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## Canadians Redefining R&B: The Online Marketing of Drake, Justin Bieber, and Jessie Reyez

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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## Abstract

In a country that long failed to accept, include, and institutionalize R&B music as part of Canadian culture, musical artists Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez have successfully broken-down barriers by having successful careers as racially diverse Canadian R&B artists. This qualitative study surveys the literature on classifications of the R&B genre and of Canadian identities in popular media. The theoretical framework of discourse analysis is used to conduct a brief episodic history of Canadian R&B and to evaluate how the music genre “R&B,” is traditionally associated with people who have "Black" and "American" identities, and how a “Canadian” identity is traditionally associated with “white” and “folk” musical artists. I conclude that the ascription of racialized and nationalized identities is found to play a role in each artist's respective inclusion, exclusion, and/or authentication vis a vis R&B. I evaluate how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez each articulate “R&B-ness” and “Canadian-ness” to represent multiple, yet equally Canadian national narratives through their Canadian R&B artist lifestyle brands. In exploring ideas of national identity, intersectionality, digital celebrity, branding, and marketing related to contemporary Canadian popular music genres, the dissertation seeks to answer the question: How have the careers of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness”? Through textual analyses of their social media posts, brand partnerships, interviews, music videos, and music lyrics, the dissertation traces out how multicultural Canadian artists Bieber, Drake, and Reyez broke into the music industry as “digital stars” (Harvey, 2017) by using online communication strategies, alongside traditional industry practices (such as networking with music industry gatekeepers). A particular focus involves Drake’s, Bieber’s, and Reyez’s brand partnerships and social media strategies, between 2019 and 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the significance of online communications, and the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged changes to race-based music industry classifications. The dissertation includes insights from interviews conducted with 35 U.S. and Canadian marketing professionals and music industry executives in 2020. This study is applicable to explorations of how race, nationality, and music genre categories are classified, cultural branding, and contemporary marketing strategies.



## Keywords

Intersectionality, Popular Music Genres, Cultural Marketing and Branding, Digital Celebrity, National Identity, Musical Multiculturalism

## Summary for Lay Audience

In a country that long failed to accept, include, and institutionalize R&B music as part of Canadian culture, musical artists Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez have successfully broken-down barriers by having successful careers as racially diverse Canadian R&B artists. This qualitative study surveys the literature on classifications of the R&B genre and of Canadian identities in popular media. This qualitative study explores the place of R&B music within Canadian culture. Through a brief episodic history of Canadian R&B, I examine how processes in classification systems group ideas of “R&B,” as a genre traditionally associated with people who have "Black" and "American" identities, and of “Canadian,” as an identity traditionally associated with “white” and “folk” musical artists. I determine how Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s racialized and nationalized identities mediate their inclusion, exclusion, and/or authentication vis a vis R&B. I also evaluate how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez each represent multiple, yet equally Canadian identities through their Canadian R&B artist lifestyle brands. In exploring ideas of national identity, intersectionality, digital celebrity, branding, and marketing related to contemporary Canadian popular music genres, the dissertation seeks to answer the question: How have the careers of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged dominant understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness”? Through textual analyses of Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s social media posts, brand partnerships, interviews, music videos, and music lyrics, the dissertation traces out how these artists broke into the music industry as “digital stars” (Harvey, 2017) by using online communication strategies, alongside traditional industry practices (such as networking with music industry gatekeepers). A particular focus involves Drake’s, Bieber’s, and Reyez’s brand partnerships and social media strategies, between 2019 and 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the significance of online communications, and the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged changes to race-based music industry classifications. The dissertation includes insights from interviews conducted with 35 U.S. and Canadian marketing professionals and music industry executives in 2020. This study is applicable to explorations of how race, nationality, and music genre categories are classified, cultural branding, and contemporary marketing strategies.

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## Preface

I have often heard that it is not until you are done a project that you truly understand its purpose, and now I understand why that is so.

The impetus for this dissertation stems from growing up in a predominately white place.

I relocated from Scarborough, Ontario, where I experienced a classroom full of diverse ethnicities, to a small Ontario town of Elmira when I was young and suddenly realized that I was the only “brown girl” in class. I was the only “brown girl” in the school. We were the only “brown family” in the entire town. We were known as the “brown family in the corner house.” Students around me were very underexposed to racialized identities. Some would use racial slurs, like the N\* word, due to racism. They immediately Othered me and positioned me as different from them.

Going to church, going to school, or going down the street to the town’s Tim Hortons, I always felt visibly different. It was not just in public spaces but also on Canadian television that I only saw white faces. Growing up, I witnessed Canadian media reflecting a predominately “white” Canada, but I did not critically question it until my post-secondary studies.

I only really realized after this dissertation that musical artists like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez had resonated with me because they enabled the younger me to embrace different parts of my identity, in ways that my immediate environments did not permit.

When I began this project, I knew that I was interested in branding, in music, and in musical artists Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez, all of whom I had grown up listening to. But, I had not realized why I truly needed to conduct this project until it was completed.

As I concluded this project, I realized that my deeper interest lay in exploring the ability of musical artists to create experiences that I can enjoy along with other listeners, that champion a sense of being distinctly “Canadian,” and that also create a space that enables me to better understand and reflect on my own identity. Through the consumption of these artists’ texts (their music, music videos, social media posts, and interviews), I felt heard, seen, and embraced. These artists articulated ideas and experiences that I resonated with, and in ways

that I felt no one immediately around me growing up could. The internet played an important role in giving me access to these artists and their cultural texts that helped me to discover who I was as a brown-skinned Canadian-Trinidadian-Indian woman, in a small town in Ontario.

Through this project, I also learned more about generations of hip-hop/R&B cultures that were created and came before me in Canada. While studying their careers, I embraced the work of many Torontonians-Caribbean artists who championed their experiences as first- and second-generation immigrants. I only wish that I could have found their work earlier in my life. Although my upbringing was influenced by my parents' Trinidadian culture, outside of that my extended family lived pretty far away: so, I was this Trini girl in a white space. It was jarring, confusing, and it was only in my adult life that I really began to embrace my Trinidadian culture.

I eventually found that so many Canadian artists were articulating a similar experience to mine and creating music that mixed my love for hip-hop, R&B and pop music. Their work resonated with me through the pop styles that I enjoyed dancing to, the soca tunes that my mom sung to in the kitchen and that created feelings of belonging, or the hip-hop beats I would spit with my brother, as my father drove us to school.

This project was a self-actualizing process through which I was able to learn more about myself, Canadian history, Canadian music, Canadian identities, marketing strategies, and contemporary forms of communication and commodification. However, the biggest take-away at the end of this project is that I truly feel like a proud Canadian-Trini from Elmira who can confidently embrace all intersecting, complicated, and challenging aspects of my complex identity, through Canadian R&B music. Canadian R&B music creates a space which enables many Canadians, many identities, to feel a sense of belonging.

# 1 Introduction: “Who is Welcome? Who Should Be Turned Away?”—Multicultural Canadian R&B Artists

Earlier this year, a CBC broadcaster affirmed that “Toronto’s hip-hop and R&B artists are among...the biggest pop artists in the entire world” (Q with Tom Power, 2023). This dissertation examines three key exemplars of that global success: Drake, Justin Bieber, and Jessie Reyez. All three artists make their “Canadian” identities central to the construction of their “R&B” artist personas. This study explores how these Canadians have gained such popularity by mixing “hip-hop,” “R&B,” and “pop” music styles and by using online communications (i.e. digital marketing) alongside traditional industry practices (i.e. networking). Songs by Drake, Bieber, and Reyez were included in a 2022 list of “Top Canadian R&B Love Songs” (Gheciu et al., 2022), and yet Canadian popular music has been traditionally framed as exclusively “rock” and “folk” and not “R&B.” Notwithstanding the fact that Canadian artists have been historically excluded from “R&B music,” a genre long considered an exclusively Black American [U.S.<sup>1</sup>] cultural practice, Toronto music journalist and DJ Josephine Cruz (2017) contended that “R&B is one of the pillars of present-day pop music, and Canada [that] is at the forefront of [the] genre.” White Justin Bieber, biracial (Black and white) Drake, and Latina Jessie Reyez successfully mix R&B, hip-hop, and pop music; however, “R&B” and “pop” music have been traditionally separated by music genre gatekeepers to segregate Black “R&B” identities from white “pop” identities. This study examines these three artists to better understand the complexities of such racial-national-music genre classifications, asking the question: How have Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez each reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness?”

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<sup>1</sup> Following Stanford University’s guidelines, I use the term “U.S.” instead of “American” to refer to people specifically from the U.S.A. I will use the term U.S.A. to refer to the national country. Stanford University (2022) states that the term “American” “refers to people from the United States only, thereby insinuating that the U.S. is the most important country in the Americas (which is actually made up of 42 countries)” (p. 6) and thereby encourage the use of the term “U.S.” rather than “American.”

Music genre categories are powerful classificatory tools, at times used by music industry executives and others to divide artists and audiences and thereby reinforce exclusionary, hegemonic views of national and racial identities. Traditional views of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness” have resulted in classificatory struggles over grouping racially diverse Canadians Bieber, Drake, and Reyez under the R&B music umbrella. Biracial, Black and white, Torontonion Drake rapped in his 2015 song “You & The 6” that he has been criticized for “not being black enough” to participate in hip-hop and R&B music. White Canadian Justin Bieber has been criticized as a “culture vulture” by music industry gatekeepers (Madden, 2018) for recording R&B music. Second generation Canadian-Columbian woman Jessie Reyez, who won the JUNO Award for R&B / Soul Recording of the Year three times (in 2019, 2020, and 2023), has been classified as “pop, not R&B” by Tuma Basa, Director of Black Culture at YouTube, whom I interviewed. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez thus each offer unique opportunities to explore how articulations of race and nationality have resulted in different rules and expectations regarding who gets to be included in R&B.

It is not uncommon for R&B and hip-hop artists to highlight where they are from (Bowser, 2015; Carmichael et. al., 2017). Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s articulations of Canadian-ness helps to build their backstories, brand their public personalities, and align themselves with the culture and the music styles associated with that place. Because of the historical associations between the U.S.A., Black identities, and the R&B genre, Canadians long faced a unique set of struggles in gaining acceptance as R&B and hip-hop artists. This struggle was among other reasons due to the lack of support R&B was given by Canadian mainstream media and Canadian music industry gatekeepers. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were chosen for this study because they achieved popularity in mainstream media as contemporary Canadian R&B artists through robust digital marketing strategies that helped them articulate different, yet distinctly “Canadian” and “R&B” artist personas. They built on the groundbreaking work of previous generations of Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists, using existing networks and music genre blurring practices while also using new forms of online communications and brand partnerships, to help popularize a distinctly “Canadian R&B” identity in the popular mainstream. Together Bieber, Drake, and Reyez articulate Canadian R&B as a multicultural practice that

includes the participation of racially diverse Canadian artists who articulate distinctly Canadian identities and different Canadian lifestyles.

The dissertation will begin by exploring hegemonic beliefs of Canada as an exclusively white folk and rock nation and of R&B as a music style exclusively practiced by people of “Black” and U.S. identities (Chapter 1). The study will include a brief episodic history of Canadian R&B by examining Canadian R&B music’s development via accounts of hegemonic constructions of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness,” through the collaboration of many Canadian Caribbean immigrants working together at the periphery of the dominant Canadian popular music culture, who were heavily influenced by U.S. R&B and hip hop culture, and mixed traditionally separated genre styles of hip-hop, R&B, and reggae music (Chapter 2). An analysis of how contemporary Canadian R&B artists Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez exercised marketing and brand management strategies to break into the industry as racially diverse “Canadian” “R&B” artists, that mix pop, hip-hop, and R&B music across traditional broadcast media and social media, will occupy Chapter 3, with Chapter 4 focused on how they maintained prominence in popular culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dissertation will conclude by highlighting the important roles that anthems play in constructing a Canadian “brand” via a brief analysis of Jessie Reyez’s extraordinary performance of the national anthem during the pandemic, exemplifying cultural marketing strategies exercised by all three artists (Chapter 5).

This study builds on the arguments made by Carl Wilson in a Billboard article titled “Why Canadians Drake and The Weeknd Shook Up American Music’s Black-White Dichotomies in 2015.” Wilson (2015b) noted the discomfort U.S. music industry experts voiced when Black Canadian artist The Weeknd and biracial Canadian artist Drake were included on the U.S. Billboard R&B and hip-hop charts; some felt this disrupted traditional classifications of R&B and hip-hop as categories exclusive to Black artists from the U.S.A. Wilson argued that:

[Drake and The Weeknd both come] from Toronto, one of the world’s most diverse cities, where multiple groups of immigrants meet from all over the globe. Drake is both African-American and Jewish-Canadian, while The Weeknd’s family is Habesha. These categories unsettle the fixed black-white dichotomies that usually organize American music and culture. And that seems freshly urgent

in 2015. Amid issues of mass migration — Who is welcome? Who should be turned away? — their music holds up ID cards stamped with question marks.

Including Drake and The Weeknd on Billboard's R&B and hip-hop charts raised questions about how music industry gatekeepers have classified musical artists into music genres based on the artist's racial and national identities. Drake and The Weeknd complicate the exclusive grouping of Black artists in R&B and hip-hop and disrupt the traditional classifications of R&B as a U.S. cultural practice. For this reason, Drake's and The Weeknd's nationalized and racialized identities position them as seemingly inauthentic contributors to R&B and hip-hop music. Yet, as Larry Starr, Christopher Waterman, and Jay Hodgson (2009) note, "although rap music's origins and inspirations flow from black culture, the genre's audience has become decidedly multi-racial, multicultural, and transnational" (p. 294). This dissertation examines how R&B music "flow[s]" in, through, and beyond Black U.S. culture to include the participation of racially diverse Canadian artists, like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, who together, invoke ideas of Canada as a multicultural nation.

Although Canada is populated by multiethnic people, including Black Canadians, covert racism exercised by white Canadians in positions of power have historically framed Canada as a nation of hegemonically white people who perform rock and folk music. This dissertation will explore how Canada's unique history of race relations contributes to dominant beliefs that Canadians are exclusively white. To help frame wider discussions in this study of hegemonic views of "Canadian-ness" and "R&B-ness," I begin with two recent comedic skits involving Bieber and Drake. Each satirizes reductive stereotypes of Canadians and music genres, mocking beliefs that Canadians are exclusively white and cannot create rap and R&B music.

Despite Justin Bieber's prominence in pop music, he first established his star persona through R&B covers and under the mentorship of Black U.S. R&B artist Usher (which will be explored in Chapter 3). In a YouTube comedy skit called *Racist Superman* (Mancuso, 2018), Justin Bieber satirized assumptions people make about his white Canadian identity, which has contributed to many music industry gatekeepers excluding him from the R&B genre classification. Bieber plays the character "Canadian Superman"

to mock the dominant view of a racially white, culturally ignorant, hockey-playing Canadian. Featuring multiple, differently racialized Superman characters played by other people<sup>2</sup>, Clevver News described the skit as “[making] fun of racial stereotypes through the eyes of various races of Superman” (Clevver News, 2018). Having Bieber playing “Canadian” Superman in the skit draws on common beliefs that Canadians are exclusively racially white. Although all of the other actors wore the same Superman suit, Bieber as “Canadian Superman” added hockey mitts, a helmet, and a hockey stick to his costume. Bieber used stereotypical Canadian language like: “Sup guys? Sorry, I’m late bro... Wanna shoot some puck? Shoot a little puck, eh?” The other characters tell Canadian Superman to “stop apologizing” and to “stop being so nice and friendly,” to which Bieber states, “I can show you nice.” Bieber then ignorantly stereotypes the other Supermen: the intent seems to be to invoke and thereby mock practices of “covert racism” exercised in Canada. For example, Bieber says, “I love hip-hop music” to Black Superman. Bieber says, “I think hummus is delicious” to Middle Eastern Superman, and “I loved Pokémon growing up” to Asian Superman. Bieber’s racist “compliments” articulate how hegemonic beliefs of Canadians’ nice-ness and polite-ness often overlooks racism that exists in Canada. Rodney Coates (2008) notes that “overt racism assume[s] blatant and insidious forms [but] covert racism hides behind the façade of ‘politeness’” (p. 225), while Ayesha Ghaffar (2020) argues that many Canadians exercise “covert racism.” In the chapters below, I will contend that covert and overt racism in Canada contributed to musical representations of Canada as an exclusively white rock and country nation. I consider how racist Canadian government policies and media regulations pushed non-white identities and R&B music outside of Canadian mainstream media.

