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

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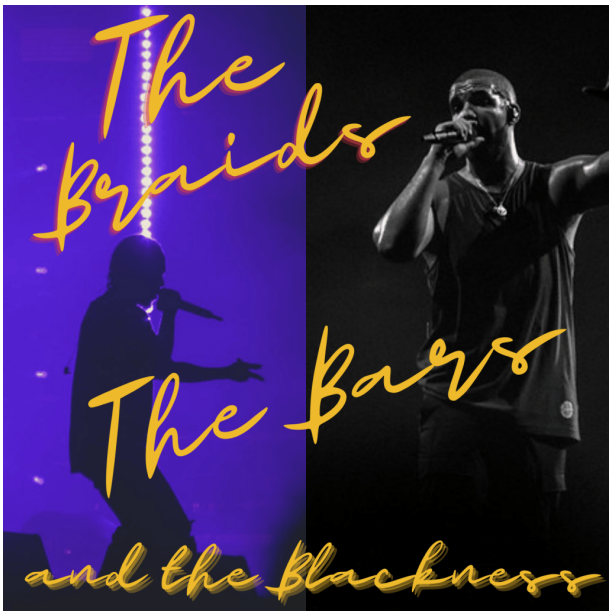
Abstract

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.*

Keywords

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



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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 wake of Drake's rapid-fire releases from April 19th, 2024, the one-two punch of Drake's "Push Ups" and "Taylor Made Freestyle." Today, Craig and Smith pick up their conversation where Kendrick did, releasing "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!* If you want to catch up with part one, click here.

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> *What is it? The braids?–Kendrick Lamar, "Euphoria"*

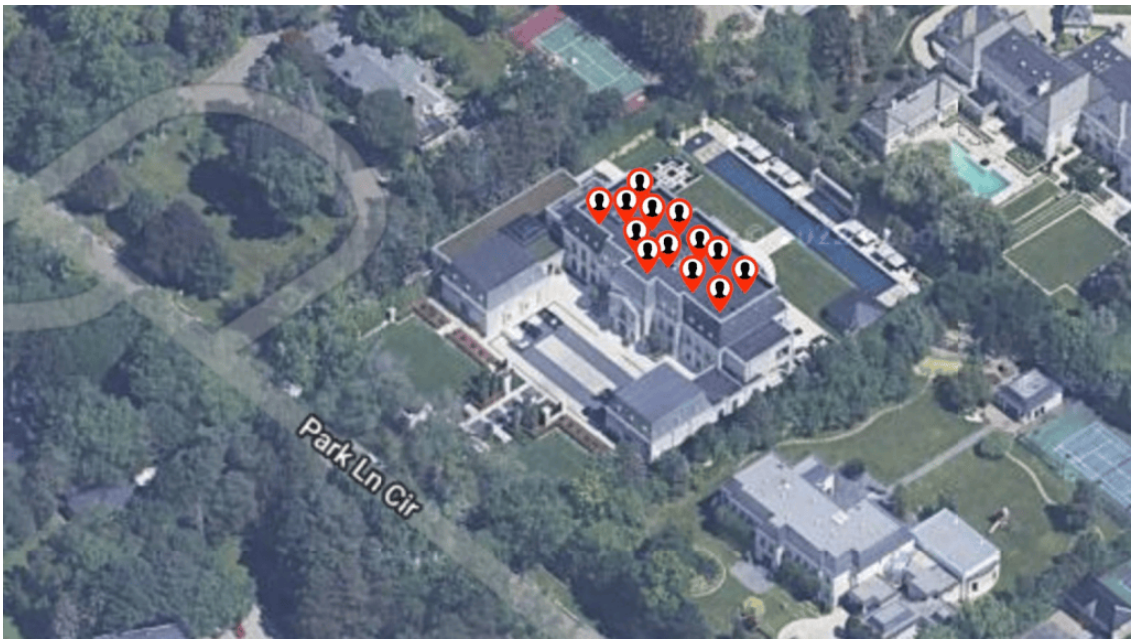
After a much-anticipated wait, Kendrick dropped "Euphoria." It not only stopped Hip Hop culture in its tracks, but it allowed all spectators to realize this was gearing up to be an epic battle. The song starts with the backwards Richard Pryor sample from the iconic film *The Wiz*. For those unfamiliar, *The Wiz* is a film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* featuring an all-Black star-studded cast, including Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. Richard Pryor played the role of the Wizard. When the characters realize the Wizard is a fraud, he says, "Everything they say about me is true"; this is the sample Kendrick uses, grounding himself in 1970s Black culture and situating where he plans to go in his writing.



https://youtu.be/NPqDIwWMtxg

There are numerous layers that Kendrick builds into "Euphoria" – which gets back to Drake's warning of "you better have a motherfuckin' quintuple entendre on that shit." The two specific lines that resonate for how K.Dot's attack plan will unfold come at the beginning and the middle of the song. The choice of his introductory lines are a serious forewarning for Drake: "Know you a master manipulator and habitual liar too/ But don't tell no lie about me and I won't tell truths 'bout you." Kendrick references the idea of a "friendly fade" but sounds firm in this warning.

