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The impossibility of being Drake: Or, what it means to be a successful (Black) Canadian rapper

ABSTRACT

This article takes Canadian hip hop artist Drake, his celebrity and his body of work as a point of departure for an examination of discursive constructions of race, hip hop and Canada in intersection. Canada's role in the global hip hop movement has always been contested; circumscribed from abroad by its proximity to the United States and at home by its ideological positioning of Black citizens and Black cultural production vis-à-vis the imagined nation. Framed by broader questions of the role of hip hop in the Canadian public sphere, this discursive analysis analyses the work and utterances of Drake as well as discourses produced about Drake through music criticism and by other hip hop artists. Drake's public performance of Blackness via hip hop is framed by overlapping and competing ideologies. Drake – whose public persona seems to embody a number of seemingly competing identities – is 'impossible' in so far as he is the product of intersecting, circulating conceptualizations of Blackness that render only some performances of Blackness both commercially viable and authentically hip hop, while others remain impossible, unacceptable, unutterable or unimaginable both inside and outside the nation state.

KEYWORDS

Canada
Drake
public sphere
race
racialization
transnational
hip hop

Drake is 'Canada's rap king' (Leijon 2018), and has put 'Toronto on the map' (Uy 2017). Drake is 'the North Star in the pop constellation' (Chow 2018). Drake 'Started from the Bottom'. He is 'busy getting rich'.[1] Drake is biracial. He is Black. He is African American. He is Jewish. He is Canadian. He is American.[2] Drake is a poser and a fraud (Richards 2016). He is whiny, emotional, relatable and insufferable (Richards 2016). Drake is upset (Bliss 2018). Drake is creepy (Richards 2016). Drake is a nice guy. Drake is 'not a nice guy – it's an image' (Potts 2018). Drake is impossible.

Drake is a Toronto born, Canadian rapper and R&B artist who rose to fame in 2010 with the album *Thank Me Later*. The above fragments of discourse and common 'definitions' of Drake point to the competing and contested positions this artist holds in relation to nationality, race, gender, sexuality, affect, commercial success and authenticity.

Drake's celebrity and body of work, as well as criticism of his work and personhood (as generated by music critics and other hip hop artists) are explored here as discourse that shapes understanding of Blackness, hip hop and Canada in various permutations and intersections. Starting with an examination of Canadian hip hop's relationship to the enigmatic condition of Canadian celebrity, I trace Drake's relationship to categories of hip hop authenticity. I first analyse how Drake's middle class identity, and his relationship to specific neighbourhoods in Toronto, intersects with a hip hop cartography that valorizes certain urban centres while skirting others. While locale confers a certain legitimacy and authenticity in hip hop discourse, relationship to particular geographies is tied to constructions of race. I next look at Drake's racial identity as it is constructed in relation to the Canadian multicultural nation state as well as his transnational celebrity. Finally, I explore Drake's performances of masculinity in the context of the political economy of hip hop. Drake's particular and sometimes contested form of introspective hip hop generates a masculinity that negotiates his distance from the typical locales and signifiers of hip hop authenticity.

HIP HOP CANADA

Arguably, Canadian hip hop is anomalous. The proximity of Canada to the United States, along with Canada's imagined position in global popular culture means that although Canada does not belong wholly to US hip hop culture – understood as the birthplace of hip hop – it is seldom figured as part of the global hip hop movement (Osumare 2001) due to Canada's proximity to the United States and position in the global imagination.

In broad strokes, Canada is understood as a global economic power and a significant trading partner of the United States. It is a self-identified multicultural nation, a commonwealth nation and member of the Francophonie, with ties to the British and French empires. Canada is a settler-colonial nation, and this manifests in everything from formal government policy, to law (Backhouse 1999), to discourse and representation, which work together to form a particular (albeit contested) image of the nation and to constitute particular identities – such as Black, white, Indigenous or immigrant – as variously belonging to, or imagined as belonging outside of, the nation state, regardless of formal citizenship. Despite both US and broader global commercial success and fame, Drake is discursively framed by his Canadian nationality.

How Drake – a public figure – fits or does not fit into an imaginary of the Canadian nation and the identities this imaginary constitutes shapes how

1. 'Up All Night', from *Thank Me Later* (Aspire Music Group, Young Money Entertainment, Cash Money Records, and Universal Motown Records, 15 June 2010).

2. Drake holds dual citizenship (United States and Canada).

Drake is perceived, received and represented in Canada and in places outside the nation state, including the United States, where particular images of Canada are disseminated (Gittings 1998). Within Canada Drake's celebrity is arguably suspect. Michele Byers suggests that Canada is an ambiguous space 'that both produces and yet does not produce stars, as a space from which stars emanate and yet a space from which emanation is impossible' (2012: 12). Byers argues that Canadian stars – regardless of merit – only become celebrities through circulation beyond the borders of Canada. This cross-border celebrity, tied (as all celebrity is) to the marketing of identity and persona, requires a balancing of assimilation to the particularities of (often American) foreign market and audience expectations and the maintenance of something distinctly 'Canadian'. This is easier to accomplish for some Canadian stars than for others. As Byers explains, not 'all Canadian identities work in transnational star spaces; that is, not all Canadian bodies can engage in this kind of border crossing' (2012: 9). Overwhelmingly, Canadian celebrities that attain transnational fame are white, where Canadian whiteness acts as 'a kind of camouflage' that permits Canadian celebrities to offer something amorphous to Americanness, that is 'not already in some sense part of the American […] lexicon and yet can be added to it without taking something away' (2012: 8). Canadian celebrities must also fit themselves into particular imaginaries of Canada. Christopher Gittings notes that a Canada imaged from outside the nation often articulates 'tensions between a Canada iconified by the raced and gendered image of a white male Mountie in snowy forests or a frozen tundra that could be a part of the US, and the image of a sovereign, multicultural, bilingual Canada' (1998: n.pag.).

