

Hip-hop on the East Side: A Multi-sited Ethnography of Breakdancing and Rap Music from St. John's and Grand Falls, Newfoundland

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INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER CHALLENGES the narrow concept of “Newfoundland music” by exploring the networks and references of hip-hop, a genre not frequently associated with the province’s culture. “Newfoundland music and dance,” as it is usually defined, conjures up images of fiddles, accordions, old-time square sets, step-dancing, and Newfoundland-Irish bar bands. These activities are a vibrant part of the island’s contemporary cultural tapestry, but they largely refer to times past. The strong presence of the past in this imagery assumes that Newfoundland culture is “traditional,” and the meaning of “Newfoundland” as an adjective conflates the local with the historical, highlighting connections with Ireland and England.

In addition, traditional Newfoundland culture (including music and dance) is often discussed in the context of the island’s relative isolation. There is a tendency to compare the pre-Confederation period with a “contemporary” Newfoundland dating from 1949, and the arrival of mass media and better communications.¹ Confederation is thus earmarked as the beginning of the end of traditional ways of life. Witnessing the changes to the expressive culture that took place after Confederation, together with other social changes, many folk revivalists of the 1970s adopted what Martin Stokes has described as the postmodernist fear that local histories were vanishing (21).

The connection between modern modes of outside influence and the loss of local cultural identity pits the contemporary against the past, and also suggests a one-way direction of influence: the hegemonic impact of mass-mediated culture, largely from Canada and the US, over local expressions of people and place. However, the flow of cultural influence need not be unidirectional. As Tony Mitchell's collection of essays on international hip-hop scenes clearly illustrates, the global does not supplant the local. Instead, it can serve as a fresh vehicle through which local identities and alliances can be formed, contested, and re-established. Several Newfoundland scholars have conducted studies that challenge the dichotomy between "tradition" and the modern. Narváez's insistence² on a traditional-pop culture continuum, and Diamond's recent CD project,³ which features both archival folksong recordings and modern reinterpretations (including a hip-hop track), are just two such examples.

For many people, the concept of "Newfoundland music and dance" is closely tied to traditions rooted in colonial influences in isolated environments, but contemporary expressions are not limited to folk festivals and revived set dances. There is a growing hip-hop scene in the province, and like the youth cultures presented in Mitchell's anthology, young Newfoundlanders are not passive consumers of this largely urban American and now "universal" (12) form of pop culture. Local youth actively engage with the "global" aspects of the genre to produce "glocal" expressions of music and dance (Robertson).

All four aspects of hip-hop culture (graffiti, DJing/turntabilism, rapping, and breakdancing) are evident in the province and are at times variably present in each of the case studies discussed in this essay. I will focus on two areas: breakdancing and rap music. Drawing upon Marcus's (1995) advocacy of multi-sited ethnography as an approach to understanding translational cultural processes, I will undertake a comparative analysis of the mediated performances of five local hip-hop acts and explore how young performers from St. John's and Grand Falls both challenge and reinforce ideas of traditional Newfoundland music and dance through hip-hop culture.

The first breakdance case study is based on a video of an experimental dance piece performed during the 2004 Festival of New Dance in St. John's. This is contrasted with an online and elaborately produced demonstration video of the St. John's-based b-boy⁴ group, East Rock Crew. The professionally produced music of Johnny Hardcore, an award-winning MC who hails originally from St. John's and is part of an eastern Canadian group that consists of turntablists, producers, and other MCs, is the focus of the third case study. The final example consists of two amateur rap groups: the first, Gazeebow Unit, is a widely popular group of three high school students from Airport Heights, a St. John's subdivision; the second is Compton and Juice from Grand Falls, which has become infamous as a result of a song which harshly criticizes the St. John's group for its use of a stylized Newfoundland accent.

Marcus (1995) suggests approaches to doing a multi-sited ethnography that involve the analysis of how a cultural idea, object, or group changes as it moves through time and space. As a frame of inquiry, I will “follow the conflict” (Marcus 110) by tracing how the notion of “battle” manifests itself in each of these performances. Like the aesthetic of “breaking” or “sampling,” the concept of “battle” is a prevalent theme in hip-hop (Rose 36), deriving from the often-discordant relationships between the South Bronx hop crews and gangs of the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, battles also strengthen relationships, especially among individual crew members and their fans. By tracing the battle element in each of the Newfoundland case studies, areas of contention and, by extension, importance are uncovered. What is being contested and what is at stake?

I also look at the varied uses of dialects in these pieces. I refer to the “ways of talking” achieved through use of specific language, local inflections, and music-speech surrogates, such as those discussed in Harry Berger’s introduction to *Global Pop, Local Language* (xiv), extending the definition to include aspects of choreography and visual art, additional elements of style and form that evoke references to specific people, places, and ideologies. The richness and variation of these meanings depend entirely upon the social positioning of listeners.

METHODOLOGY

In keeping with the concept of multi-sited ethnography, I have employed a range of data collection and analytical methods. I was a participant/observer at only one of the performances discussed, an evening practice session held by East Rock Crew on the campus of Memorial University. For the other case studies, I conducted informal conversations with performers, listeners, and viewers, both in person and via the internet. The internet also allowed me to obtain information that would have otherwise been inaccessible. Gazeebow Unit’s songs, for instance, are distributed only online. Developing rapport, and even establishing identities, has also proved to be a challenge. Web sources have proved to be unstable; some on which I drew upon have disappeared, others have been revised, such as the problematic Wikipedia.com. My data for each case study derives from a close analysis of mediated performances, both live and on the internet. Most listeners’ responses were “located” in this way.

