The Braids, The Bars, and the Blackness: Ruminations on Hip Hop's World War III – Drake versus Kendrick (Part One)

Todd Craig

Blog post published November 4, 2024 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/3apxy-n3s67

Abstract

A Conversation by Todd Craig and LeBrandon Smith DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/3apxy-n3s67 By now, it's safe to say very few people have not caught wind of the biggest Hip-Hop battle of the 21st century: the clash between Kendrick Lamar and Drake.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Canadian Studies, Cultural Studies

Recommended citation

Craig, T. (2024, November 4). The Braids, The Bars, and the Blackness: Ruminations on Hip Hop's World War III – Drake versus Kendrick (Part One). *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/3apxy-n3s67

Copyright

Copyright © Todd Craig 2024. Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

A Conversation by Todd Craig and LeBrandon Smith



DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/3apxy-n3s67

By now, it's safe to say very few people have *not* caught wind of the biggest Hip-Hop battle of the 21st century: the clash between Kendrick Lamar and Drake. Whether you've seen the videos, the memes or even smacked a bunch of owls around playing the video game, this battle grew beyond Hip Hop, with various facets of global popular culture tapped in, counting down minutes for responses and getting whiplash with the speed of song drops. There are multiple ways to approach this event. We've seen inciteful arguments about how these two young Black males at the pinnacle of success are tearing one another down. We also acknowledge Hip Hop's long legacy of battling; the culture has always been a "competitive sport" that includes "lyrical sparring."

This three-part article for *Sounding Out!*'s Hip Hop History Month edition stems from a longer conversation with two co-authors and friends, Hip Hop listeners and aficionados, trying to make sense of all the songs and various aspects of the visuals. This intergenerational conversation involving two different sets of Hip Hop listening ears, both heavily steeped in Hip Hop's sonic

culture, is important. Our goal here is to think through this battle by highlighting quotes from songs that resonated with us as we chronicled this moment. We hope this article serves as a responsible sonic assessment of this monumental Hip Hop episode.

First things first: what's so intergenerational about our viewpoints? This information provides some perspective on how this most recent battle resonated with two avid Hip Hop listeners and cultural participants.

LeBrandon is a 33 year old Black male raised in Brooklyn and Queens, New York. He is an innovative curator and social impact leader. When asked about the first Hip Hop beef that impacted him, LeBrandon said:

> *The first Hip-Hop battle I remember is Jay x Nas and mainly because Jay was my favorite rapper at the time. I was young but mature enough to feel the burn of "Ether." It's embarrassing to say now, but truthfully I was hurt—as if "Ether" had been pointed at me. "Ether" is a masterclass in Hip Hop disrespect but the stanza that I remember feeling terrible about was "I'll still whip your ass/ you 36 in a karate class?/ you Tae-bo hoe/ tryna work it out/ you tryna get brolic/ Ask me if I'm tryna kick knowledge/ Nah I'm tryna kick the shit you need to learn though/ that ether, that shit that make your soul burn slow." MAN. I remember thinking, is Jay old?! Is 36 old?! Is my favorite rapper old?! Why did Nas say that about him? I should reiterate I am older now and don't think 36 is old, related or unrelated to Hip Hop. Nas's gloves off approach shocked me and genuinely concerned me. But I'm thankful for the exposure "Ether" gave me to the understanding that anything goes in a Hip-Hop battle.*



https://youtu.be/zfyQ8muKLdc

Todd is a Black male who grew up in Ravenswood and Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City, New York. Todd is about 15 years older than LeBrandon, and is an associate professor of African American Studies and English. Todd stated:

> *The first battle that engaged my Hip Hop senses was the BDP vs. Juice Crew battle –specifically "The Bridge" and "The Bridge is Over." The stakes were high, the messages were clear-cut, and*

