

THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS IN AN MC BATTLE

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Abstract

Within hip-hop, MC (Master of Ceremonies) battles are one of the most visible and potentially humiliating venues for demonstrating one's verbal skill. Competitors face each other in front of an audience. Each has a minute to "diss" his or her opponent against a backdrop of rhythms produced by a DJ. Each participant's performance generally consists of "freestyle" or spontaneously generated rhymes designed to belittle some aspect of the opponent's appearance, rhyming style or place of origin, and ritual insults directed at his or her mother, sister, or crew. Opponents show good will by embracing afterwards. Ultimately the audience decides who wins by applauding louder for one opponent than the other at the end of the battle. Using the framework of interactional sociolinguistics (Goffman 1974, 1981), I will analyze clips from a televised MC battle in which the winning contestant was a White teenager from the Midwest called "Eyedea." I will show how Eyedea and his successive African American opponents, "R.K." and "Shells", participate in the co-construction of his Whiteness. Eyedea marks himself linguistically as White by overemphasizing his pronunciation of /r/ and by carefully avoiding Black ingroup forms of address like "nigga" (c.f. Smitherman 1994). R.K. and Shells construct Eyedea's Whiteness largely in discursive ways – by pointing out his resemblance to White actors, and alluding to television shows with White cultural references. Socially constructed racial boundaries must be acknowledged in these types of performances because Whiteness (despite the visibility of White rappers like Eminem) is still marked against the backdrop of normative Blackness in hip-hop (Boyd 2002). In a counter-hegemonic reversal of Du Boisian double-consciousness hip-hop obliges White participants to see themselves through the eyes of Black people. Hip-hop effectively subverts dominant discourses of race and language requiring MC battle participants to acknowledge and ratify this covert hierarchy.

Keywords: Ritual insults; MC battles; Whiteness, Interculturality.

1. Introduction

In hip hop culture MC (emcee) battles are contests where rappers compete with each other in the form of freestyle rap or cipher. The goal is for each rapper to insult or *diss* his or her opponent with spontaneous rhymes for a fixed length of time (usually about a minute). Winners are often judged by the response of the audience. MC battles are part of a long oral and musical tradition in the African American community and are closely related to other types of ritual insults such as playing the dozens, snaps, sounds, etc. (Labov 1972). There is also a precedent in the big band era of the 1930s when bandleaders like Chick Web and Count Basie competed with one another in musical battles in front of an audience. MC battles are thought to have originated in the Bronx

1970s along with other aspects of hip hop culture such as DJ-ing, and break dancing. Functionally, they helped to resolve tensions between young people in a non-violent way. Nowadays MC battles more commonly serve as a way for aspiring MCs to establish their credentials and gain visibility within hip hop culture.

Most of the competitors in commercial televised MC battles, including the one analyzed in this paper, are African American in line with the predominance of African American performers in rap music. Race is not an issue when both competitors are Black, but this changes when White competitors enter the fray. Interculturality in Black-White encounters takes the form of overt references to Whiteness by Black MCs. Assuming that race is always salient in these interactions is to essentialize the multiple identities and roles that individuals perform in their daily interactions with others. But in the highly ritualized context of the MC battle, references to Whiteness serve a particular function, highlighting its marked status within hip hop and reaffirming the normativity of Blackness.

A useful tool in the attempt to provide a more subtle analysis of how speakers construct, resist, transform, and reject cultural differences is the interpretive framework of *stance*. According to Irvine (2004), stance can take one of three forms: (a) *stance* as “footing,” a position within a set of participant roles in an act of speaking; (b) *stance* as point of view, opinion, or ideological position; and (c) *stance* as social position in a larger sense, invoking broad categories of participation in social life such as class or ethnicity. Importantly, stance can index one or more social identities, liberating speakers from static interpretations of their utterances, their identities and those of others. This makes stance a particularly productive way to look at how speakers manage multiple roles, points of view and identities. In the performance data analyzed here, there is a fair deal of attention paid to social categories, particularly race. Yet participants simultaneously construct themselves and one another in ways that index their co-participation in a hip hop community of practice.

In considering the role of racialized stances in interculturality, I am drawn to the work of WEB Du Bois (1953) who wrote poignantly about the “double consciousness” that he believed characterized the mindset and self-image of Black Americans. He described double consciousness as the compulsion of Black Americans to see themselves through the eyes of Whites. Spears (1998) describes it as “the dual personality caused by the cohabitation of two consciousnesses or cultural systems within one mind, the White and the African-American” (248). Double consciousness seems to play a role in hip hop culture, but in the opposite direction. In North American hip hop, the reigning position of African Americans as the artistic creators, entrepreneurs, and trend setters is indisputable. According to Boyd (2002), “hip hop and basketball are spaces where Blackness has been normalized, and Whiteness treated as the Other” (23). Thus, it is Whites who are forced to see themselves 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.