George Elliot Clarke suggests that Canada acts as repository for particular representations of whiteness in popular culture. Canada, says Clarke, is 'a kind of discount warehouse where American networks and film companies go to purchase images of immaculate, politic whiteness' (1997). Explains Clarke: '[p]olite, pacific, respectable, Canadian whites are abundantly available for Americans who want to glorify whiteness' (Clarke 1997: 101). While Clarke's argument is salient, it can be difficult to reconcile it with the North American celebrity of non-white Canadians, such as Drake. Certainly, as will be explored forthwith, Drake is often discursively formulated as nice, safe and is associated with the qualities of respectability (such as the middle class). Drake's mixed race identity, however, moves him – at least partially – outside the repository of white celebrity that Clarke suggests defines Canada in the popular, transnational imagination. When Drake's fame is critically addressed, his race is an uneasy part of the analysis. Michelle Byers, taking up Clarke's work, notes that while Drake is 'not white (and I must bracket here the complexity of how multiraciality is read through multiple lenses of identity), Drake does have all the cultural capital necessary for the kind of export Clarke describes' (Byers 2012: 5). Choosing not to bracket the complexity of Drake's racial identity but instead exploring it as it intersects with his success and output as a hip hop artist, throws Drake's relationship to Canadian national identity into particular relief.

While Drake may seem like proof that Black Canadian cultural production can be commercially successful outside Canada, his very celebrity is highly circumscribed by overlapping and competing discursively constructed identities including, notably, race and nationality. When I argue that being Drake is 'impossible' I am not denying Drake's selfhood, nor ignoring the fact of his commercial success, but instead exploring how Drake's public persona and

success is the product of intersecting conceptualizations of Blackness circulating that render only some performances of Blackness possible, making others impossible, unacceptable, unutterable or unimaginable. Drake's 'success', I argue, is the product of a constant negotiation – played out in multiple publics – of the impossibility of being a (Black) Canadian hip hop artist. This work is not meant to valorize nor indict Drake, how he identifies, his music, his production practices or his public persona. Instead, Drake is treated here as an exemplar of the ongoing and much-needed negotiation and labour required by public Blackness in the context of the social and cultural structures and ideologies that shape images of Canada – internally and abroad – as well as popular culture, Black cultural production and hip hop.

Drake is the focus of significant attention from music critics as well as other hip hop artists. Indeed, 'Call outs' and 'beefs' are part of the discourse of hip hop. While almost all celebrity hip hop artists are subjected to and the subjects of beefs at some point in their careers, Drake is often targeted in ways that call into question his authenticity as a hip hop artist. Very often in these discourses, his authenticity (which will be discussed in greater detail below) is tied to his racial identity. While any conceptualization of authentic Blackness can be critiqued, particularly if it ignores the social construction of identity or makes a bid for biological determinism, Blackness nonetheless carries a particular currency in hip hop discourses. Although, as Patrick Johnson explains, authentic Blackness 'is ephemeral and processual – a performativity that calls attention to the slippages among biology, culture, ideology, and politics' (2003: 27), hip hop nonetheless legitimizes certain constructions of Blackness as more 'authentic' or 'real' than others.

While 'realness' and authenticity are often the focus of hip hop studies, critiques of Drake as a 'counterfeit rapper' (Ludacris) can be understood, in part, as a misreading of the confluence of the cultural specificity of his Black Canadian identity and the particular ambiguity of Canadian celebrity. Focusing on the performativity of Blackness in both Drake's work and in talk about Drake highlights tensions between how Blackness and hip hop are imagined in relation to Canada. When other rappers 'call out' Drake in public (via radio shows, releases of singles, social media or other mediated forms) their utterances become part of a discourse of and about hip hop that draws into itself complex conceptualizations and negotiations of race, gender, class, geography, nationality, authenticity and commerce. Similarly, music criticism gives voice to particular understandings of race and nationality, gender and class and the role of hip hop itself in the public sphere. Although this article takes as its primary focus the discursive construction of Blackness in public utterances by and about Drake (via media and popular culture), it is also attuned to the ways in which intersectionality shapes construction of identity (Crenshaw 1991). Discourses about Drake and his success give hip hop's often uneasy relationships to national identity, commercialism and capitalism, violence and gender. Unpacking these discourses suggests that Drake is more possible in some permutations than in others.

SPLIT SIGNIFIERS: DISCOURSES OF AUTHENTICITY AND COUNTERCULTURE IN HIP HOP

Hip hop is a genre of signifiers. These signifiers spill out of the genre, attaching themselves to material and commercial objects (bling, for instance), the mediated discourses of fans and critics, and the celebrity lives of hip hop artists themselves.

Black literary criticism and critical race theory have built on semiotics to explore how Black cultural practices, particularly linguistic ones (including rap and hip hop), allow Black individuals to move discursively between dominant white culture and Black culture where the same signifiers have sometimes vastly different signification. Henry Louis Gates speaks of this discursive movement as an active process: signifyin'.

Distinguishing from wholly mainstream and white modes of expression (or 'signifying') signifyin' is specific to the cultural practices of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) that emerge in the 'wake' of slavery (Sharpe 2016) under the particular conditions of Black disenfranchisement in places like North America. For Gates, signifyin' exists at 'the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the Black, two domains that exist side by side in a homonymic relation' (Gates 2014: 75). Explains Gates, signifying is 'the linguistic sign of the ultimate triumph of self-consciously formal language use' (2014: 77) and is a marker of the 'Black person's capacity to create […] rich poetry and to derive […] a complex attitude toward attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language' (2014: 77). Following Gates, we can explore how hip hop and rap, through signifyin' practices, mediate multiple meanings as the genre negotiates what sometimes feels like a vast distance between its roots in places of Black marginalization (including hip hop's point of origin in the inner city, predominantly Black borough of the Bronx), the needs of a broader audience, and the relative wealth, privilege and success of its stars and celebrities. The multivalent meanings of hip hop coalesce in a host of signifiers.

