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Hip Hop Videos and Black Identity in Virtual Space

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In this paper, I present an understanding of music videos as useful representations of the dynamism of blackness and black identity and in fact indicative of a post-regional turn in Hip Hop. In order to illustrate, I first examine how blackness is expressed in physical space with the advent of New York City's block parties and the Bay Area's "hyphy" movement. I then situate the importance of the music video in a contemporary understanding of visualized culture in virtual space. Applying this understanding to the performance and perception of blackness, I use the example of Canadian Hip Hop artist Drake's journey of self-representation and identification, following the trajectory of his career through music video creation. In doing so, I argue that technological innovation serves as the moment and the means to visualise evolving identity as is articulated by Hip Hop and the music video.

Blackness as an identity has never been fixed to place but rather finds itself articulated through space and, more importantly, time. Movement has defined black identity and served as an origin in and of itself. Simultaneously, technology has provided Hip Hop and the black community with the necessary vehicle to communicate the fluidity of American blackness. In this paper, I argue that technological innovation serves as the moment and the means to visualise evolving identity as is articulated by Hip Hop and the music video.

While plenty has been written on the political, economic, social and sexual nature of Hip Hop and its contribution to underscoring the black experience in North America, often the narrative is simply essentialised into monolithic blackness with a fixity rooted in time, as if to present an identity that is static and unchanging. I argue that further exploration of the music video as a tool will aid in the effort to problematize a monolithic black American narrative that has been fixed in time. I will first explore Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic, which frames the background of black music's emergence directly as a consequence of enslavement and forced migration out of West Africa.[1] I will then briefly explore two case studies, which relate a spatial understanding of contemporary Hip Hop movements and resistance in American cities. I will then pursue a critical analysis of the music video as a tool and emerging art form, which is useful in representing the black experience in virtual space. Lastly, an analysis of one artist's journey of self-representation and identification through music video production will challenge the temporal fixity of this experience, one that is often misconceived as "doggedly monocultural, national and ethnocentric,"[2] and provide insight into an understanding of blackness that defies Hip Hop regionalism and archaic geographic binaries.

The ubiquity of the screen is undeniable. Resting in our pockets, on our desks, and next to us when we sleep; screens have become the first thing we see in the morning and the last thing we check at night. Thus spatially, the screen has become

[1] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993)

[2] Ibid., 80.

more pervasive and the visual, more powerful. Doreen Massey writes that, "As a result of the fact that it is conceptualized as created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation."[3] It is precisely this concept of space that I will apply to the scope of this paper. In doing so, I hope to address the following questions: Where is black identity contested? How is black identity asserted? What role do music videos have in representing black identity?

The Music Video

The music video has been overlooked as simply a by-product of an overly commercialised music industry. Relegating it to the status of commercial rather than art, however, detracts from meaning and, consequently, as Diane Railton and Paul Watson contend in their work on the music video and the politics of representation, "academic work on music video is not common."[4] I argue that the music video is important as a site of technological advancement as well as an articulation of spatial presence. Through an exploration of these elements, the usefulness of the music video as an instrument to articulate identity will become evident.

No longer confined to cable television programming and MTV-curated playlists that dominated the television screens of the 1980s and 1990s, the advent of mobile technology has created a venue whereby artists can produce music videos that necessarily challenge previously enforced restrictions and censorship rules. Additionally, videos can challenge the tastes of image producers who previously held the reigns in video production and distribution. Consumers are not forced to adhere to the old top-down system of media distribution and, as technology democratises the process of production and consumption, "the same technological infrastructure that allows record companies to promote their products more widely [enables] consumers to circumvent these official channels of broadcast and, instead, redistribute the music videos which they deem significant."[5] Railton and Watson contend that this process allows music videos to experience a much longer shelf life and to find reintroduction into pop culture more readily due to their immediate availability on websites that host content and make it available, largely, for free such as Youtube and Vimeo.[6] More importantly, contemporary video production is able to easily bypass corporate taste making and produce more culturally salient work. This process of democratisation has provided black artists the ability to hire black production companies to better articulate their own identity. Baldwin writes, "Due to video training, these positions have

[3]Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile, (London: Routledge, 1993), 156.

[4] Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 2.

[5] Ibid., 6.

