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

Todd Craig

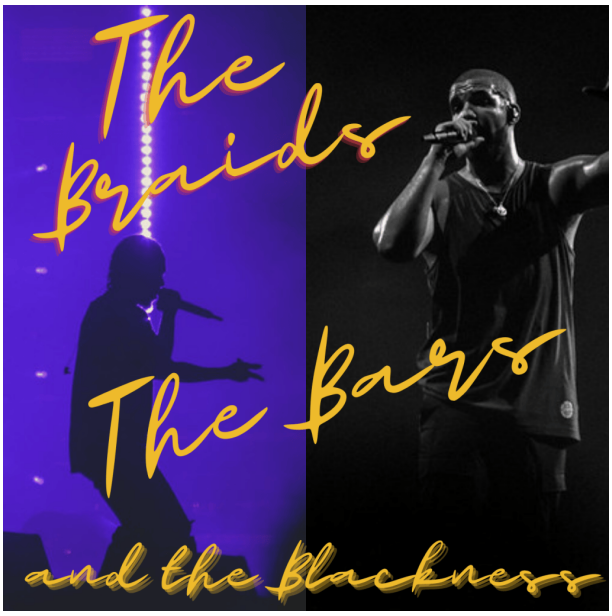
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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Authenticities, Black Studies, Canadian Studies, Cultural Studies, Diasporic Sound



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A Conversation by Todd Craig and LeBrandon Smith



Happy Hip Hop History Month! Last week writer, educator and ***DJ Todd Craig*** *and cultural curator and social impact leader* ***LeBrandon Smith*** *kicked off their three part series parsing out this past spring's beef between Kendrick Lamar and Drake, Hip Hop history in the making. We left off in the breath-holding moment just after Kendrick released "Euphoria" and "6:16 in LA" after eleven days of anticipation. Since the dust has settled a bit between K-Dot and OVO, it's the perfect time for these intergenerational Hip Hop heads to tap in and sort out what this epic beef really meant for the artists, the sound, and most importantly, the culture. School is IN, yall!* Click this link to read Part I; click this link to read Part II. And yes, we know a new Kendrick album came out! #whew #tvoff #whatatimetobealive

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Approximately 14 hours after Kendrick released "6:16 in LA," Drake responded with "Family Matters" on May 3, 2024. We're connecting it to the ending snippet of "Push Ups," which insinuates it may

have been recorded even before the prior two Kendrick songs (we also get this song as a video, so the visuals add another element).



https://youtu.be/ZkXG3ZrXlbc

The three-part diss track aims at multiple people (Rick Ross, A$AP Rocky, the Weeknd [aka Abel Tesfaye], Metro Boomin and others), but its most disrespectful lines are clearly aimed at Kendrick. This is really and truly the moment when Drake moves to bring Kendrick's family into his bars. He also aims at Kendrick's blackness in a confusing line, saying "always rappin' like you 'bout to get the slaves freed/ You just actin' like an activist, it's make-believe." This was a line we both agreed was not only a problematic misstep, but would taint some of the other formative disses in the song. In a moment where Drake's own blackness and identity were in question, calling his own supporters – Black people – "slaves," who need to get "freed" does more work to prove Kendrick's point than to further Drake's lyrical prowess on the scorecard. Todd also identified the second verse of "Family Matters" (from 2:43-5:15) as the most formidable – the beat switch, cadence and flow, that pocket Drake taps into lyrically is one of his best rapping moments of the battle. Drake's flow in this part is impeccable, as we see him rhyming in rapid fire, sending shots against multiple foes.

LeBrandon tapped into the third verse (5:16 to 7:36), when out the gate, Drake says "Kendrick just opened his mouth, somebody hand him a Grammy right now." Drake is at his best when he's being facetious and petty and his hate for the Grammys is well documented. Drake disrespecting revered entities during this battle was enjoyable and garnered attention; anytime you can call an opponent's accolades into question – whether it's a Grammy or a Pulitzer – it's helpful in a rap battle. LeBrandon could also imagine Kendrick chuckling at a few of the height one-liners like "These bars go over Kenny's head no matter what I say," as K.Dot manically crafted his response.

LeBrandon also pointed out that ownership of jewelry in Hip Hop is a staple, so he appreciated the flex of "You wanna take up for Pharrell?/ Then come get his legacy outta my house." Since when is it acceptable for another rapper to own jewelry you purchased and proudly wore? We understand Drake owning Pharrell's jewelry isn't to pay homage, but to spite Pharrell and The

Clipse. The quote is a great retort by Drake, and a keen reminder of how villainous and strategic he can be. This bar felt like the Michael Jordan shrug in audio form. Regardless of how Drake acquired the jewelry, he has it and that matters, and creating a visual in New Ho King with these pieces is devious work.