In a slightly earlier comedy skit, Drake satirized assumptions about racialized Canadian identities. In a 2016 *Saturday Night Live* skit, Drake mocked the dominant view that Black Canadians do not exist, and that Canadians do not participate in hip-hop and rap

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bachelor plays Black Superman, Timothy DeLaGhetto plays Asian Superman, Rudy Mancuso plays Hispanic Superman, Simon Rex plays Jewish Superman, Anwar Jibawi plays Middle Eastern Superman, Corey Felder plays French Superman, and Alesso plays Swedish Superman

music. Drake played the character “Jared,” who represented the intersection of multiple Canadian identity stereotypes. Jared wore a red and white plaid shirt to articulate the stereotype of a white Canadian lumberjack. Jared spoke with an exaggerated Caribbean-Canadian accent and used terminology like “mans” to articulate Toronto’s distinct cultural accent, influenced by the large population of Caribbean immigrants. Jared also wore a wig with dreadlocks to articulate Toronto’s large Black-Caribbean population. In the skit, Kenan Thompson played the character Darnell Hayes, an ignorant Black person from the U.S.A. who claims not to know that Black Canadians exist. When Jared explained that he was a “Canadian...from Toronto,” Hayes asked, “Wait, you’re a Black Canadian?” Jared answered, “obviously, dawg. Yo, there’s thousands of us. I’m sure you’ve met a few of us before.” Hayes responded with: “Nope. Never met one,” demonstrating how the U.S.A.’s cultural imaginary of Canada has not included Black people. This study will examine how many Black Canadian-Caribbean immigrants lacked visibility and audibility in Canadian mainstream media which led to disbelief that Black Canadians (and Canadian R&B music) could exist.

Following Drake’s use of an exaggerated Torontonion accent (as Jared), Hayes (as Thompson) says, “I think Canada has messed with your Blackness, man.” Hayes was contending that Blackness and Canadian-ness are somehow at odds with each other, and that Canada is not an environment for fostering Black experiences or authentic Black culture. Hayes then asserted that “no good rap comes from Canada, okay?” and ironically claimed not to know neither Drake nor first-generation, Black Jamaican-Canadian artist Kardinal Offishall (a.k.a. Kardi). In 2016, when this skit aired, Drake was a global popular music superstar; he had elsewhere been described as “own[ing] 2016...[with] his multi-platinum album *Views*” (Lamarre, 2016) and having “one of the biggest years in hip-hop history” (Emmanuel, 2016). Kardi has been described as “a staple of Canadian hip-hop” (Vanessa, 2022) and has been recognized as an artist who “pav[ed] the way for Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists” (Juneja, 2015). So, despite Drake and Kardi’s accomplishments, the skit reinforced hegemonic beliefs that Canada has an exclusively white population, and that Canadians cannot create music traditionally associated with people with Black identities, including rap, hip-hop, and R&B.



In the skit, when Drake said, “Black people live all over the world, G. You can’t just put us all into one category...Why do I have to be your definition of Blackness, huh?” his character was asserting not only that Black Canadians exist, but that they have unique experiences and cultural practices which may differ from Black people in the U.S.A. I argue that today, musical artists Drake, Justin Bieber, and Jessie Reyez represent multiple Canadian identities and Canadian national narratives through their innovative approaches to R&B music. In what follows, I examine some of the “uniqueness” of Canadian R&B music as performed and marketed by these three stars who participate in as well as diverge from U.S. cultural traditions. As a Media Studies dissertation, I will not be focused on the musical elements that define “Canadian R&B.” Rather, this study explores how Canadian R&B has been defined with and through racial and national identities, to then examine how Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez each reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness.” After contextualizing how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez are positioned within Canadian R&B’s history, I then examine how all three stars branded themselves as multiple, yet equally Canadian R&B artists through music lyrics, music videos, social media posts, interviews, and brand partnerships.

## 1.1 Theoretical Background for Examining Classificatory Struggles in Music Genre Categories

To structure my exploration of how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic views of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness,” I employ the analytic framework of discourse analysis. Michel Foucault defined a “discourse” as a set of concepts, ideas, and objects that are grouped subjectively through “rules of formation” (Foucault, 1969/2014, p. 94). Foucault (1969/2014) used discourse theory to critically examine the formation of categories by critically analyzing how ideas are grouped together to serve power interests. In this dissertation, I examine R&B-ness and Canadian-ness as discourses that are enacted by different individuals with varying degrees of power. Discourse theory can be used to help uncover unconscious biases because it challenges categories that appear “familiar” (Foucault, 1969/2014, p. 91) or taken-for-granted groupings in society, often perceived as natural or normal due to their repetitions

(Fuchs, 2014). Discourse analysis can be seen in the definition and the classification of the R&B genre.

For example, U.S. music industry gatekeepers have tended to group Black popular music artists from the U.S.A. into the R&B music genre category for at least a century (Clark, 1999; George, 1982; Keillor, 2006; Khan, 2008; LeBlanc, 2005; Leight, 2019a; K. Miller, 2010; Neal, 1999; Sacks, 1993; Umphred, 2019; Voice, 2014; Weber, 2008; Weisbard, 2014; Wilson, 2015b). In 2010, Frank Ocean hypothesized that his music had been immediately classified as “R&B” because he has a “Black” and a “U.S” identity, rather than for musical-stylistic reasons:

Maybe because I’m black...Because R&B is largely black music...any guy that’s in his 20s especially coming out and singing anything near that field of things automatically gets called that...in America, it’s the first thing that comes to mind. If you’re a singer and you’re black[,] you’re an R&B artist. Period. (as quoted in Bradshaw, 2011)

Discourse theory can help me to critically examine the pattern of grouping Black U.S. identities in “R&B” based on ideologies of race and nationality. Eric Weisbard (2014) argued that, like Frank Ocean, the Isley Brothers, a band of Black U.S. artists, were immediately classified as R&B due to their racial and national identities. Weisbard (2014) argued that although the Isley Brothers wished to participate in rock music, music industry gatekeepers classified the group’s music in the “R&B format, [which was] black music...defined by majority black audiences” (p. 32), rather than marketing their music to “white rock audience[s]” (p. 30). Band member O’Kelly Isley stated that it was their skin colour, not the sonic markers of their music, which music gatekeepers used to define their musical genre and limit their access to the rock market: “I don’t think we would have any problem crossing over if the color of the skin was different. It’s not the color of the music” (Weisbard, 2014, p. 73).

Deborah Van den Hoonaard (2012) stated that “often, prevailing discourses are so deeply rooted in our understanding of our social world that we do not question where they originated or who controls them” (p. 141) and argued that discourse theory could be used to assess how power flows in the creation and application of classificatory systems. For example, when Black U.S. artist Tyler, The Creator won the GRAMMY Award for Best

Rap Album in 2020, Tyler, The Creator argued that music industry gatekeepers weaponized music genre categories in a racist fashion to overlook the innovations of his music:

It sucks that whenever we—and I mean guys that look like me—do anything that’s genre-bending or that’s anything they always put [us] in a rap or urban category. I don’t like that ‘urban’ word—it’s just a politically correct way to say the n-word to me. (Recording Academy / Grammys, 2020)

Following Foucault’s (1969/2014) concept of social rules, which examines how discourses group ideas, I argue that ideas of race and nationality are the social rules that govern the discourses of R&B. I further argue that ideas of race and nationality are mediated through “codes” like skin colour. I put Foucault’s (1969/2014) “social rules” in dialogue with Erving Goffman’s (1974) idea of a “code” as a “device which informs and patterns all events that fall within the boundaries of its application” (p. 7-8), to suggest that social rules govern discourses. Social rules are, in turn, governed by codes. Eric Weisbard (2014) explored the relationship between music genres, rules, and codes when he stated that “music genres have rules [and rules are] socially constructed and accepted codes of form, meaning, and behavior” (p. 10).

Although these are social constructions, Simon Frith (1996) argued that such codes, like “how musicians look[,]...[affect] how at first we hear them” (p. 219). These social codes hold power in society since they are “shared understandings” (p. 109) between audiences, artists, and music industry gatekeepers. These shared understandings are commonly understood in society, giving them power in shaping classifications of music genre categories. People in positions of power have grouped these constructs to create social rules that govern society in ways that appear natural or neutral through repetition. Discourse theory works to uncover biases by examining how ideas are grouped into categories to create a particular view supporting a particular set of power relations.

Such covert racial coding of genres came to light in 2019. Elias Leight (2019a) contended that the song “Old Town Road” by Black U.S. artist Lil Nas X (2019) was removed from Billboard’s Hot Country Charts and instead included in Billboard’s Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart because of Lil Nas X’s Black racial identity:

Expelling Lil Nas X's single from Hot Country Songs points to a complicated racial dynamic. The music industry still relies heavily on old-fashioned definitions of genre, which have always mapped on race — Billboard's R&B chart...was originally titled "race music" (Leight, 2019a)

Al Horner (2019) agreed that the prejudices of Billboard personnel limited Lil Nas X and his music to the R&B music genre because "R&B" has been traditionally associated with "Black" identities: "black artists can become megastars...but to do so means staying within the confines of historically black modes of music." To refute these accusations, a representative at Billboard magazine justified their decision to remove the song "Old Town Road" from the Country music chart by claiming its "musical composition...does not embrace enough elements of today's country music" (Leight, 2019a). Yet, hundreds of people posted their comments online about the "country-ness" of the track (France, 2019).

Moreover, white U.S. country singer Billy Ray Cyrus (2019), who appeared on the remixed track, identified many country music signifiers in the song. He stated:

it was so obvious to me after hearing the song just one time. I was thinking, what's not country about it? What's the rudimentary element of a country and western song?...it's honest, humble, and has an infectious hook, and a banjo.

Again, this is not a musicological study, but I use a discursive analytic framework to argue that the racialized (and national) identity of the musical artist and not the sonic signifiers of the music itself are at play in debates around "R&B." In 2013, Teofilo Killip (2013) wrote an article in Complex that mentioned hegemonic archetypes of Black rappers and white country singers in which he stated, "country music...[is] what some people classify as 'white people music.' But, like most stereotypes, that simply isn't true...music really has no boundaries...there's a bit of cognitive dissonance when you hear the words 'black country singer.'" I argue that there is more than "a bit of cognitive dissonance" when you hear the words "white Canadian R&B artist."

Canadian R&B artist Shawn Desman, who is of Portuguese and Italian descent, stated that in the early 2000s people usually assumed that he was Black because of his participation in R&B music (Extra Gravy, 2022). Desman noted that this assumption continues in 2022 (Extra Gravy, 2022). Killip (2013) discussed how racial divides in

music genre categories have framed Black and white artists as inauthentic participants in some music genres—like Black country artists and white R&B artists. However, Killip (2013) also argued that some artists have successfully challenged these racist archetypes: “[white] guys like Eminem and Mac Miller have proven that white dudes can hold their own in hip-hop [and]...there are plenty [of white men who] are also holding it down in the world of R&B.”

White Canadian Justin Bieber has created music that he classified as R&B but has been excluded from the music genre category based largely on his white racialized and Canadian nationalized identity. In 2020, when the Grammys classified Bieber’s *Changes* album in the pop category, Bieber (2020c) protested that his album was R&B and not pop:

To the Grammys[,] I am flattered to be acknowledged and appreciated for my artistry. I am very meticulous and intentional about my music. With that being said, I set out to make an R&B album. ‘Changes’ was and is an R&B album. It is not being acknowledged as an R&B album, which is very strange to me. I grew up admiring R&B music and wished to make a project that would embody that sound. For this not to be put into that category feels weird, considering from the chords to the melodies to the vocal style, all the way down to the hip-hop drums that were chosen, it is undeniably, unmistakably an R&B album! To be clear[,] I absolutely love Pop music[,] it just wasn’t what I set out to make this time around.

Asserting that *Changes* has the “sound” of R&B, Bieber argued that the Grammys did not classify the album based on its sonic structure. The Canadian JUNO Awards also classified Bieber’s album *Changes* as pop in 2021, alongside other nominees who were also racially white Canadian artists<sup>3</sup>.

Long before Bieber, white Canadian R&B artist Remy Shand was also challenged for his participation in R&B music. Billboard expressed disbelief in 2002 that Canadians could produce R&B music: “Canada is known for many things, but R&B music isn’t one of them. To that end, when listeners hear [white Canadian artist] Remy Shand...they might be taken aback. He brings his soulful sound to the U.S.” The article highlighted the

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<sup>3</sup> Other nominees included Ryland James for album *Ryland James*, Johnny Orlando for album *It's Never Really Over*, JP Saxe for album *Hold It Together*, and Lennon Stella for album *Three. Two. One*.

hegemonic belief that a white Canadian artist could not have a “soulful” sound nor make a meaningful contribution to R&B. While Bieber’s and Shand’s whiteness complicated their participation in R&B, on the other hand Drake has claimed that his Blackness pushed his music out of pop and into rap.

In 2017, Drake challenged the Grammys for misclassifying his song “Hotline Bling” as rap instead of pop, based on his racialized identity and the racial underpinnings of the music industry’s genre categories:

I have quite an eclectic makeup, I am mixed, I am Jewish but yah I feel like, at the end of the day, I’ll tell you when it comes to...everything else, I’m black...I am referred to as a black artist...I’m apparently a rapper, even though Hotline Bling is not a rap song, the only category that they can manage to fit me in is in a rap category...maybe because I’ve rapped in the past or because I’m black...I love the rap world and the rap community, but...I write pop songs...but I never get any credit for that...almost like [the Grammy’s] were trying to purposely alienate me by making me win the rap [award]. (DJ Semtex, 2017)

Drake criticized the Grammys for limiting his music to the Black rap genre category based on his racialized identity, rather than classifying his music as “pop.” When Drake argued that he is “alienate[d],” he inadvertently echoed Karl Miller’s (2010) argument that Black and white segregation in the music charts “stemmed from the fear of alienating consumers in the Jim Crow South” (p. 220). Miller (2010) argued that following Black and white racial segregation in public life, Black artists were marketed to Black audiences and white artists were marketed to white audiences. Miller (2010) explained that “race record artists [were understood as] [B]lack [and old-time] artists [were understood as] white southerners” (p. 232) in the U.S.A. to musically underline a Black and white racial divide in different music genre categories. Drake likewise suggested that the Grammys perpetuated harmful stereotypes about identity groups by limiting his music to rap and excluding him from the pop category, precisely because traditional music genre classificatory processes were built on Black and white racial divides.