Often the negotiation of signifiers in hip hop follows discourses of authenticity. Hip hop artists and critics constantly deploy the concept of authenticity in discourses that confer authority to some hip hop subjects, while de-authorizing others. Arguably, authenticity, or the practice of 'keeping it real', are at the core of the countercultural impulse of hip hop. Authenticity (Gilroy 1991; Kelley 2002; Krims 2000; Ogbar 2007; Hess 2007) in hip hop is a fluid construct that intersects with race, gender and class and is often performed through autobiographical revelation. Kembrew McLeod calls this the 'social-psychological' dimension of hip hop authenticity (McLeod 1999: 140). Although constantly negotiated, codes of hip hop authenticity tend to value Black identity over white (1999: 141), 'underground' hip hop over commercial, and the signifiers of masculinity over those of femininity (1999: 142). Equally important to constructions of hip hop authenticity is locale. As Armstrong explains: 'rap prioritizes artists' local allegiances and territorial identities' (2004: 336). Indeed, Armstrong argues geography was a primary signifier of authenticity in emergent hip hop culture as it developed a cartography of regionally specific styles Indigenous to the various boroughs of New York in the late 1970s (2004: 337). Hip hop's emergence in US urban centres of Black marginality is a structuring force for the genre.

While hip hop can be defined as countercultural in its resistance to dominant understandings of Black identity and culture, it is not anti-capitalist. In fact, when hip hop emerged in inner city Black neighbourhoods in 1970s and 1980s United States, it encoded the aspiration of impoverished Black youth to the capital of middle class white youth that they saw reflected in popular media (Neal 2013: 134). Out of this, suggests Mark Anthony Neal, hip hop emerges as 'a concerted effort by young urban Blacks to use mass-culture

to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured and dislocated national community' (1999: 136). As a signifyin' practice, hip hop allowed early rappers and hip hop artists to refashion mass mediated and popularized signifiers of wealth.

Often associated with gangsta rap, bling culture is one example of such refashioning. Bling is at once aspirational (filled with the hope – only sometimes realized – that Black youth will attain the wealth they see reflected elsewhere) and critical, a reflection of a keen understanding that seeing Black youth performing Blackness alongside the signifiers of wealth (bling) causes cognitive dissonance for a white audience unused to images of Black wealth. This adoption of 'racially coded consumption practices' (Grealy 2008: 858) walks the line of a characteristic tension between 'mimicry and mockery' in hip hop (2008: 858). Greely argues that a 'subversive political power exists in the (frequently conscious) mimicry enacted' through bling culture. The maintenance of hip hop style 'through cultural products and argot signify the ability of the colonized to enter what has traditionally been the domain of the colonizers, questioning their claim to this space and its associated privileges' (2008: 858). The use of bling, on stage, on the bodies of rap celebrities, and in videos, is a signifyin' act, one that both celebrates the admittance of Black youth to wealth and critiques the mechanisms of capitalism.

DRAKE'S 'HOOD(S): HIP HOP AND CLASS IN TORONTO

Drake's insanely catchy, stripped down single, 'Started from the Bottom' (2013) addresses his early beginnings. The official video for the single is filled with bling, including a 2013 Bentley Continental convertible, gold chains and bars, sumptuous villas and private jets. The video also contains multiple signifiers of Canada, including the iconic CN tower, Shopper's Drugmart (a national drugstore chain), and scenes of Toronto. The song and video together deploy a classic hip hop narrative of moving from struggle to wealth. Although popular, award winning, and a critical success, the song has garnered criticism precisely because it suggests that Drake 'started from the bottom'. In such criticism, Drake's youth spent growing up in Forest Hill (an upper class Toronto neighbourhood) is held up as evidence that he does not come from the 'bottom'. While critics seemingly target Drake's class as emblematic of his inauthentic claim to 'the bottom', such criticism is underscored through its intersection with locale, demonstrating unease with Toronto as a node in the cartography of hip hop territory (Armstrong 2004).

Scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott have explored how Canadian hip hop artists have continually troubled narratives that insist on a Blackness tied to a nation state, generating a 'sonic blackness' that at once confers a sense of locality and exceeds national boundaries (Walcott 2003: 41). This appeal to a diasporic blackness found in the work of other Canadian hip hop artists, however, is seldom rewarded with the kind of commercial success Drake experiences. The 'camouflage' necessary for the type of transnational celebrity (Byers 2012) that Drake generates, at best, an ambivalent reading of Toronto as a place where the disenfranchisement of Black Canadian citizens can be understood as commensurate with (although distinctive from) their US counterparts.

Drake's connection to the Forest Hill neighbourhood in Toronto is given particular import in reviews of 'Started from the Bottom'. One critic complains; 'Drake did not, in fact, start from the bottom – far from it, actually. Drake hails

from upscale Forest Hill, moving to the neighborhood at age 11' (Graham 2015). Charlotte Graham, writing for *NYULocal*, goes on to add 'Forest Hill is not only an incredibly safe neighborhood, it's one of the wealthiest in Toronto as well' (Graham 2015). It is not simply poverty that confers 'realness', authenticity or even belonging in this discursive context, but locale as well. According to this critique, Forest Hill is an inauthentic signifier of the bottom because it does not give Drake proximity to risk, namely violence and poverty. Safety – a characteristic often associated with Canada in the popular imagination – is inauthentic, in part, because hip hop artists are supposed to have come from disenfranchised communities – places of urban disenfranchisement and Black poverty.

Drake has directly addressed criticism of his background, not denying that he grew up in an affluent neighbourhood in Toronto, but noting that he experienced his middle-class identity as undercut by his more wealthy peers: 'I went to school with kids that were flying private jets. This guy distributes Rolex in Canada, and this person owns Turtle car wax, and this person owns Roots clothing, and I went to school with kids who were very fortunate. I never fit in. I was never accepted' (Scott 2011). The video for 'Started from the Bottom', where he, along with his friends, are depicted working at Shopper's Drug Mart, gives insight into Drake's own notion of the bottom. Drake arguably depicts his bottom as working (Canadian) middle class. In the video, a mark of ascension out of this working middle class is precisely that private jet experience that eluded him during his youth. This, arguably, is a renegotiation of the signifier of the 'bottom', and the narrative of ascension commonly found in hip hop discourse, which positions the middle class as something to ascend from. While hip hop artists are similarly quick to disparage seemingly inauthentic notions of 'the bottom', there is a vociferousness with which music critics – often residing outside hip hop culture itself – insist on a lower class, precarious childhood as essential to the authenticity of an artist such as Drake.