Through an analysis of these performances, I want to ask whether there is anything distinctive about the Newfoundland hip-hop scene, whether there are any distinctive stylistic elements, and whether there is a unified hip-hop presence in the province.

Case Study 1: *CAN Control* (Video)

An annual event held during the third week of June in St. John's, the Festival of New Dance, is a multi-day, multi-performance event that showcases modern dance. Organized by Neighbourhood Dance Works [NDW], a St. John's-based dance cooperative, the festival provides a performance venue for local groups and those from elsewhere. However, its primary commitment is to the local (indigenous) dance scene:

NDW is committed to exploring new strategies for the facilitation, creation and profiling of indigenous Newfoundland and Labrador contemporary dance, on a provincial, national, and international level.

NDW is committed to the presentation of new dance in a professional setting through the Festival of New Dance. The Festival of New Dance is devoted to the exploration of new dance vocabularies, particularly those of relevance to Newfoundland and Labrador. (NDW website)

CAN Control, an experimental multi-media work choreographed and performed by Monty Hall and Baptiste Neis during the 2004 Festival of New Dance, fulfilled this mandate. One of five pieces in the programme listed as being from St. John's, it was performed once during the festival. Other pieces were held in outdoor venues and public sites around the city; *CAN Control* was held inside the LSPU Hall, the main physical centre of the visual and performance arts community of St. John's.

Hall and Neis are well known for their involvement in the local arts community. Hall is a graffiti artist, DJ, videographer, photographer, and breakdancer, and works with youth at risk. Neis is a multi-media producer with Pope Productions, and participates in many performance groups. Hall and Neis created *CAN Control* as an experiment in using the four elements of hip-hop (sampled music with a dance beat, breakdancing, graffiti, and rapping) to express new interpretations of traditional Newfoundland music, dance, and "work rhythms."

The video is an excerpt from a straight shoot of the dance programming at the LSPU Hall on 19 June 2004. On the back wall of the floor-level stage area a large projection screen is set up to display a slide show of still images, time-lapsed video, animation, and scrolling titles. Wearing a loose army-green sleeveless shirt with cream-coloured cargo pants, Monty appears on stage. Baptiste follows, wearing green satin cargo pants and a cotton halter top. Both performers call advice to the sound engineer about getting the music to synch with the visual. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Monty addresses the audience and introduces the piece by citing its connection to hip-hop. He asks the audience to come down and to sit around the stage in a circle in true b-boy style.

The first segment of the piece reflects⁵ the rhythm of traditional Newfoundland work: fly-fishing, cod jigging and trap hauling, chopping firewood, and riding a

snowmobile. Archival and contemporary photographs of these activities are displayed in slide show format on the projection screen; each image is presented for between five to ten seconds. The words “culture,” “tradition,” and “roots” scroll across these images intermittently. The dance and the slide show are set to an electronica piece that is primarily composed of free music samples available through the Apple home-recording software package “Garage Band.” In 4/4 time, the music consists of one four-measure phrase that is looped. A chromatically descending melodic line of a string quartet complements the steady bass and drum beat. At a tempo of about 110, the entire piece is punctuated randomly by a sound sample of a fly reel being released.

Although some of the choreography is executed independently by each of the dancers, the movements are, for the most part, a series of call and responses. With Monty in the lead, Baptiste usually either copies his pantomime movements or complements them in some way. Monty begins fly-fishing and Baptiste immediately does the same. When Monty begins to haul in a cod trap and wind up a squid-jigging wheel, Baptiste quickly moves in behind him to offer help with these imaginary tasks. The dynamic only changes at the end of the segment when Baptiste takes the initiative to be the first to mount and drive the snowmobile. Monty gets on behind her and the audience laughs when Monty flails his arms while they both go over an imaginary bumpy trail. Both dancers laugh openly during the performance. The choreography is rhythmically free; rarely do the dancers step in time with the solid beat of the piece playing in the background.

After three minutes, there is an abrupt change. The music switches to an entirely new piece that has a faster tempo and a harder bass and percussion line. Audio samples of keyboard typing and spray-can rattling are prevalent. The still images morph into time-lapsed video segments of words being typed on a computer screen and handwritten on a piece of paper. These videos are interspersed with a time-lapsed video of a hooded artist creating graffiti on the wall of a building. The dancers move independently around the stage, while mimicking the act of writing on a large flat surface in all directions above, below, and around them. During the segments of graffiti writing, Monty and Baptiste freeze in place and take a seat facing the screen. This pattern is repeated three times and the entire segment lasts about five minutes. There are no overt references to traditional Newfoundland culture in this piece. However, it highlights graffiti art, an important aspect of hip-hop culture that is often labelled as vandalism. It looks as though the creators of these media are comparing it to other forms of modern communication, such as email and letter writing. The act of sitting still to notice “the writing on the wall” reinforces the importance of these segments; our eyes are directed entirely towards the projection screen.