There is quite a powerful discourse within hip-hop that privileges the Black body and the Black urban street experience and despite the visibility of White rappers such as Eminem, Whiteness is still marked against the backdrop of normative Blackness. This is particularly salient in public hip hop performances such as the MC battle I will examine here where every aspect of a performer’s identity is fodder for criticism. I argue that in this context interculturality plays a functional role in ratifying

an alternative social reality in which Blackness is normative and Whiteness is marked. The framework of stance can help to tease out how this role reversal plays itself out in the MC battle, illuminating how Whiteness is rendered the marked category in the course of the battle.

A second issue that comes to the fore when Whites participate in hip hop is the link between language and ethnicity. Hall (1995) writes that, “the ideological link between language and ethnicity is so potent that the use of linguistic practices associated with a given ethnic group may be sufficient for an individual to pass as a group member” (cited in Bucholtz 1995: 355). White MCs like Eminem, the Beastie Boys and the one of the MCs we’ll examine here – “Eyedea” – employ a speech style that draws on hip hop language and African American English. But lest they fall victim to the charge that they are wannabes because of the way they speak, White rappers must adopt a stance that references their Whiteness. They can achieve this by outing themselves discursively as the Beastie Boys do when they refer to themselves as “funky ass Jews” in their song “Right Here Right Now,” or linguistically by playing up socially salient stylistic variables that index White speech such as postvocalic /r/. Taking a stance is part of a complex process of ‘keepin’ it real’ – an expression that Rickford & Rickford (2000: 23) have described as a hip hop mantra, exhorting individuals to be true to their roots, and not to “front” or pretend to be something they are not. It is difficult not to underestimate the centrality of “realness” in hip-hop and many controversies in hip hop surround accusations of “biting” or stealing someone’s lyrics or selling out by making one’s music palatable to mainstream audiences.

2. Contextualizing emceeing

Hip hop culture is said to consist of “four pillars” – MC-ing, DJ-ing, break dancing and graffiti writing. In rap music performances, the MC (Master of Ceremonies) is the one who holds the microphone and performs rhymes against the backdrop of beats and melodies provided by the DJ. In an MC *battle*, two MCs face each *other* in front of an audience. A DJ provides a rhythmic track that competitors must rhyme to. Each MC has a minute to “dis” his or her opponent by delivering a barrage of rhyming ritual insults designed to belittle some aspect of the opponent’s family, appearance, rhyming ability or place of origin. The most talented MCs are highly adept at creating spontaneous rhymes that draw on shared hip hop knowledge as well as aspects of the opponent’s style or appearance that are obvious to the audience.

Within hip-hop, MC battles are one of the most visible and potentially humiliating venues for demonstrating one’s verbal skills. A battle may end in humiliation and defeat if the MC can’t make his or her rhymes flow, or if the rhymes are obviously written ahead of time rather than generated spontaneously. Ultimately the audience decides who wins by applauding louder for one opponent than the other at the end of the battle. Competitors are not supposed to take insults personally; indeed when this happens, it may result in defeat as one of the prime rules of ritual insults is that they should be read as propositions that cannot be interpreted as truthful by either party (Labov 1972). Opponents often embrace at the end of the battle as a sign of good will.

Afrikaa Bambaataa is attributed with the creation of MC battles as a way to channel the energy of young people in the Bronx during the 1970s. Instead of engaging in physical fights, young people were encouraged to hone their verbal skills on one

another, skills that drew on the long tradition in the Black community of toasting, woofing, sounding, playing the dozens, etc. Labov (1972) provides a rich structural and functional analysis of sounding (also called the dozens, and signifying, cutting, capping, and chopping). There are slight regional differences in the actual form of these ritual insults. In New York, the dozens refers to a rhymed couplet containing a ritualized insult directed at a relative. Participants vie for dominance by demonstrating their knowledge of the largest store of rhymed couplets. Couplets can follow each other in any order and there is no expectation of spontaneity or improvisation.

