininity.” As Henderson notes, frequent comparisons are made between the performances of sexualized women in Hip Hop culture (in her article, the music video performers often referred to as “video vixens”) and predecessors of Black hyper-sexuality such as Sara Baartman and Josephine Baker.²⁹³ Henderson parses out the differences in the representation and meaning of the two through the European, white gaze, stating:

“If Baartman’s representation of the black female body became an index of racial difference and sexual deviance in the European imaginary...Baker’s “performance of the primitive” had the effect of redefining the image of the black woman as exoticized and eroticized Other in the European colonial imaginary.”²⁹⁴

Highlighting Baker’s control over how her body was staged and presented to the public, Henderson positions Baker’s Black femininity as distinct from both hyper-sexualized “video vixens” and Baartman, who, in her interpretation, have less agency. Elaine Richardson makes

²⁹² Carter Deems vs Bonnie Godiva, genius.com. It should be noted that the presentation of this material on the page, where each bar is given a separate line, is common practice in Hip Hop culture when documenting an emcee’s verse.

²⁹³ Henderson (2013) pg. 163.

²⁹⁴ Henderson (2013) pg. 165.

links between the Black hyper-sexual performances of the past and Hip Hop as well, as she notes how the sexualized representation of Black women in Hip Hop is reminiscent of the wench or Jezebel tropes used during the trans-Atlantic slave trade which position Black female bodies as loose and immoral, thus justifying their exploitation.²⁹⁵

To put these two scholars in conversation with each other, I interpret the performances of female emcees such as Bonnie Godiva as a disconnect in performative intent and reception. I view Bonnie's performances as full of agency, and a powerful form of resistance against a scene that exhibits moments of racist and sexist backlash, much in the same way that Henderson positions Baker's performances. However, Bonnie's performance style also positions her for attacks online. The reception of Bonnie's performances, the criticism of her physical appearance and hyper-sexuality by male fans, can be read as an attempt to maintain societal order and control while simultaneously reinforcing historical perceptions of Black bodies and ideologies of inequality. Much like other forms of reception in battle rap, distinctions must also be made between the reception of a woman's performance in digital spaces versus a woman's performance at live events, as it is common to see a much warmer reception from the corporeal audience than the digital one.

Gender and Live Events

When surveying the early years of Toronto's Hip Hop events, there is plenty of evidence that women were well represented and played a fundamental role in building the scene. Michie Mee played a foundational role in elevating the profile of Canadian emcees internationally. Before aligning with New York Hip Hop royalty such as KRS ONE, Scott La Rock and MC Lyte, Michie Mee was a fixture of Toronto's fledgling Hip Hop scene, making frequent

²⁹⁵ Richardson (2007) pg. 790.

appearances at Toronto's seminal Hip Hop events hosted by promoter and Fantastic Voyage Radio show DJ Ron Nelson.

Michie's battle at the March 14th, 1987, event "The Ultimate Hip Hop Battle Part II", held at the seminal Hip Hop venue the Concert Hall, was a landmark performance in Toronto battle rap. Billed as "New York Invades Toronto!" the event featured several New York emcees, DJs and breakers battling Toronto artists on their home turf. Described by Michie herself as "the most famous battle at the Concert Hall,"²⁹⁶ she emerged victorious over New York emcee Sugar Love and helped define a style of rapping that Toronto would become famous for.

Cofounder of Beat Factory Records Ivan Barry and celebrated Hip Hop journalist Del Cowie both note that the integration of Michie's lyrical flow with Jamaican dancehall and reggae was key to her victory that night. This mash-up of Hip Hop with other Afro-Caribbean traditions is what Barry would call Michie's "secret weapon," a unique approach and sound that separated her from her American counterparts.²⁹⁷ The sound that Michie pioneered situates Toronto's early Hip Hop scene as a site of unique Afro-Caribbean diasporic practices, as this fusion of dancehall, reggae, and Hip Hop, proliferated through the subsequent eras of Toronto Hip Hop production. Artists such as The Dream Warriors in the 80s and 90s, Kardinal Offishall in the 90s and 2000s and most recently Drake in the 2000s all combine diasporic musical and linguistic practices with localized Canadian references in the same manner as Michie did in her battles. Thus, her influence not only in battling but also in helping to spawn a uniquely localized rap aesthetic, cannot be overlooked. As Kardinal says about Michie's style in a 2017 interview with *Now Magazine*, "that became the norm for Toronto."²⁹⁸ I highlight Michie Mee and the early Toronto

²⁹⁶ Michie Mee in Ritchie (2017)

²⁹⁷ Ivan Barry in Ritchie (2017)

²⁹⁸ Kardinal Offishall in Ritchie (2017)

events that featured battle rap because the documentation and material ephemera from the era shows an active contingent of women both as battle emcees and spectators. Videos from the MuchMusic archives, event posters and first-hand accounts of early Hip Hop events highlight the women who were showcased on the stages of the Concert Hall, including DJs such as DJ Mel Boogie, Emcees Lady P, as well as the booking of prominent female emcees from the US such as Queen Latifa and Roxanne Shanté.

The aforementioned Roxanne Shanté was an innovator herself and helped to forge new approaches to the format and delivery of battle rap. Alongside her rival Sparky Dee, Shanté transcended street battles in Queensbridge, NYC in 1985 to co-create and tour the battle-informed record *Round 1: Roxanne Shanté vs Sparky Dee*, featuring production by industry heavyweights Marley Marl and Spyder-D. The record included tracks that featured each emcee. But more relevant for this project is the collaborative track that had the emcees exchanged verses in a battle format, with the content of the rounds being direct shots at the opposing emcee. The tour that followed the record was a revelation in an era where women had difficulty finding stage time and is an early example of a concert tour that integrated a battle format into live concerts. Top billing and sold-out shows speak to the positive reception the tour received, and the willingness for an audience to invest in the competitive narrative of two female emcees.

Shanté also battled in the 1985 edition of the New Music Seminar's emcee "Battle for World Supremacy," with a result that typifies the kinds of barriers that women must overcome to succeed in Hip Hop. Now a well-documented moment in Hip Hop history, a fifteen-year-old Shanté, the only female emcee battling that day, ran through her early competition in the event, countering her opponent's written rounds with freestyle rebuttals and scathing personal bars. The finals of the competition pitted her against Busy Bee, with Busy Bee controversially coming out

on top in what could be considered the biggest robbery in battle rap history. The blame for the result is most often placed on legendary emcee Kurtis Blow, who gave Shanté a surprising score of four-out-of-ten for supposedly relying too heavily on shocking material,²⁹⁹ but as Busy Bee explains in an interview with journalist Kathy Iandoli, was thinly veiled sexism: “I think they weren’t ready for a female to take the helm.”³⁰⁰

When analyzing the role that women played in both New York City and Toronto Hip Hop, it is evident that artists such as Michie Mee, Roxanne Shanté, and the countless female fans and performers that entered the doors of the Concert Hall or *Round 1* tour venues were prominent and important contributors. It also begs the question of how Michie and Shanté’s performances may have been received had there been social media during their era. Clearly, sexism existed before the internet, and it can be reasonably assumed that both emcees experienced plenty of sexism as pioneering emcees in their respective countries. But as Adrienne Shaw notes, misogyny and other forms of hate are “enabled by technology and the cultural norms of Internet communication in which this behaviour is supported, defended, and even valued.”³⁰¹ One must wonder if Michie Mee and Roxanne Shanté, much like Bonnie Godiva, would have been celebrated at events but scorned online.

The degree to which Bonnie experiences hostility online from fans does not align with the reception she receives from fans at the venue. When reviewing a recording of her 2016 battle with Carter Deems on YouTube, one would be forgiven if they felt they were watching an entirely different emcee than the one who is routinely derided in TalkBack. Bonnie’s primary approach to the battle is to exploit Carter Deems’ reputation as a skinny, nerdy white emcee. She

²⁹⁹ Iandoli (2019) pg. 44.

³⁰⁰ Busy Bee in Iandoli (2019) pg. 44.

