

# A Call (and Response) To Battle Rap

DiArron M.\*

Dianna Watkins Dickerson<sup>+</sup>

*Although battle rap is not a new cultural phenomenon on the hip hop scene, its value as a text is not widely listed in academic circles. Therefore, we contend battle rap culture is a prime space to analyze the influence and inherent understanding of hip hop. This art form's struggle, strain, conquest, and challenge ebbs and flows like an athletic competition infusing a culturally distinct experience of Black ontology. With this in mind, we argue battle rap creates a competitive podium where we can examine communication, culture and critically assess identification within specific groups.*

**Keywords:** Battle Rap, Black Identity, Rhetoric, Hip Hop

Over the years, the musical sounds, beats, vibes, and messages of hip-hop and rap have framed complimenting genres of music serving as conduits for Black people to express feelings regarding what theologian James Cone calls “the ghetto condition.”<sup>1</sup> This condition refers to both existence within and response to rampant anti-Blackness produced and maintained by white supremacist, capitalistic systems rooted in the African slave trade; Jim/Jane Crow; and today’s refusal of many to accept the ever-present problem of racism fully. Amid this, Black men and women consistently and persistently use their creative genius to push back against inequality through their art. For example, films such as *Straight Outta Compton* depict how groups like NWA used rap to articulate how anti-Blackness shapes, shifts, and limits their community.<sup>2</sup> Anti-Blackness, it can be argued, not only forces African Americans to remain entrenched in violent and resource-deprived environments but also either leave them liable for their own communal downfall or restrict their specific growth due to negative results of artful activism perceived to go array. Thus, normative society typically positions hip-hop and rap as a genuine threat without a proper understanding and commitment to unraveling the introspective ingenuity and collective thriving inherent in this craft.

Seemingly defined as inherently violent and divisive, mainstream sources tend to shape rap as ideologically un-American in its verse, meter, tone, beat, rhythm, and [obviously] the people who create it. With this in mind, some forms of rap are more inclined toward reconstructing space for the Black community to thrive, which is how we portray and consider the foundations of rap, in general. On the other hand, the subgenre of studio rap is arguably processed and positioned to prosper the pensions of men and women who care nothing for the state of the Black community

---

\* DiArron M. is a third year Ph.D. student at the University of Memphis. His research interests are primarily focused on the Black rhetorical tradition. Correspondence can be sent to: d.morrison@memphis.edu

<sup>+</sup> Dianna Watkins Dickerson, (Ph.D. University of Memphis) is an Instructor at Memphis Theological Seminary. Her research interest lies at the intersection of rhetoric, race, and gender. Correspondence can be sent to: diannawatkinsdickerson@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>. James A. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 161.

<sup>2</sup>. “Straight Outta Compton,” directed by F. Gary Gray, written by Jonathan Herman, Andrea Berloff, S. Liegh Savidge, and Alan Wenkus, featuring O’Shea Jackson Jr., Corey Hawkins, Jason Mitchell, Nell Brown Jr, and Aldis Hodge, aired August 14, 2015, in theaters.

outside of margins for profit. More importantly, while several artists have gained some form of success through studio rap, countless others have helped build a subculture of hip-hop and rap called battle rap. With relatively no backing from the mainstream music industry, battle rap has escaped many anti-Black power structures sociologist Wendy M. Laybourn argues plagues studio hip-hop and rap.<sup>3</sup> For that reason, much of the battle rap culture still exists in the sense of hopelessness, destruction, and early demise, which though reconstructing space outside of white patriarchy, still host a dose of pessimistic critique and grimness. Beyond this, rap is still an uncharted space for understanding African American communication studies, and more importantly, can serve as prime real estate toward providing a deep scholastic dive into the cultural identity of Black folks, in general.

In this paper, we explore the condition that helps shape the cultural identity of the battle rap community. We do so to highlight the amazingly fertile ground that battle rap provides for studying Black culture and cultural phenomena. We first briefly overview battle rap's history and cultural norms. Next, we provide background information about several battle rappers. This diverse field of MCs provides a brief insight into the complex amalgamation that is battle rap. By high-lighting culture, experience, film, and more, we delve into this study through the lens of Afrocentricity, providing a view into how battle rap and battle rappers have the ability to challenge an ontological Black identity and anti-Blackness.

### **Battle Rap History**

While many, if not most, African Americans have a lineage borne out of white violence against Black bodies, we must note that Black people's identity and experience are not monolithic, and hip-hop culture varies across the country. After Reconstruction and vast migration across the country following the Civil War, Black men and women in the United States began to develop regional nuances while still functioning from foundational frustrations of anti-Blackness in the American context of chattel slavery. For the Black community, one can argue that music is an eternal episteme capturing the heartbeat and soul of such knowledge and heaviness, possibly holding within it the closest sound and feel of a distinctly Black aesthetic West of the African shore. Fast forward some fifty years [or so] after Jim/Jane Crow, and whereas gospel, ragtime, blues, and jazz could be argued to have decisively and distinctly captured *the* Black sound, rap soon followed and was birthed from hip hop culture.