[6] Ibid.

bypassed the white male unions that control apprenticeship systems and employment networks."[7]

The prominence of the music video also rests in its accessibility. When the desktop computer became mobile in the first decade of the twenty-first century, media achieved emancipation from the living room and screens began to occupy public space. Railton and Watson take this even further: "Indeed, in the planning and organisation of the social environment the design and management of screen light is often seen to be every bit as vital as the design and management of natural light."[8] Thus the video is no longer consumed as a secondary product but rather as primary content. Additionally, the impact of an increasingly visualised culture requires that we examine the visual with a more nuanced approach. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff contends that, "This globalisation of the visual, taken collectively, demands new means of interpretation."[9] Mirzoeff's work on the exploration of the visual reinforces the cultural impact of the music video and necessitates a stronger focus on visual content production. If we are to comprehend the music video's power as a tool, we must first explore the role of music in black movement.

Black Movement, Music, and (Post) Regionality

Hip Hop has had a considerable amount of influence in the communication of black identity in North America. To better understand this phenomenon, attention must be paid to the migratory nature of black music, which has always been characterised by movement. Artist KRS-One raps on the track "Hip Hop Lives," "Hip and Hop is more than music / Hip is the knowledge, hop is the movement / Hip and Hop is intelligent movement."[10] But the movement we're discussing here is not restricted to dance; rather it is related to the manner in which Hip Hop emerged as a result of black migration across the Atlantic and the resulting flows of music and style from Africa to North America and from North America back to Europe and beyond.[11]

Gilroy's argument in his chapter "Jewels Brought from Bondage," asserts that music and musical style were the only forms of language that were transportable for enslaved Africans coming to the new world. In what he refers to as the "Topos of Unsayability," Gilroy contends that inaccessibility to traditional western forms of literacy gave black music disproportional importance as it replaced written and spoken language.[12] The mobility of music and its ability to trespass social and linguistic lines lent Hip Hop its necessary rootedness in intertextuality. Stuart Hall remarks that this

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[7] Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance* 2.2 (1999), 156.

[8] Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 7.

[9] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

[10] KRS-One, *Hip Hop Lives*, Koch Records, 2007, MP3.

[11] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993)

[12] Ibid., 74.

tendency is part and parcel of "the black experience as a diaspora experience, ...the consequences which this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut-and-mix' – in short, the process of cultural *diasporia-zation* which it implies."[13] The reduction of black identity to one idea is impossible. Gilroy remarks that there can be no one "totalising conception of black culture" and that to believe that such an identity could exist only detracts from the complexities of black identity. He further explains that "what is more significant for present purposes is that in the Africentric discourse on which both sides of opinion draw, the idea of a diaspora composed of communities that are both similar *and* different tends to disappear . . ."[14] Gilroy's concept of diaspora mirrors the contemporary shift in what I term "post-regional Hip Hop" geography. For Gilroy and Hall, there is a tension in the implicit desire to articulate blackness while simultaneously allowing for an evolving experience upon which the black diaspora is rooted.

While region-specific Hip Hop gained visibility through music video proliferation and as consumption of music has shifted from purely aural to a mixture of aural and visual, I argue that Hip Hop has entered a post-regional phase wherein the virtual space of the internet and mobile media have allowed artists to dissolve regional borders and foster more fluid identities. The popularity of a song is now measured in views on Youtube rather than plays on the radio. Hip Hop regionalism, in a sense, has become obsolete as Kendrick Lamar (from Los Angeles) can insist that "I'm Makaveli's offspring / I'm the King of New York / King of the Coast, one hand, I juggle them both"[15] while Drake (from Toronto), boasts that, "All my exes live in Texas like I'm George Strait / Or they go to Georgia State where, tuition is handled / By some random nigga that live in Atlanta."[16] Music videos, now a product of mobile media, directly reflect the fluidity of Hip Hop and black identity. Digital media provides Hip Hop the opportunity to defy archaic binaries and regionalism, and instead foments unity around a post-regional blackness that opposes white supremacy, police violence and deeply rooted racial inequality. With the focus of anxiety no longer directed towards other black communities, rappers like Kendrick Lamar reinvigorate claims to unified blackness with lyrics like, "I'm African-American, I'm African / I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village / Pardon my residence / Came from the bottom of mankind" and "You sabotage my community, making a killin' / You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga."[17] Additionally, Lamar's lyrics mirror the anxiety and the fear of impure art, commodification and dilution while establishing the desire for "real" blackness. Earl Sweatshirt explains in the song "Chum" that he's, "Too black for the white kids, and too white for the blacks / From honor roll to cracking locks off them

[13] Stuart Hall, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge 1996), 447.

[14] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 87.