³⁰¹ Shaw (2014) pp. 275.

does so by vacillating between hyper-violent and hyper-sexual bars that position her as both physically and sexually dominant, flipping the script on a tactic that men frequently apply against her. Because Carter Deems is known for producing some of the most humorous battles on the KOTD platform, Bonnie cunningly couches her approach in humour to capture the crowd that is partial to Deems' approach to battling. The following bars from her first round succinctly encapsulates her attempts to dominate Deems both violently and romantically:

“I know I told you I wouldn't be mean but fuck it I'm taking you out
And after I beat yo' ass tonight, you're taking me out
You already brought the flowers, but I want dinner and candles too
Or bitch I'ma handle you”

From my review of the video, it appears Bonnie's rounds are very well received by the mostly male audience at the venue. When her punchlines are delivered there is tangible aural and gestural reactions of support from the crowd, and her more clever wordplay elicits positive head nods and other non-verbal signs of support. Humour not only appeals to the portion of the audience that is there to see Deems perform. It also serves as a trojan horse of sorts concerning her authenticity. By framing the violence within a joke, Bonnie is dismantling any potential concerns regarding the believability of her violent bars. The sexualization of Bonnie from male fans is also minimal in comparison to the usual sexual slurs that Bonnie experiences online. Aside from two audible catcalls of “Oh you're so fine!” and “I love you!” there are no other signs of the rampant misogyny that Bonnie faces during the battle. This is not to say that she does not experience sexism at events when she is not performing, but it is puzzling that she receives so much positive reinforcement from fans throughout her battle with Carter Deems, only to get lambasted with misogynistic abuse on TalkBack.

In chapter 2 I posit that battle rap fans often learn how to perform their fandom by watching online videos. Although I firmly believe this is the case when it comes to the learning and performing of audience etiquette and other social practices that battle rap fans participate in, I can't help but wonder why a blind spot remains when it comes to learning about the reception of female emcees from the live audience. In the example above there is clear modelling of respect and admiration for Bonnie from the male fans, yet a segment of the online audience remains hostile to her regardless. This dichotomy of reception is consistent across several of her KOTD videos, where she seems to be received positively in each of the venues. This phenomenon prompted me to explore the experience for female fans who, much like Bonnie, I often see on the receiving end of criticism in TalkBack. I wanted to get a sense if, or how, the experiences of my interviewees at events were different than online.

The women I interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at live events and seemed to think battle rap events were welcoming spaces for female fans. In an interview with Destiny Quackenbush, a long-time battle rap fan and a fixture at Toronto events, she is quick to note how her experience of live battle rap events is much different to her experiences online, noting a change in attitude towards her from male fans when they are at an event:

“One thing that made me fall in love with events is that it is very rare that I am hit on or made to feel uncomfortable by sexual behaviours at the events. Men are usually respectful when rejected which is rare in hip hop or music in general. Online there is a very different attitude. As most people, hiding behind screens makes it easier to be

disrespectful and crude. Often comments are made that question my intelligence because of my gender.”³⁰²

Battle rap fan Alicia Mulvihill articulates similar feelings about the atmosphere at live events, and her treatment by male fans: “I think that once you are physically at an event it is very welcoming and accepting and comfortable for women...I guess in general everyone has been really welcoming. They seemed to like that more girls are coming to shows.”³⁰³

Mulvihill also notes the stark contrast between the behaviour of male fans and emcees online in comparison to her experiences at live events. Much like Quackenbush, she mentions the ease with which fans can hurl insults when in front of a screen: “The weird thing is that the fans don't treat each other like that in person at events. It's only online. I guess everyone can talk tough when they're hiding behind a computer.”³⁰⁴ Mulvihill expands on this thought, highlighting how the disparity between the communication online and at live events may create an issue of perceived exclusion when it comes to women attending their first live event:

“There is a perception that it might not be a great environment for women...I don't think I ever would have gone to that 1st one by myself. I think I needed someone that I really trusted to tell me how friendly everyone was and reassure me that it was a safe and welcoming environment for women. In essence, I think they have a perception problem and not an actual behavior (sic) or environment problem.”³⁰⁵

This becomes a question, then, of how the scene may validate one's participation and nullify another's. In my introduction, I claim that the battle rap scene appears to reject Auslander's impression that the polarization between live and the mediated is one of competition

³⁰² Quackenbush (2019)

³⁰³ Mulvihill (2019)

³⁰⁴ Mulvihill (2019)

³⁰⁵ Mulvihill (2019)

that is tied to cultural economy. And by in large that is supported by most of my interviews, where no one thought much of the inherent value of attending live events in relation to their position or commitment to battle rap culture. However, it is important to note that most of my interviewees are male who, although reflective of the gender imbalance in the culture itself, do not experience the same levels of discrimination as my female interviewees.

It appears as if the chasm between the cultural economy of online participation and live participation is not as significant for male fans because the same social stigma is not attached to their participation as it is with women. Men run almost no risk of being labelled “a groupie”, having their presence online sexualized by other fans, or having their fandom questioned based on their gender. They are also very unlikely to have insults levied upon them for their thoughts or opinions based on their gender (although they will undoubtedly be ridiculed for their opinions based on other factors.) Thus, the level of social acceptance that is tethered to attending live events may be gendered, as the sexism and discrimination towards my interviewees appeared to have dissipated once they were at the venue.

Of the women I interviewed, the majority felt the differences in their experience online versus their experience at events was the result of the anonymity that digital fan groups afford. While I believe their analysis is accurate, a distinction must be made between anonymous digital activity that occurs when the user is attempting to adopt an alternate persona distinct from their offline lives and digital activity that has intentions to replicate, or even cross over into, offline spaces. It is most useful for this dissertation to understand most personas within digital battle scenes as belonging to the latter, due to the substantial overlap between the people who populate digital battle rap spaces and the people who populate corporeal battle rap spaces. Hardley notes that the construction and negotiation of identities in virtual spaces change when there is an

opportunity to extend the contact offline.³⁰⁶ Because fans who communicate in digital spaces are prone to attending the events in person or share parts of their corporeal experiences in online spaces with fellow fans, the ability to “escape their embodied selves” in TalkBack is limited, and often not desired in favour of connection that can transcend the casual and the virtual.

Contrary to the creation of an alternate persona via TalkBack, one may witness examples of one’s alternate persona being stripped down in this digital space. The use of a multi-purpose social media platform such as Facebook means that one’s identity within battle rap intersects with other facets of one’s broader identity. Because a substantial number of participants use the same Facebook account for battle groups as they do for the rest of their social media practices, the identity displayed in TalkBack coincides with the identity that communicates with family, friends, and/or work colleagues on Facebook’s platform. For instance, emcees who frequent TalkBack are often communicating using their birth name rather than their stage alias, and their profile pictures do not reflect the persona they construct for the stage, but rather pictures with their children, or pictures of them in work attire. As a result, it can be argued that group members are getting a more accurate sense of a fan or emcee’s identity in a digital space rather than in a corporeal space since aspects of one’s personal life are also on display in these digital spaces.

This is not to say that there are not some completely anonymous users or that one’s identity is still not constructed when there is a connection between online and offline. In the introduction to their book *Race in Cyberspace*, Kolko et al position the internet as a “constructivist environment” where one’s virtual self comes to exist through a series of purposeful choices embodied in language, gender, and other markers of identity. Within this environment, Kolko et al posit that one’s virtual self is often an extension of one’s “offline self”

³⁰⁶ Hardley (2002) pg. 570-571.

to some degree, and we often carry with us a way of understanding the world through our personal experience and worldview. In this case, the construction and presentation of one's identity on TalkBack echoes Kolko et al.'s position in that a fan's identity may still be carefully constructed in their profile while reflecting some parts of the user behind the profile. But one's "virtual self" cannot stray too far from one's offline identity if one plans on participating in offline fan culture, such as attending events.

This is what makes the blatant sexism that is present in battle rap so disturbing. Sexism has been normalized to the extent that fans can make disturbing comments about female fans or emcees, understanding that they may share space with that person at an upcoming event. Moreover, it appears that fans aren't made accountable for their actions online once they are in venues, speaking perhaps to the extent that sexism is an accepted part of fan cyphering online, which as I have articulated throughout this dissertation, is an act that has substantial effects on the culture itself. The lack of accountability for sexism speaks to two distinct, but connected, performances of masculine, online sexism. The first could be considered "hegemonic" masculinity in the Gramscian sense of the word, where the offending men attempt to reaffirm gender inequity through explicitly sexist posts concerning female emcees. By dismissing the contributions of female fans and emcees, these participants delay or prevent systemic change in the group. These are often the most salient performances of masculinity but do not necessarily make up a statistical majority of activity. Equally as common is the second form of masculine performance, which may be considered a non-performance by some, and that is the act of silence. The male fans that stay silent in the face of sexism in battle rap's online space, in turn, reify the system of inequality that they benefit from, even if they do not participate in explicitly sexist activity online. Despite this being impossible to quantify, one must consider what larger

effects the silence of men has in relation to battle rap's sexist discourses, and if this lack of mobilization by men around the issue has larger consequences in how and when women participate in the scene.

Notwithstanding the overwhelmingly positive perspective from the female fans I interviewed regarding their experiences at the events they attended, I cannot imagine this is a universal experience for all women at events. I cannot help but wonder what perspectives are missing from women who have never attended a live battle event in fear that the sexism online may be more explicit and dangerous in the live event context, or who did not feel comfortable responding to my request for an interview for fear that I too may replicate the sexist patterns that they see online. This most certainly is a factor in how my positionality affects the outcome of this analysis.