To give context and background, we consider rap a musical manifestation given breath by three significant periods in which African Americans labored toward liberty. They are 1) the Civil Rights Movement, which built bridges toward integration and social mobility by pairing an ethos of self-determination with social activism; 2) the Black Power and Black liberation theology efforts driving a foundational impetus for reclaiming the Black body as relevant, worthy, whole, and virtuous; and 3) the intellectual dynamism of the Black Arts Movement which not only coupled poetry with activism but emboldened and emblazoned artists to stand in the communal gap as a trusted activist, thereby generating more expansive space for those who could be deemed community movers and shakers beyond the preacher and the teacher. During these periods, Black communities became more educated, integrated into mainstream society, and to an extent, gained greater economic opportunities. Such progress could be thought to draft a stark distinction between culture and craft. Yet, hip hop remains a phenomenon transcending class, and no matter the region, it retains the grit,

---

<sup>3</sup>. Wendy M. Laybourn, "The Cost of being 'Real': Black Authenticity, Colourism, and Billboard Rap Chart Rankings," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 11 (2018), doi:/10.1080/01419870.2017.1323848.

grind, and griminess of the ghetto superstars it has the power to transform. Due to this, like other forms of Black music, battle rap encompasses the hurt, shame, pain, denial, frustration, and more of the sighs and dreams deferred carried on the backs of a people thrown to the wayside. As film scholar Roy Grundmann explains, battle rap is “a traditional African-American street contest in which competitors engage in poetic repartee, often taunting each other with insults.”<sup>4</sup>

While earlier scholarship such as Shingi Mavima’s *Bigger By the Dozens: The Prevalence of Afro-Based Tradition in Battle Rap* attribute battle rap’s early notoriety to the film *8 Mile*, much of the modern battle rap scene traces back to Harlem, New York, in the late 1990s and the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> Troy “Smack” White, now the owner of one of battle rap’s biggest platforms, URL, got his start selling rap DVDs in the early 2000s. As Smack recalls:

I used to love mixtapes. I’m a fan of DJ Clue, Doo Wop, Kool Kid, Ron G. I thought it would be hot if they could get visuals behind the music based on the underground lane. Technology caught up with the times and you could buy the camera and take the content that you captured and actually do your own editing. So, I got the necessary equipment to start producing Hip Hop underground content.<sup>6</sup>

These DVDs, commonly referred to as SMACK DVDs, serve as one of the earliest widespread showcases of two artists competing against each other in a rapping contest. Not long after the release of the first SMACK DVD, YouTube emerged as battle rap’s new platform. As a result, battle rap found a more accessible space for viewers.<sup>7</sup> Much like the competitive flair seen on the football field when a running back ‘jukes’ or runs and shuffles with a fast-paced swerve offsetting the defender, battle rap functions as a sports contest with each verse serving as a new exciting play sure to be better than the last and media outlets reeling to become the hosting platform to showcase the latest and greatest. Therefore, several other leagues emerged on YouTube, including Smack’s URL, which eventually became the sport’s flagship.

### Battle Rap Cultural Norms

Unlike its more mainstream studio counterpart, battle rap centers live performance and competition. As Mavima explains, “artistic competition has been a part of hip-hop from its very inception.”<sup>8</sup> Promoters pay artists to compete against each other in pay-per-view events. Much like a boxing match, each battle plays out in rounds. Each round consists of both battlers performing freestyle or offering a prewritten verse to annihilate their rival verbally. Eric King Watts explains, “rap battles are raw and intense.”<sup>9</sup> Battlers adopt a broad range of criteria as a means of appealing to judges or, more importantly, the general opinions of the live crowd and the streaming audience, evidencing the inherent way in which this genre of music leans toward the Black experience due to how it depends on the Afrocentric ideal of call and response.

4. Roy Grundmann, “White Man’s Burden: Eminem’s Movie Debut in *8 Mile*,” *Cineaste* 28, no. 2 (2003): 33.

5. Shingi Mavima, “Bigger By the Dozens: The prevalence of Afro-Based Tradition in Battle Rap,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 3, no. 1: (2016): 92.

6. “Smack Talk: The Secret Success of the Rap Battle Industry,” *HipHopDx*, accessed August 14, 2020, <https://hiphopdx.com/editorials/id.1962/title.smack-talk-the-secret-success-of-the-rap-battle-industry>.

7. “The Rise and Fall of Grind Time- Battle Rap History,” *YouTube*, October 28, 2016, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfaDy61vgJw>.