The final piece is a hip-hop interpretation of Newfoundland traditional fiddle music and square- or step-dancing. Again, there is an abrupt change in the auditory and visual display. The music for this segment is also a piece of electronica, but in

this case a live instrument is sampled. Monty asked one of his friends, a traditional Newfoundland fiddler, to record some samples to be used in this composition. Like the strings in the first piece, the fiddle sample moves chromatically. However, the riff, a cluster of sixteenth notes that descends and ascends around a “home” pitch, is executed more quickly and resembles a fiddle ornament, such as a “turn.”⁶ This riff is repeated sporadically throughout the piece. The visuals projected behind the dancers are animations of black and white dots superimposed on a moving ribbon that resembles ticker-tape. To a tempo of approximately 90 bpm, the dancers perform a hip-hop interpretation of individual step-dancing and the act of “swinging your partner” during a square-set figure. Their movements follow the rhythm of the music more closely than in other segments of the piece. In addition, they interject slow-motion renditions of various hip-hop dance moves. After three minutes, MC Radar takes the stage and performs free style rapping. Monty and Baptiste signal to the audience to join in and a young man takes centre stage to show his own talents at breakdancing. The performance ends after about twenty minutes, when the dancer gets up from the floor and bows his appreciation to the MC.

This multi-media performance contrasts various elements of past/present, rural/urban, and traditional/modern by the juxtaposition and recombination of “locally” (Newfoundland) and “globally” (hip-hop) referent images, sounds, and movements that, according to the performers, strive to reinterpret Newfoundland traditional culture through an urban dance form. The multitude of somewhat abstract visual and auditory stimuli creates a performance experience that allows for varied individual interpretations. The audience can sample, mix, and remix elements to create meanings that resonate with individual experience. For some, this piece may simply be a local hip-hop showcase. For others, it could suggest more politically charged ideologies.

This possibility for multivalent interpretations is also reflected in the title of the piece. Originally I thought that it was an untitled work, since none of those involved could remember its name. Nor was it listed on the 2004 Festival of New Dance programme, archived on the NDW website. I accidentally found the title by scrubbing through the footage; *CAN Control* appeared in bold white letters on the projection screen for a few seconds before the audiovisual engineer tested the slide show in preparation for the performance. Could this name signal a political stance: Canadian control over Newfoundland resources and traditional ways of life? Does it refer to the finesse of a graffiti artist? Is it a message of individual empowerment or a call for more individual involvement in the welfare of the province? Perhaps it is a combination of all four.

One of the most striking components of this piece is the fact that breakdancing, a worldwide dance form that originated in the 1980s, was chosen as a part of a new dance festival. Considering the prevalence of hip-hop in mainstream culture, and the popular imagery of traditional Newfoundland culture employed in this piece, one could argue that there is little new about the performance at all. On the other

hand, “hip-hop was slow to develop in Canada,” and was largely ignored by record labels in the 1980s due to their lack of confidence in the appeal of the genre to wider (white) audiences (Chamberland 309, 313). According to Chamberland, the major acts and most lively hip-hop scenes are based in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, with a wide-ranging subculture stretching from Halifax to Vancouver (323). He does not list Newfoundland in his survey of the Canadian hip-hop scene. Given that locals are often surprised that such a scene exists in Newfoundland, it is not a stretch to imagine why the province was not listed in Chamberland’s survey. That many Newfoundlanders do not recognize hip-hop as a local musical expression could explain how it might be perceived as a form of new dance: not new to the world, but new to the province. The combination of this “new” dance form with some common references to traditional Newfoundland culture arguably fulfills both the “indigenous” and “experimental” criteria of the NDW mandate. Although Monty and Baptiste were “battling” common notions of traditional Newfoundland music and dance through their hip-hop reinterpretations, the inclusion of this genre in this type of dance festival signals a “battle” to recognize local cultural dialects that include “outside” references. This need for recognition is also realized by East Rock Crew, a breakdancing troupe based in St. John’s.

Case Study 2: East Rock Crew

Founded in 2004, East Rock Crew is a St. John’s-based breakdancing troupe that consists of between eight and ten young men in their late teens to early twenties. Although many members are from Newfoundland and all have, at one time, been local students, some are from other parts of the country and one member is originally from South Korea. According to Matt, one of the more passionate and outspoken members, the mandate of the group is to establish a local, urban dance presence to illustrate that breakdancing and hip-hop are just as much “Newfoundland” dance as other, more traditional dance forms. In addition to their participation in b-boy battles, the most recent of which was held in Halifax in September 2005, the Crew performs regularly at local St. John’s pubs, such as the Gypsy Tea Room restaurant, and at other public events such as the 2005 opening of the new provincial cultural centre, The Rooms. In addition, East Rock Crew is actively involved in youth outreach activities; the group often performs at school assemblies and encourages school-aged boys and girls to join the Tuesday night classes held at the Hatcher Dining Hall on the campus of Memorial University.

I attended the practice/jam sessions that are routinely held after the Tuesday night class. Although some of the students stayed on for this rehearsal, they remained on the outskirts of the practice space and did not dance with the members of the Crew. Although they were not ignored, it was clear that this session was for the Crew. The students sat along the edges to watch, or simply left.

Near the front of the room, turntables and speakers were set up on folding tables. A crate of records rested under the table. However, this equipment went un-

used for the entire practice session. Instead, the Crew used a portable CD player and flipped through a folder of CDs they had compiled themselves when they wanted to select new music.