Silence in Battle Rap Fandom

Despite the vibrant and varied forms of fan contributions I have described throughout this dissertation, the relative absence of women posting may be the most telling sign concerning the state of gender discourse in the group. In my interview with Destiny Quackenbush, who frequently participates in conversations in TalkBack, she notes the sexism she experiences in her participation online, and how silence can be a tactic of de-escalation: "I have experienced sexism via online comments...usually by a fellow fan. I usually don't engage or respond to their comments, so the situation has never escalated past a trolling comment."³⁰⁷

The silencing of women in mainstream Hip Hop culture has been addressed by scholars such as Bakari Kitwana, who notes that women that are present in the narrative of mainstream Hip Hop are often positioned as "inanimate objects" that are presented as if they "have no

³⁰⁷ Quackenbush (2019)

opinions.”³⁰⁸ Kitwana also notes “that there are significant repercussions to a thinking woman who questions incites the physical violence of her male peers.”³⁰⁹ Rebollo-Gil and Moras also highlight the silencing of women in mainstream Hip Hop narratives, evoking aspects of emotional and physical abuse in lyrics that amounts to silencing: “much of black male rappers’ energy is spent trying to either keep women quiet or getting them to shut up. The rest is spent trying to get them into bed or in some cases even condoning or bragging about sexual assault/rape which ultimately has the same silencing effect.”³¹⁰

When reading the feedback on TalkBack from female fans in conjunction with the literature on mainstream Hip Hop narratives, it is reasonable to assume that the silencing that occurs in mainstream Hip Hop is equally present in the battle rap scene. However, simply evoking the notion of silence brings about a methodological conundrum. As Nedim Hassan reminds us, “Academic writing on fandom is, after all, a *discourse*” and the articulating and shaping of this discourse inevitably goes through “processes of inclusion and exclusion.”³¹¹ In my interviews, there was a wide breadth of answers to questions relating to women having their voice heard in fan discussions, from sometimes feeling excluded to feeling completely respected in their opinions. There was also a lot of vulnerability shown by the interviewees considering they were being asked to discuss their experiences of toxic masculinity with a white, male researcher that they either didn't know or only knew tangentially.

However, what I have had to reconcile with as a researcher are the limitations to this particular methodology when it comes to access. One might imagine that the responses for interviews I received are only indicative of the kinds of respondents who felt comfortable

³⁰⁸ Kitwana (1994) pg. 53.

³⁰⁹ Kitwana (1994) pg. 53.

³¹⁰ Rebollo-Gil and Moras (2012) pg. 126.

³¹¹ Hassan (2013) pg. 134.

connecting with a white, male researcher. I imagine different researchers, with different markers of identity, might garner different responses from a different subsection of KOTD's fan base. Although the responses I received from women about battle rap's sexism were incredibly helpful in contextualizing aspects of the culture that I did not experience myself, this chapter does not speak to the experiences of women who may not have felt safe or comfortable responding to my open calls for interviews on TalkBack. It also cannot account for female fans who have ceased their participation on these online forums because they may have felt they were disrespected or not being heard. After gaining greater insight through my interviews and the analysis of discourse on TalkBack, I also cannot help but wonder if my own positionally as a white, male researcher presented a risk for women to respond to requests online. Undoubtedly battle rap has lost female fans because of the toxic environment online, and their voices and opinions on the matter cannot be recovered in this dissertation. As a result, the impact of silencing is difficult to quantify, and I struggle to understand to what extent it may play in the participation of women online. From a larger research perspective, this struggle also reminds me of the need for more diverse voices tackling the topic of gender in battle rap, to ensure that the voice of a white, cisgender, male (with their own positionality and inevitable oversights) is only one of several writers investigating the topic.

Conclusion

The impetus for this dissertation was to detail the productiveness of fan activity in battle rap, and more specifically, emphasize the fan's ability to shape the culture they participate in. Through their tireless productivity, battle rap fans have forged change in the approaches of emcees, the environment in which events take place, and the flow of resources and commerce that enter the scene. Therefore, battle rap fans, many of whom participate predominantly in digital realms such as message boards, Pay-Per-View events, and Facebook groups, hold significant power when it comes to the future of battle rap, a future that is changing rapidly due to technological and social shifts in our current cultural climate. In a less positive light, the tireless advocating and admonishing that battle rap fans engage in also has negative effects on their fellow participants, particularly Queer participants, and women participants, who often remain at the margins of the culture due to the incessant prejudice that fan activity produces in battle rap's digital settings.

It is not controversial to state that the evolution of battle rap and its fandom will be inextricably linked to the cultural shifts that have occurred, and continue to occur, with the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the increasingly rapid shifts in the application of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although several factors will weigh into the future of battle rap, the most pressing concerns and the most immediate shifts in the culture will emerge in the wake of these two global phenomena. Throughout this conclusion, I attempt to provide some structure to the shifting conditions that are occurring in 2022, while also coming to terms with the fact that the scene's ongoing conversations will continue to develop long after this dissertation has gone through its necessary academic administrative processes.

I am certain this is the case for many researchers who attempt to capture a particular

artistic moment in time, but the pace at which our culture seems to be shifting in the current moment has left me scrambling to understand what is still true from my research and what might be irrelevant by the time this publication is released. My inability to respond in this form to the ongoing changes that will emerge in the coming months is frustrating and is a substantial limitation of this format of research and publication. Although I firmly believe that I have done justice to the scene and the people that populate it, throughout this conclusion, I aim to provide some possible directions the scene may be headed in relation to the material I have covered in each chapter.

Chapter 1 aimed to fill a gap in Hip Hop scholarship by focusing on Hip Hop audiences and fandom. The framework I use to analyze audiences is contingent on analyzing the conditions of both the digital and corporeal battle rap spaces, however an emphasis was placed on connecting these two modes of reception, rather than treating them as disparate siloed entities. This began with a historical analysis of battle rap's spaces in Toronto, understanding the connection between digital and corporeal audiences that KOTD incorporates as a continuation of previous models of battle rap such as Ron Nelson's Hip Hop events and radio call-in battle programs such as "Eat the Beat." As I reiterate throughout the chapter, battle rap audiences have unique ways of thinking throughout their participation at events, particularly as it relates to the relationship between online and corporeal audiences. This analysis of battle rap fandom in this hybrid context shifts the research away from models of Hip Hop scholarship that position these fan spaces in polarity. By detailing the specific pedagogical, communicative, and performative practices present in these spaces, this chapter provides new frameworks for understanding fan participation in battle rap.

Battle rap fans learn how to be fans through countless hours of watching battles on digital

platforms such as YouTube. I contend that through the act of watching online battles, digital fans learn many of their spectatorial habits and traditions. By observing both the emcees and the fans who are present at the battle events, digital spectators develop an understanding of the etiquette, habits, and traditions associated with being corporeal audience members. This unique process leads battle rap fans to value the corporeal and digital experiences of audiences equally, with a nuanced understanding of the pros and cons of each mode of spectatorship. Fans reach out to each other to break the divide between corporeal and digital by communicating throughout the event, often discussing their spectatorial positionality as it relates to their judgment of a battle. By doing so, fans take control of the narrative of the event, shaping how battles are perceived and how emcees are adjudicated.

In response to the influence that digital battle rap audiences have on the events, battle rap organizations continue to search for more intricate ways to incorporate them as a part of the ritual. The most salient example of this is the recent collaboration between battle rap league URL and the social broadcasting service Caffeine. The use of the term “live” that Caffeine employs signifies the temporal liveness of the event, where the primary audience is digital and there is a set start time for the audience to tune in. There is also an ephemeral aspect to their use of the term “live”, as their broadcasts on Caffeine are only shown once in real-time and then are no longer available until the organization decides to release the footage on their URL app or YouTube. These applications of the term “live” speak to the prioritization of the digital audience on these platforms, which are increasingly important to battle organizations during a time when live audiences are less possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Battle rap organizations were in an ideal position to deal with the effects that COVID-19 has had on performing arts events. Because battle rap organizations have been gradually shifting

the conditions of their events to prioritize the digital audience, the growing pains associated with the digitization of the traditions and practices of the art form have been managed over a long period of time. Rather than trying to rush to market with an adapted digital form of a mostly corporeal performance form, battle rap has been evolving with digital technologies to adapt their events to the internet in ways that most theatre, dance, and music producers have not. The fan discourse associated with the shift to an all-digital audience for battle rap organizations has been an ever-evolving and polarizing one and may play a role in how organizations envision large venue events in the future.