Following Karl Miller’s (2010) argument regarding Black and white racial divides in music genre categories, Black Canadian artist Fefe Dobson described that when she created rock music “people questioned the sound of [her] music [based on her] image...A little black girl, with curly ponytail, [and] Converse shoes, makes no sense [to

them]...just based on [her] colour” (Trend Hunter, 2013). White Canadian artist Jay Levine worked with Dobson and said, “at the time people expected her to be an R&B artist, but when we [played] around with rock, she totally shined” (Newman-Bremang, 2021). Although Dobson wished to participate in multiple music genre categories (The Brandon Gomez Show, 2020), music labels only offered her record deals to perform R&B/pop styles (Newman-Bremang, 2021) based on their interpretations of the music she “should” produce. Amanda Petrusich (2021), Sheila Whiteley (1997) and Matthew Morrison (2019) examined how codes outside of a song, like an artist’s appearance, work in combination with other codes like sound, music, or instruments, to create social rules that determine the genre classification of their music. Fefe’s Blackness boxed her into performing “R&B” and not the “rock” music traditionally associated with white artists.

Guthrie Ramsey (2003) has also argued that music genre categories in the U.S.A. are organized to sell different styles of music to different racialized groups. I bring Ramsey’s (2003) argument into dialogue with Brian Egan’s (2014) statement that race has become “defined as a marker of human worth or value, with lighter skin tones indicating human beings with superior moral, social, and intellectual qualities than darker skin tones” (p. 213) to suggest that R&B music—inclusive of its cultural practices, fashions, and behaviours—has been associated with qualities of lesser value than its whiter counterparts of country, folk, and pop music. Matthew Morrison’s (2019) theory of “Blacksound” expanded on the idea that “notions of racial authenticity were fabricated through aesthetics” (p. 783) to highlight how artists have been limited historically by segregated Black and white music genre categories, which have also contributed to economic disparities between artists in race-based music genre categories. In Canada, white artists and their cultural practices, fashions, and behaviours in “rock” and “folk” music have long dominated Canadian mainstream media and contributed to a hegemonically white Canadian rock and folk nation. The on-going classification of artists through music genre categories has helped naturalized alignments of an artist’s skin colour and the classification of their music.

Discourse theory can be used to identify how the organization of music genres through racialized identities has been an ongoing issue in popular culture for decades, if not

centuries. In 1954, Billboard advocated for the removal of the category “race music” and issued the following statement: “[in] June, 1949 ... Billboard... dropped the use of ‘race’ and ‘sepia’ then universally used...and initiated the term ‘rhythm and blues.’ It appealed to the industry to follow suit and erase its former distasteful terms and thereby eliminate their restrictive connotations” (p. 13). Decades later, Republic Records (2020) likewise advocated for the removal of the word “urban” from the music industry lexicon by making the following post on Instagram: “Effective immediately, Republic Records will remove ‘URBAN’ from our verbiage in describing departments, employee titles and music genres #WeUseOurVoices. We encourage the rest of the music industry to follow suit...to...not adhere to the outdated structures of the past.” Both gatekeepers attempted to reform their use of racially charged music genre categories: Republic Records (2020) critiqued this organization of music as using “outdated structures of the past,” and Billboard (1954) argued that “race” and “sepia” are “distasteful terms...[that have] restrictive connotations” (p. 13). Ironically, Billboard congratulated itself for dropping the use of “race,” yet, thirty-two years later, in 1986, it renamed the chart Black Singles and then went back to R&B in 1990. Yet, in the 46 years between Billboard’s and Republic Records’ proclamations, music industry gatekeepers in Canada and in the U.S.A. continued to use such music genre categories with problematic racial ideologies. The continued racialization of music genre categories has resulted in classificatory struggles in grouping white Justin Bieber, biracial Black and white Drake, and Latina Jessie Reyez in “R&B.”

In this dissertation, discourse analysis enabled me to critically examine power relations in classification systems including how the category “R&B” has been weaponized by some music industry executives to box in Black identities and exclude Canadians. I also explore how the category of “Canadian” has been employed by government and media policies to exclude non-white identities from the cultural imaginary of Canada. In sum, I examined how categories of race and nationality intersected with ideas of music genre categories to shape the marketing strategies and the perceptions of Bieber, Drake, and Reyez as Canadian R&B artists.



## 1.2 Ideas of Blackness and Canadian-ness in R&B

In my examination of how Bieber, Drake, and Ryeze each reinforce, complicate, and/or challenge hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness, I found that much of Canadian R&B continues to remain forgotten or underrepresented in the academic literature and popular culture texts. For example, Rupert Harvey was a member of the Canadian R&B group, Crack of Dawn, which he described as “the first all-Black Canadian R&B band to sign with a major U.S. label in 1975. Rupert Harvey argued in 2018 that Canadian institutions still fail to give his band recognition for their contributions to Canadian history and music:

with the history that Crack of Dawn adds to this country...I think that [we’re] an essential part of the tapestry of music here, to this day... no one came to us and wanted to know the history of our band...it’s part [of Canadian history]...they totally ignore us...they say there’s no interest...in the first R&B band [and] Black group to be signed to a major label in the history of the country. (NWC, 2018)

Canadian R&B artists contributed to the development of Canadian culture, but they have long been ignored, overlooked, and excluded in Canadian music history.

Similarly, DJ and Toronto music journalist Josephine Cruz (2017) stated that Canada’s “foundations of rhythm and blues...have been laid over a rich and often overlooked history that spans more than half a century” but in Canada “R&B music...never got the attention it deserved.” In addition to U.S. artists dominating Canadian R&B talent, Cruz says “ironically, Canada didn’t have any mainstream urban radio stations during the years which this medium was the primary means of promotion for artists” and there was a long struggle for Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists to gain support from music industry gatekeepers to build their careers in Canada. Billboard’s Canadian bureau chief Larry LeBlanc stated that although “Toronto was a strong R&B town...in the 50s, 60s and early 70s...that scene remained separate from the Canadian recording industry” (as quoted in Patrick, 2006) which failed to support racially diverse Canadian R&B artists. Instead, Canadian music industry gatekeepers privileged white rock and folk artists which ultimately led to views of Canada as an exclusively rock and folk nation.

Our missing recordings of Canadian R&B history are necessary for uncovering important contributors to Canadian culture and reflecting on the power enacted by Canadian music

industry executives, media professionals, and academics to craft a Canadian identity that excluded racialized identities. In a country that has long failed to accept, understand, and institutionalize R&B music as part of Canada, Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez built on the works of their predecessors, used innovative approaches to R&B, and optimized both online and traditional broadcast media to demand and achieve representation in Canadian popular culture, as racially diverse Canadian R&B artists.

In the next sections, I briefly discuss how R&B became associated with Black identities, how Canadian-ness became associated with white identities, and how racially diverse Canadian R&B artists began mixing pop into their music to push their audibility and visibility into mainstream society. This will then enable me to provisionally define “contemporary Canadian R&B,” the classification I use to group my case studies of Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, as I seek to understand how these artists each reinforce, complicate, and/or challenge hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness and build on the work of their predecessors. This discussion will frame the rest of this dissertation that analyses the construction of hegemonic beliefs that “Canadians” are exclusively white and create folk and rock music, and that “R&B” is a cultural practice created exclusively by people with Black and U.S. identities.

### 1.2.1 Building Blackness into R&B

White Justin Bieber, biracial Black and white Drake, and Latina Jessie Reyez complicate traditional ideologies of R&B as a Black cultural practice in a number of ways. A more thoroughgoing analysis of the discourse of R&B will be presented in Chapter 2, but I provide an introductory account here to frame how the genre category of R&B became associated with Black racial identities. Beginning in 1949, early definitions of “R&B” were popularized by RCA Victor, a major record company in the U.S.A., through colour-coded records. RCA introduced the 7-inch, 45-rpm record design in 1949 (The Orchard Music, 1949/2009) and used the term “blues and rhythm” for a “Cerise [coloured] record” that featured primarily Black artists. Popular U.S. music magazine Billboard also helped popularize the term Rhythm & Blues and its association with people with Black U.S. identities that same year. Journalists and scholars (Khan, 2008; Sacks, 1993; Weber,

2008; Voice, 2014) have credited Jerry Wexler, a Billboard magazine writer, with creating the term Rhythm & Blues.

In 1982, Nelson George wrote an article in Billboard magazine that chronicled the historical re-brandings of the Rhythm & Blues chart. George (1982) stated that the chart was first called “The Harlem Hit Parade” (1944) and was “symbolic of a tendency during that period to associate anything black with that then-vital Manhattan community” (George, 1982, p. 10). George argued that the chart united people with Black identities and created a space for them to celebrate Black U.S. lifestyles in popular culture. The chart was then renamed in 1947 to “race records,” which were intended for “black audience[s]” (George, 1982, p. 10), and “in 1949 Billboard substituted race [records] for Rhythm & Blues...[to represent the] 15 best-selling black records” (George, 1982, p. 10) in the U.S.A. George further stated that Rhythm & Blues had been “immediately identif[ied]...with black music, while not being said” (p. 43). The term R&B, previously called race music, then became “Black Singles” in 1982 before switching back to the classification of “R&B” in 1990, following the publication of George’s article. This is a clear demonstration of the connection between conceptualizations of R&B and Blackness and U.S. identities and the classification of R&B.

In Canada, the term “R&B” was adopted by Canadian music producers who heavily relied on U.S. music content and U.S. music classifications. In a 2017 lecture, music scholar Alan Cross argued that for a long time, Canada was neither a “music society [nor] a music producing country” because Canada lacked centralized music studios, venues, promoters, producers, and managers (Ross, 2018). Articulations of Black identities in hegemonic conceptions of R&B have contributed to classificatory struggles of racially diverse identities, Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez in “R&B” music.

### 1.2.2 Constructing Musical Whiteness in Canada

Hegemonic constructions of Canadian musical artists as exclusively white and creators of “rock” and “folk” music have complicated the perceived authenticity of Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s public personalities as “Canadian” and “R&B.” Here I briefly point to how the formation of Canada’s music industry contributed to the hegemonic beliefs of

Canada as a white rock and folk nation, but this will be further explored in Chapter 2. It is telling that, in 1964 Walter Grealis and Stan Klees neglected to include R&B music when they launched the first Canadian national publication of music charts, RPM Magazine (RPM), to chronicle Canadian popular music. As a term, “RPM” stands for revolutions per minute, which measures the speed at which phonographs can be played. In the context of the magazine, it also stood for “Records, Promotion, Music” (Library and Archives Canada, 2015). Grealis and Klees created RPM in 1964 to establish “a star system for Canada” (Library and Archives Canada, 2015) and to offer awards to the top songs and artists in Canada across various genres. However, Grealis and Klees failed to include any “Black” coded music, including blues, soul, funk, jazz, or R&B, in the awards<sup>4</sup> (Cryer, 2009). The following year, in 1965, the magazine expanded its awards to include 11 more categories, and yet again they excluded R&B from the sounds and images they understood to represent Canada (Library and Archives Canada, 2015).

Even when the RPM magazine evolved into a nationally televised awards ceremony in 1970 called The Gold Leaf Awards, it continued to exclude R&B in the awards and performances<sup>5</sup>. In 1975, the show was rebranded as The JUNO Awards (JUNOS) and became the most prominent nationally broadcast award show for Canadian musical talent, but again it failed to include an R&B award. Although national media attempted to unify the sounds of Canada, it did so while excluding R&B music. It was not until 1985 that the JUNOS created its first R&B/Soul award (Lowers, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> RPM’s first publication presented awards in the following categories: Top Male Vocalist, Top Female Vocalist, Most Promising Male Vocalist, Most Promising Female Vocalist, Top Vocal Instrumental Group, Top Female Vocal Group, Top Instrumental Group, Top Folk Group, Top Country Male Singer, Top Country Female Singer, Industry Man Of The Year (Krewen, n.d.)

<sup>5</sup> The Gold Leaf Awards presented awards in the following categories: Top Country Female Artist, Top country Instrumental Vocal Group, Top Country Male Artist, Top Female Vocalist, Top Vocal Instrumental Group, Top Male Vocalist, Top Folksinger (or Group), Best Produced Single, Top Canadian Content Company, Top Record Company in Promotional Activities, Top Record Company, Special RPM Radio Award For Community Activities, Canadian Industry Music Industry Man of the Year, Best Produced MOR Album (Junos, n.d.)

Liberty Silver, a Black Canadian woman, received the first R&B/Soul JUNO award, but it was presented during an untelevised portion of the show. The JUNOS historically presented R&B, rap, and hip-hop awards during the untelevised parts of the show, thereby minimizing the visibility of Canadian artists grouped into those categories. Liberty Silver won the award with her self-financed album and claimed to have gotten little support from Canadian music industry labels. Silver said she was required to pay “three hundred and fifty dollars” to have physical ownership of the award (as quoted in Boshart, 2021). Thus, the Canadian music industry continually created financial barriers for artists, both large and small, in R&B.

Ryan Patrick (2006) highlighted a few reasons why Canadian R&B artists remained unsupported: “the struggles faced by a domestic [Canadian] R&B/soul scene remain an intricate mix of fear, prejudice and conservatism twinned with an inferiority complex when held up against American counterparts.” In other words, Canadian music industry gatekeepers feared disrupting hegemonic views of Canadians as exclusively white and of R&B as an exclusively Black U.S. cultural practice.

Many Canadians were also racist against Black people and were prejudiced against R&B music. Canadian music gatekeepers continued to fill Canadian airways with music created by U.S. artists because they had more confidence in the marketability of U.S. music. Salome Bey is known as “Canada’s first lady of the blues.” In an interview with CBC in 1978, Bey echoed Patrick’s argument that in Toronto, people “are a little conservative...that’s their style” (C. Porter, 2020). Canada’s music industry infrastructure remained underdeveloped compared to the larger and richer U.S. music industry so successful U.S. records were presumed to be likely to be successful in Canada. Rupert Harvey from Canadian R&B pioneers Crack of Dawn noted that “90%” of R&B and soul performers “in nightclubs [on]...the Toronto strip at any given night [in the 1970s and 1980s]...were American” (NWC, 2018), suggesting Canadian music industry gatekeepers were filling the market with U.S. artists rather than home-grown talent. According to Ashante Infantry (2012), “Crack of Dawn remains a rare Canadian R&B band in terms of recognition and airplay” because Canadian R&B bands remained on the periphery of mainstream Canadian society. Therefore, scholarly attention is required in exploring the

development of the Canadian R&B scene. Canadian R&B long lacked infrastructural support. Chapter 2 will provide an analysis of how Canadian R&B artists battled against Canadian music industry gatekeepers to gain visibility and audibility in Canadian society. These efforts would then help pave the way for artists like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez to achieve prominent positions in Canadian mainstream media. Canadian artists who came before Bieber, Drake, and Reyez faced the fact that there was no commercial Canadian radio station dedicated to hip-hop or R&B music during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Likewise, the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, established in 1978 “to acknowledge artists that have made an outstanding contribution to the international recognition of Canadian music,” waited 40 years to celebrate its first Black Canadian woman, Deborah Cox, in 2022 (The Juno Awards, 2022). Deborah Cox, a second-generation Afro-Guyanese artist known as “Canada’s Queen of R&B” (Clark, 1999), won the JUNOS for Best R&B/Soul Recording of the Year in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2009. During her career, she argued that Canadian media represented neither people with Black identities nor R&B music:

[it was] very racist in the [Canadian music] industry...there just weren’t that many [Black artists] to see any kind of diversity in the style of music...we didn’t even have a Juno category [for R&B]...I had to find my own way of finding inspiration. Thankfully my parents really exposed me to a lot of different things and showed me that that’s not the norm. (as quoted in Saxberg, 2000)

The exclusionary “norm” was that Canadians created exclusively rock, folk, and pop music. Without representation, it was difficult for a Black Canadian artist like Deborah Cox to envision a career in R&B music or in Canadian music more generally. As a result, she moved to the U.S.A. to establish a successful career in R&B. After signing with a U.S. record label, she was celebrated by Canadian media gatekeepers.