[15] Big Sean featuring Kendrick Lamar, *Control*, Def Jam Records, 2013, MP3.

[16] Drake, *HYFR (Hell Ya Fucking Right)*, Cash Money Records, 2011, MP3.

[17] Kendrick Lamar, *The Blacker The Berry*, Interscope Records, 2015, MP3.

bicycle racks / I'm indecisive, I'm scatterbrained, and I'm frightened, it's evident."[18] With anxiety surrounding difference and definition, the assertion and preservation of blackness are at the heart of post-regional black identity formation. The struggle becomes that of maintaining authenticity and is best exemplified in spatial resistance. In other words, since relevance is no longer directly tied to origin, importance rests in developing authenticity by other means. In this instance it can be derived and asserted through physical resistance in space (be it physical or virtual).

Space and Authenticity

For Hip Hop artists, rooting music in place was a means of asserting authenticity. Knowing, defending and representing one's origin has persisted as a key tenet of Hip Hop music production and with the music's beginnings rooted in the South Bronx, the focus on Hip Hop relied on the New York Hip Hop scene. This reliance, or "overemphasis" as Caspar Melville and David Hesmondhalgh contend, "can lead to difficulties in accounting for other variants of Hip Hop culture, not only on the U.S. West Coast, but in Houston, in Jamaica, in Britain, and elsewhere."[19] In response, the contemporary American Hip Hop scene has made a point to generate regionally specific Hip Hop sounds and styles. From Southern to Midwestern, Los Angeles to the Bay Area, success in the music industry was tied to regional representation in order to challenge the perceived homogeneity of black music and identity in America. Michael Keith and Steve Pile, introducing their collection of works on place and the politics of identity, echo this point:

Narratives of identity formation in mainstream social science have frequently spoken to an interplay of commonality and difference that erases spatiality through a homogenization of the specific – not a process of *misrepresentation* through over-generalization but instead a naturalization of particular experiences within a frequently implicit spatial frame of reference.[20]

As the lines and divisions that forged early Hip Hop rivalries have diminished in post-regional Hip Hop culture, authenticity has remained a necessary component of Hip Hop and black identity.

Authenticity in Hip Hop has relied on purity and resistance. Davarian Baldwin, in his article on the spatial politics of identity in the age of Hip Hop, contends, "Racial authenticity is best articulated in these instances through the stance that the artistic production is pure and untouched by any means of dilution."[21] With the following two

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[18] Earl Sweatshirt, *Chum*, Tan Cressida, 2012, MP3.

[19] David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 106.

[20] Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 16.

[21] Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance* 2.2 (1999): 141.

examples, I will illustrate the connection between purity, resistance and space in Hip Hop and the manner in which they inform authenticity.

The Block Party and the Sideshow

In 2005, American comedian Dave Chappelle, with French director Michel Gondry, ventured to organize (and document) a concert in the heart of one of Brooklyn's oldest black communities, Bedford Stuyvesant. The goal, Chappelle articulates in the documentary, was to bring together some of the most influential black Hip Hop artists and to stage a free performance in the centre of the historically black community. The documentary and the performances are rife with symbols and statements regarding American black identity and Hip Hop as a site of resistance.

Situating the concert in the streets of Bed Stuy, rather than a formal venue in Manhattan for example, is Chappelle's first site of resistance. He refuses to support the commodification of black music in mainstream markets and he necessarily situates the concert in a poorer community in order to emphasise his classist critique of the music industry. Davarian Baldwin, in his article "Black Empires, White Desires," explains that much of black authenticity has rested in a rejection of middle class consumptive practices. He writes that, "The gatekeepers of 'authentic blackness' are anxiety-ridden over public displays of the black good life society, exemplified in the emergence of a new hip hop identity".[22] Notably, this is exemplified in the emergence of gangsta rap and "ghetto authenticity" as a rejection of "black bourgeois respectability".[23] Locating the performance within a historically black community, Chappelle attempts to preserve the purity of the music, unburdened by commercialism and distortion. Hip Hop drummer, Questlove, explains in an aside with Chappelle, "All of us have...what we have in common, is that our audience doesn't look like us. And it's the same for [Dave Chappelle]."[24] In other words, American black artists are faced with the predicament whereby the material they produce and intend for black audiences is being shared and consumed, largely, by white middle class communities, who are less equipped to receive or interpret the art in the manner in which the artist intended. Thus the art might not resonate with some audiences as effectively as it will with others. It is worth noting that the name of the documentary and the performance was simply "Block Party." The block party in New York has always held a very special social, political and spatial significance for poorer diaspora communities. It has served as a space for gathering, cultural exchange and of course musical performance, similar to the "autonomous black

[22] Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance* 2.2 (1999), 151.