Drake's middle-class identity, already a signifier of inauthenticity, is indelibly tied to Toronto, both of which exile him from the centre of hip hop. As one Toronto-based critic explains:

> The 'bottom,' as it exists in the context of hip-hop, is a very low bottom indeed, and the idea that Drake's upbringing was even remotely similar to that of Jay-Z or Notorious B.I.G (both raised in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood of Brooklyn during the crack epidemic) could, given the socio-economic factors in play, be considered not just untruthful, but offensive.
>
> (Jones 2013: n.pag.)

Such comparisons position Drake outside the authentic hip hop locales of US-based hip hop. Although some of Drake's critics do note that Toronto has similarly impoverished, predominantly Black neighbourhoods (Graham 2015), these places do not discursively signify hip hop authenticity in the popular imagination either. While there are a myriad of reasons that could account for the lack of US-based commercial success for other Toronto hip hop artists, it is arguable that Toronto's impoverished urban centres of Black marginality do not easily function as signifiers in hip hop discourse because of their connection to the imagined Canada – respectable, safe and, above all, white.

While the Jane and Finch or Regent Park neighbourhoods of Toronto might be racialized and impoverished inner city centres, they are connected neither to a US-centred cartography nor to a global imaginary of authentic locales of hip hop production.

These locales, including the Bronx, Brooklyn, Compton and other urban, predominantly black, neighbourhoods in the United States, are discursively reinforced through 'citation' in hip hop lyrics. Mentions of places like the Bronx in rap lyrics – usually born out of autobiographic connection to the borough – signifies connection and continuity with the history of hip hop, something difficult for Canadian rappers to achieve, regardless of the disenfranchisement of their own communities. There is, it should be noted, a rich history of hip hop production in Toronto from rappers associated with precisely those Toronto communities and neighbourhoods marked as racialized and poor. For example, Michie Mee, one of the first hip hop artists of note in Canada, grew up in the notorious Jane and Finch neighbourhood (D'Amico 2015) with several Toronto-based rappers from Jane and Finch as well as other impoverished, 'multicultural' neighbourhoods such as Rexdale, the Flemingdon Park neighbourhood of Scarborough and Regent Park, all following in Mee's foundational footsteps (Haines 1999). Although these 'hoods' feature in Toronto rap productions, it is notable that none of these rappers have reached the commercial success of Drake in the United States.

Canada and the United States – comprising most of North America in conception and geography – are often imagined as being virtually the same. However, Canada's position within North America is not one of dominance economically, politically or culturally. Canadian hip hop musicians must constantly negotiate their relationship to a dominant US culture from a position of marginalization that is seldom articulated. Canadian hip hop artists perform from a locale (Canada, Toronto etc.) that is constantly at risk of fading into the hegemony of a North American culture in which the United States has primacy. As Lorraine Code explains, Canada is 'an invisible colony of the new colonial power', a 'locality [that] risks disappearing into the global optimizing that permeates the agenda of North America's dominant culture' (1998: 84). It is difficult to acknowledge the racialized poverty and violence of Toronto neighbourhoods when those neighbourhoods are circumscribed by popular images of Canada as 'respectable'. Places of racialized poverty and violence in Canada are seldom visible against the backdrop of the highly mediated poverty, violence and disenfranchisement of urban US centres.

These discursive and material realities mean that Drake – as a Canadian hip hop artist – is always uneasily positioned in relation to the United States. Drake's middle class background and, as we will see later, his 'nice guy' persona, bolsters a view of Canada as less threatening, 'safer', cleaner and nicer than the United States. Such an image of Canada positions Drake as non-threatening interloper to US hip hop culture. For example, one critic labels 'Started from the Bottom' an 'American Dream song' but inserts the bracketed caveat '(Never mind that the dreamer himself is from Canada)' (Richards 2016). But, Drake never wholly belongs to the image of Canada as nice and safe, and also white (Clarke 1997). If, as a middle class Canadian Drake acquiesces to a dominant imaginary of Canada as respectable and safe, as a Black Canadian Drake does not fit the dominant frame.

ABSENT BLACKNESS: READING DRAKE'S RACE IN MULTICULTURAL CANADA

Yet, Drake's Blackness is – like his middle class upbringing – often a point of contention. Canada's particular proximity to the United States has meant that Canadian hip hop artists have found themselves branded outsiders to or imitators of American hip hop culture. This, combined with Canada's ideological framing of Blackness, leads some mainstream Canadian hip hop artists to insist on connections not to Canada but to elsewhere. Often Canadian hip hop artists deploy connections to the Caribbean or Africa as geographic sites that confer hip hop authenticity. Connections to the Caribbean or Africa are, of course, not random signifiers but tangible negotiations of the geographies of the Black Atlantic or the Black diaspora (Gilroy 1993; Palmié 2008). Such connections – through autobiographic revelation, sampling, accents, language or other signifiers – allow Canadian hip hop artists to skirt the relationship to the 'margins of urban America' (Rose 1994: 2) central to US hip hop.

A contemporary of Drake during his early years, K'naan is Canadian hip hop artist who achieved global recognition and commercial success, perhaps most notably with the release of 'Wavin' Flag' (2009) which became a FIFA world cup anthem in 2010. Discursively, K'naan is seldom identified as a Canadian rapper. Instead, in most media reports and music criticism, K'naan is defined as either Somali, or as a Somali-Canadian. Rinaldo Walcott notes that cultural production in Canada raises 'difficult questions concerning the slippery language of […] national belonging when questions of Blackness enter into the conversation' (2003: 129). K'naan's Somali identity situates him as always belonging outside of the nation state. As Walcott explains: '[i]n Canada, Black identities must be rooted elsewhere and that elsewhere is always outside of Canada' (2003: 105). For Walcott, the hyphen in K'naan's 'Somali-Canadian' appellation is significant because 'it puts into place a semiotics of meaning', that positions the Black subject as forever outside the borders of the nation (2003: 105). Walcott traces this semiotic positioning to the formation, discourse and ideology of Canadian multiculturalism.