Jully Black, a second-generation Afro-Jamaican artist, labelled “Canada’s Queen of R&B Soul” also stated that she struggled to be heard and seen in Canada because in the early 2000s, “there weren’t as many outlets to service [and play Canadian R&B] music” (Maxwell, 2018). Black Canadians and racially diverse Canadian R&B artists lacked representation in Canadian mainstream media. As a result, Canadian R&B music was long boxed in and lacked opportunities to grow. Like Deborah Cox, Jully Black also

moved to the U.S.A. and signed with a U.S. record label. They both only gained recognition in Canada after establishing success in the U.S. music industry.

In Chapter 2, I further examine how relationships between U.S. and Canadian hip-hop and R&B music genre worlds helped popularize Canadian R&B music. In Chapter 3, I assess how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez benefitted from the efforts of generations of artists that came before them, to gain popularity as Canadian artists and to create genre blurring R&B music.

### 1.2.3 The Development and Sound of the Canadian R&B Music Mix

Canadian artists that were pushed to the periphery of society attempted to popularize forms of Canadian R&B that mixed traditionally separated genre styles, leading to distinctive styles of Canadian R&B music as a mixture of hip-hop, pop, and R&B. Music journalist Kevin Ritchie (2017) argued in the 1980s and 1990s a distinctly Canadian rap style “mix[ed] hip-hop and dancehall[, which] helped set Canadian rap apart from the New York scene.” Additionally, Canadian R&B artist Tamia explained that in the 1990s, “R&B and hip-hop artists were collaborating, and that was something new and fresh” (Leonie, 2019). Today, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez continue to blend pop, hip-hop, and R&B in their performances. In this section, I survey a selection of Canadian artists who, prior to and coeval with Drake, Bieber and Reyez, have embraced and hybridized R&B to help contextualize my approach to the Canadian R&B mix.

In Jon Pareles’ article in The New York Times (2020) titled “Jessie Reyez is yelling and loving at the same time,” Pareles argued that Reyez blended R&B with other music genre styles. Alex Narváez (2022) also argues that Reyez represents her “Latin heritage” in her contemporary interpretations of R&B music. In an LA Times article by Mikael Wood titled “With ‘Believe,’ Justin Bieber’s at top of his vocal game” (2012), Wood addressed the contradictions of Bieber’s white racial identity in R&B by stating that his performances are “rooted in...blue-eyed R&B” and further argues that Bieber mixes “dance-music” and other musical genres with “R&B” traditionally associated with exclusively Black identities. David Renshaw’s Fader article (2020) titled “How Drake

finessed rap history and made singing the norm,” addressed how Drake has merged different genre styles of “hip-hop, pop, and R&B.” Drake himself argues that he “sings” and “raps” and that he “loves melody” and always tries “to blur the lines” between the two (CBC News: The National, 2013).

Thus, I do not entirely agree with David Renshaw’s (2020) statement that “[a] byproduct of Drake’s path to the top of the rap world has been the blurring of the lines between hip-hop, pop, and R&B,” because rather than genre-blurring being a “byproduct” of his journey, I argue that genre-blurring was paramount to Drake’s success. I further disagree with Renshaw’s (2020) statement that “pop stars like Justin Bieber...[glean] [*sic*] both style and cadence from the hip-hop world” because I have not labeled Bieber as primarily pop, but have instead assessed his approach to R&B as a mixture of traditional R&B, hip-hop, and pop music. Although this is not a musicological study, I argue that Reyez, Bieber, and Drake all represent a fairly eclectic style of “R&B” that mixes pop, hip-hop, and R&B music, as style developed through the genre blurring practices of many generations of Canadian (and U.S.) artists before them.

Drake (2019a) credited U.S. artists for inspiring his blended music style: “50 Cent. ‘21 Questions’ will probably be my most inspiring example of a guy who’s not supposed to be singing, [singing] [and Ye is] known for his bars.” Cassandra Chaney and Krista Mincey’s (2014) academic study titled “Typologies of Black Male Sensitivity in R&B and Hip Hop” differentiated R&B and hip-hop as two separate genres based on stylistic features of singing and rapping. They stated that:

Hip Hop also evolved as a means of expression for many social ills taking place within the Black community using rhyming and rapping lyrics in contrast to R&B lyrics which traditionally are sung. While R&B is a softer music genre that lends itself to the free expression of feelings, Hip Hop is a genre more recently known for its misogynistic views toward Black women as sexual objects. (p. 2)

However, they also identify Chris Brown as one artist who has collapsed these two music genre categories by representing both “R&B” and “Hip Hop” styles in his song “Cry No More” (2009) (Chaney & Mincey, 2014, p. 148). Although U.S. artists had also blurred R&B and pop, Canadian interpretations of R&B remained distinctive because music is a



reflection of the artist's background and individual experiences. The Canadians that are the focus of this study particularly foreground their national formations.

An interview with Canadian hip-hop group Dream Warriors demonstrated how the band members' first- and second-generation immigrant identities have offered them unique perspectives that have in turn shaped how they create music and their public personalities as Canadian hip-hop artists. The band members self-identify as Canadian as well as the following identities: Capital Q (Frank Allert) "from Trinidad," King Lou (Louis Robinson) "from Jamaica," and DJ Luv (Phillip Gayle) "from Jamaica," and Spek (Hussain Yoosuf) who stated,

My parents are from Sri Lanka, we all have diverse backgrounds...our backgrounds play an important role in the way we live, the way we think, the way we write and our whole personality...and our music is a reflection of our personalities...those backgrounds go way farther than just living in Canada. They're deep rooted and that's why our music is a reflection of that...our culture is way stronger than any 5 or 19 years in Canada. (5<sup>th</sup> Element, 2017)

As Spek notes, "music is a reflection" of a musical artist's cultural background. Many first- and- second-generation Canadian artists continued to contribute their own interpretations of the hybridized Canadian R&B and hip-hop genre mix by applying their unique cultural influences.

This is also true of Belly, a rapper, songwriter, and record producer, who was born in Jenin, Balshe but moved to Canada at the age of 7 (International Rescue Committee, 2021). While he stated, "My past is in my music" (Belly as quoted in International Rescue Committee, 2021) to argue that his Palestinian culture influenced his approach to rap. Belly reinforced the idea that Canadian culture and Canadian music is diverse in saying that "if you're Canadian you know that we're all colours so it's not like you're only Canadian if you're this colour or that colour, nah we all Canadian and you know what I love about Canada?...[We] embrace multiculturalism" (Power 106 Los Angeles, 2017). Hence, Canadian rap, hip-hop, and R&B honestly reflected Canada's diversity.

Just as Helienne Lindvall (2012) argued that multiculturalism in London, UK, contributed to London's unique "creati[on] [of] new genres and hybrids of music" (2012), I argue Canadian artists participate in R&B through a mixture of traditionally

separated music genre styles that reflect the multicultural identities of many artists who worked together in the periphery of mainstream society to produce music not traditionally supported by Canadian music industry gatekeepers. Bieber, Drake, and Ryeze continue to articulate Canadian multiculturalism by each articulating different, yet Canadian, lifestyles in interviews, music videos, and through social media posts.

According to Canadian Music Blog, “the future of Canadian music” can be heard in Kristina Maria’s French and English song “Co-Pilot” (2012). It features “Corneille who was born in Germany to Rwandan parents and holds a Canadian passport.” The blog considers the track significant because “The ethnic diversity shown in this video is wonderful and a true reflection of the real Canada” (Canadian Music Blog, 2012). Corneille is described by music writer Scott Frampton (n.d.) as an “Afropop-influenced R&B” artist with a voice described as having “a satiny sheen—Sam Cooke by way of Seal.” Thus, his collaboration with Maria exemplified this pop infused R&B style of music that also mixes Canadian diverse sounds and ethnicities. This is explicitly attributed to the “experiences” of the artist: when Corneille moved to Montreal in 1997, he felt that he had found “home” when, at music festivals, he experienced hybridizations of sounds and cultures: “during festival season, Montreal is just breathing cultural exchange...So many cultures meet [and] seem to be not only co-existing harmoniously but also in a complementary way” (Cabrera, 2021). Therefore, multiculturalism has contributed to the construction of a distinctly Canadian R&B music.

By blending hip-hop and R&B with pop, Canadian R&B artists gained more opportunities to garner visibility and audibility in Canadian mainstream media. Will Straw (2020) argued that successful Canadian artists, particularly those with pop music styles, had become prominent figures in Canadian media:

with Canadian media required to air designated quotas of Canadian content, and with a shortage of performers of high visibility to fulfil these quotas, those who attain a certain level of celebrity find themselves and their music endlessly recycled on radio and television. This works for performers of all genres, but we might speculate that it works particularly well for those performing emotive sorts of pop music which cross radio formats. (p. 141)

Canadian R&B artists finally gained more visibility in mainstream media when they mixed traditionally accepted pop music into their R&B performances.

In the 2000s, R&B music in Canada began incorporating more pop sounds, and this pushed it further into mainstream media, creating prominence for new alignments of traditionally coded Black R&B and hip-hop music, mixed with white coded pop. In 2005, Larry LeBlanc's Billboard article titled "Newcomers Brown, Black Add Urban Appeal To The Great White North" described how Canada's diverse demographic was being reflected in Canadian R&B music, and many Canadian R&B artists strategically began incorporating pop music into their R&B styles to push their music into popular culture.

Shawn Desman, who was also part of this shift in R&B/ pop music, comments on these new mixes:

from 2000 on the shift in music started happening. Backstreet Boys and everything was kind of phasing [out]. Hip-Hop and R&B [was] making a big move [into popular music]...music [was] changing...[and soon realized that when his 'Out' was ready to be released it didn't]...really [fit the new R&B pop style]. [He created new songs for the album that] lean[ed] a little more urban, a little more R&B [and pop], cuz you noticed everybody did it, NSYNC did it with 'Girlfriend.' Britney did it with 'Slave.' Christina did it with 'Dirty.' Yeah everybody who was like super pop is now leaning urban...the vibe and the intention was always for me to come out as a[n] edgy pop artist but then it was like okay you're gona be the edgy white pop R&B artist who is dancing, wearing the baggy clothes, and the diamond chain because there is nobody here...was doing that here. (Extra Gravy, 2022)

Desman highlighted the wide-scale shift of pop-infused R&B when he states that pop was "lean[ing] a little more urban, a little more R&B." The sonic blending and the blending of traditionally segregated styles, dancing, fashion, and behaviours in "white" pop and "racialized" R&B resulted in a contemporary approach to traditional R&B music.

In terms of this "leaning urban," second-generation Portuguese-Canadian R&B artist Nelly Furtado noted this generational shift at the outset of her career: "I'm big into urban [and]...early 90s kind of R&B. I think my whole generation is though. I'm 22 and we're all kind of bred on that stuff" (steelygray, 2022). Furtado later said, "my music reflects my generation...because...it's the whole new hip-hop generation coming up...kids today will listen to like absolutely every [type] of pop CD" (NellyFurtado Argentina, 2013).

She conflates hip-hop and pop to suggest that the styles of R&B, hip-hop, and pop are merging. Furtado says traditional music genre categories fail to accurately classify her blended pop and R&B style of music:

I think 'Turn Off The Light' is moving closer to...this brand of pop that you can't really put your finger on as much and you get my vibe from it but it's still really accessible at the same time...the radio formats in America...there is modern rock, which used to be alternative radio five years ago, which I think where I would have gone five years ago, but now it's just basically really heavy, and if it's not that it's pop radio, and if it's not that it's urban radio so pop radio you know contemporary hit radio, it's like gotta have that cross-over appeal. (Nelly Furtado Argentina, 2013)

When Furtado argued that music requires a “cross-over appeal” she is suggesting that the traditional music genre categories are becoming outdated and fail to adequately classify her music. When she argues that her music is “a new brand of pop,” I interpret this to mean that her music is not necessarily a “cross-over” from hip-hop and R&B to pop music because it is in and of itself a hybridized mixture of various sounds, styles, and cultural influences.

Nelly Furtado's early work anticipates the kind of multicultural mix practiced by Drake, Bieber and Reyez. She extensively described how her Canadian experiences contributed to her musical style:

[I] was [part of] a small hip-hop scene in Victoria...[with] MCs, DJs...choreographed [dancing and] graffiti...my walls plastered of Salt-n-Peppa [,] LL Cool J [,] and Ice-T [,] Crisscross...Mary J, Boys To Men [, and] Pharcyde...I listened to a lot of Indie West Coast hip-hop...[and when I moved to Toronto I became influenced by] English trip-hop...Portishead [and] Tricky...[and I went by] Nel Star [which was] like my alias...the street kid...little urban kid...[I was a] MC...freestyling...from there I started doing electric stuff...[I] recently discover[ed] Brazilian music which pretty much inspired the record I was like let's make a pop record but I want to use my Portuguese heritage[,] incorporate Brazilian sounds...the record is international hip-hop record because...it's a pop record but it has roots to it...I'm a Portuguese Canadian girl, international girl...I'm a child of all these urban influences...[the album is] representative of my generation really of what we're listening to what we grew up listening to...it's the sound of the product of 90s influences...it's kind of like beat poetry...I really relate to like Jack Kerouac and Ginsberg and those beat writers...it doesn't feel like I'm an R&B artist because I just kind of travel and taking cultures and get very inspired by them...my first generation background. My parents [immigrated] to Canada...I speak so much about my Portuguese heritage. I think it's important to talk about your culture because

North America is a multicultural country and it's...time that it's reflected in media and in Hollywood. (vegastiki, 2013)

Furtado's influences spanned different Canadian cities, poetry styles, U.S. and British music, generational experiences as a "90s kid," and her outlook on life as a second-generation immigrant. The introduction of the internet enabled her, and her generation of artists, to access music more easily, which may have contributed to her genre-mixing approach to music and expansive influential sources. The hybrid nature of her inspirations and art highlights the multiple identities and multiple genres Furtado claims to participate in. Her Canadian-ness and R&B-ness therefore become complex classificatory tools to define her globalized influences. When Furtado claimed her music is inspired by her "culture" and "heritage" she seemingly contradicts her argument when she also says she "travel[s]" and "take[s]" from cultural practices. Furtado stating that she is inspired by Brazilian music as a Portuguese-Canadian, also implicitly acknowledges how her ancestors colonized Brazil, thereby further complicating her assertions of authentic participation in these cultural styles and practices. Her statement anticipates the discussion of appropriation in Chapter 2 which evaluates how Canadian artists were challenged for their authenticity in hip-hop and R&B music. In Chapter 2, I also discuss how white Canadian and U.S. artists created covers of Black performers' "race records" and R&B songs and rebranded them "folk" and "rock" music, to gain more money, more fame, and more visibility in ways not offered to the original Black performers. In Chapter 3, I further interrogate Bieber's and Drake's arguments about appropriation and their participation in multiple music genre styles, as racially diverse and Canadian artists.