Sounds on the other hand usually center on simpler personal insults and do not involve rhyming. Labov (1972: 327) describes the structure of sounding as involving three participants: Antagonist A, antagonist B, and the audience. A sounds against B; the audience evaluates; B sounds against A his sound is evaluated. The structure would be: A-1, e, B-1, e, A-2, e, B-2, e. A-1 almost always contains a reference to B's mother. B-1 should be based on A-1. If B-1 is a well-delivered transformation of A-1, B may be said to have won. A-2 may be an entirely new sound, but if A-2 is a further transformation of B-1, it is usually evaluated more highly. A can be said to have "topped" B most commonly if A-2 is a variant or clearly related to B-1.

The structure of MC battles is somewhat similar in that competitors take turns with an audience response following the second "spit." (A-1, B-1, e). The difference is that competitor A must deliver a whole series of rhyming couplets (upwards of 20 lines) before B has a chance to respond. Then the audience chooses the winner. Competitors are expected to deliver spontaneous or "freestyle" rhymes that draw on the immediate circumstances or are based on ritual insults; this may include shared knowledge about the competitor, and any observable details pertaining to his dress style, hair, his or her rap crew, hometown, family, or rhyming skills. Competitors simultaneously try to broadcast the superiority of their own rap crew, rhyming skills, etc. in ways that are akin to "woofing," the African American oral tradition of boasting of one's physical prowess or threatening physical violence (Smitherman 1994). Another unique aspect to MC battles is that competitors must stay on the beat provided either by a DJ or in more spontaneous, intimate settings by a human "beat box" (Foytlin et al. 1999). Competitors may lose the battle if they go "off beat" - what Foytlin et al. (1999: 4) refer to as a "casualty." A casualty may also result when an MC uses "too many stock phrases, fails to interact with his opponent, or lashes out in repeated insults or name calling - rather than just 'capping' the other" (Foytlin et al. 1999: 4).

3. Analysis

The data below illustrate how ethnic boundaries get negotiated between a White contestant and his African American opponents. The data come from a videotaped and televised hip-hop battle sponsored by the now defunct Blaze Magazine that took place in New York in November 2000.¹ It is important to point out that as a highly commercialized, televised event, the Blaze Battle is qualitatively different from the spontaneous, informal battles that take place on street corners and local hip hop clubs. The latter are often called *ciphers* (Alim forthcoming). The analysis will show how a

¹ The Blaze Battle Face-Off 2000 World Championship was broadcast on HBO on November 25th at 11:30 p.m. EST.

White contestant cooperates with his African American opponents in constructing himself as White. This is not necessarily divisive or problematic; it's simply a way for an order to be acknowledged. Crucially, interculturality is reified as a way to establish ground rules, not necessarily in order to de-legitimize White participants.

The first battle is between R.K., (a.k.a. Richard Kimble), a Black MC from Miramar, Florida, and Eyedea (a.k.a. Mike Averill), a White MC from Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota (shown in 1 and 2 below). Each performer gets a minute to complete his "spit." The winner is determined after both opponents have delivered their spits. R.K. begins with a ritual insult in line 2, insinuating that Eyedea's Adam's apple (*prominentia laryngea*) is so big, it looks like he swallowed a motorcycle helmet. FOD is perhaps a reference to a rapper known to many hip hop devotees. R.K. is thrown off in line 4 when the DJ's beat stops momentarily; he then announces that he will proceed *a capella* but does not deliver another ritual insult until line 15 when he refers to Eyedea as "Telly", the polemical White rebel from the 1995 Larry Clark film *Kids*. The implication is that Eyedea – like the lead character Telly – is a *wannabe* or a White kid who wants to be Black. Then in line 23 in a double dis against MTV and Eyedea, R.K. alludes to a widespread sentiment among hip hoppers that MTV plays primarily to a White audience and has no cachet for authentic hip hoppers when he says that Eyedea is "wacker than MTV's lyricist lounge." These two references to Eyedea's Whiteness are really the only challenges that R.K. makes to Eyedea's legitimacy in the spit.

Significantly, Eyedea participates in the construction of himself as White. Whereas his competitors rely on discursive methods to mark his Whiteness, Eyedea collaborates in his ethnic self-marking phonologically. He possesses a high level of linguistic competence, employing many of the quintessential morphosyntactic patterns found in the rap lyrics of young urban African Americans from New York City such as verbal –s absence, glottalization of medial /t/, copula absence, negative concord, and multiple negation as well as a range of discourse genres like *dissin'* and *freestyling* (c.f. Cutler 2002). He is clearly capable of carrying off quite an authentic rendition of hip hop speech, yet he is careful to maintain a boundary by emphatically deploying linguistic resources that mark his speech as White. One way he does this is via hyper-rhotic realizations of postvocalic /r/ - one of the features that typifies White American English in places like Minnesota and Wisconsin. Clark (2002) has described "hyper-rhotic" /r/ as a strategy used by African American teenagers to mark White speech in the classroom. This contrast relies on the interlocutors' access to linguistic stereotypes that contrast White rhoticity with Black /r/-lessness.²