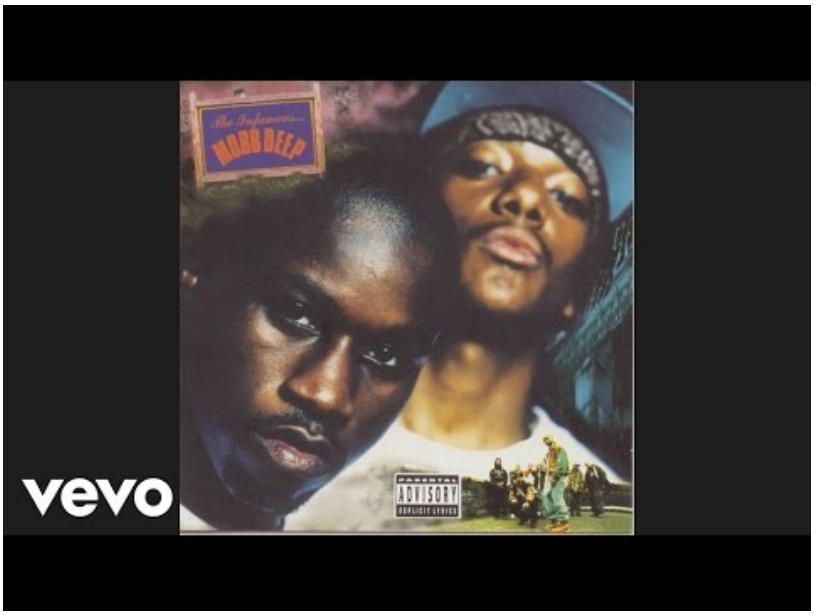
> *the battle lines were drawn. I lived in Ravenswood but I had family and friends in QB. And "The Bridge" was like a borough anthem. Even though MC Shan was repping the Bridge, that song motivated and galvanized our whole area in Long Island City. This was the first time in Hip Hop that I recall needing to choose a side. And because I had seen Shan and Marley and Shante in real life in QB, the choice was a no-brainer. That battle led me to start recording Mr. Magic and Marley Marl's show on 107.5 WBLS, before even checking out what Chuck Chillout or Red Alert was doing. As I got older, it would sting when I heard "The Bridge is Over" at a club or a party. And when I would DJ, I'd always play "The Bridge is Over" first, and follow it up with either "The Bridge" or another QB anthem, like a "Shook Ones Pt. 2" or something.*



https://youtu.be/dS4RpBR0Zn0

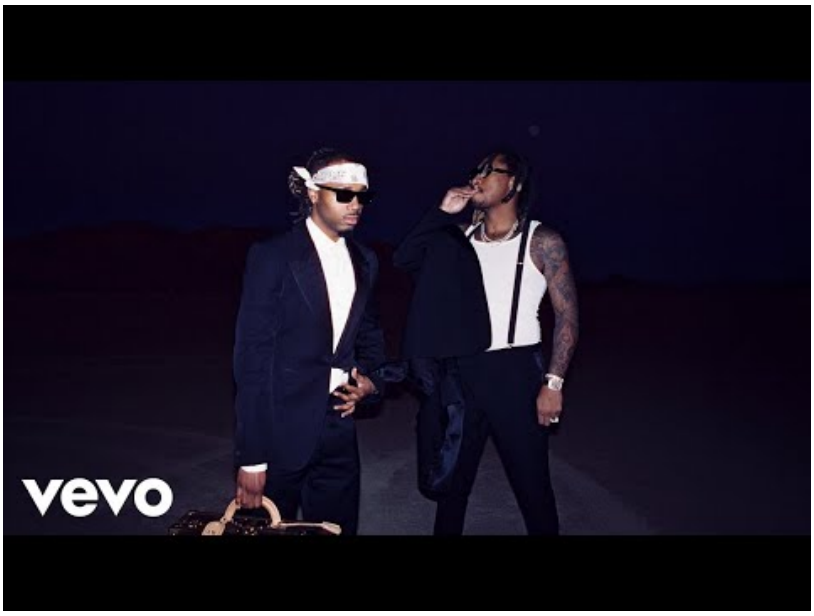


https://youtu.be/r0Sy4twXSn0



https://youtu.be/rTKpYJ80OVQ

We both enter this conversation agreeing this battle has been brewing for about ten years, however it really came to a head in the Drake and J. Cole song, "First Person Shooter." Evident in the song is J. Cole's consistent references to the "Big Three" (meaning Kendrick Lamar, Drake and J. Cole atop Hip-Hop's food chain), while Drake was very much focused on himself and Cole. It is rumored that Kendrick was asked to be on the song; his absence without some lyrical revision by Cole and Drake, seems to have led to Kendrick feeling snubbed or slighted in some way. This song gets Hip Hop listeners to Kendrick's verse on the Future and Metro Boomin' song "Like That" where Kendrick sets Hip Hop ablaze with the simple response: "Muthafuck the Big Three, nigguh, it's just Big Me" – a moment where he "takes flight" and avoids the "sneak dissing" that he asserts Drake has consistently done.



https://youtu.be/N9bKBAA22Go

We both agreed that Drake's initial full-length entry into this battle, "Push Ups," was the typical diss record we'd expect from him. Whether in his battle with Meek Mill or Pusha T, Drake's entry

follows the typical guidelines for diss records: it comes with a series of jabs at an opponent, which starts the war of words. The goal in a battle is always to disrespect your opponent to the fullest extent, so we find Drake aiming to do just that. We both noticed those jabs, most memorably is "how you big steppin' with some size 7 men's on." We also noticed Drake's misstep by citing the wrong label for Kendrick when he says "you're in the scope right now" – alluding to Kendrick Lamar being signed to Interscope – even though neither Top Dog Entertainment (TDE) nor PGLang are signed to Interscope Records. Drake's lack of focus on just Kendrick would prove a mistake: he disses Metro Boomin, The Weeknd, Rick Ross, and basketball player Ja Morant in "Push Ups."