I expected to witness a rehearsal of previously determined choreography. Instead, individual members tried their own moves out on small groups of two to three members. At one point Greg Bruce, the lead member of the Crew, negotiated a series of moves with one of these smaller groups. After some debate, these new moves were accepted and inserted into a 30-40-second piece of choreography that was still in development. The majority of the members practiced this segment over and over again, all the while adjusting the new move to create smooth transitions. During these repeated segments, no one would stop to rewind the music that was playing; the CD just continued until a song came on that did not have the appropriate beat. At that point someone would run over to the CD player and skip through the tracks until a suitable one was found. I asked Greg about the music selections. He said that it was most important to select a piece of music that had the right tempo. When I asked if he used any locally composed dance songs, he replied that he did not. Although he knew of Johnny Hardcore, he reported that his music did not have the right kind of beat. He told me that the group did not strive to develop any localized breakdance moves. As Matt reported, they are interested in building their repertoire of well-known steps so that they can compete on a national level and establish a Newfoundland presence at these battles. They want to get their name "out there" and, according to their website, to establish a permanent breakdancing presence in Newfoundland.

The "East Rock Crew demo video" is a streaming windows media file that was available from the crew's website.⁷ This five-minute, 43-second video was created as a showcase of the group's breakdancing abilities. Subtitled "January 2004-March 2005, So far So good ...," it is a highly edited series of short segments of home video footage set to a specific soundtrack "Battleflag," a 2000 hit single from the Yorkshire group Low Fidelity All Stars.

The song is a mixture of hip-hop, old school R and B, and punk-pop. The beginning of the song contains an eerie, electronically altered, instrumental chorus that consists of an ascending and descending minor second interval that is repeated until it is overtaken by a heavy, multilayered set of electronic beats (approximately 120 bpm) and an electric organ/synthesizer. The vocal styling is somewhere between speech and song and resembles that of an MC, except the words are sung more slowly and are not quite as dense in the sense that fewer words/syllables are sung per measure. The lyrics of the song match the title: it is a call to arms against cooperation with authorities that are perceived to be corrupt. The lyrics of the last chorus state: "Got a revolution behind my eyes. We got to get up and organize."

After the eerie intro, there are two verses and two choruses, each of which contains different lyrics. Each verse or chorus is also sung slightly differently. The vocals on each of the choruses are produced with distortion to sound like they are

coming through a megaphone. The verses are sung more clearly, but exhibit a high degree of digital “scratching” whereby a consonant is quickly repeated to sound like an extremely fast, electronic stutter. Despite these elements, the video segments do not match the song structure. For the most part, each small one-to-two-second segment appears to be presented randomly. However at certain times during the song, one virtuosic move, for example, a head spin, is featured over and over again and is performed by different members of the Crew at different times and places. At no time during the video are any of these members named. The majority of the video footage is shot during private practices; only a few short segments show the group performing together. Although some of the clips are visually distorted, there is no evidence of time-lapse. There are very few local references within the video, but the few that exist connect the Crew with a distinct locality: Memorial University of Newfoundland. These local references appear as book-ends. Near the beginning of the video, we see a quick shot of the university clock tower. At the end we see the varsity mascot attempting to mimic the dance moves of Greg Bruce during what appears to be a pep rally.

Although East Rock Crew displays only a fraction of the local references in their selection of music and breakdance moves that *CAN Control* does, I would argue that their allegiance to the local is just as strong. In order to establish a Newfoundland-based breakdancing presence on the national scene, a more “global” vocabulary is required; local dialects of choreography do not translate well at national battles. The idea of “battle” is more directly observable in this case study and is closer to the kinds of inter-crew competitions that originated in the South Bronx. However, instead of just battling other Canadian breakdancers, as one member explained, East Rock Crew also challenges the inherent notion of the traditional in the often-cited definition of “Newfoundland music and dance” discussed above. The fact that they were selected as one of the local groups to perform at the opening of The Rooms suggests that these battles have had a measure of success.

Case Study 3: Johnny Hardcore

Johnny Hardcore, the performance name of St. John’s native John Young, is a member of the eastern Canadian crew of MCs, turntablists, and music producers called Backburner, a group that grew out of another eastern Canadian troupe, The Verbals.⁸ Winner of the 2002 Halifax DJ Olympics, a high-profile public battle, Johnny released his debut self-titled CD⁹ in the same year. In 2003, Matt Jost posted a review of Johnny’s CD on www.rapreviews.com. According to Jost, Johnny’s name clearly reflects his musical style and attitude: hardcore. However, this is more indicative of his vocal timbre, dedication to his craft, and frequent allusion to MC battle lyrics rather than any alliance with the aesthetics of gangsta rap, a style similar to that of some of the Halifax rap artists cited in Chamberland’s survey of Canadian rap music (308). The collaborative nature of Johnny’s CD is evident in the credits; many tracks feature the work of others including members of Backburner.

Most of the tracks on Johnny's CD deal with his personal experiences (love and insomnia), his experiences as a battling MC, and his ideas about hip-hop and how to "keep it real." Two songs on his CD make direct reference to Newfoundland. Track number five is called "Newfinloons." I originally thought the title meant that it was created by a group of Newfoundland hip-hop artists. However, according to Johnny, the title of the song makes reference to it being a collaborative effort between Newfoundlanders and two hip-hop artists from London, Ontario, who have given the nickname "Loondon" to their hometown.¹⁰ It features Johnny and three "Loondon" artists performing high-speed raps to a funky bass, organ, and drum line, punctuated by scratches.