8. Mavima, “Bigger By the Dozens,” 86.

9. Eric King Watts, “Border Patrolling and ‘Passing’ in Eminem’s *8 Mile*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): 193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180500201686>.

While studio rap typically emphasizes lyrics flowing with an instrumental beat, battle rap's (usual) acapella backdrop creates opportunities for cadences, rhythms, rhyming schemes, and flows studio rap cannot begin to accomplish due to its highly engineered nature. The added aspect of competition also creates an environment in which artist's skills are pitted against each other, making battle rap far more interactive than studio rap considering the importance of understanding audience dynamics and the extreme need to dynamically engage tools, tactics, and linguistic tricks to retain their attention, support. Of course, if the MC can identify, in some way, with the audience by highlighting shared experience, s/he is even more successful. In short, battle rap provides an energetic, crowd-driven, and participatory environment in which artists compete, not in the silo of the studio, but in a rich congregational experience that builds an authentic identity, making the MC and participant equally responsible and invested in the outcome.

Topics vary from battle to battle, but most battles include some discussion of poverty. As Richard and Scott explain, many battlers come from situations that, in general, "are replete with poverty, police brutality, drug abuse, educational inequality, high dropout rates, and violence."<sup>10</sup>

Battle rapper's life experiences are not uniform, however. For instance, one of the most popular battle rappers is Hitman Holla. Raised in a two-parent household in St. Louis, MO, he is a "college athlete turned battle rapper, whose birth name is Gerald Fulton."<sup>11</sup> According to verse tracker, a website dedicated to documenting battle rap news and history, Hitman Holla averages 2,170,265 views of videos of his battles posted on YouTube. His videos have been viewed approximately 78,129,523 times throughout his career, and he has participated in 36 battles.<sup>12</sup> Before entering the world of battle rap, Fulton played basketball at Mineral Area College and later transferred to the University of Missouri-St. Louis.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, Fulton transcended media platforms by becoming a cast member of *Wildin' Out*.<sup>14</sup> His battle career has been long and storied with many epic matches, but his most acclaimed battle that generated the highest views was against Aye Verb.

Aye Verb's birth name is Chaz Duncan. The 35-year-old battle rapper's "earliest professional raps took place in 2010 in contests against Hollow Da Don and Math Hoffa."<sup>15</sup>

Hailing from St. Louis, Missouri, Aye Verb boasts 50 battles, averaging 780,4448 views per battle and boasting 39,022,413 total career views.<sup>16</sup> His legacy in battle rap is likened to that of a "pioneer" who made a case for the Midwest battle rappers to stand on their own as viable competition for the dominant east coast factions dominating the art form at the time.<sup>17</sup> Regional dominance is not the only realm of battle rap in which pioneers of the sport have emerged. Since early on in the platform's formation, women have been participants. However, as with many "male-dominated" industries, their voices and talents are often marginalized. It is noteworthy that Aye Verb has often been a loud and adamant contributor to that marginalization by openly disrespecting Black women opponents. He, unfortunately, is not the only one. Despite this, promotions such as

<sup>10</sup>. Jeanita W. Richardson and Kim A. Scott, "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context," *Journal of Negro Education* 71, no. 3 (2002): 175.

<sup>11</sup>. "Hitman Holla," *famousbirthdays.com*, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.famousbirthdays.com/people/hitman-holla.html>.

<sup>12</sup>. "Hitman Holla," *versetracker.com*, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/hitman-holla>.

<sup>13</sup>. "Mineral Area College Basketball player profile: Gerald Fulton #2," *mineralarea.edu*, accessed April 20, 2018, <http://www.mineralarea.edu/athletics/MBB-GeraldFulton07.htm>.

<sup>14</sup>. "Gerald Fulton," *imdb.com*, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm6744617/>.

<sup>15</sup>. "Aye Verb," *famousbirthday.com*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.famousbirthdays.com/people/aye-verb.html>.

<sup>16</sup>. "Aye Verb," *versetracker.com*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/aye-verb>.

<sup>17</sup>. "Greatest Battles: Aye Verb," *YouTube*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfa05BJpgwM>.

the all women's Queen of the Ring have given women a platform to showcase their abilities. URL's recent Kings vs. Queens collaborations with Queen of the Ring have produced several battles between men and women. Nevertheless, long before this pay-per-view, women such as 40 B.A.R.R.S were finding success in battles against all genders.