(1) R.K., Miramar, Florida vs. Eyedea, Minneapolis, Round 2³

² This is not meant to imply postvocalic /r/-lessness is a universal feature of hip hop speech style. It is however commonly found in the speech of African American rappers in the Northeast as well as among young whites who want to signal their affiliation with hip hop. In the interview data I collected in New York City for my dissertation, I found rates of postvocalic /r/-lessness that ranged from 0% to 82% among white hip hoppers (Cutler 2002). Eyedea's rate (based on all the performance data in this battle) was 8% (N=64), suggesting that he can control this feature stylistically. His choice to adopt a hyper-rhotic realization of /r/ appears to be a way for him to emphasize his local (Minnesota) White identity.

³ Transcription Conventions: (()) inaudible or questionable utterance; //laughs// = stage directions; Ø = copula absence; [] = IPA transcription; [rr] = hyper-rhotic postvocalic /r/; ALL CAPS = increased volume; Bold text = feature or word pertinent to the analysis.

- 1 You wanna spit with me dog? Understand it's like velvet.
- 2 Nigga_ Adam Apple, he swallowed FOD's helmet.
- 3 Yo, so you wanna spit with it.
- 4 //break in DJ's beat; R.K. is momentarily thrown off but quickly resumes without DJ//
- 5 A CAPELLA. FUCK IT! Kill it.
- 6 Hey yo, I dare you comin' up here claimin' you Ø ill.
- 7 They call me barbeque. Nothin' but fire comes from my grill.
- 8 You wanna spit, understand you make no ((ends)).
- 9 This nigga right here is wacker than (()).
- 10 All R.K. nigga, spittin' these rhymes.
- 11 I can do this shit dog, don't matter the time.
- 12 Understand nigga, it's about dice.
- 13 Halloweens' over. (()) who stop actin' nice.
- 14 Son, you wanna spit? Nigga, I'mo split your wig.
- 15 Motherfucker, lookin' like **Telly** from **Kids**.
- 16 R.K. nigga, come in the game.
- 17 Understand everything that I'mo spit is flame.
- 18 I ((hide)) niggas. I'm glad that you try.
- 19 Your career's over like ((inaudible)) when Tupac died.
- 20 Yo son, I ((pillage)) niggas that spit.
- 21 Motherfuckers like me, yo, I'm a *real* lyricist.
- 22 I got more shit. I ain't feelin' you clown.
- 23 This nigga is wacker than MTV's lyricist lounge.
- 24 Yo, R.K. nigga don't (()).
- 25 This nigga here, don't got nothin' to do.
- 26 So I can spit shit. Understand nigga, I rhyme.
- 27 If you signed to Bad Boy, you still wouldn't see no shine.

Clark (2002) identifies three realizations of /r/ in the speech of his informants: Vocalized, mildly pronounced, and strongly pronounced /r/. Using this three-way distinction symbolized as - / /, - /r/, and /rr/ respectively in the data - we can see how Eyedea performs and marks his own Whiteness. When it comes to intervocalic /r/, Eyedea employs a labialized variant (/w/) that occurs frequently in East Coast hip hop. This variant is part of Eyedea's extensive repertoire of features that he uses to mark himself as part of the hip hop culture.

Observe the near categorical realization of postvocalic /r/ throughout the performance. Examples are found in line 1, *murder* and line 2, *heard* and even more emphatically in the rhyming of *enhancer* and *dancer* in lines 23 and 24. There are only two instances where Eyedea actually omits the postvocalic /r/ - the first /r/ in *motherfuckers* in line 10 and *you're* nothin' in line 16 - showing that he can manipulate this variable stylistically. The fact that he does not increase his rate of deletion in a performance setting points to its function as a marker of identity, serving as a way for Eyedea to adopt a White stance.

One of most notable aspects of Eyedea's performance here is his skill at delivering successful punch lines (a damaging blow to one's opponent). He makes repeated references to R.K.'s afro hairstyle; first he compares R.K. to an imaginary "Homey the Clown" - a homeboy or male hip hopper with clown hair in line 4. In line 9 he draws on shared knowledge within the hip hop community about famous rappers and

their appearance when he says that R.K. looks like a mixture between Mystikal and Bizzy Bone. The mental image is of two slightly older, passé rappers; Bizzy Bone had a fluffy, loose afro and R.K.'s face resembles Mystikal's to some degree.