Track four is entitled "MUN (Man U Nuts)." Rapping over a bass and drum line that sounds much like the one in "Newfinloons," Johnny's lyrics describe the day-to-day activities and academic philosophy of a hip-hop university, which is no doubt a tongue-in-cheek reference to Memorial University of Newfoundland. Johnny is fairly free with the metre of his rapping in comparison to the background track (4/4 time). Although he says many words in a short period of time, his enunciation is very clear and his transitions are fluid. The following is a transcription of the lyrics.¹¹

This is the procedure
 The basic **introduction**
 To being a **flow-leader**
 Completely wasted while **our talents are conducted**
 Like electrical **currents** centrifugal events
 Which is concurrent with the class which is **current**

I want everyone in the **universe to be**
 In contact with **my university**
 Entitled "Flow Freely," **established in 2003**
 This is my annual manual for **submission and registration**
 IDs, address accuracies and **class placement**
 There's no scholarships **bring skills and wills**
 We won't separate economically each **term's two bills**¹²

You should send proof and reasons why
 You want to attend "**Flow Freely**"
 For degree is **b-boyism**, smoke¹³ **madism**
 Call our offices by **phone** and explain why
 Your mind's **flowin**, by hip-hop and its ability to roam freely
 Make **mass maneuvers on the masses' identities**
 Seek academic advice; **think about it precise**:
 "Is that what you really want in your life"?

We have old school cats as counselors to see how fresh **your raps are**
And interrogate you about **playing the guitar**
Cuz that shit is simply **not condoned**
Rock n' Roll's been dead **since Lennon got domed**¹⁴
Back in the day all degrees are courses in **supreme art**
You'll know what I mean after you soon **begin to start**
Our goal is to install intelligently
An **understanding and respect of who we are and what we see**
Master the art of graffiti, turntablism, **b-boyism**, the title MC

We have anthropology, biology **economics, computer science and history**
Of course we have music and **drama** linguistics **and law with a comma**
There's humanities, **philosophies, women studies and technology degrees**
Class breaks at **4:20**,¹⁵ there's freestyles in lunch room between **1 and 3**
December 2nd is the **MC cook-out** when graduates come back
And new admissions get took out

There's counselors for those who are hurt **by all those whack MCs**
Extensive studies **on how they're infiltrating society**
We got pub crawls and **bud study halls**
Imported chicks that study lick balls (aaaaaah)
Hope you've enjoyed your **stay here**
Bring mikes needles spray cans **and footwear**
MUN
Man they just straight nuts
MUN
Man you nuts (*MUN*)
Man you nuts (*MUN*)
Man they nuts (*MUN*)
Man you nuts (*MUN*)
MUN! MUN! MUN!

The bold lyrics indicate when Johnny is singing in unison along with his vocal track as a means of providing emphasis. The italics indicate the use of an audible Newfoundland accent. For the most part, the accent used by Johnny is, to my ears, indistinguishable from that of other rap artists who imitate African-American, Bronx-based accents. This track contains the only instance on the album where I could hear a trace of a local accent. The "MU" of MUN is sounded similar to the "maw" in maudlin, although it is located more deeply in the throat. The "N" is sounded with the tip of the tongue touching to top of the palate. It is not as nasal sounding as an "N" that is spoken with the tongue placed on the back of the teeth. As one would expect, "MUN" is a word that is frequently used around campus and sounding this word with a local accent is a quick and sure way to communicate that you are from Newfoundland and, more specifically, the St. John's area. Could Johnny have consciously decided to include this aural reference as an indication of

his local roots to others in-the-know? On the other hand, its use seems rather conspicuous, especially since it is employed at the end of the song when Johnny repeatedly sounds off the word “MUN” at random. If Johnny can don a hip-hop accent that resembles American dialects on the other tracks, why does he choose to use a local accent at this point? Could he be making fun of himself and the university that he may have attended? When asked, he explained that, although he didn’t consciously use a specific accent, he intentionally tried to express his negative opinions about the university. “It just came out that way.”¹⁶

John wrote the song when his brother was registering for his first semester at MUN. It came to him while he was flipping through the Table of Contents of the MUN telephone registration manual. He felt a certain amount of pressure from friends and family to attend university, even though he did not want to do so, and the song was a response. He created a fictional university that better suited his ideas about higher education. He created the lyrics quickly and within a few hours he and “a beat maker” were collaborating on the telephone.¹⁷

The specific battle at play in Johnny Hardcore’s song “MUN” challenges the legitimacy of the local academy as an institution that can serve his personal and professional educational needs: those that address the social, political, and performative aspects of hip-hop. Further, Johnny sounds the name of the local university with a thick St. John’s accent that is often associated with “skeet” culture — a derogatory term that refers to

a white, aggressive, uneducated teenager. Often living in economically poor areas, a “skeet” is said to have a loose grasp on standard English dialect; speaking with a noticeable Newfoundland English accent (sometimes on top of an Ebonics vocabulary), non-standard grammar, and a more-than-liberal use of homophobic and vulgar language. (“Skeet”)

By referencing this culture, Johnny was attempting to add subtle insult to injury by suggesting that those who attend MUN are not just nuts, but also little wiser for the wear.¹⁸