Choosing to eschew the PPV model for some of their events in favour of reaching a broader audience through free video streaming, URL's shift to Caffeine has altered how digital fans participate during the event. The proprietary in-app chat system allows fans to "react" to the battles they are watching in real-time by sending a short message or emoji, which is seen below the video of the battle. According to Caffeine, the purpose of this is to streamline the connection between viewers and broadcasters "to create a meaningful and unique experience for each user."³¹² The messaging systems also allow fans to engage with other fans' reactions as well, providing a multi-directional mode of communication between fans watching battles on Caffeine.

KOTD has followed suit by signing an exclusive worldwide partnership with the video streaming service Twitch to host their upcoming Grand Prix Tournament. Much like Caffeine, Twitch utilizes a proprietary chat function to allow fans to communicate in real-time with the host and other fans during the broadcast. For KOTD's Grand Prix, live voting by fans on Twitch was factored into deciding the victor during the tournament. This meant that fans who usually

³¹² https://caffeine.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/3/~what-is-caffeine%3F

unofficially debate winners and losers on platforms like TalkBack had a voice in deciding the winner. Although this may or may not become a permanent feature of KOTD battles hosted on Twitch, it yields potential for the fan to have an even greater influence on the outcome of the battles, and thus, the direction of the culture.

The opportunity that Caffeine and Twitch provide for real-time communication is an exciting new addition to digital fan interaction during events and centralizes the communication activities that fans are already doing on one single platform. Nevertheless, the change in audience connections does not come without a cost. Both Caffeine and Twitch's chat infrastructure prioritizes speed and turnover when it comes to messages from fans. This means that a fan's message is only present on the screen for mere seconds before it is replaced by another fan's message. The fleeting presence of a fan's comment, combined with the fact that Caffeine reactions are limited to roughly 80 characters, means the articulate and nuanced fan communication that currently populates Facebook groups throughout an event is not possible in the real-time ecosystem of either platform at this time. This shift also calls into question what type of fan interaction KOTD and URL want during events and how they imagine that interaction being integrated into the fan experience.

Although it is too early to tell how fan interaction will evolve on platforms such as these (or even if these types of streaming sites will be long-term hosts of battle rap), it appears as if fan interaction during the event is on the course to be more transient and ephemeral, rather than a part of a cyphering or repertoire that lives in a knowledge depository such as a Facebook thread. Will this new form of fan interaction usurp the current model that is common on Facebook groups, or will we see new hybrid forms of fan discourse emerge that combine multiple technological platforms and methods of communication? It is too soon to tell, but these questions

are particularly important when we consider the future of fan cyphering as new technologies are prioritized in the scene.

Chapter 2 traced how battle rap's digital fan forums become sites for the practice of fan cyphering, an act of cyclical fan discourse that contributes significantly to the preservation and contestation of battle rap's cultural memory. By positioning the practice of uploading, sharing, and adjudicating battle rap videos and other digital ephemera as a repertoire of translocal fan labour, I aimed to unpack how fan cyphering collaboratively yields social, pedagogical, and performative outcomes. Through the acts of posting and critiquing footage, fans map the history of battle rap culture and its contemporary practices while navigating complicated intercultural discourses concerning race, gender, and free speech. I assert that the strength of the fan archive lies in its diversity of contributors. Through a diverse set of fan archivists that create and disseminate meaning within the context of battle rap forums, the historicizing of battle rap is constantly negotiated through the detailed analysis of the politics and aesthetics embedded in the archived videos. The perpetual co-production and contestation of battle rap's historical discourses prevent a singular hegemonic narrative from emerging, thus usurping the hierarchies present in traditional archival practices.

The future of fan cyphering will be affected most significantly by two intersecting factors I aim to unpack here: 1) future/emerging social media technologies and 2) battle rap's evolving communal standards. The evolution of social media platforms has the potential to affect how fan production is organized and distributed. Historically, the primary digital affordance of fan cyphering is the thread, a vertical organization of fan communication that prompts the user to add their voice to a growing list of posts organized by user, date, time, etc. Threads are battle rap's primary knowledge depositories and have come to be understood by the scene as a

fundamental organizing principle of fan communication since early fan forums. One question facing this organization of fan communication is how it may change if new platforms or hosts emerge. Two primary sites where threads currently emerge, Facebook and YouTube, each face different challenges which call into question their long-term viability concerning battle rap's digital scene.

Facebook, the current preferred medium for battle rap fan groups, is an ageing social media platform, and there is evidence that younger generations of social media users are moving away from Facebook in favour of other platforms. Edison Research and Triton Digital's 2020 Infinite Dial study, a digital consumer report that has been published yearly since 1998, notes that usage of Facebook among the United States 12 to 34-year-old demographic group has declined by 15% since 2017.³¹³ Even though battle rap fan groups are translocal, the United States remains battle rap's largest and most economically important market, and these statistics could mean that the prime target age demographic is becoming less and less interested in participation on Facebook. Although it is unclear exactly where or how this migration of social media activity affects the usage of newer social media outlets such as TikTok or Discord, it appears as if battle rap's young fans do not envision Facebook as their chosen form of communication.

This calls into question the future of the thread itself. Should younger generations of fans adopt Discord, for instance, the text-based channels that operate in similar ways as Facebook may not change the inherent thread structure of battle rap fandom. However, if social media outlets such as TikTok become the preferred site of fan labour, the scene may see a shift away from text-based threads in favour of short-form, mobile video production. What this may yield

³¹³ <http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Infinite-Dial-2020-U.S.-Edison-Research.pdf>

for the archival or pedagogical effects of fan cyphering is difficult to deduce. But the creative and performative potential of social media applications that prioritize the physical body of the user has the potential to center the fan and their performative body in a way that threads are currently incapable of doing. Currently, the centring of a fan's body is most common on YouTube, where fans may record and publish videos that include their thoughts on recent battles, predictions for upcoming battles, or interviews with people in the scene. Despite this practice being quite popular, questions of monetization, censorship, and communal standards have raised questions concerning YouTube's suitability for the battle rap scene.

The fundamental shift in the YouTube ecosystem occurred in 2017 with their first "Ad-pocalypse", a colloquial term used to detail YouTube's abrupt changes in policy and guidelines. These abrupt policy changes are often created to protect major advertisers from accidentally being connected to videos that are violent or hateful. But there is an unintended trickle-down effect on all content generators whose videos may correctly or incorrectly get caught up in the frantic demonetization of videos that could be loosely interpreted as violating YouTube's ever-changing policies. As Amanda Hess notes in her 2017 article for the New York Times, "YouTube's process for mechanically pulling ads from videos is particularly concerning, because it takes aim at whole topics of conversation that could be perceived as potentially offensive to advertisers and because it so often misfires."³¹⁴ This process gets even more complicated when the adjudication process (either mechanical or manual) cannot identify the context of the potentially offensive material, such as when it is used in an artistic medium such as battle rap.

³¹⁴ Hess (2017).

Furthermore, YouTube's vague use of terms such as "hate speech" and "violence" leaves content creators scratching their heads as to what content may be acceptable and what content may be demonetized. KOTD's Online Operations Manager's Troy "King Fly" Daniels has stated his concerns with the consistency of the adjudication process in several posts, seemingly unable to understand how one battle can be monetized while another similar battle cannot. Battle rap's communal standards, which I have argued are negotiated via processes of fan cyphering, increasingly do not align with YouTube's changing community standards. KOTD's partnership with Twitch and URL's partnership with Caffeine are in part a response to the uncertainty of ad-based revenue in the ever-changing landscape of YouTube, as both organizations are moving prime content away from YouTube and appear to be using YouTube's platform more selectively.

In another approach to circumvent the censorship of YouTube, URL launched a proprietary app to house several of their new releases, rather than uploading them onto their YouTube channel. Although the app has received mixed reviews from fans in terms of its usability and performance, URL's aggressive distribution strategy of three unreleased and/or new battles a week and app-only streaming events mark a clear shift away from third-party hosting services. Considering the increasingly stringent barriers created by services such as YouTube which do not align with the communal standards of the battle rap scene, I believe we will see more and more battle rap content producers pursuing other avenues and corporate partnerships that align more closely with battle rap's communal standards or have less restrictive guidelines.

As mentioned in chapter 2, battle rap's communal standards are not fixed, but rather continuously re-evaluated and re-worked by the scene's participants. The re-working of battle rap's views on race have been evolving with the 2020 resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and an overall re-evaluation of how race functions within the scene. The most salient

example is a currently evolving controversy concerning battle rap's preeminent director of battles on film, Kyle "Avocado" Gray. In August of 2020, a 2014 video resurfaced where Avocado, who is white, appears to be laughing at and participating in racist jokes about Black battle rappers alongside white emcee 24/7. This understandably set off a firestorm of opinions on fan forums, particularly because Avocado had been so vocal about racism in battle rap and his place as a guest in the culture. Accusations of being a racist hypocrite, pledges to absolve him of his actions, and calls to "cancel" him from battle rap has all been common reactions in the wake of the controversy. It is too early to tell what the fallout from this incident may be, as fan cyphering on the topic continues, but unlike other topics of fan cyphering which benefit from the inconclusiveness of the perpetual circulating and contesting of opinions, I have a personal fear that this topic will not be resolved adequately.