Eyedeade draws on another common theme found in sounds and toasts - the imputation of femininity or homosexuality (Labov 1972). He throws in a rather childish reference to a taboo subject of menstrual blood in line 7 in line with Labov's description of sounding among White adolescents. Then in line 17, Eyedeade taunts R.K. for sitting down during his spit by implying that he "likes to dick suck." The point is driven home in the last four lines: R.K. begins to dance on stage in a halfhearted way as if to imply that Eyedeade's rhymes are boring. Eyedeade seizes on this opportunity to feminize R.K. when he says that R.K. "wants to be my fuckin' backup dancer" in line 26 and finally in line 29 where he tells the audience that R.K. should sign a deal with "little Janet Jackson."

(2) Eyedeade vs. R.K., Round

- 1 Hey yo, it's time to murder you.
- 2 From the crowd yo, all I hea[rr]d was boos.
- 3 Yo, it's all good. On the mic I just straight pound.
- 4 And I'll neve[rr] get beat by a cat that looks like Homey the Clown.
- 5 So try to bring that back.
- 6 My mate[w]ial's ill.
- 7 You[r] pants used to be White until your pe[w]iod spilled.
- 8 What's it make you feel?
- 9 Yo, it's difficult. I'm battlin' Mystikal mixed with Bizzy Bone.
- 10 Moth[]fucke[]s can't play me when I freestyle.
- 11 Yo, why you got y[] hand wrapped in that weak towel.
- 12 Comin' up dressed like a clown, yo, you talk a lot.
- 13 Yo, you just stepped in dog shit, fo[rr]got to wash it off. //R.K. lifts up his foot to check//
- 14 It's just like that. I'll grab the mic and straight ((tease me)).
- 15 Even if I come off wack, I'll win 'cause it's just easy. //R.K. sits on the floor holding his
- 16 knees and bobbing his head to the rhythm//.
- 17 Yo, sit down. Oh, that's right because y[] nothin.'
- 18 And that's the same type like you like to dick suck man.
- 19 Yo, man, there it goes on the mic.
- 20 I'm oh so te[w]ible.
- 21 Look at him tryin' to mock me, knowin' that he jocks me.
- 22 You couldn't kick those lyrics with karate.
- 23 Come on, bring up the microphone and try to rock me.
- 24 //R.K. stand up and starts dancing lethargically in a mock hip hop style//.
- 25 Yo, I'll grab the mic and try'n be y[] rap enhance[rr].
- 26 This cat wants to be my fuckin' back-up dance[rr].
- 27 //audience roars in laughter//
- 28 Why Ø you doin' that shit? This man ain't rappin.'
- 29 He should go sign a fuckin' deal with little Janet Jackson.
- 30 //thunderous applause/

R.K. is not the only MC to reference his opponent's ethnicity. Just as R.K. marks

Whiteness by comparing Eyedea to Telly, Eyedea says R.K. looks like a mixture of two Black rappers - Mystikal and Bizzy Bone. Yet it is unlikely that race is the most important referent here. The allusion to Bizzy Bone probably has more to do with the fact that he, like R.K. has a big fluffy afro hairstyle. Notably, the Black MCs don't seem to resort to these race-referenced comparisons when they battle each other, but the construction of interculturality in Black-White face-offs appears to be almost *de rigueur*.

3.1. *Whiteness*

Whiteness provides a wellspring of potential rhymes for Black competitors. Indeed, every one of Eyedea's opponents in the contest makes oblique references to his Whiteness. In the third round of the battle, Eyedea's opponent E-Dub tells him that he shouldn't be "rappin' - he should be skateboardin' the X-games" - a sort of para olympic event featuring post adolescent White males performing dare devilish stunts. Eyedea in his rebuttal says, "Yo, I'm dooper than you on the mic even if I am a skater" - tacitly acknowledging something about who he really is and where he comes from. Remaining cool-headed in the face of these repeated references to race is part of how Eyedea "keeps it real".