Case Study 4: Gazeebow Unit and Compton and Juice

Gazeebow Unit is a group of three young male high school students from Airport Heights, a subdivision in northeast St. John’s, which has recently achieved local cult status with their humorous rap compositions. To those outside of their circle of friends, these three musicians/comedians are known only by their MC names: Alfabit, Mike \$hanks, and M to tha C. They have not made a CD, nor do they have a website. Gazeebow Unit’s songs are widely available as mp3s and are also easily downloaded from file-sharing applications such as Limewire. Since the summer of 2005 the group has been interviewed by CBC radio, which now uses short samples

of their songs as trailers. They have also been hired to do a promotional radio jingle and have been the topic of literally hundreds of web forum and blog site entries.¹⁹

The topics of these entries fall within a relatively narrow range. Many of the early ones were posted as a form of discovery: "Have you heard Gazeebow Unit?" Follow-ups tried to piece together some biographical information on the group: "Are these guys from Airport Heights?" There was some debate as to whether Gazeebow Unit was a comedy troupe or a group of young teens legitimately trying to "make it in the rap game." What makes their intentions hard to determine, especially for those of us who grew up in St. John's, is the fact that although they sound like they are making fun, they evoke "skeet" cultural references that are accurate, not exaggerated, even if they are somewhat stereotypical.²⁰ Listeners posted various interpretations online and for those opposed to the group's use of Newfoundland dialect, of primary concern was the perpetuation of a "Newfie" stereotype, especially among other Canadians. However, the most heated debates, some in the form of rap poetry, took place after the release and circulation of a song by a Grand Falls group called Compton and Juice.

If little is known about the real identities of Gazeebow Unit, even less is known about Compton and Juice. They hail from Grand Falls and they take offense at Gazeebow Unit's use of a Newfoundland accent. Their response song or "diss" was so harshly critical that it is generally understood by those who post to the online forums that Compton and Juice did not appreciate the humour.

Gazeebow Unit sings about life as a "skeet," and their song "The Anthem"²¹ describes aspects of a skeet lifestyle (riding bikes, smoking, and picking fights). Additionally, the combinations of dialects used match those described in the Wikipedia description (especially the inclusion of Ebonics²² vocabulary). In 4/4 time, "The Anthem" has a tempo of approximately 100 bpm and the instruments used to create the two-measure background track are a funky "wah wah" distorted electric guitar riff, and a synthesized snare drum beat. These two measures are repeated for the duration of the song, which is a little less than two minutes. All three members of Gazeebow Unit are rhythmically free with their raps; they rarely if ever stay completely on the beat. Sometimes this beat skipping appears to be a mistake. Instead of taking away from the experience, however, these shifts, I would argue, reinforce the humorous intentions of the piece.

To those who are familiar with St. John's skeet culture, the lyrics are filled with blatant references to the skeet lifestyle. Although somewhat exaggerated, the accent is right on the mark as well. Homegrown parodies of Newfoundland culture are not unknown to local audiences. Some parallels include the St. John's-based "Snook" character, created by Peter Soucey, the CODCO-derived comedy on the CBC television show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and the music and comedic skits of the central Newfoundland group Buddy Wassisname. So how could it be that some of the people who posted their comments online still did not recognize this as a joke? One possible explanation may lie with the fact that other Newfoundland com-

edy groups present their work through a highly visual medium. In the case of the Gazeebow Unit, there are no performance cues besides the aural and the textual; unlike stage or television comedy listeners cannot read body language or dress or background set, and much of the interpretation of these groups is negotiated among audience members via the online forums and in-person discussions. Perhaps it is this which leads many to attribute more truth-value to mediated musical expression than to live performances. No one would mistake an actor for the character she is portraying. Many people, however, tend to equate a musician's lyrics with autobiography.²³

Compton and Juice seem to have made this equation. Instead of recognizing the skeet reference as located in St. John's, they have equated the exaggerated use of a Newfoundland accent as a pan-provincial slur against rural life. They do not see Gazeebow Unit as making self-referencing jokes because they do not recognize the skeet characters Gazeebow Unit members are pretending to be. Furthermore, as some listeners pointed out, there is a large community of snowmobile and off-road motor-sport enthusiasts in rural parts of the province, especially in Central Newfoundland.²⁴

For the majority of the "diss,"²⁵ Compton and Juice attempt an American accent similar to the one employed by Johnny Hardcore. Unlike Johnny Hardcore and Gazeebow Unit, Compton and Juice are on the beat with the rhythm of their rap; their words keep time with the straight 4/4 beat of the background track: distorted drum sounds, a short, two-note bass guitar riff, and a sample of male voice screaming "ahh."

There is no hint of parody in this song. It begins with a sample of a Gazeebow Unit track that fades into the sound of someone laughing. The type of laughter, however, does not suggest that Compton and Juice are "laughing with" Gazeebow Unit's antics; they are clearly ridiculing them and this sentiment becomes evident as soon as Compton begins his rap.