My fear emerges from the tenor of the debate, which appears to be blind to the differences between the use of race as a tactic in battle rap and the use of racist language in a colloquial discussion. Race in battle rap is messy, particularly when racist slurs and racial angles are so common within the context of a battle. Emcees are so good at compartmentalizing the vulgar materials directed at them that I can't help but wonder if this promotes a less thoughtful consideration of race in some fans. When race is used in an artistic context, there is a risk that this practice can bleed into other aspects of the scene. For a subsection of fans, the bleeding of battle rap's performative ethos into regular life seems to provide them with the necessary permission to be absolved of all racist behaviour within the scene. I have yet to fully understand how this logic functions in a scene that is fundamentally rooted in Black culture, particularly since it does not seem to be one specific race or demographic that abides by this line of thinking. But the controversy surrounding Avocado has the potential to be a pivotal moment in the culture,

where casual racism and questions of power can be laid bare and adequately addressed. In my interview with Pass, one of his parting messages speaks directly to white fans about the first step in combating flawed thinking on race in the scene:

“Battle fans can learn from really listening, um, like the white battle rap fans, like if anyone doesn’t think that, like, white privilege is a real thing or that white supremacy isn’t a challenge for Black folks...I want folks to listen, like, openly, to Black people...just intentionally listening, and not with a defensive burden of your white guilt, or whatever, getting in the way.”³¹⁵

Pass’ call for white fans (and by extension, league owners, and emcees, etc.) to listen and learn from the Black members of the scene is crucial for the health of the scene, particularly as battle rap begins to enter the mainstream and runs the risk of being further co-opted by dominant culture.

In chapter 3, I describe how fan groups such as TalkBack become productive spaces of commercial activity, and I position this commercial activity as a part of a broader lineage of Hip Hop entrepreneurship that values capitalist practices. Two forms of social commerce, one official that influences outcomes for KOTD and one DIY that helps to build the brand of an emcee, account for most of this commercial activity. In both instances, fans play a substantial and mostly undocumented role in facilitating and consuming this commercial activity. The activity that occurs on Talkback is a collective practice that is co-created between the organization, the fans, and the emcees, who work together to increase the visibility and sustainability of battle rap through their activity online. Positioning fans as communal stakeholders in the vitality of battle rap troubles the notion that fans are merely exploited free

³¹⁵ Alexander “Pass” Jenney (2020)

labour or passive consumers in this commercial context. Because fan labour in battle rap is envisioned by the scene as community-minded labour, it is not tethered to a pursuit of individual distinction or social power. Instead, the community-minded labour of fans is a less official and more culturally specific form of humanitarianism, or what I have called “hu-fan-itarianism.” Because the labour of battle rap fans rarely benefits a single organization, a single emcee, or their own financial interests, I contend that the labour of fans should be seen as extensions of the moral and altruistic philosophies of the battle culture they serve. The goal of including this chapter, and what I believe is its primary contribution to the field, is to help shift the conversation of commercialism and Hip Hop away from trite moral judgements on capitalism and toward the individual frameworks created by the scenes in question. The findings reflect the feelings of the scene, with all the conflicts and contradictions that come with those feelings. I believe the exegesis of this ideological shift in commercial practices and DIY labour more accurately positions the fans as willful, consenting adults negotiating humanitarianism and commercialism in nuanced ways rather than passive victims of capitalism. This nuance is crucial as researchers, artists, and fans of Hip Hop continue to examine how capitalism functions within Hip Hop at both the commercial and grassroots levels.

As battle rap becomes a more commercially viable art form, or more “mainstream” for a lack of a better term, questions arise as to how and when fan labour stops being a communal practice. The current scene-based model of fan labour is contingent on a form of reciprocation via a triangulated form of scene building with emcees and organizations. In exchange for their labour, fans benefit from having a direct line to the decision-makers of the art form in some instances. But what happens when decisions on how battle rap is managed and presented come from outside the scene? Commercial entities such as James Corden’s segment-turned-television

show “Drop the Mic” use the aesthetics and practices of battle rap to produce comedic content. Although “Drop the Mic” worked with emcees such as Rone and Hollow Da Don on their writing teams, the product exists and operates outside of the scene for the most part, which is reflected in the poor reception and support it has received from fans invested in battle rap culture.

Aside from their outsider status, “Drop the Mic” strictly emphasizes one aspect of the art form, humour, and largely ignores the political aspects of battle rap discussed in this dissertation. Commercial products such as “Drop the Mic” that appropriate battle rap with little-to-no consultation with the scene continues the historical practice of white commercial entities exploiting Black cultural products. In the introduction to his 2003 book *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture*, Greg Tate notes the tragic silencing effect of white America’s insatiable appetite for Black cultural products and simultaneous desire to scrape the Blackness away from them.³¹⁶ This process rings true when it comes to certain uses of battle rap outside of the scene and becomes particularly concerning when we see institutions outside of Hip Hop controlling the narrative around Hip Hop or any other Black diasporic performance practice. Shows such as “Drop the Mic” aren’t forced to engage with feedback from the battle rap scene or listen to calls for change from fans and emcees in the same way a white-owned battle rap organization like KOTD does. Instead, they bypass those who are invested in the culture in favour of a broader audience that has little exposure to battle rap, its participants, and the internal discourses that shape the art form.

The opposite of this model is the active incorporation of the battle rap scene into the film *Bodied*, which premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival and was eventually

³¹⁶ Tate (2003) pg. 2-3.

distributed by YouTube Premium. Written by former KOTD champion Alex “Kid Twist” Larsen, the film features a significant number of battle rap fixtures such as Terrance “Big T” Greenlee, Davone “Daylyt” Campbell, and Lekan “Poison Pen” Herron, just to name a few. Aside from subjective opinions regarding the quality of the film, battle rap fans were generally quite supportive of the project since members of the scene were intimately involved in its creation. Links to public showings, articles about the film, and critical reviews were often shared in fan groups around the time of the film’s release, and the overwhelming support from Toronto’s battle rap scene helped the film win the 2017 “Toronto International Film Festival’s People’s Choice Award: Midnight Madness”, which celebrates underground and cult films.

Another example I have witnessed is the significant change in reception for Nick Cannon’s battle rap-based television show “Wild n’ Out” once the show began incorporating more emcees from the battle rap scene as cast members. The show is far from universally loved in battle rap circles, but many battle rap fans appear to be applauding the show for strengthening its ties to the battle rap scene while providing high profile opportunities to emcees who otherwise had limited exposure outside of battle rap. I use these two examples to underscore the importance of fans feeling intimately connected to the products that reflect battle rap in the broader public sphere. At the core of this connection is a feeling that the product must take into consideration the views and standards of the scene. When battle rap fans feel as if the product is linked to the scene in meaningful ways, a practice of collective promotion and consumption tends to occur, particularly when the fan base feels as if the product in question will benefit the battle rap scene.

Chapter 4 serves to highlight battle rap’s systemic barriers that impede the participation of women in the scene. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, these barriers are simply not discussed in battle rap circles to the extent they deserve to be. Although Hip Hop Studies and

Popular Music Studies often investigate systems of sexism and oppression, battle rap's specific issues related to these topics remain underexplored in the academy.

Female emcees and fans are forced to navigate a series of problematic expectations to have their voices heard, particularly in the digital sphere. In instances where there is resistance to the sexist structures of online fandom, such as the examples involving Bonnie Godiva, the sexism often accelerates, including the reception of her performance practices rooted in historically racist and sexist tropes of the Black female performative. I contend that fan performance and representation are inherently connected and that shifts in the reception of the fan performances of women by male fans would allow for women to continue contributing to the advancement in the scene. Although I contend that battle rap is not monolithically anti-women or anti-Queer, a contention supported by my interviews with female fans regarding their experiences at live events, there is plenty left to be desired when it comes to the treatment of marginalized peoples in the scene.

Much of the work that needs to be done can broadly be described under the umbrella of equity practices. Although equity is a buzzword that can have several meanings, the battle rap scene must begin to make conscious decisions to ensure that fans and emcees are not marginalized or excluded based on their gender or sexuality. One could point to the few women and members of the LGBTQ2S+ scene who are showcased in major battle rap leagues as evidence that the scene is already leaning toward practices of equity. However, the sparse examples of representation that are often used in this argument run dangerously close to tokenization, where emcees from marginalized communities are present in the scene, but not necessarily provided the same opportunities as other emcees.