According to verse tracker, 40 B.A.R.R.S boasts a total of 13,767,477 views over a total of 41 battles, with an average viewership of 335,792.<sup>18</sup> The B.A.R.R.S in Boston, MA native Carlisa Lee's stage name stands for "Bitches Always Respect Real Shit."<sup>19</sup> Lee made her name in the early 2010s, besting her male counterparts. When the advent of Queen of the Ring arose, she became dominant there as well. To that end, Queen of the Ring's fandom page explains that "No Queen of the Ring battler has ever had a more legitimized claim to the throne than 40 B.A.R.R.S."<sup>20</sup> Lee's early success in battle rap may be due, at least in part, to her location on the east coast. As was the case with the Midwest movement, which is unfortunately often thought of as an exclusively male venture, women MCs outside the east coast found themselves navigating the dual barriers of gender and region. Perhaps no woman has transcended those barriers better than O'fficial.

O'fficial was born Jessica Fisher in 1993. The New Orleans native "burst onto the battle rap scene just twenty years later."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most gifted member of one of battle rap's most popular women factions, The Bardashians, Fisher boasts 7,944,135 total views across 31 battles.<sup>22</sup> According to sglyric.com, "She made her battling debut on the GotBarz battle league against fellow New Orleans native Boogie in 2012."<sup>23</sup> Unlike 40 B.A.R.R.S, O'fficial's regional positionality effectively isolated her early career. It was not until her 2015 defeat of New York born fellow Bardashian, Jaz the Rapper, that Fisher accomplished the highly sought-after million view battle.<sup>24</sup> Since then, she has become well-known for taking legendary male battle rappers such as Arsonal, Nu Jersey Twerk, and most recently Tay Roc to the limit and arguably beating them. While the often-subjective nature of judging battle rap makes it difficult to tally wins and losses objectively, O'fficial's impressive showings undoubtedly put her in league with the best of her era, such as Tsu Surf.

Tsu Surf, short for Tsunami Surf, is a Newark, New Jersey born battle rapper who honed his rapping skills by freestyling. Born Rahjon Cox, Tsu Surf has been a part of 25 battles, has an average viewership of 1,815,032, and has 45,375,793 total views.<sup>25</sup> A self-proclaimed member of the Newark's rolling 60's Crips, one of Tsu Surf's most significant claims to fame, outside of battle rap, is his criminal record. Most notably, he was released from prison shortly before battling Hitman Holla, a battle that garnered 7,368,538 views.<sup>26</sup> In that battle, Tsu Surf's difficult upbringing and years in prison help create a platform on which he compares himself to Hitman Holla.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup>. "40 B.A.R.R.S.," *versetracker.com*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/40-barrs>.

<sup>19</sup>. "40 B.A.R.R.S.," *Battle Rap Fandom*, accessed November 24, 2021, [https://battlerap.fandom.com/wiki/40\\_B.A.R.R.S](https://battlerap.fandom.com/wiki/40_B.A.R.R.S).

<sup>20</sup>. "40 B.A.R.R.S.," *Battle Rap Fandom*.

<sup>21</sup>. "O'fficial," *famousbirthday.com*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.famousbirthdays.com/people/o-fficial.html>.

<sup>22</sup>. "O'fficial," *versetracker.com*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/official>

<sup>23</sup>. "O'fficial (Battle Rapper)," *sglyrics.com*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://sglyric.com/artists/1024566/official-battle-rapper>.

<sup>24</sup>. "JAZ THE RAPPER VS O'FFICIAL SMACK/URL (OFFICAL VERSION)| URLTV," YouTube, June 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KuaKR8-qII>.

<sup>25</sup>. "Tsu Surf," *versetracker.com*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://versetracker.com/rapper/tsu-surf>.

<sup>26</sup>. "Tsu Surf."

<sup>27</sup>. "TSU SURF VS HITMAN HOLLA SMACK/URL| URLTV," YouTube, October 13, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_PFpLKgDyTU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PFpLKgDyTU).

The stark comparisons that he draws in that battle exemplify the depth and breadth of personas, ideologies, experiences, and issues ripe for analysis and critical evaluation within battle rap.

## **Conclusion**

While battle rap is a small space in hip hop culture, it is an ever-growing and diversifying sector of the music movement. While no artform or sub-community could ever fully represent Black people and their cultural practices, battle rap is uniquely positioned to speak to and about the Black experience. Like all rap, its origins are distinctly Black. For the most part, battle rap culture remains unencumbered by imperialistic corporate intrusions. Battle rappers still retain complete control over what they say and rap about, and most league owners are Black. Even sponsorship, in many cases, comes from Black-owned businesses.

This study adds to the communication discipline by highlighting battle rap as a genre within hip hop culture and demonstrating how call and response and experience frame identity formation in Black spaces. While the rappers highlighted all share several attributes of marginalized existence due to their Black skin, their experiences are different and distinct, based on region, class, education, and family structure. Yet, despite the consistent denial of personhood, African Americans assiduously craft and maintain space to forge means of communal identity in complex and multifaceted ways. Additionally, any interest in hip hop and hip hop studies must consider further exploration of battle rap for other means of academic inquiry.