In Canada, the legacy of British and French colonization means that Indigenous and non-white citizens (the latter categorized as 'visible minorities') are discursively positioned outside the binaries of these two colonial forces, something Himanji Bannerji defines as a particular form of white supremacy: '[t]he expression "white supremacist", harsh and shocking as it may sound to many, encodes the painful underpinnings of the category visible minorities. The ideological imperatives of other categories – such as immigrants, aliens, foreigners, ethnic communities or New Canadians – constellate around the same binary code' (2000: 106) of the English and the French. These 'others' or visible minorities never fully belong to either the English or the French. While Canadian multiculturalism ostensibly embraces otherness, this embrace is inflected with the ideological formation of a national identity that does not fully admit the other into the nation state or into popular representations of Canada.

K'naan is a 'visible minority', who becomes 'known' through his discursive positioning as a Somali-Canadian. Critics and reviewers follow suit in a strange one-up-manship of violence that confers hip hop authenticity to K'naan based on his proximity to risk and violence as well as his geographic connection to locales outside Canada. As reviewer, Mathew McKinnon demonstrates: 'where Eminem would rhyme about handguns, K'naan talks

about rocket-propelled grenades. His horror stories are real; the violence in his past is *bigger* than that of his American peers' (McKinnon 2005) (emphasis added). Since Canada is not imagined as a place congruent with the impoverished, urban Black violence that is considered foundational to hip hop, other sites of Black violence must be evoked in order to confer hip hop authority. When critics – often removed genealogically and geographically from the places of Black marginalization and disenfranchisement – rush to insist that only Black men from places of risk and volatility are entitled to inhabit authentic (or 'real') positions within hip hop, they (re)produce discourse that suggests that for Blackness to be publicly performed, commodified and consumed as part of authentic hip hop, real Black citizens have to have incurred significant risk of violence or death.

While hip hop itself might negotiate this expectation of violence against Black citizens, it does so in the context of what Christina Sharpe calls 'wake work'. 'Wake work' is labour – in this case, the labour of Black cultural production – that occurs in the wake of the middle passage. Importantly, this work also happens in the wake of what Sharpe defines as 'wokeness' a particular consciousness that understands 'Black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect' of western democracy and its attendant notions of civil liberty and freedom (Sharpe 2016: 7). Images of the Black subject are framed by this context, even when those images are created by Black producers. It is consciousness of the constitutive nature of violence against Black citizens combined with Canada's particular understanding of Blackness as always coming from 'elsewhere' that encourages discourses such as the one above, which pits handguns against rocket launchers – both aimed at Black bodies – in a bid for hip hop 'realness'.

Drake cannot claim the hyphen that makes K'naan (a Somali-Canadian) knowable in the context of a Canada that constructs K'naan as belonging 'elsewhere'. This is another of Drake's impossibilities. As Black (the son of an African American), he cannot belong inside the nation, but neither does he belong to the imagined communities – immigrants or refugees, Jamaicans or Somalis – to which Canada expects Black individuals to belong. Absent cultural belonging to the nation state of his birth (always imagined as white), to the United States and its history of hip hop geography, or to nodes in the Black diaspora, perhaps it is unsurprising that Drake adopts signifiers that are clear markers of Walcott's 'elsewhereness'. In particular, Drake has adopted Jamaican sounds, accents and language in his work and his public utterances. While issues of cultural appropriation are worth exploring, I argue here that the appropriation of Jamaican-ness by Drake is an act that belies a need – constituted by what is possible and what is impossible for public Blackness in the Canadian public sphere – to connect to nodes of the Black diaspora in order to confer hip hop authority.

Drake's connections to Jamaica and Jamaican identity are found in collaborations with Jamaican groups and artists such as Popcaan and Movado, videos shot in Kingston Jamaica, samples of Jamaican reggae artists, and most controversially, the use of Jamaican patois and a Jamaican accent. Certainly, there exists a legacy of Caribbean influence on hip hop in general. In Drake's work, however, Jamaica is an absent connection that signifies the impossible negotiation Drake must undertake to fit into the ideological frame of Canadian Blackness.

Sajae Elder, reviewing *Views* and critiquing the Jamaican patois that peppers Drake's 2016 album asks, '[w]hat could a half-Black, half-Jewish

Canadian know about Jamaica?' (Elder 2016). While it can undoubtedly be argued that Drake's connections to Jamaica are spurious, such geographic links – made audible in sampling, collaboration, accents, patois and other production practices – are Drake's negotiation of his own Blackness framed both by a nation state that constructs Blackness as belonging outside Canadia and by hip hop discourses that construct Blackness as central to authenticity. Although critical of Drake's appropriation of Jamaican patois, Elder nonetheless uncritically reiterates the multicultural ideology that insists on Blackness as belonging outside Canada, noting that 'in Canada, notions of Blackness tend to be inherently linked to Afro-Caribbean roots, with 30% of the Black population tied to Jamaican ancestry alone (alongside the rest of the West Indies and continental African identities)' (Elder 2016). As a Black citizen *not* connected to a hyphenated identity that signals a Blackness belonging outside Canada, Drake's Blackness is inevitably contested.

When Drake does insist on his connections to the United States and African American culture (which he is genealogically connected to via his father), such connections are quickly subsumed beneath his Canadian identity and the labour of being a Black cultural producer in and from Canada. For example, Elder goes on to note that '[e]ven in the earlier stages of his career, Drake pointed to his summers spent in Memphis as an explanation for the slight Southern lilt in his rapping and speaking voice, something rappers in Toronto have had to do for years in a bid to gain larger global success' (Sajae 2016). In this short passage, the challenges of Canadian hip hop are clear. Canada's proximity to the United States means that Black rappers must either mimic a US sound or find a way of authorizing Blackness that skirts the connection to the United States altogether, something accomplished through connections to the Black diaspora via the Caribbean or Africa. Yet, when Drake deploys either of these strategies, his authenticity comes under fire. Drake exists in a no-man's land between Canada (where he lived, worked as an actor and started his career) and the United States (where his father lives, where he spent musically formative time, and where he signed as a commercial hip hop artist). He belongs to neither, not simply because of his mixed race, but because his Blackness cannot be connected to the places of disenfranchisement that makes hip hop palatable to mainstream audiences, nor can it be connected to the 'exotic' (but still dangerous) realms of 'elsewhere' that Canadian multiculturalism demands.