Compton and Juice do not support the way that Gazeebow Unit uses a Newfoundland dialect in their rap, and they state so clearly in the lyrics. At one point in the song, however, Compton also sings with a Newfoundland accent: to my ears, specifically a central Newfoundland accent. This accent is present only when Compton refers to Newfoundland and stands up for the people that he feels were the butt of Gazeebow Unit's jokes, a group he perceives to include all rural Newfoundlanders, including himself. The fact that most of the song is sung in an American accent suggests that Compton's use of a Newfoundland accent was not conscious. Although the rest of the "diss" is peppered with harsh personal attacks and homophobic slurs that resemble skeet-like speech, this part of the "diss," the one in which Compton harshly reprimands Gazeebow Unit for "embarrassing the people up in Airport Heights," contains perhaps the most important message and one that hits closest to home. Is it possible that during this segment, Compton unconsciously slips out of the serious rap character he and Juice are portraying (indi-

cated by the Bronx-like American accent) and speaks from a place of autobiography (indicated by the Central Newfoundland accent)? In any case, Gazeebow Unit did not agree with this interpretation of their music and created a musical response to this “diss.”

Although they are aggressive in their reply to Compton and Juice, Gazeebow Unit realize that Compton and Juice did not “get” the comic references. In Gazeebow Unit’s response, they explicitly state that they do not take themselves seriously. Further, they are careful to explain the difference between being a skeet from the St. John’s area, and a “hick” from rural areas of the province. The group defends these local cultural references and refuses to back down from using them. Despite their opposition, it seems as though they are willing to forgive this misinterpretation. They end the song with a call for peace.

The two groups in this case study are engaged in a musical battle of identities. Gazeebow Unit both challenges and claims the stereotype of “skeet” by making fun of it. Compton and Juice resist essentialized notions of Newfoundland identity that are often negatively portrayed to outsiders through the use of dialect. The audience has engaged in these battles as well through their postings on the Internet. They may feel more inclined to take sides because of their involvement in the distribution of the music. The listeners are arguably partially responsible for the success and notoriety of these two groups.

At first hearing, the violent threats in the lyrics lead one to wonder if the groups have gone too far. How idle are these threats? Has the recent attention given to the members of Gazeebow Unit made them feel somewhat vulnerable to violent rebuffs by those who take offense? I wondered these things myself when my requests to interview Alfabit were repeatedly denied. Eventually he admitted that he was avoiding my questions because the group was receiving too much public attention, and agreed to chat sessions. He responded sporadically to my questions. When he chose to answer, he did so while “in character,” intentionally “misspelling” common words to indicate a thick skeet pronunciation. The following is a sample of one of our short chat conversations.

2:41:57 PM)

Can you tell me about the time when you and your crew decided to make these songs?

2:42:26 PM)

dere was more den 1 time by de jesus²⁶

2:42:32 PM)

we have more den 1 song

Unlike the other performers in this essay, Alfabit and the rest of Gazeebow Unit are engaged in a battle to remain anonymous, a desire that is uncommonly exhibited among performers in the public sphere.²⁷ Gazeebow Unit may have originally intended that these songs should be heard only by close friends, and they

explicitly stated in their response to the Compton and Juice diss that their songs should not be taken seriously. Once these songs were “released” via email, those who recognized the songs as “not serious” may have felt free to distribute them, perhaps without considering the possibility that the group did not want the exposure. After all, what musician does not want to be heard and who can resist sharing a good joke with a friend? Further, it is impossible for Gazeebow Unit to ask everyone to stop listening since they have little or no control over who listens to their music. They do, however, have control over how they choose to present themselves in public. As was the case with my chat sessions, the group kept entirely in character when being interviewed for a CBC radio profile. Their “real life” identities have been guessed, confirmed, and contested by listeners, but not by the group itself. Could this desire to remain anonymous be a way of isolating themselves from the characters portrayed in their lyrics, and in turn, re-asserting and re-establishing their own pre-Gazeebow Unit identities? Perhaps they felt that their musical personae, as portrayed in their globally disseminated songs, were beginning to overshadow their “real” lives. Were these aggressive, widely disseminated, and disembodied vocals speaking so loudly that their own voices could not be heard?

Fears that a potentially violent rivalry had developed between the Grand Falls and St. John’s rap groups have been put to rest by recent posts and quick MSN chats with Alfabit. Essentially, these two groups are engaged in a Geertz-like deep play.²⁸ Major battles are waged sonically, but in real life there appears to be little at stake. Compton and Alfabit regularly converse over MSN and are reportedly the “best kind” of friends. In fact, Alfabit has made some recent posts on Penney’s Pics site to defuse an apparently growing animosity between Grand Falls and St. John’s. Unlike Geertz’s cockfight, however, which is an established tradition, these sonic battles grew unexpectedly over a period of time. In many respects, the “players” are fighting blind, especially if one includes the listeners and those who post comments online as participants in the battle. If many do not know exactly whom they are fighting for or against, beyond the musical personae present in the songs, they are clear on the cause. In the case of the “diss” and response, lines are drawn with well-worn sticks in familiar ground: the Newfie joke and the urban/rural tension known locally as the rivalry between “townies” and “baymen.” Distinguishing between “having fun” and “making fun” in face-to-face communication requires a certain level of esoteric knowledge. In the case of mediated performances, where visual cues are largely non-existent, making such a distinction can be a difficult process.²⁹

No matter the individual interpretation of this music, the amount of attention that has been given to these two groups illustrates just how contentious and important regional dialects are to Newfoundlanders. Further, this case study illustrates the power of the Internet as a self-publishing tool and a vehicle for grassroots distribution. Although Johnny Hardcore has a professionally produced CD available for purchase, I would guess that more Newfoundlanders have heard Gazeebow Unit and Compton

and Juice. The less-than-industry-standard production quality of their music (the levels on the vocals consistently produce distortion) has not affected their popularity. They are widely known and used as icons when CBC (St. John's) samples their raps for station identification. The amateur production quality might prevent their music from getting airplay on commercial radio stations, but it has not hindered the music from reaching audiences. Home-based recording and mp3 are analogous to the practice among Canadian youth cultures of using readily available cassette technology (Chamberland 308). Low-fi and inexpensive compared to CD technology, cassettes have played a large role in the circulation of rap music and other popular music genres that do not receive much airplay on Canadian stations (Chamberland 308).