Questions of hybridity and authenticity are also implicit in the career of Lebanese-Canadian R&B star Massari. Massari has said that he was "in love with pop culture" and he had a "love for Arabic music and reggae music" (Kix Mag, 2014) all of which contributed to his interpretations of and contributions to R&B music. Massari argued that Arabic music and reggae are similar styles: "they are so close it simply is the question of a snare or...removed from a beat... growing up in Lebanon and listening to Arabic music, I felt very close to reggae music, I love the melodies...the vibe" (Kix Mag, 2014). When Massari highlighted the sonic similarities and the emotive similarities he perceives between Arabic music, a cultural language he learned in Lebanon, and reggae, a cultural

practice he experienced in Toronto through many first- and second-generation Jamaican immigrants, he demonstrates how culture can resonate with an individual based on their cross-cultural experiences, interests, and preferences. Additionally, Massari described the extensive cultural influences that shape his interpretations of R&B when he says, “I grew up listening to guys like [Black Jamaican deejay] Super Cat, [white Canadian reggae artist] Snow, and [Black Jamaican artist] Sean Paul...I listened to...R&B records...whether it was [Black U.S. R&B artist] Brian McKnight or [Black U.S. R&B artist] Usher” (Kix Mag, 2014). I will examine in Chapters 3 and 4 how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez all provide their unique interpretations of “R&B” and “Canadian” branded lifestyles in their performances across music and multiple media texts.

Massari addresses the differences between the artist and his public personality brand:

As Massari, I am...able to separate myself from the artist and be able to look at myself as a product and say what do we need to do in order for this product to success for it to become a household name...to differentiate between their personal life and their artist life...you need to be able to understand that you are a business. (Ryad, 2017)

In creating music and strategically branding themselves to meet trending practices of articulating diversity, some may question the artist’s authenticity. Discussing Irish popular musicians, John O’Flynn (2003) examined how a “binary” is perceived between “authenticity and commercialism” and stated that this binary “served to deauthenticate Irish pop acts that incorporated traditional sounds and/or performance practices into their music” (p. 233), whereby “negative judgements of authenticity [sometimes] override the Irishness that may be perceived in the use of traditional musical materials by...popular artists” (p. 234). Building on O’Flynn’s (2003) argument that “it could be said that [“Irish-ness”] has been re-packaged and re-presented in an era of economic-cultural entrepreneurship,” (p. 244), I will address some of the specifics of the “art vs commerce” debate as they contribute to the perception of Bieber’s, Drake’s, Reyez’s authenticity in Chapter 4. Overall, the dissertation is concerned with the complex commodification of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness as Bieber, Drake, and Reyez re-package and re-present these in their performances, in ways that positively increase representations of diverse Canadian identities while also profiting from the commodification of their performances.

### 1.2.4 Contemporary Canadian R&B Artists as Digital Stars

I agree with Jon Caramanica (2019) that Drake's enormous fame helped popularize the style of singing and rapping on a track. However, I disagree with Caramanica's (2019) argument that "[Drake rewrote] the rules of entry for what it meant to be a rapper in the 2010s [and]...reconstitute[d]...the genre's DNA," precisely because Canadian artists before him, like Saukrates, were already practicing the mixture of rapping and singing in the 1990s. Saukrates stated, "[Canada is the] home of the singing MCs...it started with me and K-OS" (CBC Music, 2014). Although the origin of any cultural practice is debatable, especially music, it is clear that many artists before Drake were practicing this hybrid pop, hip-hop, R&B style, but just not yet at Drake's level of success. Drake (2019a) himself implicitly acknowledges this when he says "I think I was probably the one that took it the furthest to go and [make] full-blown R&B songs."

So, some of the factors that enabled Canadian artists like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez to take it further in their particular careers include: their ability to build on the growing acceptance of Canadian artists that practiced this mixture of pop, hip-hop, R&B music style; the opportunity they were afforded to build on the existing networks between U.S. and Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists and music industry executives; their use of social media platforms to exercise digital marketing strategies that would grow their brand visibility, circulate their music, and build relationships with audiences; and the availability of more brand partnerships with companies to expand their visibility across multiple markets outside of music.

The changing media landscape has been key here. Canadian R&B artist Shawn Desman notes that the internet is a resource that makes music more accessible to audiences: "it's so easy...like TikTok, social media, Instagram, Facebook, Spotify, Apple Music...[where] people can hear music" (Extra Gravy, 2022). Another performer, Danny Fernandes, also argues that streaming platforms make music more accessible, and that social media enables artists to conduct their own self-promotional strategies to grow their brand visibility and help circulate their music in popular culture:

I was seventeen...In Canada...I was taking off there [in Canada] but no one knew who I was [in U.S.]...Drake sells records but he sells like digital ones...sells

a...ton of records for sure but I'm saying like it wasn't like that before [there was no] iTunes...apple music...there was no Spotify, it was just like you're buying that shit for 99 cents...so it was a lot harder than it is now, there was no TikTok there was no Instagram...[and that to promote yourself it was just] through the record label, through commercials on tv but yea...ads for [brands]...there was no other way to do it. (Money Buys Happiness, 2021)

Fernandes notes that his career, in part, was limited because of the fewer avenues he had to promote himself prior to the flourishing of the internet and social media platforms.

Building on the concept of a “star” (deCordova, 1990; Dyer, 1991) as a carefully constructed public personality, Eric Harvey (2017) defined a “digital star” as a carefully constructed public personality that has heavily relied on “Internet to maintain her mass popularity” (p. 116) and “[has a] mastery of the malleability of her identity representation on the platformed Internet” (p. 126). Following Eric Harvey’s (2017) definition of the digital star, I argue that Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez are digital stars that have demonstrated a mastery of the internet to break into the music industry, brand their public personalities, and maintain relationships with various audience members—and in doing so, helped define Canadian R&B.

In the 2020s, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez are skilled online marketers exercising digital marketing and contemporary marketing strategies to maintain relevancy in popular culture. [NetLingo.com](#), a website “dedicated to documenting Internet culture and history [including] the lingo, acronyms, catch phrases, [and more],” used Justin Bieber as a prime example of a “digital star” in its definition:

digital stars a.k.a. famechanger, online celebrity. The name for people who have become celebrities due to the online world. Historical perspective: Justin Bieber is perhaps the most well-known digital star and in December 2015,<sup>17</sup> [*sic*] of his songs were listed on [Billboard](#)’s Top 100, breaking the record set by the Beatles, who boasted 14 Top 100 hits back in April, 1964. (Jansen, 2022)

[NetLingo.com](#) identified a digital star as a new form of celebrity that is created through online platforms, including YouTube. In this study, I examine how the digital stardom of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez was born through online communications. I examine how these digital stars were strategically branded as both “Canadian” and “R&B,” using social media, genre-blending performances and innovative brand



partnerships in ways that have reinforced, complicated, and challenged hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness. I explore how online networked environments enabled artists to launch their careers and build intimate relationships with audiences. I evaluate how the internet and social media enables new generations of Canadian R&B artists to further disseminate their music in popular culture, create more expansive networks, reinforce their Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness, and establish robust and distinct Canadian R&B artist brands. I also investigate how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez use more traditional marketing methods, like brand partnerships, to help establish their brands.

Although music merchandising has long been an important revenue stream for artists (Rohter, Section D, p. 1), it is an especially important source of revenue for digital stars who have nearly limitless opportunities for commodifying and selling artist-branding products large and small. For example, Drake lint rolling his pants on the sidelines of a Raptors basketball game subsequently led to the sale of “OVO and NBA cross-branded” lint rollers (N. Scott, 2014). In addition, music companies have recently changed music contracts to focus on securing more brand partnerships for musical artists to generate more revenue (Marshall, 2013; Stahl & Meier, 2012). As a result, brand partners have themselves become powerful mediators in constructing digital stars. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have strategically partnered with corporate brands to build (and sell) their authenticity as Canadian and as R&B artists. This dissertation seeks to be in dialogue with studies that examined how artists have sold more than just music—they have marketed lifestyle brands through cognate commodities, such as fashion products (Baym, 2018; D. Buxton, 1983/1990; Hearn, 2008; Lieb, 2018). I examine how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez diversify their lifestyle brands in online media and through traditional marketing methods, to articulate ideologies of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

The contextualizing examples in the previous section show that I am not arguing that Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s performances represent the entirety of Canadian R&B music culture. I selected these three artists as my case studies for several reasons. Firstly, all three exemplify the idea of a digital star because they have each claimed that social media helped them break into the music industry. Bieber claimed that his manager Scooter Braun discovered him on YouTube. Drake argued that key music industry

executive Jas Prince found his music on MySpace. Reyez confirmed she first contacted one of her managers, Mauricio Ruiz, on Facebook. However, I seek to demystify overestimations of social media's role in their rise-to-fame narratives and evaluate how traditional marketing practices were also required in building their digital stars. At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social restrictions limited in-person interactions, all three artists successfully released new music and maintained prominent positions in Canadian popular culture via the internet. Thus, I will uncover some of the contemporary marketing methods and brand management strategies that were used by Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's management teams to promote their new music and maintain relationships with audiences during this tumultuous time. Additionally, Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's racially diverse and Canadian identities enable me to compare and contrast how they each marketed themselves as uniquely Canadian and R&B in similar, yet different ways. I also examine how they each participated in BLM movements and assert their participation in "R&B," a music genre traditionally associated with Black U.S. artists. By first providing a brief episodic history of Canadian R&B, I evaluate how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez each benefitted from the work of their predecessors in establishing multiple, yet equally Canadian R&B artist brands.

### 1.2.5 Defining Contemporary Canadian R&B

R&B in Canada recently experienced classificatory changes that demand scholarly attention. In 2021, the JUNOS split the original R&B Recording of the Year award into two separate categories, Contemporary R&B/Soul Recording of the Year and Traditional R&B/Soul Recording of the Year. This was done "to represent the sonic differences of the genres" (Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences [CARAS], 2020). While Jessie Reyez and The Weeknd were both excluded from consideration for the Traditional R&B award, they were nominated for the Contemporary R&B award, which represents a new kind of R&B that blends traditional pop, R&B, rap, and hip-hop.

So, what exactly is this new kind of R&B? Volt FM, "a website where people [can] create a...public page for their Spotify profile with all their stats, playlists, etc." (Platform & Stream, 2021), has provided a definition of Canadian Contemporary R&B as follows:

Canadian Contemporary R&B is a genre of music that combines elements of traditional R&B with modern pop and hip-hop influences. It is characterized by its smooth, soulful sound and often incorporates elements of jazz, funk, and reggae. Canadian Contemporary R&B artists often draw inspiration from their own cultural backgrounds, creating a unique sound that is distinctly Canadian. The genre has seen a surge in popularity in recent years, with artists such as The Weeknd, Jessie Reyez, and Daniel Caesar leading the way. (Volt FM, 2023)

This definition includes an array of music genre categories and further expands the genre to include the cultural backgrounds of the Canadian artists participating in the genre. Although this definition does not suggest that Canadian artists must be of a specific ethnicity, all three examples of artists provided in the definition are not white. A further question then arises: how do white Canadian artists fall under this classification of Canadian R&B?

Discussing race and R&B, Michael Arceneaux (2012) states that there is a “widespread anxiety about the state of modern R&B—and black peoples' place in it,” in part, because “many black R&B artists say...that in-vogue club pop sounds have infiltrated the genre they love” and as non-Black artists infiltrate the genre, their stronger marketability and genre mixing styles overpower the voices and faces of Black artists participating in R&B. Arceneaux (2012) argues that “so-called R&B radio stations play music [tracks] that...aren't actually R&B—yet get labelled as such because Black artists are singing on them.” Thus, diverse music genre styles created by Black artists continue to be lumped together in the same R&B genre category, even as white artists continue to be commercially advantaged. I will unpack the participation of white artists in R&B more thoroughly in Chapter 2, but here, I note that white privilege works to pigeonhole non-white artists inside limited music genre spaces, so that if white artists begin participating in these genres, then Black artists may become further oppressed and silenced.

Questions of identity, clearly crucial to debates about genre, are not limited to race. Canadian Music Blog, an online magazine that was founded in 2011 by Canadian producer, writer, and composer Shawn PT, to “provid[e] information about popular music performed by Canadian recording artists,” stated: “We reject the notion that one’s age, gender, and race should determine what artists and style of music s/he should listen to” (Canadian Music Blog, n.d.). The Blog defined a Canadian recording artist as “artists

who are Canadian citizens regardless of where they are based.” The complex intersection of racial, national, and generic identifications is also evident in interview statements made by Zacharie Raymond, a member of the Montreal musical duo Banx & Ranx, who have mixed “reggae,” “dancehall,” “trap,” and “hip-hop” music genres. Raymond said that “even though we’re considered two white boys from the North, we have so much respect for the music and the codes” (Raymond as quoted in Indongo, 2018) of those genres. Raymond argued that his white-ness and his Canadian-ness should not render his participation in these music genres as inauthentic, not least because of his “deep...connection to Jamaican culture, being a part of a West-Indian family, [and] raising kids who are half-Jamaican” (Raymond as quoted in Indongo, 2018). Raymond attempts to authenticate his participation in music genres like dancehall by articulating his Jamaican-ness and West-Indian-ness, even as he also calls himself a “white boy from the North.” The other member of Banx & Ranx, Yannick Rastogi, moved to Montreal from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, and claimed “[neither] your colour [of] skin...[nor] where you come from” should dictate the music you can create (Rastogi as quoted in Indongo, 2018). Excluding an individual from participating in a music genre category based on their racial or national identity overlooks music’s creative, emotive power to resonate with artists and audiences based on their unique experiences. Yet, Blackness continues to be an important articulation of R&B’s hegemonic meaning.

When Ian McBride (2014) argued “pigeonholing rap music as a black genre is inaccurate considering how diverse Canadian hip-hop has become over the years,” McBride articulates Canadian hip-hop’s diversity through its sonic styles and through the complex racial identities of its participants. As I provisionally define R&B, I draw on Ruth Adams’ (2019) argument that UK Grime music, like hip-hop music, was a “Black musical form” but online communication and London’s diverse population enabled more ethnically diverse people to participate in the genre of music:

Although a predominantly black musical form, Grime does not preclude an “authentic” white (or other ethnic) identification; both musically and lyrically it illustrates a process of cultural blending which creates new modes of identity and expression... Both the survival of Grime as a genre and its more recent widespread popularity are due in no small part to the ubiquity of digital media technology, social media, and the ease with which content can be shared and accessed.... Grime, like London, has the capacity to offer an identity that is open

to all ethnicities and cultural and national backgrounds, and although the contribution of black culture and experience cannot be overstated, London's multiculturalism means that Grime is [open to]... *any* working-class young urbanite... regardless of their ethnicity. Like Hip Hop and Punk before it, Grime is a musical form that emerged from a very specific set of local circumstances, but with the potential to travel widely and to speak to, and for, marginalized fractions of society in diverse places, addressing and expressing the commonalities and specificities of the experiences of young people in each of these. (p. 439-452)

My position on Canadian R&B is that it, too, is deeply rooted in ideologies of Blackness. On the one hand, R&B helped a group of racialized individuals forge a cultural space in society, to collaborate and to gain visibility. On the other hand, the term was weaponized as a racist tool to constrain opportunities for racialized peoples. The participation of many non-Black and non-U.S. artists in R&B has thus often been rendered as inauthentic. According to David Brackett (2015), music genres are an example of how hegemony works as the negotiation of shared meaning among artists, audiences, and music industry executives who have varying degrees of power. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony examines how dominant and subordinate powers are in a constant battle over meanings, where space for negotiation may enable resistance against the dominant power, as well as serving its interests (whether through the direct consent of the subordinate class, or by fostering particular values in society—potentially through media—that support the ruling class' ideas and convince the subordinate class to follow the ruling class' beliefs). Stuart Hall (1992) described popular culture as a crucial space for negotiating “cultural hegemony” (p. 24), making it an arena to both articulate stereotypes and challenge the ruling class's ideologies:

popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not...the arena where we find who we really are [nor] the truth of our ancestral experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented. (p. 32)

Popular culture can be a powerful tool to communicate ideologies that challenge hegemonic views; yet as a commodified and stereotyped text, it is also not to be taken as “truth” but as a form of expression that may also mystify. Although not a “truth,” a popular culture text, like a song, is a powerful tool for complicating hegemonic views. For example, Mário Vieira de Carvalho (2012) studied how musical artist Fernando

Lopes-Graça “‘positioned’ himself, his own music, and his whole artistic work as representatives of a counter-hegemonic ‘Portuguese identity’” (p. 10) in a popular culture which operated as “alternative, counter-hegemonic structures of communication” (p. 1) to challenge hegemonic views of nationalism. Canadian R&B artists likewise articulate their multiple identities in music and other media texts, to reinforce, complicate, and/or challenge hegemonic views of both Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

It is difficult to specify and define contemporary Canadian R&B music, in part, because, as Christopher Small’s (1998) theory of “musicking” explains, music is an unfolding experience that expands beyond song lyrics and sonic styles to the artist’s public personality, including their speech and fashion in interviews and other interactions that they have with audiences. Music genres, like culture, are difficult to define because they are “moving targets” that are constantly changing through multiple interactions (Baldwin et. al., 2006). Following Nancy Towns (2021), who stated that “music is redefined again and again within ever-changing communities, traditions, migrations,” I argue that definitions of R&B are shifting because racially diverse Canadian artists are finally gaining respect and recognition. To better understand the classification of music genres through ideas of race and nationality, I use Simon Frith’s (1996) framework of “genre worlds” as communities created by musicians, audiences, and mediators. Their interactions regulate rules of inclusion and exclusion in music genres. Using the conceptual framework of genre worlds, I examine how artists, audiences, and music gatekeepers have had varying degrees of power in classifying music genre categories.