If connections to certain geographies are implicated in hip hop's signifying practices, race – both tied to and unmoored from geographic locales – is equally significant. While K'naan, for instance, is understood as Black as a result of his connection to Somalia, Drake's connection to Black identity is often constructed as more nebulous and more ambiguous. Drake, who is frequently identified as biracial or mixed race (a term he has used himself, most recently in an acceptance speech for a 2019 Grammy award) has also been criticized for being 'too white'. In *Scorpion*, Drake addresses such claims: 'Yeah, I'm light-skinned, but I'm still a dark ni**a'. Minelle Mahtani points out that mixed-race individuals are often represented as 'out of place', stigmatized as confused about their identity, or valorized as a physical symbol of the dissolution of racism. Explains Mahtani, 'the mere presence of "mixed race" people challenges mainstream racial categories constructed precisely to police boundaries that are already heavy with classed and gendered meanings' (Mahtani 2002: 471). Mahtani notes that mixed race identity is often

constructed as negative or problematic, with mixed raced individuals being classed as "marginal', 'groupless' or 'not fitting in" (2002: 471).

Drake's mixed race – which has been called into question by other hip hop artists in the context of hip hop rivalries, or 'beefs' – is often discursively positioned as (further) evidence of his (hip hop) inauthenticity. Beefs are an extension of the signifying' practices of rap and involve one rapper dissing (or disrespecting) another as a result of a perceived insult. This can take place in lyrics, but can also occur in other forms of public discourse, including interviews, social media and statements released by artists or their labels. Practically speaking, beefs afford artists attention outside the scope of albums and singles and also focus attention on the release of new albums and singles. Beefs are a form of coded communication and fans enjoy decoding the meaning embedded in the words. Rapper Common, however, was fairly explicit when he called Drake out by name in a 'Stay Schemin' remix in 2012. Part of a broader beef, Common targeted Drake's racial identity in the remix lyrics: 'You so Black and white, trying to live a n****'s life/I'm taking too long with this amateur guy/You ain't wet nobody, n****, you Canada dry'. Here, Drake's Canadian and mixed race identity intersect in Common's undercut.

Common suggests that Drake is not Black enough, something echoed in a more recent beef with rapper Pusha T who tells Drake 'Confused, always thought you weren't Black enough / Afraid to grow it 'cause your 'fro wouldn't nap enough'. The lyrical disses of beefs are meant to verbally eviscerate their opponents and anything is fair game in such word play, but these attacks on Drake's racial identity serve to emphasize how Drake is discursively constructed as (a Canadian who is) not Black enough to claim authentic connection to African American hip hop culture. Public perception of Drake's racial identity, however, differs in different geographic locations. Drake himself suggests that the emphasis on his whiteness is heightened in an American context: '[t]hat's a very American thing […] light skin and dark skin' (Hello Beautiful 2011). The United States and Canada construct racial identity in similar, but not identical, ways. When Black Canadians enter the public sphere of the United States, where Blackness is visible in historically contingent ways, their own lived experience as Black Canadians can make performing Blackness in a US context fraught.

The complexity of cross-border racial identity for Drake is acutely visible in his beef with Pusha T. Although ongoing for several years, it intensified recently and notably with Pusha T's release of 'The Story of Adidon' (2018). The song is a masterful and wide-ranging diss track. Accompanying the release of the single, Pusha T released a photo of Drake in Blackface that he claims to have 'found' online. It is a shocking image and it is difficult to dispel the historical significance and associated racism of Blackface when looking at it. Drake responded to the release of the image not in song but in an official statement telling his audience that the photo was from 2007, 'a time in my life where I was an actor and I was working on a project that was about young Black actors […] being stereotyped and type cast. The photos represented how African Americans were once wrongfully portrayed in entertainment' (Frace 2018). It is an interesting response and one that seems to address a particular audience. The use of 'African Americans', erases the specificity of Canadian experiences of Blackness, experiences that – presumably – Drake was at least in part attempting to address in 2007 when he still would have been working on the Canadian production of, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

Whether or not Blackface can ever be reclaimed as an antiracist act (as Drake is suggesting his own appropriation of Blackface is meant to be read) is highly debatable. However, it is worth noting that discourses around Blackface in Canada tend to position the phenomenon as an American one, this despite the fact that minstrelsy was historically prevalent and popular in Canada (Howard 2018). The insistence that Blackface belongs to the United States may account for Drake's use of the term African American, and intersects with Walcott's analysis of Blackness as discursively positioned outside the frame of the Canadian nation state, something that has the effect of rendering a history of anti-Black racism in Canada invisible. Canada is often discursively positioned against the United States as less racist. However, as Phillip Howard explains, this 'long-standing national identity' is 'partly constructed through revisionist understandings of the nation's relationship to blackness, and against an ostensibly more virile racism in the US. This Canadian self-concept requires a collective national amnesia around Canada's history of blackface minstrelsy' (Howard 2018: 88). Drake, represented through Pusha T's diss track, is a signifier of an uneasy Blackness, not simply because Drake himself is uncomfortable with his own Black identity – as Pusha T claims – but because Pusha T's representation of Drake, and Drake's response to this representation, renders the specificity of Canadian Blackness and racism invisible, even while suggesting that Drake is not quite Black enough for hip hop.