[23] Ibid.

[24] *Dave Chappelle's Block Party*, DVD, Dir. Michel Gondry (2005; Prod. Bob Yari Productions; Distr. Rogue Pictures) Film.

cultural spaces" that were created in the United Kingdom, which led to sound system culture.[25]

Similarly, the hyphy movement in the Bay area of California emerged in the late 90s as a social movement articulating American blackness in the midst of deep social and racial inequality on the American west coast. DJ Vlad's documentary, *Ghostride the Whip*, explores the beginnings of hyphy music in the Bay Area, as well as the advent of the *Sideshow*, a term for the public displays of reckless driving, as well as music and dance specific to the Bay Area Hip Hop style. Mac Dre, the godfather of the hyphy movement, explains that the " 'Street gatherings [are] called 'sideshows'. A sideshow is just super campaigning. It's a parade. It's a mobile party. It's cats swingin em. Cats stuntin.'"[26] Like the block parties of New York and the sound systems of London, the sideshows of the Bay Area provide the community with a space to explore cultural difference and to establish "autonomous black spaces" that stand in resistance to the white power structure.

Hyphy, which essentially draws its meaning from a manipulation of the word hyper, connotes an entire spirit as well as a genre of music and a style of dance. Hyphy performance is a rejection of the mainstream and an intentional deviation from what is socially acceptable. Thus the dance moves are seemingly arrhythmic and the parlance often unintelligible. Hyphy serves as a direct response to under-representation through subversion. During a *sideshow*, the driver spins his car around in circles, producing smoke in a show of prowess and symbolically asserting control over the street and public space in general. Another style of hyphy driving is called *ghostriding* whereby a driver will exit the car while it is in motion and walk alongside it for several blocks. Using the car as an instrument and the street as a canvas, the youth challenge authority and establish an identity against the perceived order. Thus hyphy is not simply a style of music or a type of dance. It is not reducible to one particular idea. Rather, it is part of the story of Hip Hop, which, as Hesmondhalgh and Melville conclude, "[can be seen] as one of a number of elements that can be recombined to make important statements about cultural identity."[27] Cultural theorists place a great deal of emphasis on the idea of recombination as a means of reimaging and representing identity.[28] We have seen Hip Hop's ability to construct identity through the subversion of physical space. Using Hip Hop videos as a tool, we can explore identity formation in virtual space as well.

Situating several videos in a post-regional context will not only provide a visual aid but will also support the claim that time and space are inextricably tied to identity

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[25]David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 88.

[26] *Ghostride The Whip*. Dir. DJ Vlad, (Rugged Entertainment, 2008), Web.

[27]David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 97.

[28] See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993); Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

formation as I have introduced above. With this in mind, I turn now to four music videos, which, I assert, represent both the fluidity of black identity as well as the video's capacity to represent and communicate mobility.

Drake and the Post-Regional Rap Game

The following case study will focus on the emergence of Canada's most influential Hip Hop artist to date. Aubrey "Drake" Graham started his career in show business as a child actor on the hit Canadian teen drama, *Degrassi.* He began producing rap albums in 2007 and, with a white mother, a black father, and roots in a prominent Jewish neighbourhood in Toronto, Graham's identity has been problematic and, as a result, endured scrutiny and contestation. Following the trajectory of his career, an exploration of Drake's music videos will reveal how his identity has evolved alongside the establishment of his authenticity. I argue that, in order to be taken seriously as a Hip Hop artist, Drake had to first root his identity in obscurity and with respect to his predecessors before he could present himself as a "mixed-race" Jewish rapper from Canada. For this paper I will look at four videos in particular: "Successful," "The Motto," "HYFR" and "Started from the Bottom" produced in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013, respectively.