When Amanda Petrusich (2021) argued that “genre is not a static, immovable idea but a reflection of an audience’s assumptions and wants at a certain point in time,” she identified that music genre categories constantly reflect the social, political, and cultural contexts in which these categories are created and exercised. But, even by anchoring R&B to “Canada,” Canadian-ness is itself a “fractured” ideology in “Canadian R&B.”

Benedict Anderson (1991) recognized that a national identity is not easily homogenized because it is “fractured [by]...racial, class and regional antagonisms” (p. 203) and overgeneralizes diverse identities into one category. Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss’

(2008) point out that a national commodity does not have “intrinsic [national] properties...but rather the shifting modalities through which meaning is attached to them that distinguishes them as national products]” (p. 552). Thus, I do not argue that Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s constructed lifestyle brands are intrinsically Canadian just because all three artists were born in Canada. Rather, I explore how these artists brand themselves as “Canadian” and actively construct “Canadian” lifestyle brands by articulating “Canadian-ness” in brand partnerships, social media posts, song lyrics, interviews, brand management strategies, and marketing campaigns. I examine Canadian-ness and R&B-ness as “shifting modalities” and explore how these “shifting modalities” are mapped onto Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s respective racialized, nationalized, and gendered identities, in order to understand how they each articulate Canadian-ness and R&B-ness and thereby complicate the notion of a singular Canadian identity.

Charlotte Gray (2016) has stated that “there is no master narrative for Canadian history: there are too many stories to package into a tidy, tightly scripted identity” (p. xiv). R&B in Canada is shaped by many intersecting histories of hip-hop, urban, and R&B music genre styles. R&B in Canada is a cultural practice co-created by many diverse Canadian identities of different racial identities. Canada’s music industry’s long failure to support R&B music also resulted in the construction of a Canadian R&B genre world that is deeply indebted to U.S. music industry executives, U.S. artists, and U.S. audiences who supported Canadian R&B at times that Canada failed to. In my explorations of Canadian R&B’s development, I, in no way, intend for this dissertation to encapsulate all of the different ideas, themes, and histories constituting Canadian R&B. Rather, this study is intended to help stimulate conversations and debates in academic texts and in popular culture discussions. In provisionally defining the term “Canadian R&B,” I somewhat contradictorily suggest that there is no one definition, but all definitions have some value insofar as they raise questions about Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

In this dissertation, I seek to offer multiple viewpoints about Canadian R&B. Yet, I also understand the complexities of trying to classify and define, which inherently is an exercise of power. The study highlights the complexities in defining a distinctly Canadian R&B genre world, influenced by multiple sonic styles and diverse cultural identities.

While assessing the contradictions and challenges of defining a Canadian R&B genre world, this work is necessary and important in uncovering Canadian histories, individuals, and cultural practices that make up contemporary Canadian society. Canadian R&B can help to redefine distinctly Canadian identities by shedding light on infrastructural racism in Canada, which has been weaponized to exclude racialized identities from the cultural imaginary of Canada. Additionally, the study explores how Canadian-ness and R&B-ness have been developed through, and diverged from, U.S. popular music culture. It also points to cultural and technological shifts that have changed audience-artist relationships and highlights the complex processes of commodifying culture through the lifestyle brands and constructed public personalities of musical artists. In sum, this study is founded in the hope that contemporary Canadian R&B artists, like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, can help redefine Canadian-ness and R&B-ness to bring about positive changes that would empower more individuals and make them more visible, accepted, understood, and embraced in the country we consider home, and ultimately be able to participate in any music genre they choose.

My working definition of contemporary Canadian R&B is thus: a mixture of the traditionally separated music genre styles of pop, hip-hop, and R&B, created in the late 2000s to 2020s, by Canadian citizens of different ethnicities, inclusive of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez (among many others), mediated via recordings, online music videos, social media posts, brand partnerships, and traditional mass media. Canadian R&B music is not homogenous in sound, in style, or in its cultural representation of public personality types. Rather, Canadian R&B music encapsulates many experiences of multicultural Canadians that implicitly challenges hegemonic views of R&B as a cultural practice for exclusively U.S. Black performers. Contemporary Canadian R&B thus complicates hegemonic views of Canada as an exclusively white rock and folk nation.

In 2022, the online publication KultureVulture acknowledged this distinctly Canadian R&B music genre, inclusive of many racially diverse Canadians, in releasing their list of the “Top 20 Canadian R&B Singers.” The list introduction stated:

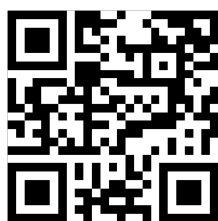
Before viewing the Canadian R&B music scene, no one can question the talent of Canadian R&B singers with the extensive list of legends to call Canada home. Legendary artists like Celine Dion, Shania Twain, Alanis Morissette, Nelly



Furtado, and not to forget renowned Canadian R&B artists like Tamia, Deborah Cox, Keshia Chanté, [and] Jully Black, have all proven that the United States is not the only place to create great music... Whether... from Toronto or another city in one of Canada's many provinces, the rhythm and blues music scene displays the country at its best, the diversity, the creativity, and the beauty of its people.

Although this list included Jessie Reyez, it excluded Drake and Justin Bieber, stating “even though Drake, Justin Bieber, and The Weeknd have cast shadows over Canada’s present-day ‘music scene,’ there is a long roster of Canadian R&B artists.” I agree that many artists have contributed to Canadian R&B, but I focus this study on how racially diverse Canadian artists including white Justin Bieber, biracial Black and white Drake, and second-generation Canadian-Columbian Jessie Reyez have complicated the relationships between traditional racial-national-music genre categories.

To enhance the reader’s understanding of the musicking discussed in this study of Canadian R&B, I have created a Spotify Playlist titled “Amara Pope’s Playlist of Canadians Redefining R&B” which can be found by scanning the QR code below:



**Figure 1: Amara Pope’s Playlist of Canadians Redefining R&B**

Since this is not a musicological study, but a Media Studies dissertation, I encourage readers to listen to the playlist as they read about how the Canadian R&B genre world is deeply indebted to U.S. music influences and co-created by many racially diverse Canadian artists, across intersecting music genre styles of hip-hop, R&B, and pop music. Although contemporary Canadian R&B artists, like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, have gained international recognition and mainstream media support, previous generations of Canadian and U.S. artists helped paved the way for their success. Like the artists, ideas, and events discussed in this study, the playlist includes Canadian and U.S. artists across different decades and genre styles. Many artists that are not included in this playlist fall outside of the scope of this study and/or remain unrepresented on the Spotify platform.

### 1.3 Research Questions and Methodology

This study seeks to answer the question: How have Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez reinforced, complicated, and challenged hegemonic understandings of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness?” Other questions addressed in this study include: How has Canada’s R&B music genre world developed in Canada in ways that intersected with and diverged from the U.S.A.? How have hegemonic ideas of race underpinned music classification systems in the U.S.A. and Canada? How have online communications and mobile devices shaped and shifted artists’ brand management and marketing strategies?

In this dissertation, I provide an episodic historical development of a Canadian R&B music genre world to inform my textual analyses of how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez broke into the music industry and developed careers as Canadian R&B artists. I survey the literature on classifications of R&B in Canada and the U.S.A. to better understand the ongoing relationships among traditional racial-national-music genre categories. I address the social, cultural, and political conditions through which R&B classifications were created in Canada and the U.S.A. during different periods. I also analyze published interviews conducted by journalists between the 1940s and 2020s with musical artists, music industry executives, and marketing professionals, who discuss their experiences in the music industry, to evaluate hegemonic beliefs of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness.”

The study then focuses on how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez broke into the music industry. There is a myth that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez used the internet to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and establish their careers; however, this study will explore how these artists used online communications alongside traditional industry practices to achieve music label contracts. I analyze trade magazines, the artists’ autobiographies, documentaries, social media posts, and published interviews with the artists and their teams.

Then, I evaluate how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez maintained popularity between 2019 and 2022 through brand partnership announcements, brand integration strategies and cultural marketing campaigns, considering that during this time, (1) all three artists released new music, (2) digital communication trends were amplified due to social distancing restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) Black Lives Matter movements

intensified discussions of racial identities and sparked changes to music genre categories. I assess patterns and divergences in Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's articulations of music genres, nationality, and race. I also explore their articulations of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness in social media posts, songs, music videos, brand partnerships, interviews, press releases, and performances to assess their brand positioning as Canadian and R&B.

To supplement my textual analyses, I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews in 2020 with Canadian and U.S. music industry executives and marketing professionals (working at companies including Spotify, YouTube, Warner Music, United Talent, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Partnership, and United Talent Agency). The purpose of these interviews was to provide me with insights into contemporary online marketing strategies and brand diversification methods. These interviews informed my analyses of how popular musical artists use online space to break into the music industry and build and maintain their lifestyle brands across industry markets. Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez represent new generations of musical artists as “digital stars” who break into the music industry using online communications as well as traditional marketing practices (including brand partnerships and networking strategies).

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, semi-structured interviews best served my research goals. I applied and gained approval from Western's Ethics Board to conduct these interviews. All participants were public-facing business professionals and industry executives within the entertainment industry. I emailed a Letter of Information and Consent Form to each participant to get confirmation that they were willing to participate in the study. All participants were above the age of 18, and no vulnerable people were interviewed. I created guided questions to help organize the topics covered in my interviews, but I was keen to hear about the interviewees' individual experiences and specialized knowledge that could provide unforeseen insights into marketing and brand management. My interview questions were not intended to be asked in a particular order. Instead, I followed the responses of my participants and allowed them to elaborate on ideas that I found most interesting. I practiced active listening “to identify ideas or potentially useful concepts to ask about in subsequent questions” (Van den Hoonaard, 2012, p. 104), which enabled me to identify how each participant's unique insights and

experiences could help me to examine what contemporary marketing and brand management strategies that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have used to build their careers.

I was especially interested in exploring how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were using the online space to develop their digital star brands. During the pandemic, online communications accelerated, making this an opportune time for me to discuss with participants how their marketing and brand management strategies were adjusting to social restrictions. Additionally, Black Lives Matter movement further intensified discussions of racial identities and sparked changes to music genre categories during this time. Potential participants for the interview portion of this study were recruited through a snowball sampling to gain access to marketing professionals, music industry executives, and content creators. I first emailed or messaged potential participants who had publicly accessible contact information over social media, including LinkedIn and Instagram. After explaining my research project to them, I would ask them to discuss their experiences with me over the phone, Skype, or email due to social distancing restrictions. After I approached individuals who were available and accessible online, I then asked participants to nominate others whom they knew. In a snowball effect, I gained access to more individuals in the marketing and music industries. All participants in this study were given the option to be named or to remain anonymous when cited in this study. A copy of the ethics application is included in the Appendix.

The interviews I conducted, my exploration of the development of Canadian R&B, and my textual analyses of Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's social media posts, music, music videos, interviews, and brand partnerships help me explore how classifications of R&B music and Canadian identities are invested with ideologies of race, nation and gender.

## 1.4 Goals of this Study

Black Canadian rapper Cadence Weapon describes what it was like to grow up in Canada during the 1990s, with an entertainment industry that failed to represent people with Black racial identities, like himself, and excluded R&B music, a genre that he participated in and contributed to in Canada. Weapon then acknowledges a crucial shift in Canada when Canadian R&B artists, like Drake, began to gain prominence in popular

culture through the internet, to articulate Canadian identities that had long been excluded from mainstream media:

Growing up in the 1990s in Edmonton, Alberta, it was pretty clear to me what Canadian identity was “supposed” to be. Canadian meant mounties and lumberjacks, navel-gazing introspection and hosers in plaid shirts playing hockey. The artists that dominated radio were confessional pop singer-songwriters...On TV, it was Hockey Night in Canada, Due South and the Red Green Show...[but in the late 2000s]...the internet tightened the bonds of Canada’s underground rap community, helping to galvanize disparate regional scenes and spread our music to people around the world...Drake blew up and showed that Canadian rap could be a fruitful investment...I saw reflections of myself in an experimental and innovative instrumental hip-hop scene...Rap took rock’s place in the global conversation about Canadian music [yet] you still mostly only hear rap, R&B, and dancehall on [Canadian] college and community radio [and mainstream Canadian media still fails to support Canadian R&B music]. (Pemberton, 2016)

Cadence Weapon is the son of the late Teddy Pemberton, a pioneering hip-hop DJ on CJSR-FM (a Canadian campus-based community radio station, 88.5 FM in Edmonton). Through his father’s work, Cadence Weapon experienced first-hand how Canadian music industry gatekeepers excluded Black Canadians and R&B artists from Canada’s mainstream music culture. Like Cadence Weapon, I grew up in the 1990s when Canadian broadcast media failed to reflect my experiences as a young, second-generation Trinidadian-Canadian. However, unlike Cadence Weapon, who creates music, I participated in Canadian R&B and hip-hop as an audience member. In the late 2000s, I remember experiencing the sudden growth of Canadian R&B music and the increased visibility of racially diverse Canadians in popular culture. Although Canadian radio and television continued to be dominated by white rock and folk artists, the online space circulated R&B music created by racially diverse Canadians. In this dissertation, I examine how Canadian R&B artists Bieber, Drake, and Reyez use the online space to help cultivate distinctly Canadian artist personas and elaborate on their unique Canadian experiences through online music videos and social media posts that provide a new prominence to new representations of Canadian identity.