A summary of all of the references to Eyedea's Whiteness throughout the televised contest appears in Table 1. Interpreting these references requires a certain amount of American cultural literacy: Comparisons between Eyedea and White rappers like Eminem and the risible Vanilla Ice were also common ways to out Eyedea as White. These examples also point to the salience of the mass media and the names of celebrities in the creation of rhymes. Referencing television shows, movies, actors, sports teams and rappers is a significant part of how MCs demonstrate their knowledge of hip hop culture and American popular culture more generally. E-Dub asks incredulously where Eyedea is from, insinuating that Minnesota is not a legitimate place of origin for an MC. He follows this up with a dis against the local sports team - the "ho ass Temple Wolves" - implying that they too lack credibility. Finally, as we'll eventually see in Round 4, Shells calls Eyedea a Lil' Chuck Norris - a White martial artist and actor who successfully broke into martial arts films. The imputation is that Chuck Norris is not an authentic martial artist because he's White and that the same is true of Eyedea and other White kids who want to make it as MCs in hip hop. Collectively these references to Whiteness all seem to point to Whites being *wannabes* and dilettantes who think they can cross racial boundaries and participate in another cultural domain. As we can see from these examples, White culture offers a treasure trove for rhymes that simultaneously index both competitors' racial backgrounds and critique White hegemonic culture more broadly.

Table 1. References to Eyedea's Whiteness in Rounds 2-4 of the Blaze Battle.

Round 2 Eyedea vs. R.K.	R.K.: Motherfucker lookin' like Telly from <i>Kids</i> . R.K.: This nigga is wacker than MTV's lyricist lounge.
Round 3 Eyedea vs. E-Dub	E-Dub: You shouldn't be rappin', you should be skateboardin' the X-games. Where the fuck you from, Minnesota? Home of the Vikings and ho-ass Temple Wolves?! You belong on MTV.

	You ain't fuckin' with me, light skinned Eminem. You're not from Detroit. Stop tryin' to be Eminem.
Round 4 Eyedea vs. Shells	Shells: They got Shells battlin' Lil' Chuck Norris. I'll be damned to lose against Vanilla Ice. You look like Buffy the mother fuckin' rhyme slayer.

3.2. Respecting boundaries

An additional way that White competitors like Eyedea keep it real and acknowledge racial boundaries here is through the avoidance of certain themes and terms of address. Most of the Black competitors refer to each other as *nigga* throughout the battle. As an ingroup form of address, *nigga* indexes a stance of cool solidarity for young Black men and for young White men, albeit usually in homogenous groupings. Its use has expanded so that it is now employed as a general address term. Indeed it seems that *nigga* is developing into a discourse marker that need not always identify an addressee, and that more generally encodes the speaker's stance to his or her current addressee(s) - a stance that is cool, urban, usually male streetwise.

However the use of this term is not bidirectional in Black-White configurations: Black competitors can use it with one another and when they address Whites, but Whites do not use it when addressing Blacks - ever. The role of *nigga* as a neutral solidarity marker is complicated by its unidirectional use. It allows the Black MC to ratify his partner's legitimacy, but dies the latter the ability to reciprocate. As such it functions also as a marker of status.

Although I have recorded many instances of White teenagers using this term to refer to or address their White friends, the public use of this term by White people is still highly controversial (Smitherman 1994; Kennedy 2002). Even the White rapper Eminem who grew up in a poor Black part of Detroit says he would never use the term. Here we see it is noticeably absent from Eyedea's performance as well even though R.K. uses the term 11 times when he addresses Eyedea during the battle. Eyedea *never* employs this term with any of his competitors. The other White competitor in this battle, See For, similarly avoids the term completely when up against his African American opponent K.T.

Eyedea prevails in Round 3 against "E-Dub" and in Round 4, the final round, Eyedea battles Shells, an MC from New York City (see below). As in the previous round, Eyedea references interculturality in oblique ways when he compares his opponent to well known Black rappers such as Ja Rule and Flavor Flav's imaginary second cousin. There is also one very interesting vocative token in line 19 where Eyedea directly names his opponent "Black." It is the only token in all of Eyedea's performances and it serves not only to label his opponent, but also to reinforce his own Whiteness. It also falls in a place where the N-word would normally come and functions as an interculturally licensed alternative. Eyedea's use of the term *cat* is also interesting here as an index of his opponent's Blackness.

In terms of stance, Eyedea has set himself up as the more authentic of the two in lines 13 and 14. Shells has begun to mouth Eyedea's lines as if to say that they are prewritten rather than spontaneous or freestyle. Eyedea jumps on this and turns it around, implying that Shells is "biting" or stealing his lines - a grave allegation within

hip hop – and furthermore implies that this is the only way he'll ever sell a record. Eyedea places himself in the position of an authority figure vis-à-vis Shells in lines 19 and 20 when he tells him he needs to go back to school – Eyedea being the teacher who will set him straight. He finishes off his performance with tightly constructed rhyme in which he frames himself as the grim reaper.