Like every issue in battle rap, a solution to this concern will only be achieved through the

collaboration of fans, leagues, and emcees. One positive step toward a more inclusive environment was the decision by KOTD to ban the word “faggot” from their 2020 Grand Prix tournament. This may seem like an incremental change to the casual observer. But the banning of any word in battle rap is substantial considering how guarded the notion of free speech is. This decision was not universally praised; however, many fans and emcees were vocal in defending the decision by the organization, which may embolden KOTD to take a closer look at the rules and/limitations they put on speech in the future. Although I think it is valuable to debate the efficacy of banning words as an attempt to curb hatred, I believe this instance is at the very least a positive gesture to the broader battle rap scene that change is needed to grow the scene. The next step for fans, emcees, and leagues is to make further tangible commitments that help to support marginalized voices in the scene.

Despite some skepticism amongst fans, the URL partnership with Queen of the Ring to produce the “Royalty” event in January of 2020 and the “Kings vs Queens” event in October 2020 should be interpreted as a step forward. By setting up battles between some of the most respected industry veterans from URL and Queen of the Ring, the collaboration should continue to expose more fans to female battle rap, create more access for female emcees in other top leagues, and develop more interest in Queen of the Ring’s brand. This last point is particularly important, as the health of a female-focused battle rap league is vital to the development of female emcees, particularly if women continue having difficulty getting booked in other leagues. Even simple acts of support for Queen of the Ring from the fans in the form of YouTube subscriptions and watching their catalogue of battles would allow the league to increase their digital revenue streams, attract new corporate partnerships, and produce more events where marginalized emcees are featured.

For larger leagues such as KOTD, fan advocacy for a greater diversity of emcees, and vocal support for a league's efforts in equity, has the potential to create an environment where marginalized emcees can be perceived as the asset that they are rather than a liability they are often assumed to be. An increased profile for marginalized emcees has substantial growth potential for the scene. For the league, this can translate into more eyes on their brand/product, larger view counts on social media, and a wider pool of fans to draw to events, all of which increase the league's bottom line. Leagues and fans alike often discuss the barriers that battle rap faces in growing the culture without ever addressing a large portion of fans who may be disincentivized based on battle rap's prejudicial practices. I assert that greater representation among the emcees has the potential to increase the visibility of the art form, while also increasing the number of fans and spectators. If leagues continue to make space in the scene for women and members of the LGBTQ2S+ scene, they must see substantial support from the fans regarding this decision.

As I have noted throughout this dissertation, fans play a substantial role in the business practices of the culture and in formulating battle rap's guiding beliefs. Much in the same way that fans take on active roles in deciding matchups, preferred battle spaces, and audience configuration, battle rap fans must take on some of the responsibilities to change the overall ethos of the scene. Battle rap fans have proven to be tolerant, supportive, and even enthusiastic, about change. There is no more pressing and necessary change than the current communal standards which have allowed racism and homophobia to go unchecked at times. Battle rap is not immune to changing cultural attitudes despite its self-perception as a place for free speech. Tough conversations on race and gender as it pertains to who participates in the scene have already begun and will only gain momentum as broader societal conversations on equity

continue to evolve.

Works Cited

- “...Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto’s Hip Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital,” *McMichael Canadian Art Collection*, <http://mcmichael.com/event/everything-remains-raw-photographing-torontos-hip-hop-culture-from-analogue-to-digital/>, accessed Jan. 5, 2020.
- “About this Group, Description. KOTD - 'TalkBack' - Official Battle Discussion Group.” *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/KOTDTalkBack/about/>. Accessed Oct. 23, 2018.
- Abercrombie, Nicholas and Brian Longhurst. *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, SAGE Publications, 1998.
- Abraha, Lidia. “Why won’t Toronto venues book hip-hop?” *nowtoronto.com*, <https://nowtoronto.com/music/features/why-wont-toronto-venues-book-hip-hop/>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- “A Collective Impact: Interim report on the inquiry into racial profiling and racial discrimination of Black persons by the Toronto Police Service”. *Ontario Human Rights Commission*, <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/public-interest-inquiry-racial-profiling-and-discrimination-toronto-police-service/collective-impact-interim-report-inquiry-racial-profiling-and-racial-discrimination-black#IV.%20Findings>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- Alim, H. Samy, Jooyoung Lee and Lauren Mason Carris. “Moving the crowd, ‘Crowding’ the Emcee: The Coproduction and Contestation of Black Normatively in Freestyle Rap Battles.” *Discourse Society*, 22.4, 2011, pp 422-439.
- Allain, Paul and Jen Harvie. *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*, Routledge, 2006.

- Androutsopoulos, Jannis & Arno Scholz. "Spaghetti Funk: Appropriations of Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music in Europe", *Popular Music and Society*, 26, 2003, pp 463-479.
- Ang, Ien. "The Nature of the Audience", *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction*, edited by John Downing, Ali Mohammadi, Annabelle Sreberny, SAGE Publications, 1995, pp. 207-220.
- Arnold, Mark J., and Shelley R. Tapp. "The Effects of Direct Marketing Techniques on Performance: An Application to Arts Organizations." *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 15:3, 2001, pp. 41-52.
- Aston, Elaine and George Savona. *Theatre as Sign-System*, Routledge, 1991.
- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture, Second Edition*, Routledge, 2008.
- Auxier, Brooke and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2021." *Pew Research Centre, Internet & Technology*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>. Accessed May 15, 2021.
- Balfour, Jay. "NoShame Describes Being Transgender In Battle Rap World." *HIPHOPDX.com*. <https://hiphopdx.com/news/id.28040/title.noshame-describes-being-transgender-in-battle-rap-world>. Accessed July 10, 2019.
- Banes, Sally. "Physical Graffiti: Breaking is Hard To Do." *The Village Voice*, 22-28 April 1981.
- Banes, Sally. "Breaking is Hard To Do." *Contact Quarterly*, 7.1, 1981, 7-10.
- Banks, Daniel, editor. *Say Word!: Voices from Hip Hop Theater*, University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, W. Morrow, 1963.
- Barnett, Michael. "Humanitarianism Transformed," *Perspectives on Politics*, 3:4, 2005, pp.

723-740.

Bass, Holly. "Blowin up the Set." *American Theatre*, 16:9, 1999, pp 18-20.

Bay-Cheng, Sarah. "Digital Culture." *Performance Studies: Key Words, Concepts and Theories*.
edited by Bryan Reynolds, Palgrave, 2014, 39-49.

Baym, Nancy K. "The new shape of online community: The example of Swedish independent music fandom." *First Monday*, 12:8, 6 August 2007, <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1978/1853>. Accessed May. 30, 2019.

Bennett, Andy. "Hip-Hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip-Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities." *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Marc Anthony Neal Murray Forman, Routledge, 2004, pp 203-213.

Bennett, Andy. "Hip hop am Main: the localization of rap music and hip hop culture." *Media, Culture & Society*, 21:1, 1999, pp 77-91.

Bennett, Andy and Richard Peterson, editors. *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*.
Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.

Bennett, Lucy. "Texting and Tweeting at Live Music Concerts: Flow, Fandom and Connecting with other Audiences through Mobile Phone Technology." *Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience (1st ed.)*, edited by Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts, Routledge, 2014, pp. 89-99.

Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Routledge, 1997.

"Bishop Brigante on His Battle Rap Record/ MC Jin Trilogy & More! | Pt1 S4 Part 1" *YouTube*,
uploaded by We Love Hip Hop Network, June 19 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PotU0R0NKHw>

Booth, Paul. *Digital fandom: New Media Studies*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.

- Booth, Paul, editor. *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2018
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *The Sociology of Economic Life*, edited by Mark Granovetter, Richard Swedberg. Routledge, 2011, pp. 78-92.
- Brewster, Bill and Frank Broughton. *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. New York: Grove Press, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, 40:4, 1988, pp. 519-531.
- "What is Caffeine?" *Caffeine*. https://caffeine.custhelp.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/3/~/~what-is-caffeine%3F. Accessed Aug. 30, 2020.
- Campbell, Mark V. "Our Story." *Northside Hip Hop Archive*, <http://www.nshharchive.ca/about/our-story/>. Accessed July 10th, 2019.
- Campbell, Mark V., editor. ...*Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto's Hip Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital*. Goose Lanes Editions and McMichael Canadian Art Collection. 2018.
- "Carter Deems vs Bonnie Godiva." *genius.com*. <https://genius.com/King-of-the-dot-carter-deems-vs-bonnie-godiva-lyrics>. Accessed July 10, 2019
- Carter, Denise. "Living in virtual communities: An ethnography of human relationships in cyberspace." *Information Communication and Society*, 8:2, 2005, pp 148-167.
- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, Picador, 2005.
- Charnes, Dan. "A history of hustling gives hip hop its entrepreneurial edge", *Financial Times*, February 3, 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/4282afc8-ab9f-11e4-b05a-00144feab7de>,

accessed Jan 5, 2020.