In 2020, Black Canadian executive producer Taj Critchlow also described how Canadian media has historically failed to reflect the diversity of Canadian identities:

I love Canada. Look, I love being Canadian. I am Canadian. But even when you grew up watching those commercials, [I] never saw myself in those spots. They

always said Canada's...[multicultural]! But everything that came out to advertising was white, white, white. But I'm like, where's the Black, where's the Indian, where's the South Asian, where's the biracial—it was such a confusing thing because I don't know, it just makes no sense. So representation matters on so many levels. (Narváez, 2020)

Critchlow's quote shows how the "representation" of racially diverse Canadian identities in broadcast media "matters" in challenging a Canadian identity curated for too long as homogenously white. Jessie Reyez also argued in 2020 that racially diverse representation matters, but specifically in the music industry: "we have this benevolent idea of multiculturalism [but]...Latinos and Blacks are still not represented [in positions of power in the Canadian music industry]" (as quoted in Flores, 2020). When she stated that "We need to dig deeper so the statistics match the outer perception of who we are as Canadians," (Reyez as quoted in Flores, 2020), Reyez was pointing to how the hegemonic "perception" of an exclusively white Canadian identity continues to operate in Canadian music industry infrastructures, enabling white males to control the Canadian music industry and curate it in ways that reflect their own identities, rather than allow the industry to reflect the true ethnic diversity of Canadians. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have each articulated different aspects of Canadian-ness that I identify with. Bieber has articulated my Canadian experiences of living in a small town in Ontario, dominated by people with racially white identities, drinking Tim Horton's coffee, watching the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey games, and enjoying Ontario's natural landscapes. Drake has articulated my Canadian experiences of growing up in Scarborough surrounded by Caribbean immigrants and feeling great pride for Toronto's basketball team, the Raptors. Reyez has articulated my experiences in Canada as a second-generation immigrant woman with brown skin who, at home, celebrates her parents' diasporic culture but adapts to Canada's hegemonically Anglo-Saxon British cultural practices at work and school. I argue that each of them, in their own way, gives a prominent voice to different Canadian national narratives.

As a framing device, I will examine how Justin Bieber represents Canada as "The Great White North" (Abdel-Shehid, 1999; Baldwin et al., 2014; Moss, 2003), a rural landscape populated by hegemonically white people and governed by Anglo-Saxon ideals, through his descriptions of his small hometown of Stratford, Ontario, his Christian traditions, and

his brand partnerships with The Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team and Tim Hortons. I will examine how Drake has embodied Canadians as “Multicultural Metropoli[s]” (Trotman, 2005) through his descriptions of growing up in Toronto, influenced by many immigrant communities, and his brand partnerships with Canada Goose and The Raptors. I will examine how Jessie Reyez has articulated Canada as a “Post-Colonial Utopia,” offering a narrative of Canada “expressing a desire for social change alongside its challenges and obstacles” (B. Jones, 2018, p. 642) by describing her experiences growing up in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) as a second-generation Canadian woman with Colombian roots, in partnerships including women’s Secret deodorant and Canadian companies like Roots.

Benedict Anderson (1991) defined a nation as “an imagined political community” (p. 6) that groups individuals together. It is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). As an imagined community, a nation is built by individuals who believe that they have a relationship with other people through “visual and aural creations” (B. Anderson, 1991, p. 23), including the “newspaper...as a cultural product...[which creates] an imagined linkage” (B. Anderson, 1991, p. 33). From this perspective, media becomes a central tool for creating a sense of nationhood by helping individuals forge relationships. Building on Anderson’s (1991) argument that media helps foster ideologies of nationhood, Tim Edensor (2002) argued that “the nation [can also be] imagined in [other media including the]...music hall and theatre, popular music, festivities, architecture, fashion, spaces of congregation, and in a plenitude of embodied habits and performances” (p. 7). Yet, for much of the past 100 years, the Canadian government used television and radio to mediate ideologies of a Canadian nation as an exclusively white population that practiced rock and folk music.

I agree with David Taras (2015) that the increasing consumption of online content has diminished some of the power broadcast media has had over the mediation and curation of Canadian-ness. I disagree with Taras’ (2015) statement that it is becoming more difficult to define Canadian-ness because of the government’s loss of power over the

mediation of Canadian identities in popular culture: “a main problem for Canada is that so much of its political and cultural life has been dependent on newspapers and broadcasting” (p. 5). I argue that Canadian-ness is not harder to define. However, the power of who can help define Canadian nationhood in popular culture has shifted from broadcast media and government bodies into the hands of those mediating online platforms and the people with the most visibility on these platforms. In April 2023, the Canadian government has also extended its reach to the mediation of online content (Lilley, 2023; Patel, 2023; Raycraft, 2023) to potentially further mediate their idealistic views of Canadian-ness on social media. Although broadcast media and government bodies continue to play a role in constructing Canadian-ness, I argue that digital stars Bieber, Drake, and Reyez contribute to be important mediators in crafting ideologies of Canadian nationhood through their increasing visibility in society (online, in their own branded events and products, and through brand partnerships) and through their intimate relationships with individual audience members. Digital stars, in particular, can help define new notions of Canadian-ness through their lifestyle brands that expand and move across the online and offline space via different products, services, and events.

## 1.5 Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 introduces the dissertation’s central research question: How have Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez each reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness?” It establishes the context of contemporary Canadian R&B as a vibrant and important part of the Canadian music scene, and therefore an important cultural practice in defining a Canadian national identity. It introduces the concept of Canadian R&B, defines the scope of the study, highlights the research project’s questions, and describes the discursive analytic framework that the study uses to examine racial-national-music genre categories.

Chapter 2 surveys the literature about the changing definitions of R&B as a music genre category in the U.S.A. and Canada. The literature review aims to identify and evaluate the formation of hegemonic views of Canadian identities and of R&B through ideologies of race, gender, and nationality in the U.S.A. and Canada as they inform the classificatory struggles facing Bieber, Drake, and Reyez as Canadian and R&B artists. It defines



intersectional theory to conceptually underpin the study in assessing how musical artists are classified into music genre through racial, national, and gendered identities.

Chapter 3 discusses Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez as digital stars by examining their entrées into the music industry through digital marketing campaigns and traditional networking practices with music industry gatekeepers. In addition, this section explores the unique brand positioning of each musical artist as “Canadian” and “R&B,” in interviews, live performances, brand partnerships and social media posts.

Chapter 4 investigates what digital marketing and brand management strategies were used to develop the Canadian and R&B lifestyle brands of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter explores marketing practices, including building brand consistency, user-generated content, and other contemporary marketing strategies, primarily on social media platforms Instagram and YouTube.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation by considering Canadian R&B artists’ performances of national anthems, those highly overdetermined musical moments of national identity work. It focuses particularly on how Jessie Reyez’s involvement in the Black Lives Matter Movement inflected her internationally-televised performance of national anthems atop the CN Tower, prior to a Toronto Raptors playoff game in 2020. This chapter also addresses the potential socio-political power of contemporary Canadian R&B artists as cultural leaders through their participation in brand partnerships, marketing campaigns, and musical performances. Finally, the chapter concludes the study by discussing further research directions that expand upon the ideas presented in this study.

## 2 Chapter 2: Episodes in the Historical Development of a Canadian R&B Music Genre World

In this chapter, I selected, key moments in the history of “R&B” to determine how racialized music genre categories, including “minstrelsy,” “race music,” “rock n’ roll,” “urban” and “R&B” can perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Black people in Canada and in the U.S.A. I identify and evaluate the formation of hegemonic views of Canadian identities and of R&B through ideologies of race, gender, and nationality in the U.S.A. and Canada as they inform the classificatory struggles of Bieber, Drake, and Reyez as Canadian and R&B artists. I explore how different political and cultural practices in Canada reinforced Black and white racial divides in Canadian music and in wider Canadian society. I examine how Canadian music industry gatekeepers weaponized music genre categories to construct a hegemonically white Canadian national identity. The fraught history of attempts to license the first Black-owned Canadian radio station is examined to show the institutional challenges faced by Canadian R&B artists and audiences. I also underline the resilience of many Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists who fought for their recognition in contributing to Canadian society.

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Ron Nelson, known as “the godfather of hip-hop” (Parris, 2017), hosted a hip-hop and R&B radio show on Ryerson University’s radio station CKLN 88.1 FM from the 1980s onward. It was called the Fantastic Voyage Show and it—and Nelson—worked to promote Canadian hip-hop. In a 2011 radio interview, Nelson argued that Canadian hip-hop artists were “underprivileged,” faced “oppression,” lacked “freedom of expression,” and that their “voice[s]” were underrepresented in Canadian mainstream media which was “power[ed]” by mainly white racist Canadian media gatekeepers who privileged white artists (Koganometry, 2011). Nelson understood Canadian hip-hop to be a mixture of hip-hop, R&B, and dancehall music that importantly represents Canadian “Black history,” which has long been excluded from a hegemonically white Canadian society:

[Canadian hip-hop] is Black history...[and] is all about our culture...when it comes to voices of the oppressed, when it comes to freedom of expression, when it comes to fighting the power...when it comes to [having the voices of the]

underprivileged heard...we do it through the lyrics in hip-hop...[it] is the most political music that exists today. (Koganometry, 2011)

By arguing that Canadian hip-hop is “Black history,” Nelson claimed that Canadian hip-hop artists played a central role in Canadian history and significantly contributed to Canadian culture. Although Nelson also argued that Canadian hip-hop was Canadian Black history, he was not suggesting that hip-hop was a cultural practice created exclusively by Black Canadians. Rather, Nelson contended that “hip-hop is not black it’s not white it’s like colour free. Anyone can do it. We all have a right to it.” While acknowledging how the mistreatment of Black people in Canada contributed to the development of Canadian hip-hop music, Nelson further argued that artists in liminal positions between traditional Black and white racial classifications also faced a unique form of racism when he said: “[Canadian artist] Mastermind...was against the odds. He was hated to a degree too because he wasn’t Black [and] he wasn’t white...people were prejudiced and racist [and challenged his participation in the genre]” (Koganometry, 2011).

Second-generation Canadian artist Mastermind was born Paul Parhar and is the son of Indian immigrants (Pastuk, 2015). Like Mastermind who was challenged for his participation in music genre categories traditionally associated with Black artists, white Justin Bieber, biracial Black and white Drake, and Latina Jessie Reyez also complicate hegemonic beliefs about hip-hop and R&B. According to Harvey Whitfield (2022), “when whiteness is decentered – when it’s not taken for granted – the past looks very different” (p. ix). By decentralizing whiteness in Canadian history, one can uncover how Canada’s history of race relations has mediated the discourses of R&B music and Canadian identities. In this episodic history of Canadian R&B, I have drawn on the voices and experiences of many racialized Canadian identities who have been overlooked, ignored, and forgotten in the recordings of Canadian history, via R&B.

## 2.1 Canadian 19<sup>th</sup> Century Minstrelsy: “I Didn’t Learn Anything About Black History in School”

Beginning in the 19th century, white actors performed on stage and participated in the music genre of “minstrelsy” to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Black people in the

U.S.A. and Canada. To examine how minstrel performers created harmful representations of Black people, I applied Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of "impression management," through which individuals perform a social role, like racial identity, using "fashion...posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; [and] bodily gestures" (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). White Canadian and U.S. minstrel performers would act on stage in theatres to "parody, burlesque or [create] comedic distortion[s] of [Black slaves]" (Whiteoak, 2018, p. 42) and exercised impression management by darkening their skin with "burnt-cork make-up" (Whiteoak, 2018, p. 42), wearing tattered clothing, singing songs they wrote themselves or stole from enslaved Black people, and using exaggerated expressions to depict Black people as childish, dim, lazy, and unintelligent. Sedef Arat-Koç (2010) argued that skin colour is a cultural code for racial identity. The darkening of white performers' skin to represent Black racial identities (a practice commonly known as Blackface) highlighted, in problematic fashion, the idea that race itself is performative. Goffman (1959) stated that the goal of impression management is meeting audiences' expectations to create a believable performance of the role. In minstrel performances, white actors articulated Black identities as undesirable through negative character traits, tattered clothing, and exaggerated expression in ways that supported the mistreatment of Black people in Canada and the U.S.A. Hence, white minstrel actors supported hegemonic views that devalued Black identities through Black slavery and Black and white segregation, to meet audiences' expectations and to create believable performances.

Like theatrical performances with actors on stage, Goffman (1959) explained that people exercise impression management in their everyday lives by performing different social roles, for different audiences, in different environments. For example, I could perform the role of a daughter with my parents at home, and my behaviours, fashion, and even language would differ from how I performed the role of a student with my university's faculty. Goffman (1959) applied George Santayana's analogy that "masks are arrested expressions" (Goffman, 1959) to suggest that every social role is like a mask that individuals can animate at different times with different audiences. In the analogy, each mask, or social role, would have a cultural script to follow. The cultural script represents hegemonic performances of that role, which actors could follow to create believable performances. Goffman (1959) argued that the social role of "race" could be enacted at

different times, with different props, to different audiences. When white minstrel actors created “codes” for their theatre performances of enslaved Black people, these codes shaped the social scripts of Black racial identities outside of minstrel performances, in everyday life.

Guthrie Ramsey (2003) argued that the depictions of “Black life...[in minstrel performances] taught some white Americans all they knew about black culture” (p. 5) and these performances normalized racist ideologies of Black people. Similarly, Daniel Tate and Rob Bowman (2019) argued that minstrel performances taught some Canadian audiences “what life was like in the Southern United States for African Americans” (p. 7). Therefore, minstrelsy could be defined as a performative act of race, both in the theatrical sense on-stage, and in everyday life, because these minstrel performances articulated racist beliefs that some white people held about Black people.

Angela Onwuachi-Willig (2016) stated that “race is not biological. It is a social construct” and that race can be “defined by markers such as skin color, hair texture, eye shape, ancestry, identity performance and even name” but these markers or “codes” used to define a racial identity are relative and can shift across time and different contexts. When Onwuachi-Willig (2016) said that “[someone] who could be categorized as black in the United States might be considered white in Brazil or colored in South Africa,” she suggested that definitions of a Black racial identity can change in different social contexts. Onwuachi-Willig (2016) argued that despite the relativity of racial definitions, “racial classifications are [not] free of consequence or tangible effects.” The ideology of a Black racial identity has been invested with rich cultural meanings, practices, and histories, and has shaped people’s lived experiences. Ideologies of Black identities, created by white minstrel performers, permeated Canadian and U.S. societies. Consequently, when Black people participated in minstrel performances, they were pressured to conform to racist caricatures created by white people, in order to appear “authentic” and create a believable performance.

Black performers were offered opportunities to enter the entertainment industry by performing minstrelsy. Black performers were pressured to follow existing minstrel genre

codes by using exaggerated expressions, wearing tattered clothing, and blackening their faces with burnt cork to support hegemonic beliefs about people with Black identities (L. Jones, 1963). Despite likely disagreeing with the racist caricatures they enacted, Black performers benefitted from upholding minstrel genre codes because these minstrel performances gave Black performers the ability to participate in the music industry. As such, Black minstrel performers may have offered some (highly problematic) visibility for Black people in an entertainment industry dominated by white people. For music genre codes to have value in helping to organize society, audiences and artists must accept them. Many participants, including Black and white minstrel performers and audiences, contributed to hegemonic classifications of “minstrelsy” as a music genre category that represented Black people through racist caricatures. Black minstrel performers helped increase the visibility of Black people in popular culture, but they also helped to reinforce the racist interpretations white people made about Black identities.