LeBrandon literally let out an audible sigh when we heard Drake say, "Your daddy got robbed by Top…" Rap is entertainment so there's an expectation that lies may surface. Great lyrical battles are like playing the dozens: to garner the most rousing response from the audience, folks will definitely exaggerate. But we agreed that this line ain't that. This is just straight up faulty comprehension, as the story of Kendrick's dad and Top Dog's meeting (in the song, "DUCKWORTH") was not a robbery narrative. Part of war is knowing your opponent's weaknesses and "DUCKWORTH" as a song is bulletproof.



https://youtu.be/Dm-foWGDBF0

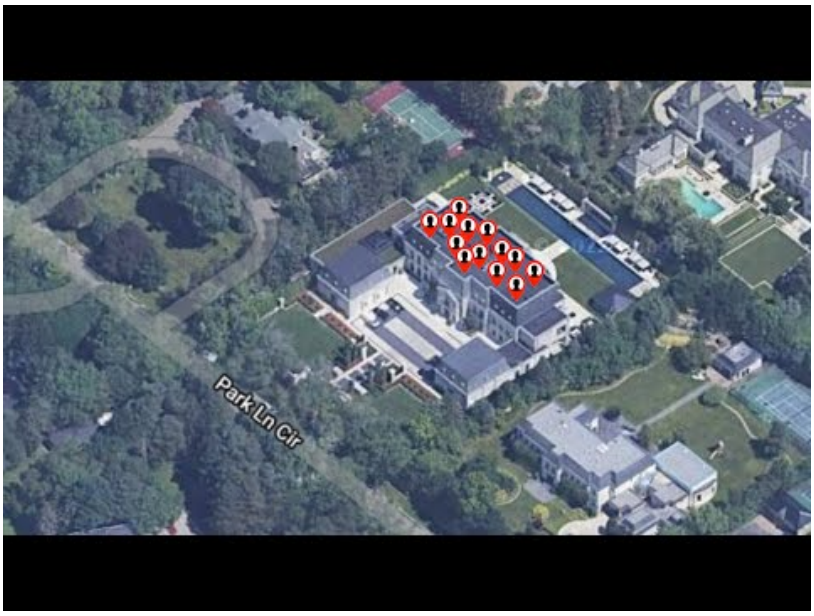
After Drake's brash talking on both the verses and outro of "Taylor Made Freestyle" warning Kendrick he should be prepared, this uninformed lyrical analysis, or misstep at rewriting the factual narrative is disappointing, specifically because Drake is so talented; misses like this in the midst of a legendary battle makes him look foolish and lazy. Unfortunately, this isn't the only time Drake does this during the battle, but we found this occurrence quite jarring.

We both agreed the craziest turn of events for the battle was when MINUTES after "Family Matters" dropped, Kendrick responded with "Meet the Grahams": the darkest and most sinister song of the battle. The way in which Kendrick composed an open letter to members of Drake's family after Drake mentioned Kendrick's fiancé by name along with other accusations, put Kendrick in a space he describes, saying "this supposed to be a good exhibition within the game/ But you fucked up the moment you called out my family's name/ Why you had to stoop so low to discredit some decent people?/ Guess integrity is lost when the metaphors doesn't reach you." This song exemplifies why Kendrick has been given the "BoogeyMan" moniker. These dark and disturbing lyrics are what nightmares are made of; and what better way to tap into such a dark landscape than with an eerie beat produced by the Alchemist.



https://youtu.be/2QiFl9Dc7D0

We agreed it was the moment in the battle where Kendrick's cerebral nature fully set in: new vocals, new flows and a new attack on Drake's morals and character. At this point in the battle, Todd hoped Drake stopped rhyming because of just how dark this sonic happening was. "Meet the Grahams" is a cerebral and intense listening experience that took the battle to a whole other level. In addition, K.Dot showed us just how much he liked "Back to Back," as he would double down and double-drop again, this time with the anthem "Not Like Us." We both agreed that "Meet the Grahams" was the dark, uncomfortable turn, and "Not Like Us" felt like the sonic nails in the coffin for the battle. Besides the absolute instrumental bop DJ Mustard provides for Kendrick, the lyrics coupled with the anthem-feeling hook felt like Kendrick had outsmarted Drake, and simply beat him to the "bop-punch" that we've known Drake to produce.