Pusha T followed Drake's statement with more criticisms this time made in a radio interview on *Big Boy's Neighborhood* airing on the LA station 92.3. Responding to Drake's statement, Pusha T griped; 'You are silent on all Black issues, Drake […]. You don't stand for nothing, you don't say nothing about nothing. […] You have all the platform in the world' (Gaca 2018). It is a valid critique, with the bulk of Drake's work, save for a few exceptions, skirting the social, political, and economic conditions facing Black men and women. Yet, as one critic notes, venturing into any discussion of subaltern Black identity in the United States is particularly fraught for Drake. Comparing Drake to Logic, an American mixed race rapper often derided for not being Black enough, this critic notes that

> Drake has one additional 'strike' against him: he's Canadian. […] I understand his frustration when he's simply written off by his staunchest critics as that 'Jewish kid from Toronto'. […] I also understand the hesitation to speak too freely on issues that affect the Black community in America – as it would definitely put him under an even larger microscope.
>
> (Wallace 2018: n.pag.)

There is, it should be noted, a great deal of highly political hip hop and rap produced by Black artists in Canada that does address issues of shared concern for Black Canadians in particular and members of the Black diaspora in general. That this work has not attained the commercial success afforded Drake is likely not a coincidence. As a Black (non-hyphenated) Canadian certain public utterances about the political conditions facing Black youth are, if not impossible for Drake, incommensurate with his celebrity and fame.

GENDERED INTERSECTIONS: DRAKE AND REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY

If race, class, violence and geographic location shape the public image of Drake – and underscore his impossibility – so too does the construction of sexuality and gender. Many beefs between male hip hop stars are filled with misogyny and those between Drake and Common, and Drake and Pusha-T, are no exception. A reading of both misogyny and hypermasculinity in hip hop can be situated in a historicity of Black cultural production as it has intersected with representations of Blackness where the Black man has been constructed as simultaneously disenfranchised and as a threat – particularly to the purity of the white woman. Mireille Miller-Young argues that hip hop, like porn, markets 'Black bodies, aesthetics, and culture to a global consumer audience' (Miller-Young 2007: 262). The construction of gender and sexuality within hip hop is circumscribed by the ideologies which frame the production of hip hop. As Miller-Young explains: '[h]ip-hop femininities and masculinities are subject to market concerns of white supremacist, patriarchal, multinational, corporate capitalism and are positioned as marginal to the means of material production and institutional political power' (2007: 262). Notably, Drake's work largely bucks commercial demands on Black male artists to perform hyper-masculinity by focusing on emotion, relationships and interior life – as well stereotypes of Canadian identity – to discursively formulate himself as a 'nice guy'. Nonetheless, Drake's nice guy image is framed within performances that reinforce his masculinity.

Several of Drake's songs, from the more recent 'Emotionless', to 'Best I Ever Had', are about sexual conquests. Arguably unable to rap about the issues of social, political, or economic concern facing inner city Black citizens in the United States or Canada, Drake uses the narrative of the female conquest to bolster his connection to hip hop authenticity in ways that intersect with how race can be performed in Drake's corpus. Drake, in bucking typical hip hop hypermasculinity, also – occasionally – represents his own desire for and pleasure in women in ways that subvert notions of acceptable Blackness for mainstream hip hop audiences. While hip hop videos are often filled with light skinned, thin women, Drake raps in 'Only' about women who are bigger and Blacker: 'That's right I like my girls BBW,[3] yeah […]. So thick that everyone else in the room is so uncomfortable'.

Drake's celebration of a less frequently represented Black woman extends to his personal life where he reportedly had a brief relationship with African American tennis star Serena Williams, a woman under constant scrutiny for her performance of Black femininity. It was his relationship with Serena that ostensibly started Drake's beef with Common, where his racial identity was called into question. It is tempting to read Drake's performance of desire for underrepresented Black femininity as a bid for belonging to a Blackness that he is excluded from. While commercial hip hop is inevitably framed by 'white supremacist, patriarchal, multinational, corporate capitalism', Marion-Young also suggests that 'hip-hop identities are defined as well by Black cultural investments in authentic, ever subversive, and pleasure-giving performances, visualities, and soundscapes' (2007: 263). Drake's discursive pleasure in Black female bodies, performed in his songs and raps, intersects with power, politics and identity to allow for a particular performance of Blackness, via the bodies of Black women that can appear subversive.

3. BBW is an acronym for 'big beautiful women'.

Yet, Drake – like other hip hop artists – nonetheless reinforces gender inequity even as he performs his 'nice guy' identity. When Drake and Kendrick Lamar collaborated on 'Poetic Justice' (2012) Lamar deliberately chose the dark skinned Brittney Sky as his lead for the song's video. Of the choice, which was notable in its unusualness, Lamar said: 'I had an idea where I just wanted a little bit of a darker tone [girl] in the video. It's almost like a colorblind industry where there's only one type of appeal to the camera' (Armstrong 2013). The video and raps for 'Poetic Justice' are a fascinating example of the limits of possibility for representations of female Blackness. The video opens with Lamar rapping over classic hip hop signifiers of bling (cars, money and chains), street scenes (blatantly signifyin' 'street cred') and even implied violence. Throughout these scenes, the 'dark toned' model, often spoken about as having 'versatile beauty' (Yvette 2013) is centred. Here is not a woman so 'thick that everyone in the room is so uncomfortable'. Instead, Sky, although darker, is thin and in many ways represents the acceptable beauty standards of western femininity. When, inevitably, asked about her background after the release of 'Poetic Justice', Sky's self-identification strangely mirrors Drake's own: '[m]y mom is from St. Vincent in the Caribbean and my dad is from Costa Rica. My mom is bi-racial, so I feel like I can kind of relate to a little bit of everyone. But seriously, I'm *Black*' (Yvette 2013: n.pag.).