(3) Eyedea, Minneapolis vs. Shells, New York City; Round 4 (Final Round, Spit 1 of 2)

- 1 Eyedea: Hey yo, this cat can't stand me.
- 2 Know he wanna hand me.
- 3 He'll only win this battle 'cause the whole crowd's his family.
- 4 But yo, your shirt says "record breaker."
- 5 What that mean, yo? You the only cat that only ever took 80 losses in a row?
- 6 Is that how it goes?
- 7 On the mic you can't (()).
- 8 How you say (()) cat, you look just like Ja Rule.
- 9 That's how it goes.
- 10 Up on the mic you ain't straight (()).
- 11 Fuck Ja Rule, you're Flavor Flav's second cousin.
- 12 That's how it goes. //Shells points to his mouth, implying that Eyedea is stealing his
- 13 lines.//
- 14 Your flowin' is weak and when you do that shit you show me your corroded ass teeth.
- 15 Always spittin' [spI In] my lines, thinkin' that he's fresher,
- 16 Spittin' [spI In] Eyedea lines the only way you'll ever sell a record.
- 17 So why'd you do that?
- 18 You don't wanna be (()).
- 19 You know what, you need to take your whole fuckin' crew back to school, **Black**.
- 20 That's how it goes. Pull up a stool, I'm the teacher.
- 21 I'm about to win.
- 22 Your bitch ass sounds like you sneakers.
- 23 You MCs to me is just geekers.
- 24 This cat stays close to my dick like a beeper.
- 25 He ain't even comin' with the cheaper.
- 26 You just lost your life by Eyedea the grim reaper.

This differs in a couple of ways from Shells' performance (shown in 4 below). Shells also tries to feminize Eyedea by calling him a Buttaface or a girl who has everything going for her but her face. He continues this feminizing discourse by drawing a parallel between Eyedea's hopping dance style and the all girl hip hop group Destiny's Child. Shells makes oblique references to Whiteness in line 3 when he calls Eyedea a "lil' Chuck Norris," the White martial arts actor and again in line 17 when he says he'll be "damned to lose against Vanilla Ice," the universally reviled White rapper from the early 1990s. It is important to note Eyedea's physical response; he throws up his hands and looks to the audience for a bit of sympathy. It's at least the third time one of his competitors has called him Eminem or Vanilla Ice, and he seems to be saying, "Yes, I'm White. Can't you think of a better rhyme?"

Finally, it is noteworthy that Shells does not use the N-word to address or refer

to Eyedea at all, nor does he ever address Eyedea directly at all. The combination of these acts seems to suggest that Shells does not really accept Eyedea as a full-fledged competitor. As a native of New York City, performing for a home crowd, Shells may have assumed that this White skate kid from Minneapolis wouldn't be accepted as authentic by the audience.

(4) Round 4: Shells vs. Eyedea (Final Round, Spit 1 of 2)

- 1 Shells: Listen man, yo. Hey, yo, listen. Hey yo, hey, yo.
- 2 I'mo spit hot bars even if this dude is borin'.
- 3 They got Shells battlin' lil Chuck Norris.
- 4 We get it goin' man you don't really want that
- 5 And I'll put this burner right where your tongue at.
- 6 Yo, this dude name girl is Butta Face
- 7 'Cause everything look good BUT HER FACE.
- 8 You don't really want no part of Shells
- 9 'Cause I hate hard.
- 10 You can call me the Black Sprewell.
- 11 Now wait a minute.
- 12 (()) jumpin'. He's like Destiny's Child - jumpin jumpin //rhythmic speech//
- 13 You don't know - I'mo let this go.
- 14 And you talk about my teeth, talk about my flow.
- 15 I'm a hot ((skimity)) cat.
- 16 Me mad nice.
- 17 I'll be damned to lose against Vanilla Ice. //Eyedea throws up his hands and rolls his
- 18 eyes//
- 19 Hold up, don't try to save my lines
- 20 'Cause it's like 1-800 nuttin' but hot lines.
- 21 Hold up, you better slow up.
- 22 This dude's so ugly, I about to throw up.
- 23 //Shells turns to the audience.// You Ø sayin' I'm wack cause my man's ((White))
- 24 And guess what, I'm here (())
- 25 And we can fight and I don't care.
- 26 We can do this forever,
- 27 You like fake jeans and you fake...//buzzer sounds//

Because this is the final round of the battle, competitors have to perform a second spit. We see some classic examples of ritual insults in Eyedea's spit shown in 5 where he claims to have slept with Shells' mother and fathered his little sister. This is in line with Labov's analysis of sounds in which the most common theme is someone's mother's sexual activity (1972: 322). The imputation that Eyedea fathered Shells' sister, making her "half White" is another instance of racial self marking.