Chiweshe, Manase. "One of the Boys: Female Fans' Responses to the Masculine and Phallogentric Nature of Football Stadiums in Zimbabwe." *Critical African Studies*, 6:2-3, 2014, pp. 211-222.

"Cypher." *Lexico Powered by Oxford*. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/cypher>.

Retrieved June 15, 2019.

Conner, Lynne. "In and Out of the Dark: A Theory about Audience Behaviour from Sophocles to Spoken Word." *Engaging art: the next great transformation of America's cultural life*, edited by Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey. Routledge, 2008.

Cutler, Cecelia. *White Hip Hoppers, Language and Identity in Post-Modern America*. Routledge, 2014.

Cutler, Cecilia. "The Co-construction of Whiteness in an MC Battle." *Pragmatics*, 17:1, 2007, pp. 9-22.

Cutler, Cecilia A. "Yorkville Crossing: White teens, hip hop and African American English", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 3:4, 1999, pp 428-442.

Daniels, Troy "King Fly". "Re: Sean's questions about TalkBack." Received by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 31 Oct. 2018.

De Kosnik, Abigail. *Rogue Archives. Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, MIT Press, 2016.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Dimitriatis, Greg. "Hip-hop: from live performance to mediated narrative." *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal and Murray Forman, Routledge,

- 2004, pp 486-502.
- Driscoll, Ronald “Rahney”. Facebook Messenger interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 1 April 2019.
- Ellessor, Elizabeth. “Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom.” *Cinema Journal* 51:2, 2012, pp. 46-66.
- “Facebook Tips: What’s the Difference between a Facebook Page and Group?” *facebook.com*, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-tips-whats-the-difference-between-a-facebook-page-and-group/324706977130/>. accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- “Erik Foreman On Battling, Being An Early Uploader Of Rap Battles, Luke, Seasoning.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Battle Rap.com, November 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxEYst3dz2U>.
- Felman, Adam. “Organik Speaks on ‘Blackout 5’”. *battlerap.com*, Jan 28, 2015, <http://battlerap.com/news/2015/01/8870-organik-speaks-blackout-5>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- Fiske, John. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, Routledge, 1992.
- Fleetwood, Travis “Organik”. Telephone interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 24 March, 2016.
- Fogarty, Mary. “Breaking expectations: Imagined Affinities in Mediated Youth Cultures.” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 26.3., 2012, 449-462.
- “For the Record: An Idea of the North,” *Toronto Public Library*, accessed Jan. 5, 2020. <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/programs-and-classes/exhibits/for-the-record.jsp>
- Forman, Murray. “‘Represent’: Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music.” *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman, Marc Anthony Neal. Florence: Routledge, 2004, pp 231-255.

“Frankie Payne aka Jugganot” *Views B4 the 6*, <https://soundcloud.com/viewsbeforethe6/views-b4-the-6-frankie-payne-aka-jugganot>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.

Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme. Directed by Kevin Fitzgerald, Palm Pictures/VH1 Television, 2000.

Gehl, Robert. “The archive and the processor: The internal logic of Web 2.0.” *New Media and Society*, 13:8, 2011, pp. 1228-1244.

Gilbert, Ben. “How Facebook makes money from your data, in Mark Zuckerberg’s words.” *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-facebook-makes-money-according-to-mark-zuckerberg-2018-4>. Accessed July 15, 2019.

Gillis, Carla. “Vanishing music venues: three months into 2017 and we’ve already lost seven.” *nowtoronto.com*, Mar 1 2017, <https://nowtoronto.com/music/torontos-vanishing-music-venues/>

Grandmaster Caz. “The MC, Master of Ceremonies to Mic Controller.” *Davey D’s Hip Hop Corner*, <http://www.daveyd.com/historyemceegmcaz.html>. Accessed March 31 2017.

Gray, Jonathan, C. Lee Harrington and Cornel Sandvoss, editors. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. NYU Press, 2007.

Guerra, Paula. “Just can’t go to sleep’: DIY cultures and alternative economies from the perspective of social theory,” *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*. 16:3, 2017, 283-303.

Hardey, Michael. “Life Beyond the Screen: Embodiment and Identity through the Internet.” *The Sociological Review*. 50, 2002, pp 570-585.

Hanifan, Lyda F. “The Rural Community Centre.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67, 1916, pp 130-38.

- Harrison, Anthony K. "Racial Authenticity in Rap Music and Hip Hop." *Sociology Compass*, 2:6, 2008, pp 1783-1800.
- Harrison, Anthony K. "'Cheaper than a CD, plus we really mean it': Bay Area underground hip hop tapes as subcultural artefacts." *Popular Music*, 25:2, 2006, pp. 285.
- Harrison, Anthony K. and Craig E. Arthur. "Hip Hop Ethos." *Humanities*, 8:1, 2019, pp. 39.
- Harvie, Jen. *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Hassan, Nedim. "Hidden Fans? Fandom and Musical Activity." *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, edited by Mark Duffett, Routledge, 2013.
- Heaggans, Raphael. *The 21st Century Hip-Hop Minstrel Show: Are We Continuing the Blackface Tradition?*, University Readers, 2009.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 1979.
- Heim, Caroline. *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, 2016.
- Henderson Mae G. "About Face, or, What Is This 'Back' in B(l)ack Popular Culture? From Venus Hottentot to Video Hottie." *Understanding Blackness through Performance Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anne Crémieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Hicks, Matt. "Facebook Tips: What's the Difference between a Facebook Page and Group?" *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-tips-whats-the-difference-between-a-facebook-page-and-group/324706977130/>. Accessed Oct. 23, 2018.
- Higgins, Dalton. "TDot vs the 6" *Now Magazine*, June 17, 2015, <https://nowtoronto.com/news/tdot-vs-the-6/>, Accessed Jan 5, 2020.

- Hoch, Danny. "Towards A Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts Movement." *Total Chaos: The Art And Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*, edited by Jeff Chang, Perseus Books, 2006, pp 349-363.
- Hodkinson, Paul. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2002.
- Hunter, Marcus Anthony. "The Nightly Round: Space, Social Capital, and Urban Black Nightlife." *City & Community* 9:2, 2010, 165-86.
- Iandoli, Kathy. *God Save the Queens: The Essential History of Women in Hip-Hop*. Dey Street, 2019.
- Ibrahim, Awad El Karim M. "Becoming Black: Rap and Hip-Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL Learning." *TESOL Quarterly*, 33:3, pp 349-369.
- "Is Toronto's music scene segregated by race, class, & geography? The NICE show hopes to change that". *spacing.ca*, April 22 2014, <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2014/04/22/torontos-music-scene-segregated-race-class-geography-nice-show-hopes-change/>, accessed Jan 8 2020.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Towards and Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti, University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Jenkins, Henry. "Acafandom and Beyond: Week Two, Part One." *Henry Jenkins* June 20, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/06/acafandom_and_beyond_week_two.html, Accessed July 10, 2022.
- Jenney, Alexander "Pass". Zoom interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, July 6, 2020.
- Johnson, Imani Kai. *Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop*. 2009, University of Southern California, PhD dissertation.

- Johnson, Imani Kai. "From blues women to b-girls: performing badass femininity." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 24:1, 2014, pp. 15-28.
- Jones, Bethan. "The Fandom Is Out There: Social Media and the X Files online." *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, edited by Kristin M. Barton and Jonathan Malcolm Lampley, McFarland and Company, 2014. 92-104.
- Keleta-Mae, Naila. "Outskirts to Mainstream?: Performance Poetry on the Move." *Canadian Theatre Review*, 149, 2012, pp. 76-79.
- Kennedy, Gerrick D. "Bad Boy For Life: A look back at the rap empire Sean 'Puff Daddy' Combs built." *latimes.com*, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-sean-p-diddy-combs-bad-boy-entertainment-retrospective-20151005-story.html>. Accessed July 15th, 2019.
- Kitwana, Bakari. *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, Basic Civitas Books, 2005.
- Kitwana, Bakari. *The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence*, Third World Press, 1994.
- Knowles, Ric. *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Krishnamurthy, Sowmya. "From Unpaid Intern To JAY-Z's Right-hand Man, Lenny S on How You Can Get Into (and stay) in Hip-Hop." *xxlmag.com*, <https://www.xxlmag.com/news/2018/03/lenny-s-interview-shot-callers-podcast/>. Accessed July 15th, 2019.
- Lashua, Brett. "The Arts of the Remix: Ethnography and Rap." *Anthropology Matters*, 8:2, 2006, https://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/67/129, Accessed 10 July 2019.
- Lee, Jooyoung. *Blowin' Up: Rap Dreams in South Central*. Chicago: University of Chicago