When the video cuts to Drake, he is removed from the street scenes, situated instead in a bedroom, a Black model on the bed while Drake raps to another, nameless and faceless woman on the phone. Here, we have a representation of the type of Black femininity that Drake so often valorizes: 'Your natural hair and your soft skin/And your big ass in that sundress, ooh'. Through this objectification of the particularly racialized female form, Drake makes a connection to yet another node in the Black diaspora by identifying his phone love interest as an 'East African' girl. Like his appropriation of signifiers of Jamaica, East Africa becomes a vector of long-distance connection to a racial identity. In this case, the connection to Walcott's 'elsewhere' is focalized through the female form. Drake raps: 'I was tryna […] put you on a plane/Take you and your momma to the motherland/I could do it, maybe one day'. It is a wistful passage – a realization of the value of, and his own distance from, a (perhaps imagined) 'motherland' – framed within both Drake's nice guy persona (looking after his erstwhile girlfriends and their mothers) and the signifiers of sexual conquest that pepper Drake's work.

In 'Song of Adidon', Pusha T outs Drake as having a son with former adult film star and artist, Sophie Brussaux, something Drake later confirms in verse in the *Scorpion* (2018) track 'March 14' where he repurposes Michael Jackson's iconic lyrics, rapping; 'She's not my lover like Billie Jean, but the kid is mine'. As with many depictions of women in Drake's work, Brussaux is not central, but peripheral. When Drake makes a bid for hip hop authenticity it reinforces the subjugation of women rather than the female empowerment he sometimes promulgates. Pusha T seems, momentarily, to call Drake out for his views on women when, speaking about Brussaux, he entreats Drake to 'respect that girl/Forget she's a pornstar, let her be your world', a sentiment undone both by his insistence that sex work is something that is incommensurate with respectability and, more viscerally, by his resounding 'yuugh!' sound of derision.

Both Pusha T and Drake reinforce the misogyny that hip hop is often derided for. But even when Drake is rapping about women as commodities or conquests – or embroiled in (sexist) beefs with other artists – he cannot escape issues of geographic location and the relative construction of social

identity in relation to geography. While Pusha-T's dis track, unlike Common's, does not attack Drake's Canadian identity directly he nonetheless evokes the subject position of geographic belonging when he raps: 'You are hiding a child, let that boy come home/Deadbeat mothafucka playin' border patrol'. Without knowing Pusha T's authorial intent with these lyrics, the evocation of 'home' and 'border', inevitably frame the contested spaces Drake inhabits. While the female form is often used to reinforce Black masculinity, for Drake this is often a reinforcement of an uneasy, contested and unmoored Blackness.

Discursively, the represented figure of Brussaux brings together common depictions of women in hip hop and the autobiographical nature of identity revelation central to hip hop authenticity. Brussaux, represented in the work of Drake and Pusha-T as well as in the copious words of music criticism and social media occasioned by this particular beef, is seldom a fully realized person and more often a figure signifying either Drake's shame or others' delight in the erosion of his reputation. Brussaux's physicality mirrors that found in many hip hop videos (including 'Hotline Bling', despite Drake's bid to represent BBWs). She is slim, with large breasts and bottom, something highlighted when she posed for *Smooth Girl* magazine, a publication aimed at 'young urban men', and featuring 'stars in Black entertainment'. Brussaux, however, is not Black.

As a white woman publicly attached to Drake through the discursive mechanism of a beef, Brussaux-as-signifier undoes Drake's seemingly subversive valorization of unconventional images of Black female beauty, something Brussaux herself appears to lament in a now deleted tweet which reads; 'So when I say my n***a I can't because I'm white but when I say I'm white and naturally curvy they say I'm not considered white?? – Sophie' (@SophieKnowsMuch) (27 November 2013). Racist stereotypes of Black women's bodies and femininity collide with representations of race and complex historic patterns of racialization that always casts Black sexuality in a negative frame (Magubane 2001). While the dissemination of the stereotype of a 'curvy' figure signifying Blackness merits further analysis elsewhere, this unease around race and public discourse – what one is 'allowed' to say given one's racial subject position – seems particularly significant in the context of Drake's own identity.

CONCLUSION

Drake's race, class, status as a hip hop artist, and the relationship of that status to gender and sexuality always intersects with his Canadian identity. Perhaps, it is unsurprising then that Drake's response to the Pusha T beef in 'Emotionless', brings us back to Toronto. In some ways, 'Emotionless' mirrors 'Started from the Bottom' although musically, they could not be more different. While 'Started from the Bottom' is buoyant and catchy, 'Emotionless' is musically sparse, with frequent starts and stops. It is more through composed, although the sample of Mariah Carey's 'Emotions' (1991) gives the piece unity. Yet, there are parallels in the videos that accompany both songs. Both videos take place largely in Toronto, both feature Drake's crew, both centre Drake as a grounded, misunderstood, nice guy who remains loyal not only to his crew, but to his city of Toronto.

While in 'Started from the Bottom' Drake's villa in Los Angeles signifies his ascendency to success, the United States is a less victorious locale in 'Emotionless', where he raps: 'Workin' in the land of the free, the home of the

brave/I gotta bring my brothers or else I feel out of place'. The implication is that Toronto is the place where he feels 'in place'. But the video belies a disease here also. Unlike 'Started from the Bottom' – which depicts large dancing crowds, Drake's crew in 'Emotionless' is smaller, more tight-knit. Toward the end of the video for 'Emotionless' a man, dressed in a warm parka, appears, waking up Drake, who is sleeping in a car. The man has a strong Jamaican accent. 'Wake up Daddy', says the figure as Drake hops into the driver's seat and prepares to drive away. Like the figure of the 'East-African' girl in 'Poetic Justice', the Jamaican friend in 'Emotionless', represents a homeland to which Drake never fully belongs.

Both videos depict the cold that Canada is so known for, but while the performers in 'Started from the Bottom' seem unbothered by the cold and snow as they cruise the city in convertibles, those in 'Emotionless' look cold. They bounce on the balls of their feet in bids to stay warm, they make the same grunts and hisses every cold North American makes as they scurry from one indoor place to the cold comfort of their parked cars. Cold – that ever popular signifier of Canada – signifies differently in 'Emotionless', than it does in 'Started from the Bottom'. It less beautiful and more hostile. One cannot help surmise that maybe this Toronto is more hostile also. That despite his success and his insistence on connection to the city, that this is a place that is not so much a home – a place to which he can bring his son (as Pusha T entreats him) – as it is a signifier of out-of-place-ness.

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