(5) Round 4: Eyedea vs. Shells (Final Round, spit 2)

- 3 Eyedea: I'll grab the microphone and let you know I'm mad tight
- 4 I'll let you know I coulda been your dad right?

- 5 Matter of fact, I was with your mom last night
- 6 Matter of fact, I'm the reason your little sister's half White!

Eyedeade continues to deliver a barrage of rhymes that severely cripple Shells. Eyedeade is responding to the growing support he feels from the audience. He alluded to the fact that Shells is from New York City in the first spit ("He'll only win this battle 'cause the whole crowd's his family") and returns to the same theme here when he implies that Shells should be able to garner more crowd support.

- 13 I grab the microphone and straight smoke the clown
- 14 I'm beatin' him in his own fuckin' hometown!

Eyedeade then returns to the familiar strategy of feminizing his opponent by creating a somewhat more elaborate (and highly misogynist) portrait of Shells as a girl who is too ugly to be raped even though her legs are spread open. The feminizing theme continues with a question about why Shells can't grow mustache.

- 15 Now how (()) does that make you?
- 16 On the mic I'll break you
- 17 Even if you was a bitch with your legs open, no one would rape you.
- 18 That's how it goes On the mic he just straight bus' wack.
- 19 Look at this cat; 25, can't grow a mustache
- 20 What's up with that?

In the last few lines, Eyedeade delivers a withering series of rhymes, culminating in a punch line that pre announces Shells' defeat.

- 23 Your whole style is weak
- 24 You're defeated depleted
- 25 Your whole style is cheatin'
- 26 Yo, I'll grab the mic and straight disconnect your face
- 27 Yo, it's your turn, but you got second place

Shells' spit falls completely flat and the audience begins to boo. He begins to lose the beat and struggle with his flow. He looks at the clock with 30 seconds remaining and tries to incorporate the time remaining into a rhyme. He then makes one last attempt to delegitimize Eyedeade with an awkward comparison between icebergs and Whiteness.

(6) Round 4: Shells vs. Eyedeade (Final Round, spit 2)

- 17 Shells: It's thirty seconds, twenty nine and you's a berg
- 18 He thought iceberg meant...
- 19 Hold up and bring it back
- 20 You White like that

Shells ends his spit by turning on the audience and cursing at them in lines 29-30. He makes an attempt to rebut Eyedeade's ritual insult about his sister being half White, but it's a last ditch attempt to get a flow going before the buzzer sounds.

- 29 //Shells turns to the audience// Fuck y'all niggas!
30 I got a gun, and I don't really trust y'all niggas
31 We could get it jumpin' and you don't really want that
32 And guess what, I'm the reason your sister's half Black
33 So let's go
34 And I'mo kill (())
35 Cause I'mo tell you this one more last time //buzzer sounds//

Ultimately Eyedea emerges hands down as the winner. Given the fact that Shells had a lot of supporters in the audience, we can say with some confidence that Eyedea really earned his win by outclassing his opponent. More importantly, the audience accepts him as “real” because he doesn't act like he's trying to be Black - or try to be something he isn't. His clean cut style, absence of head coverings or gang symbols of any kind show that he is not trying to claim street credibility or indeed be anything more than a White suburban skate kid. He deftly lets his opponents' incessant references to his Whiteness roll off his back, tacitly accepting that while his identity is marked in this context, “skills” as they say in hip hop are the most important aspect of the performance.

4. Conclusion

MC battles are part of a long oral tradition of ritual insults in the Black speech community, overlapping with the dozens and sounding in terms of content and to some degree in terms of structure. But battles are also somewhat unique in that success is measured by how well MCs can deliver a spontaneous series of rhyming couplets that jibe with the DJ's beat. In terms of interculturality, these data show that Whiteness is a highly salient factor that triggers overt and oblique references in MC battles. Black and White contestants cooperate to construct difference in ways that reflect a shared orientation about the markedness of Whiteness within hip hop. Interculturality serves an important functional role as a way to ratify the alternative social order within hip hop rather than as a way to delegitimize the participation of Whites. The contestants reference cultural differences in their performances in ways that that reveal shared cultural knowledge and practices, binding them in important ways that often supercede cultural and ethnic differences.

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