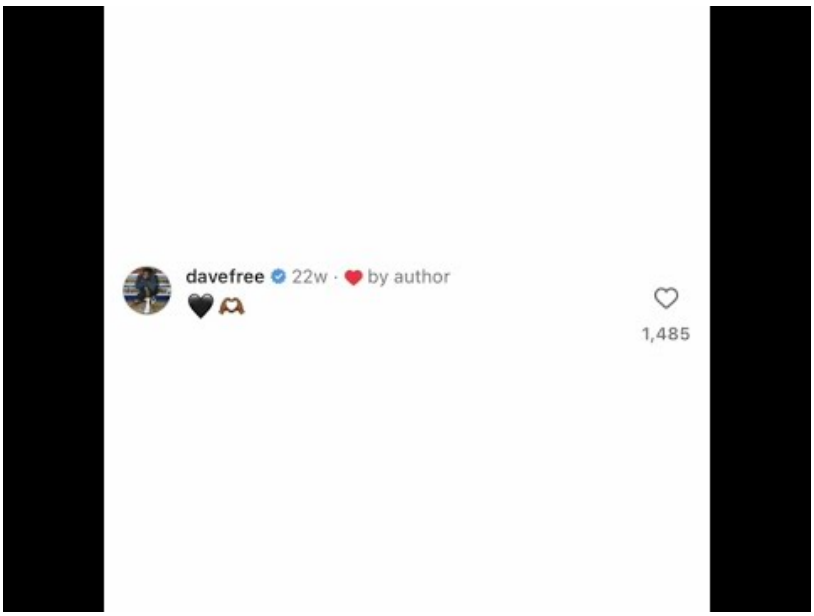


https://youtu.be/T6eK-2OQtew

When we listened to the bars, "I'm finna pass on this body, I'm John Stockton/ Beat your ass and hide the Bible if God watchin'/ Sometimes you gotta pop out and show niggas," we knew it was

going to be downhill for Drake. As Kendrick moved through the verses and tapped into the last verse with the lesson on Drake's sonic connections to Atlanta, and calling him a "colonizer," an important sentiment popped up for Todd. What's really deceptive about these lines is that Kendrick is leaning into generational and cultural Blackness. He does it earlier in the references that LeBrandon picked up on with hair and "the braids." But these sayings K.Dot continuously extols not only emanate from Southern culture, but are also older sentiments from elders in the Black community. So when Kendrick inserts these lines, they're more harsh than even some of the direct disses, because they lean into Black American culture in ways that Drake would never understand as either a Canadian or a kid visiting his dad in the states (evidenced by "always rappin' like you 'bout to get the slaves freed"). However, sonically, it feels "super Black" – putting Black listeners right at home, like they're hearing their grandma chastise someone. So by the time Kendrick gets to the call and response moment of "Lemme hear you say 'O-V-Hoe'" (again, another Black trope that transcends Hip Hop), as listeners, we already feel like we're in the livest cook-out and block party of the summer!

As we tuned into "The Heart Part 6" on May 5, 2024, we both agreed Drake sounded defeated, he was clearly waving the white flag, and he was continuing down the road of missteps that were no longer forgivable. When he lays the bars, "My Montreal connects stand up, not fall down/the ones that you're gettin' your stories from, they all clowns," only to follow up three bars later with, "we plotted for a week and then we fed you the information," it became clear that even Drake wasn't sure how to move through the rest of the song as well as the battle. This was another unforced error, a critical misstep Drake simply could not afford at this juncture.



https://youtu.be/HJeY-FXidDQ

When thinking of this moment alongside Drake's lack of comprehension around Kendrick's song, "Mother I Sober," (where Kendrick touches on abuse in his family – not to be confused with a personal admission of sexual abuse) this stands as Drake's weakest song in the battle. It also doesn't stand close to Kendrick's initial chess move of usurping Drake's "timestamp songs" – when Kendrick presents "6:16 in LA" (a series Drake has used on almost all of his albums), it proves to be a more robust offering than "The Heart Part 6" (a series Kendrick has used in his career). After this

offering from Drake, we see The *Ken and Friends: Pop Out* (a concert streamed live via Amazon Prime on June 19, 2024: Juneteenth), followed by the "Not Like Us" video (which was released on July 4, 2024: Independence Day). These two drops on cultural "Independence Days" just furthers the notion that Kendrick had a level of vision and foresight far beyond where Drake could imagine. By "The Heart Part 6," we also agreed Drake thought the song and visuals to "Family Matters" (which was probably recorded around the same time as "Push Ups" and "Taylor Made Freestyle") would be the end of the battle with Kendrick. An egregious misstep by both Drake and his team to underestimate the BoogeyMan in such a way.



https://youtu.be/H58vbez_m4E

We close this article sharing an important intergenerational conversation that will serve as a Hip Hop cultural landmark. We've both seen various videos and TikToks deconstructing many of the "Easter eggs" left by both Drake and Kendrick in this battle. We hope this article serves as another perspective on how we might be able to think about these songs and this battle from a music as well as a cultural perspective, specifically as it relates to all things Hip Hop. And again, we both agreed there are complicated messages and moments in the battle that require further attention and future analysis.

We also felt a responsibility in sharing this dialogue in an academic space as two avid Hip Hop listeners from two different generations with two different seasoned and highly informed viewpoints. Our perspectives on Hip Hop are forever altered, especially with this battle following the 50th anniversary of the culture last year. So we feel obliged to document this moment, as the battle raised a series of questions for us. We introduce some of those questions throughout the article, while some questions might be answered over time, and others might never see a response. Each of our questions generate analysis that will remain critically relevant to the resonance of this historic battle, which has turned into a cultural moment and movement. It's crucial to consider the artistic creation outside of any two individuals, as Hip Hop proved with this battle that it remains the biggest culture shaper in our world today.

We hope to see your thoughts on the topic, and, just like Kendrick, we reserve the right to return, and to even "pop out" one more time. . .Superbowl LVIII?

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

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

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

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