- Press, 2016. Print.
- Lee, Steve S. and Richard A. Peterson. "Internet-Based Virtual Music Scenes: The Case of P2 in Alt.Country", *Music scenes: Local, Translocal & Virtual*, edited by Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, pp 262-285.
- Lenneis, Verena and Gertrud Pfister. "Gender Constructions and Negotiations of Female Football Fans. A case study in Denmark." *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 12:2, 2015, pp.157-185.
- Levin, Laura and Marlis Schweitzer, ed. *Performance Studies in Canada*, McGill-Queens University Press, 2017.
- Lindemann, Justine. "Gardens and Green Spaces: placemaking and Black entrepreneurialism in Cleveland, Ohio." *Agriculture and Human Values*, 36, 2019, pp 867–878.
- Marsh, Charity. "Keepin' it real?: Masculinity, race, and media representations of Gangsta' Rap in Regina." *Making it like a man: Masculinities in Canadian arts and culture*, edited by Christine Ramsey, Wilfred Laurier Press, 2011, pp 149-170.
- Marsh, Charity. "Don't call me Eskimo: The politics of hip hop culture in Nunavut," *Musicultures: The Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*, 36, 2009, pp 108-129.
- "Mastermind PART 1." *Views B4 the 6*, <https://soundcloud.com/viewsbeforethe6/views-b4-the-6-mastermind-part-1>.
- McLeod, Kembrew. "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation." *Journal of communication*, 49:4, 1999, pp 134–150.
- Mitchell, Tony. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

- Mitchell, Tony. "The Diy Habitus of Australian Hip Hop." *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 123:1, 2007, pp. 109–122.
- Morgan, Marcyliena. *The Real Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. Print.
- Mulvihill, Alicia. Facebook Messenger interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 6 June 2019.
- "NoShame brings transgender awareness to the battle rap arena." *cbc.ca* <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/noshame-brings-transgender-awareness-to-the-battle-rap-arena-1.3194831>. Accessed June 12, 2019.
- "NoShame Rapper Page." *versetracker.com*, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/no-shame>. Accessed June 12, 2019.
- O'Leary, Ryan. Telephone interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 10 Aug. 2018.
- "Our Story," Northside Hip Hop, <http://www.nshharchive.ca/about/our-story/>, accessed Jan. 5, 2020.
- Oware, Matthew. "Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap Music." *Journal of African American Studies*, 15:1, 2011, pp 22–39.
- Palfrey, John G. "Reluctant Gatekeepers: Corporate Ethics on a Filtered Internet." *Global Information Technology Report*, World Economic Forum, 2006-2007. pp. 69. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=978507>
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993.
- Phua, Joe. "Use of Social Networking Sites by Sports Fans: Implications for the Creation and Maintenance of Social Capital." *Journal of Sports Media*, 7:1, 2012, pp. 109-132.
- Pihel, Erik. "A Furified Freestyle: Homer and Hip Hop." *Oral Traditions*, 11.2, 1996, 249-269.
- Potter, Russel A. *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, SUNY

- Press, 1995.
- Quackenbush, Destiny. Facebook Messenger interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 5 June 2019.
- Rabaka, Reiland. *The Hip Hop Movement: From R&B and the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation*, Lexington Books, 2013.
- Rae, Douglas. "Foreward." *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives on Community and Bowling Alone*. edited by Scott L. McLean, David A. Schultz and Manfred B. Steger, 2002, pp. xiii
- Randolph, Antonia. "'Don't Hate me Because I'm Beautiful: Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music.'" *Race, Gender & Class*, 13:3/4, 2006, pp 200-217.
- Rebollo-Gil, Guillermo and Amanda Moras. "Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 45:1, 2012, pp. 118-132.
- Reeves, Mosi. "The Roots' Black Thought on How He Spit a Nearly 10-Minute Viral Freestyle." *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-roots-black-thought-on-how-he-spit-nearly-10-minute-viral-freestyle-197206>. Accessed 6 May 2019.
- Richards, Thomas. "Archive and Utopia." *Representations*, 37, 1992, pp. 104-135.
- Richardson, Elaine. "'She was Workin like Foreal': Critical Literacy and Discourse Practices of African American Females in the Age of Hip Hop." *Discourse & Society*, 18:6, pp. 789–809.

- Ritchie, Kevin. "An Oral History of Hip Hop Shows at the Concert Hall." *Now Magazine*, 2017, <https://nowtoronto.com/music/features/an-oral-history-of-hip-hop-shows-at-the-concert-hall/>. Accessed July 15th.
- Rodman, Gilbert B. "Race...and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity." *Popular Communication*, 4:2, 2006, pp. 95-121.
- Rodman, Gilbert B., Lisa Nakamura and Beth E. Kolko, editors. *Race in cyberspace*, Routledge, 2000.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan Press, 1994.
- Rudy, Kirstie. Facebook Messenger interview. Conducted by Sean Robertson-Palmer, 5 June 2019.
- Sarkar, Mela, and Dawn Allen. "Hybrid Identities in Quebec Hip-Hop: Language, Territory, and Ethnicity in the Mix." *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 6.2, 2007, 117-130. Accessed 27 Nov. 2018
- Schloss, Joseph. *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip Hop Culture in New York*, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Scott, Anna B. "What's it Worth to Ya? Adaptation and Anachronism." *Routledge Dance Studies Reader. 2nd Edition*, edited by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, Routledge, 2010, 97-108.
- Setaro, Shawn. "Everything You Think You Know About Freestyling Is Wrong." *Complex*, <https://www.complex.com/music/2017/11/everything-you-know-about-freestyling-is-wrong>. Accessed 6 May 2019.
- Shadkam, Mahdi and James O'Hara. "Social Commerce Dimensions: The Potential Leverage

- for Marketers.” *Journal of Internet Banking and Commerce*:18:1, 2013, <http://www.icommercecentral.com/open-access/social-commerce-dimensions-the-potential-leverage-for-marketers-1-14.php?aid=37955>. Accessed July 15th, 2019.
- Shaw, Adrienne.(2014) “The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 11:3, pp 273-277.
- Shikhan, Amani Bin. “Toronto’s hip-hop building blocks: An oral history with DJ Grumps.” *redbull.ca*,<https://www.redbull.com/ca-en/toronto-hip-hop-history-dj-grumps>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- Shumway, David. R. “Rock and Rock as a Cultural Practice.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 90:4, 1991, pp. 139-155.
- Spady, James. G., H. Samy Alim, Samir Meghelli. *Tha Global Cipa: Hip Hop Culture and Conciouness*. Black History Museum Publishers, 2006.
- Story, K.A. “Performing Venus- From Hottentrot to Video Vixen: The Historical Legacy of Black Female Body Commodification.” *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology*, edited by Gwendolyn Plough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham and Rachel Raimist, Parker Publishing, 2007, pp. 235-247.
- Straw, Will. “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies*, 5:3, 1991, pp. 361-375.
- Tate, Greg. *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture*, Broadway Books, 2003, pp 2-3.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire:Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003.

- “Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 Neighbourhoods Action Plans”. *toronto.ca*, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2017/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-108051.pdf>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Wesleyan University Press, 1996.
- “The Infinite Dial 2020” *Edison Research*, <http://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Infinite-Dial-2020-U.S.-Edison-Research.pdf>, accessed May 25, 2021.
- Ting-Peng Liang & Efraim Turban. “Introduction to the Special Issue Social Commerce: A Research Framework for Social Commerce.” *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 16:2, 2011, pp. 5-14.
- “Tony D & Brother Different of the Sunshine Soundcrew” *Views B4 the 6*”, <https://soundcloud.com/viewsbeforethe6/views-b4-the-6-tony-d-brother-different-of-the-sunshine-soundcrew>
- United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development. “Poverty by Postal Code: The Geography of Neighbourhood Poverty. 1981-2001”, *Centre for Urban & Community Studies*, April 2004, <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/gtuo/PovertybyPostalCodeFinal.pdf>, accessed Jan 5, 2020.
- Vargo, Steven L. and Robert F. Lusch. “Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing*, 68:1, 2004, pp. 1-17.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. “Boyfriends with Clits and Girlfriends with Dicks: Hip Hop’s Queer Future.” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 2:2, 2013, pp. 168-173.

Weinstein, Deena. *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*. Da Capo Press, 2000.

Williams, Matt. "Meet the Man Behind Drake's Favourite Battle Rap League, King of the Dot,"

Vice, Feb 4, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/rq44gx/king-of-the-dot-organik-interview-kotd-ovo, accessed Jan 5, 2020.

Woo, Benjamin, Jamie Rennie and Stuart R. Poyntz. "Introduction: Scene Thinking." *Cultural Studies*, 29:3, 2015, 285-297.