The video for the song, "Successful," opens with the artist positioned in front of a blurred cityscape. Drake stares pensively out of a window but the shot focuses on the artist himself rather than following his gaze, thus the audience fails to see what he sees. The remainder of the video alternates between an interior shot to that of Drake and another artist, Trey Songz, driving through an anonymous city at night. A woman, scantily clad and shrouded in darkness, reclines on a bed while Drake and Trey Songz repeat the hook, "I want the money / Money and the cars / Cars and the clothes / I suppose / I just want to be successful." Success for Drake, at this point in his career, resides in the material. The video represents Drake's attempt at solidifying his identity as being rooted in obscurity. He claims to want success and yet it seems to be out of his grasp as he aimlessly roams the streets at night. Jamieson Cox, writing for *Pitchfork* magazine, authored an article on Drake's Toronto. He affirms that, "Drake's lyrical relationship with his city has shifted and grown over the years. On mixtapes like 2009's *So Far Gone*...his interactions with Toronto were vague and distant; any references to the city were typically oblique..."[29]

The video accompanying the second song, "The Motto," takes the audience and our understanding of Drake's identity even further away from Toronto. The first scene cuts to a shot of a woman speaking to the camera. She says, "So Andre wanted me to be a strong black woman. If you could see me now...." The Andre she is referring to is her deceased son and the aforementioned godfather of the Bay Area's hyphy movement, Mac Dre. Drake not only pays homage to an innovator of Hip Hop but he also removes his identity from regional restriction. Drake embodies post-regional Hip Hop directly

[29] Jamieson Cox, "Views from the 6," *Pitchfork*, March 5, 2015

and subsequently provides further evidence of his authenticity as a black artist. Lyrically, the song takes the audience around the country, "Go uptown, New York City, bitch / Them Spanish girls love me like I'm Aventura / Tell Uncle Luke I'm out in Miami too" before returning to one of Hip Hop's sites of origin as he concludes, "Rest in peace Mac Dre, I'm-a do it for the bay." Visually compelling, the video is comprised of scenic and spectacular shots of the entire Bay Area.

After paying homage and asserting his authenticity through his struggle for acclaim as well as the escape from the perils of poverty, Drake is ready to explore the more controversial elements of his identity. The artist, in the video for the song "HYFR (Hell Yeah, Fucking Right)," recreates a scene from the Jewish rite of passage, his Bar Mitzvah. The first scene is a home video clip from Drake's youth. His mother leans over and asks the young boy what he has to say to which he replies, "Mazel Tov." Then several lines of text appear on the screen: "On October 24th 2011 Aubrey 'Drake' Graham chose to get re-bar mitzvah'd [sic] as a re-commitment to the Jewish religion." The remaining four minutes of the video display Drake, his friends and his family reenacting the Jewish ceremony with scenes of prayer, dance, excessive drinking and partying. The video marks a departure for the artist from earlier image development. Initially, this video would have been impossible when he was situating his identity as a black artist. This moment in his career marks a dislocation. Drake is simultaneously subverting static blackness *and* monolithic Jewishness. Thus he brilliantly positions himself as an emblem of post-regional Hip Hop.

The final video discussed in this paper marks the artist's homecoming. Having established himself as a true artist, Drake brings the audience back to his hometown of Toronto in the most direct and blatant tribute to his city yet. The song, "Started from the Bottom" (and the main hook of the track, "Started from the bottom now we're here") is an anthem for Drake's progress as an artist as well as a direct statement regarding blackness in North America. The video is rife with borrowing and recombination. Drake is seen *ghostriding* around his old neighborhood, mirroring Bay Area style and again dissolving regional borders. Notably, the cityscape is no longer blurred. Clear gorgeous shots of the CN Tower, Canada's tallest structure, occupy large chunks of the video. Drake's Canadianness is unencumbered by a requirement to prove blackness. The final scene of the video is simply a shot of the artist's jacket, which reads TORONTO in bold lettering. Drake's journey has taken him back to where he started yet, in order to return, he first had to depart.

Conclusion

I have argued that Hip Hop serves as a means of communicating black identity made necessary by a "Topos of Unsayability" that accompanied black migration to North America during slavery. Challenging fixity and static blackness in North America, an understanding of Hip Hop's use of space and time to subvert a white supremacist structure was explored through New York's block parties and the Bay Area's *sideshows*. Desiring a tool to better articulate this practice, I asserted that the

growing prevalence of the screen in an increasingly mobile and technologically advanced society has served as a moment of *dislocation* and thus the music video is an excellent tool for such a study. I used the example of Drake's journey in Hip Hop to articulate how blackness and Hip Hop are intertwined and that the necessary steps an artist must take to assert authenticity reflect the complexity of blackness and black identity. Drake exemplifies a movement towards a post-regional understanding of Hip Hop and, subsequently, black identity in general, which reflects the fluidity of blackness as well as the intertextuality that Stuart Hall discusses. Challenging old binaries and dissolving archaic borders, a post-regional understanding of Hip Hop problematizes monolithic and static blackness, which is increasingly finding representation in the media.

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