https://youtu.be/HKH9p19PRLA

While we agree that in a rap battle, the goal is to disrespect your opponent at the highest level, we had differing perspectives on Drake's second diss track "Taylor Made Freestyle." LeBrandon felt this song landed because it took a "no fucks" approach to the battle. Regardless of how one may feel about Drake's *method* of disrespect (by using AI), the *message* was loud and inescapable. LeBrandon highlighted the moment when AI Tupac says "Kendrick we need ya!"; outside of how hilarious this line is, Drake dissing Kendrick by using Tupac's voice – a person with a legacy that Kendrick holds in the highest esteem – further established that this would be no friendly sparring match. Not only did Drake disrespect a Hip Hop legend with this line and its delivery, but an entire coast. The track invokes the spirit of a deceased rapper, specifically one whose murder was so closely connected to Hip Hop and authentic street beef. This moment was a step too far for Todd, who lived through the moment when both 2Pac and Biggie were murdered over fabricated beef.

https://youtu.be/2_UZmQih0vU

Furthermore, LeBrandon pointed to the ever controversial usage of AI in Hip Hop, something Drake's boss, Sir Lucian Grainge, recently condemned (especially when Drake, himself, condemns the AI usage of his own voice). By blatantly ignoring the issues and respectability codes the Hip Hop community should and does have with these ideas, Drake's method of poking fun at his opponent was glorious. It was uncomfortable, condescending and straight-up gangsta. It also showcased Drake's everlasting creative ability and willingness to take a risk. Todd acknowledged a

generationally tinged viewpoint: this might also be a misstep for Drake because he used Snoop Dogg's voice as well. Not only is Snoop alive, but Snoop was instrumental in passing the West Coast torch and crown to Kendrick. So when Drake uses an AI Snoop voice to spit "right now it's looking like you writin' out the game plan on how to lose/ how to bark up the wrong tree and then get your head popped in a crowded room," it strikes at the heart of the AI controversy in music. This was not Snoop's commentary at all. We both agree, however, that the "bark up the wrong tree" and "Kendrick we need ya" lines came back to haunt Drake. We also agree that dropping "Push Ups" and "Taylor Made Freestyle" is Drake's battle format, hoping that he can overwhelm an opponent with multiple songs in rapid fire.

Todd and LeBrandon's Hip Hop History Month play-by-play continues on November 11th with the release of Part 2! Return for "Euphoria" and stay until "6:16 in LA."

—

*Our Icon for this series is a mash up of "Kendrick Lamar (Sziget Festival 2018)" taken by Flickr User Peter Ohnacker (**CC BY-NC-SA 2.0**) and "Drake, Telenor Arena 2017" taken by Flickr User Kim Erlandsen, NRK P3 (**CC BY-NC-SA 2.0**)*

—

Todd Craig (he/him) *is a writer, educator and DJ whose career meshes his love of writing, teaching and music. His research inhabits the intersection of writing and rhetoric, sound studies and Hip Hop studies. He is the author of* "K for the Way": DJ Rhetoric and Literacy for 21st Century Writing Studies *(Utah State University Press) which examines the Hip Hop DJ as twenty-first century new media reader, writer, and creator of the discursive elements of DJ rhetoric and literacy. Craig's publications include the multimodal novel tor'cha (pronounced "torture"), and essays in various edited collections and scholarly journals including* The Bloomsbury Handbook of Hip Hop Pedagogy, Amplifying Soundwriting, Methods and Methodologies for Research in Digital Writing and Rhetoric, Fiction International, Radical Teacher, Modern Language Studies, Changing English, Kairos, Composition Studies *and* Sounding Out! *Dr. Craig teaches courses on writing, rhetoric, African American and Hip Hop Studies, and is the co-host of the podcast* Stuck off the Realness *with multi-platinum recording artist Havoc of Mobb Deep. Presently, Craig is an Associate Professor of African American Studies at New York City College of Technology and English at the CUNY Graduate Center.*

LeBrandon Smith (he/him) *is a cultural curator and social impact leader born and raised in Brooklyn and Queens, respectively. Coming from New York City, his efforts to bridge gaps, and build community have been central to his work, but most notably his passion for music has fueled his career. His programming has been seen throughout the Metropolitan area, including historical venues like Carnegie Hall, The Museum of the City of NY (MCNY) and Brooklyn Public Library.*

—



***REWIND!*...If you liked this post, you may also dig:**

"Heavy Airplay, All Day with No Chorus": Classroom Sonic Consciousness in the Playlist Project—Todd Craig

SO! Reads: "K for the Way": DJ Rhetoric and Literacy for 21st Century Writing Studies—DeVaughn (Dev) Harris

Caterpillars and Concrete Roses in a Mad City: Kendrick Lamar's "Mortal Man" Interview with Tupac Shakur–Regina Bradley