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CONCLUSION

Although slow to be recognized outside subculture circles, as is the case in other Canadian scenes, hip-hop culture is alive and well in Newfoundland. It does not, however, exist simply as a mirror image of American-derived pop culture. My case studies demonstrate that Newfoundland hip-hop takes many forms and is not a unified or homogeneous scene. Each of the performances highlighted in the case studies have incorporated distinct local elements. Whether battling for or against various ideologies and affiliations, this mode of negotiating local identity reflects issues that are relevant to the youth of this province. Although battles are often associated with contest between rival groups, they also serve to form alliances among groups that share common goals and ideals.

It is also clear that not every Newfoundlander holds the notion that "Newfoundland" music and dance includes only expressive culture rooted in the past. Further, "Newfoundland" is more than a geographic location; it is also a complex combination of aesthetics, dialects, feelings, ways of relating, groups of people, political stances, and individual experiences.

Notes

¹The Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website is an example: <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/society/culture.html>

²For a collection of essays that address this issue, see *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*, ed. Peter Narváez and Martin Laba (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular Press, 1986).

³This CD, entitled *It's Time For Another One: Folksongs from the South Coast of Newfoundland — Ramea and Grole*, is available through Landwash Distribution (<http://www.landwashdistribution.com/>). Selected tracks (including the hip-hop track) can be accessed through the online version of Memorial University's 2005 President's Report

(<http://www.mun.ca/2005report/audio/preserving.php>). A complete citation of both the CD and the website are listed in the bibliography.

⁴B-boy and b-girl are hip-hop terms that refer to male and female breakdancers. During b-boy/-girl sessions, dancers and observers commonly stand to form a circle with a space in the centre for dancing. In this case, due to the fact that there is a projection screen on the back wall, the circle is not closed and the audience chooses to be seated on the floor.

⁵I choose to describe mediated performances in the present tense because of the fact that they are able to become part of one's immediate experience by viewing or hearing them on a playback device.

⁶For example, to create a turn around C, one would quickly play D-C-B-C.

⁷At the time of publication, this video was no longer available on the East Rock Crew website, www.eastrockcrew.com.

⁸A profile of the Verbals can be found at http://www.newmusiccanada.com/genres/artist.cfm?mode=longBio&Band_Id=8156. See bibliography for a complete citation.

⁹Thanks to Tony Mitchell for letting me listen to his copy during a conference held in St. John's in June 2005.

¹⁰Young, personal communication, 9 August 2006.

¹¹Thanks to John Young (Johnny Hardcore) for correcting errors in my initial transcription of his lyrics.

¹²"Two bills" means two thousand dollars. He is referring to the price of tuition.

¹³He is referring to marijuana.

¹⁴Hip-hop synonym for "shot."

¹⁵The time 4:20 is an esoteric term among those who use marijuana daily. It refers to the concept of English teatime and, according to Johnny, frequent users will often break from their daily routines at this time, just before the workday ends, to indulge.

¹⁶Young, personal communication, 9 August 2006.

¹⁷Young, personal communication, 26 July 2006.

¹⁸I beg to differ.

¹⁹eBaum's World Forum and "Penney's Pics" are two examples of these web forums. Complete citations are listed in the bibliography.

²⁰I thank Philip Hiscock for sharing some of his ideas and research on Gazeebow Unit.

²¹One of the members of Gazeebow Unit requested that I not include any lyrics in this article.

²²Ebonics is a term used to describe African American vernacular English.

²³My colleague Contessa Small raised this issue in her comments on a seminar version of this essay. Myerhoff and Ruby also discuss the notion of autobiography and song lyrics. See bibliography for a full citation.

²⁴Thanks to my friends Charlie and Bob for this insight.

²⁵There are two parts to this song. The first two-thirds are sung exclusively by Compton, with Juice joining in unison on certain words. Juice's segment contains no trace of a Newfoundland accent. In fact, his accent sounds African American.

²⁶The expression "by de jesus" is one of the group's signature expressions and is used as a call and response at the end of their response to the Compton and Juice diss. It is also a common "skeet" slang expression.

²⁷I cannot determine whether or not Compton and Juice enjoy the attention garnered from their Gazeebow Unit "diss." I have been unable to make contact with them.

²⁸I refer to Geertz's use of Bentham's concept of "deep play" in his essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. In this essay, Geertz discusses the importance of this event in the social lives of the Balinese in the sense that it is a projection and a representation of status contests among male members of hierarchical social groups.

²⁹I thank Philip Hiscock for sharing his ideas about Gazeebow Unit and the notion of navigating the fine edge of irony.

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