The second line to resonate in our listening was "'Back to Back' I like that record/ I'ma git back to that for the record." This bar was an intriguing foreshadowing of not only how Dot planned to approach the battle, but it also references the fact that Kendrick has studied Drake's battles, thus he is prepared for this moment. It's critical to note in Drake's last battle with lyrical tactician Terrance Thorton aka Pusha T in 2018 (which Kendrick references in "Euphoria"), he mentioned Pusha T's wife – this led to Pusha T introducing the world to Adonis, Drake's then-infant child which he most definitely had NOT introduced to the world. As Kendrick runs through this 6:24 minute song, his indictments of Drake's cultural voyeurism and appropriation are crystal clear, but Kendrick doubles down on this idea by saying: "It's not just me, I'm what the culture's feeling." This is the start of Kendrick framing the argument of how Drake is exploiting Black American culture from the safety of the Embassy, his Canadian compound located in a different country.



a little ahead of ourselves, but Kendrick's "Not Like Us" cover art features "The Embassy"

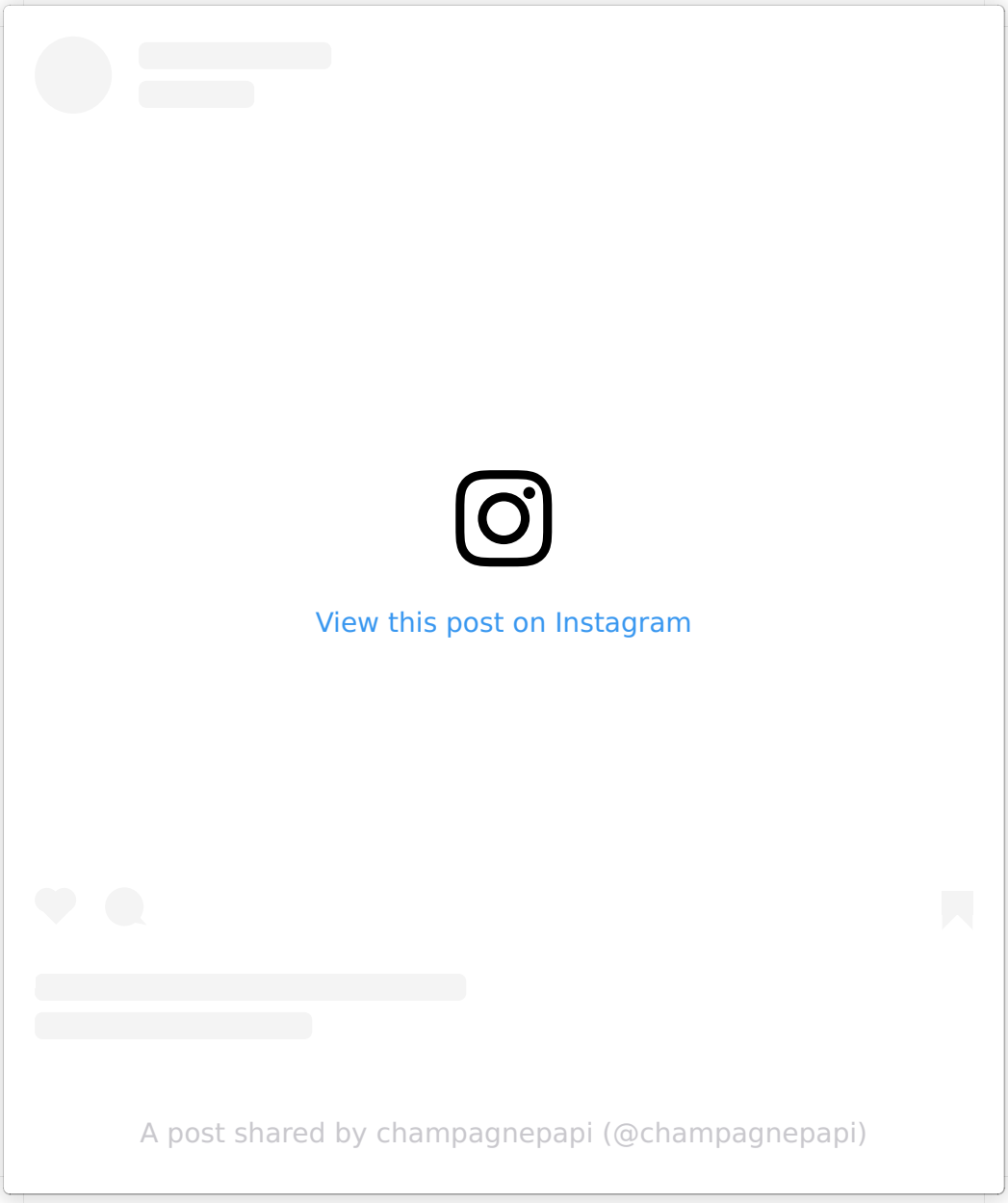
LeBrandon highlighted a few additional quotes while also generating a series of questions. When he heard, "I even hate when you say the word 'nigga' but that's just me, I guess/ some shit just cringeworthy it ain't even gotta be deep, I guess," it evoked the feeling of not having to justify why the usage of the word "nigga" is okay for Black people. While LeBrandon acknowledges his grandparents and parents may not agree with him, he feels its usage is not worthy of a fight unless used by a non-Black person; it's widely accepted as part of the vernacular of Black people in Hip Hop culture. So to question Drake's usage of the word and strip him of this privilege is a demoralizing and thought-provoking action. A second aspect of these bars considers hater-ation. Sometimes hate is irrational and without cause and sometimes that's simply good enough! This moment also sparked questions for LeBrandon that we wanted to include:

> *Maybe it's overstating the impact of the battle but will the remainder of Drake's career be under a microscope?*
>
> *Will Hip Hop heads and casuals now analyze and likely scrutinize Drake's every move?*

Another moment we both agreed on was an additional Kendrick quote LeBrandon highlighted: "What is it? The braids?" Hair, hair, hair: a fixture in these conversations as well as a clue into where this battle gets debated...the barbershop and even the hair salon. Drake's masculinity, racial and cultural authenticity has always been sensitive; let us never forget Pusha T's "Story of Adidon": a song that questioned Drake's character and even his hair, released with cover art displaying Drake in Blackface with Jazz hands. Drake's perceived "entanglement" with Black American culture has always been warm, and felt like a younger cousin following their big cousin. Drake was younger then and Pusha T was written off by some as a bully: an old Hip Hop head yelling at the clouds.

But recently, Drake's actions began to feel like a mockery, or even a caricature (like a "master manipulator"). How much of this behavior is Drake trying on costumes, using real hairstyles and real life experiences of Black folks to portray a life he hasn't lived or interacted with? Fashion and

swag regionalism has become lost in the internet age, which makes the concerns about Drake's "costumes" jarring. And despite one of Hip Hop's keys being the ability to flex individuality, Hip Hop has always been a conduit of style (think throwback jerseys and other fashion cues). So why does Drake's recent fascination with braids and other things raise eyebrows? Are his braids too tight? Maybe the bobbles and barrettes are giving young Black girl vibes too much? Only time will tell...



LeBrandon also tapped into the Kendrick line, "notice I said we, it's not just me, I'm what the culture's feeling." How many behind-closed-doors conversations were had about the current state of Drake? Naturally, we've all had them, as he's the second biggest artist in the world. Drake is a brand, a corporate behemoth, and one of Universal Music Group's greatest interests. But is he a cultural thief? Another corporate behemoth once said "dark knight feeling, die and be a hero/ or live long enough to see yourself become a villain" (Carter). Is Drake becoming a villain or are these valid concerns and questions Kendrick has raised?

Hip Hop has existed for 50+ years now – but cultural moments and movements can die off, so can we just dismiss some of the thoughts this battle has provoked? Is it the responsibility of those at the forefront of the artform to behave a certain way? Or does innovation and variety–even at its silliest– keep Hip Hop's spirit alive? Kendrick's ability to stay off the grid, then "pop out and show niggas" is unparalleled. The way his city and coast showed up for him also has to be acknowledged in a time when access to rappers' lives is oversaturated online. The line "I'm what the culture's feeling" is interesting because it informs us that Kendrick is paying attention and considering the artform, even when we can't see it with his presence in public or on social media.

Kendrick quickly followed up with "6:16 in LA," and the layering throughout each song only gets impressively more intricate. For example, the length of the song refers back to the date the TV show "Euphoria" was released (Drake is credited as executive producer on the show). The entire first section is incredible, especially as Kendrick spits "Like Raphael, I can heal and give you art," which speaks to the duality Kendrick uses to approach this battle.



https://youtu.be/R1ypnmTMNqA

It was also one of Todd's favorite moments of the "Pop Out" show. While multiple online analyses say Kendrick is personifying Drake, the way in which he's rhyming is undeniable. Furthermore, the Kendrick line telling Drake "every dog gotta have his day/ now live in your purpose" is quite condemning, especially alongside the concept of Drake being a voyeur of Black American Hip Hop culture. Couple this sentiment with Sounwave and Taylor Swift music collaborator Jack Antonoff producing the beat for the song that uses a sample from Al Green's "What a Wonderful Thing Love Is" – a song that features Drake's uncle (Mabon "Teenie" Hodges) on guitar – shows just how cerebral Kendrick has gotten with his sonic offerings. This song also presents a different tempo: a more soulful, Boom-Bap-style that highlights Kendrick's flow and cadence, diverging from "Euphoria."

We both agreed Kendrick may not enjoy tearing down another artist. LeBrandon highlights the lines, "Who am I if I don't go to war." This line, its surrounding bars, the tone, and delivery speak to the conflict Kendrick feels about the ensuing lyrical violence. It's incredible that such conflict is

being considered by Kendrick during a heated battle–it requires us to cherish this level of consideration and introspection. This line also feels layered because of Kendrick's roots, and the enduring Hip Hop element of battling: "if I'm called out," Kendrick raps, "who am I if I don't answer that call?"

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Todd and LeBrandon's Hip Hop History Month play-by-play concludes on November 25th!

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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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