The codes that were created in minstrel performances to define Black identities were then grouped with further codes in other media texts to reinforce the devaluation of Black people. Guthrie Ramsey (2003) argued that “since the advent of minstrelsy in the late nineteenth century...American popular culture has continually perpetuated negative stereotypes of African Americans” (p. 65), in other media texts including film and television. Although audiences actively negotiate the representations of ideas in media texts, if they experience repeated codes, they may adopt the represented worldview and act accordingly (Berger, 1995; Katz, 1957; Lasswell, 1971; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968).

Stuart Hall (1973/2007) argued that a repeated grouping of images and sounds, which he also referred to as codes, can form “naturalized” (p. 55) associations in society. Hence, if audiences are presented with repeated codes of Black identities, across multiple discourses—like in music, television, advertisements, and film—these codes of Black identities may then shape how audiences view or understand Black people and their assumed lifestyles, personalities, and characteristics (Lewis & Jhally, 1994). For example, scholars have examined how codes of Black sexuality, lawfulness, and temperament in media have been used to justify policies that disempower Black women (P. Collins, 2004; Gilliam, 1999) and exclude Black people from public life (Ong, 2005;

Wingfield, 2009; Neal, 1999). Minstrel performances created codes about Black identities that manifested in other harmful hegemonic beliefs and government policies that disempowered Black people in society.

Ramsey (2003) argued that minstrelsy evolved into other music genre performances, like “coon songs,” that also perpetuated hegemonic views that Black people should be denied participation in certain social experiences and national communities:

Coon songs of the 1890s...expanded upon early minstrelsy's uses of black stereotypes [and] traded in racist stereotypes of [Black people as] chicken thieves [eating] watermelons [to] violent simpletons unequipped for either citizenship or domestic love. (p. 41)

Building on racist theatrical performances of Black people in minstrel performances, coon songs told racist narratives about Black life to create more harmful codes about Black people. Although minstrelsy and coon songs were a form of entertainment, the codes that they used to define Black identities contributed to hegemonic beliefs regarding Black people in Canada and in the U.S.A. Minstrelsy and coon songs also supported the hegemonic belief that people should be separated through Black and white racialized classification systems.

In line with Barry Shank's (2001) argument that “the history of racial segregation in the United States shaped the creation of the music industry” (p. 257), I recognize that racial segregation also affected the construction of the Canadian music industry and the Canadian R&B genre world. Formal segregation ended in the U.S.A. in 1964 (History, 2010), but the last segregated school in Canada closed in 1983 (Province of Nova Scotia). This recent history of racial segregation in Canada and the U.S.A. contributed to chains of associations between ideologies of race, music genres, and nationalities in Canada that ultimately helped portray Canada as an exclusively white Canadian nation.

Like Justin Bieber, who stated in an interview that “in Canada, I didn't learn anything about Black history in school” (Zach Sang Show, 2021), my experiences in Canada's educational system also excluded studies of Black slavery and Black and white racial segregation in Canada. Paul Thompson (2022) argued that cultural amnesia around Canadian Black slavery is due in part to the “[difficult challenge] of locating black voices

in the Canadian historical record[s]” (p. 8). Canadian histories were recorded by white people who often excluded the voices and experiences of non-white people. As a result, racist and dehumanizing practices such as Canadian Black slave trading have remained untold and repressed (Baldwin et al., 2014; Cooper, 2021; David, 2008; Moss, 2003; V. Stevenson, 2020; Trudel, 2013). The widespread historical popularity of minstrel performances has illuminated Canada’s suppressed history of mistreating Black people and separating Black and white racial identities.

Jessie Reyez referenced how Canada’s educational system also excluded conversations about Indigenous people, who were colonized by white British and French settlers, when she said that “some teachers [in Canada]...just regurgitate the information that’s in a lot of these textbooks [that] try to sugarcoat massacres and try to sugarcoat our history” (as quoted in etalk, 2020a). Residential schools tore Indigenous families apart and their children were systematically removed from their culture, languages, and traditions to be assimilated into the dominant English-British Canadian culture (Annett et al., 2007). Therefore, Reyez was indicating that Canadian history has been narrated from the perspectives of exclusively white British colonizers.

Many Canadian political leaders have attempted to create a hegemonically white Canada, otherwise termed “The Great White North” (Baldwin et al., 2014; Moss, 2003). For example, Canada’s 1906 Immigration Act involved a “broad interpretive framework [that] granted the government absolute discretionary powers to effectively restrict the flow of immigration according to prevailing ideologies about race, desirability and assimilation” (Meister et al., n.d.). Based on existing ideologies of race, the Canadian government continued to create a hegemonically white Canada by prioritizing immigrants that they classified as racially white. Erica Gagnon (2022) identified which cultural groups were deemed desirable by the Canadian government:

[In] 1905, the desire to preserve and protect Canada’s ‘British-ness’ re-emerged...Americans, Poles, Dutch, Germans, Finns, and Scandinavians...[were] considered as highly desirable settlers by Canadian immigration agencies: they were familiar with the Prairie climate and land conditions from experience in the American West, and were culturally desirable immigrants with physical similarities to the Brits. They were also accustomed to democratic institutions,



and while displaying high rates of cultural retention, they did not practice ‘questionable’ customs (such as communal living or polygamy).

The Canadian government believed in crafting a white national identity with homogenous political ideals, religious beliefs, and customs.

Canada was only established as a self-governing entity in 1867. Although Ontario politician and Methodist pastor James Shaver Woodsworth argued in 1910 that, as a young nation, “there [had] not yet been sufficient time to develop a fixed Canadian type” (p. 13), he published the book “Strangers Within Our Gates” in 1909 to discourage the colonization by “incoming multitudes [of immigrants]” (p. 4) whom he argued “will drag us and our children down” (p. 4) if they are not educated. Woodsworth (1910) further defined a Canadian type as English-speakers and described “non-English speaking people...[as] foreigner[s]” (p. 25). Woodsworth (1910) also defined the Canadian type as practicing the “Anglo-Saxon” religion (p. 89). When Woodsworth (1910) asked “how shall we weld this heterogeneous mass [of] English and Russians, French and Germans, Austrians, and Italians, Japanese and Hindus...into one people? That is our problem” (p. 203), he was speaking from a colonialist’s perspective by suggesting that the plurality of cultural identities co-existing in one nation was a “problem” for Canada. Woodsworth thus believed that a Canadian national identity should be homogeneous and include only British, English-speaking, and Anglo-Saxon people and cultural practices.

In the 1920s, after the First World War, the British government developed a series of advertisements “for emigrants to Canada...to help relieve population pressures [in Britain] and provide workers needed [to colonize the country]” (Canadian Museum of History, n.d.). Many of these advertisements were also distributed to the U.S.A. One Canadian pamphlet from 1926 was titled “Housework in Canada: duties, wages, conditions and opportunities for household workers” and stated:

Canada welcomes men and women of the right type who come to seek their fortune in this broad new land...(people) of good moral character, and in good health, mentally and physically. (National Archives of Canada ‘C-56944,’ 1926, as quoted in Canadian Museum of History, n.d.)

The “right type” of men and women meant white. White British people remained central to the construction of Canada’s cultural imaginary and were explicitly targeted with these

advertisements (National Archives of Canada ‘C-56944,’ 1926, as quoted in Canadian Museum of History, n.d.). Nevertheless, culturally diverse Canadian immigrants were profoundly contributing to the evolution of Canada’s national identity and of Canadian music.

Like his father, Emile Berliner, a Canadian-German immigrant who invented the gramophone, Herbert Berliner also worked in music recording. He pioneered Canadian jazz recording in the early 1920s:

[Herbert started] a record label of what was then called ‘race records’...intended exclusively [for] African-American [audiences]...[and] made the first recordings of jazz artists, such as Millard Thomas and his Famous Chicago Novelty Orchestra...from Montreal’s black community. (Reynolds, 2018)

In the 1920s, Canada’s jazz music evolved from the contributions of many Black Canadians and Canadian immigrants. However, their contributions to Canadian culture remained overlooked because the separation of Black and white identities was perpetuated in the organization of music: all music created by Black people was limited to the music genre category of “race records.” Race records, also known as race music, encompassed many diverse styles of music, including R&B (George, 1982). Record companies perpetuated a belief that Black and white people created different styles of music, which would be valued differently (white records would be valued more than race records) and marketed to different Black and white audiences.

To critique the underlying classificatory process of categorizing artists in the race music genre category, I draw upon Richard Dyer’s (2017) argument that a “raced” identity is immediately classified as non-white, despite a white person also being raced. Although Dyer was not talking about race(d) music, his argument that the immediate association of a raced person being non-white illuminated how Canadian society has been organized and constructed through the central position of white people. Dyer argued that other identities have only been defined through their comparison to a central white identity, which is why all other identities have been grouped into the raced category. Whiteness has been unmarked and perceived as the norm in society. Dyer’s concept of the centrality of whiteness applies as well to the organization of Canadian and U.S. music industries, where white artists were perceived as the norm and were offered many classificatory

genres to participate in and contribute to, whereas Othered, non-white artists were boxed into fewer racialized music genre categories, including race music and—later—urban, hip-hop, and R&B.

Racial and musical genre categories have offered ineffective and incomplete understandings of individuals' identities. Paul Gilroy (1993), Thomas DeFrantz (2020), and Guthrie Ramsey (2003) have all argued that studying Black music could be a rich way to explore Black identities, but the category of Black music has overgeneralized the diverse styles of music created by Black people. DeFrantz (2020) stated that there is “no unified black subject,” and the homogenization of artists with Black identities in a performance style does not adequately represent the diversity within Black communities. I agree with Paul Carr and Darren Lund (2007) who argued that the racial category of “white people,” like the category “Black people,” “oversimplifi[es] [multiple identities] into one [w]hite category [to overlook individuals'] ethnic, cultural, linguistic, [and] religious” (p. 3) differences. In this study, I have employed racial categories of white and Black people to examine the historical contexts and discursive formations that articulate the classifications of R&B music and a Canadian nation through ideologies of Black and white racial divides. In my classification of “contemporary Canadian R&B,” I include multicultural Canadian identities that expand beyond Black and white racial divides to include biracial (Black and white) Drake, white Justin Bieber, and Latina Jessie Reyez.

## 2.2 Commemorating Black Canadians in Postage Stamps and Coins

Associations between race music, R&B music, Black identities, and racial inferiority have resulted in the exclusion of many Canadian R&B artists from broadcast media. For example, former Vancouver radio host DJ Red Robinson stated that when he bought music records created by Black people in Canada “they'd put it in a brown sack, and under the counter...it was like pornography” and stated that he would be called a “[N\*\*\*\*\*] lover” (as quoted in T. Cohen, 2000). Similar to the aforementioned skit involving Bieber addressing Canadian “nice-ness” (in Chapter 1), DJ Red Robinson also explained: “You see in Canada, we're a little smug. We think that we didn't have racial discrimination, but yes we did...Louis Armstrong [was not allowed to stay at] Hotel

Vancouver [because of his skin colour]” (as quoted in Capone, 2017). Hegemonic beliefs that Canada did not exercise racism were false. Racism in Canada stunted the development of Canadian R&B music and pushed Black artists outside of physical spaces and sonic airwaves.

Although Black Canadian Eleanor Collins, became known as “Canada’s first lady of jazz” in the 1950s, the Canadian Federal government waited 64 years before inducting her into the Order of Canada in 2014:

Eleanor Collins is a supremely talented vocalist who changed the face of race relations in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Vancouver. In 1948, she was ostracized upon moving into one of the city’s predominantly white neighbourhoods. She...became a civic leader and pioneer in the development of British Columbia’s music industry. Celebrated for her extensive career as a jazz singer with CBC Radio and Television, she became the first Black artist in North America to host a nationally broadcast television series. (The Governor General of Canada, 2014)

Facing a racist Canadian entertainment industry, Collins fought to represent Black Canadians in broadcast media. In a 1988 interview, Collins said that her parents moved from the U.S.A. to Canada by “follow[ing] an ad in a newspaper [posted by the Canadian government that said]...come to Canada. 165 acres will be yours. All that is required is that you pay 10 dollars and promise to cultivate the land” (ST40TV, 2011). For Black U.S. citizens, land ownership at an affordable cost seemed like a good offer. Nonetheless, Black people continued to be ostracized in a racist Canadian society. “Collins faced racism when she moved to B.C. Her white neighbours once petitioned against her Black family living in the same area. In response, Eleanor Collins volunteered as a music teacher at her children’s school to break down barriers” (Global News Hour, 2022). Although Collins was challenged for owning land and building a home in B.C., the land that white Canadians claimed to be theirs was also problematic. The Canadian government industrialized and populated this land already inhabited by Indigenous people to push them out of their settlements. Therefore, racial tensions continued in Canada, despite the influx of different racialized immigrants.

When the Black Lives Matter movement was reinvigorated by the death of George Floyd in 2020, Eleanor Collins, at the age of 102, finally received further recognition for her contributions to Canadian society: Canada Post, Canada’s national postal operator,

commemorated her on a postage stamp. However, when Canada Post announced this stamp, they undermined the racism faced by Black Canadians in Canada. Canada Post focused only on the racism Collins faced from a single “Swedish neighbour” and redirected the attention to racism in the U.S.A., stating:

Collins’ journey to national success did not come without its challenges. She confronted racial prejudice in her own way – at a time when Black citizens to the south were still living under racial segregation and harsh Jim Crow laws. After Collins and her family moved to Burnaby, B.C., a Swedish neighbour showed her a local petition that had tried to prevent her family from living there. (Canada Post, 2022)

By focusing on Black U.S. southerners who faced racial segregation under the U.S.A.’s Jim Crow Laws, Canada Post failed to acknowledge Canada’s own practices of racial segregation, Black slavery, and the permeation of racist ideologies in Canadian society. Although Eleanor Collins’ parents were from the southern U.S.A., Collins was a Canadian-born citizen who faced racism in Canada due to racist ideologies within Canada. She faced racism in more than just one instance and from more than just one “Swedish” neighbour, which should be acknowledged in how we think of her and how we celebrate her accomplishments. She should also be celebrated for the contributions she made to the growth of a Canadian R&B genre world through her creation of jazz and blues music and her collaborations with other Black Canadian artists like Oscar Peterson.

Black Canadian Oscar Peterson was born into a predominately Black community in Quebec to Caribbean immigrant parents. Peterson’s father worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway, which involved hard labour and long hours. He encouraged his children to play music to find better opportunities in society as Black Canadians, since “[i]n the 1930s, Black Canadians faced a hushed form of oppression. For the Petersons, music was an escape from dead-end jobs on the railroad and a shot at a better life” (Allen, 2003). So, Oscar Peterson developed his talent as a pianist and as a musical composer while performing at his school and at his local church. At the age of seventeen, Peterson joined a popular jazz group in Montreal called the Johnny Holmes Orchestra. Peterson was the only Black performer of the jazz group. When he went to perform with the group at Montreal’s Ritz Carlton Hotel, the hotel manager stated that he would not allow a Black musician like Peterson to perform on the stage (Allen, 2003). “The most influential Jazz

producer and promoter of the day, Norman Granz” heard Oscar performing on the radio and invited him, at 24 years old, to play at Carnegie Hall with Ray Brown (Allen, 2003). Following his performance, Peterson was then invited to tour the world with Jazz at the Philharmonic, a legendary show that included jazz greats such as Ray Brown, Buddy Rich, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, and Coleman Hawkins.

In 1962, Peterson wrote and performed the song “Hymn To Freedom,” which “became a crusade song of the civil rights movement and is frequently performed by choirs worldwide” (Toronto Symphony Orchestra). The adoption of Peterson’s song by U.S. civil rights leaders demonstrated a shared experience between Black Canadian and Black U.S. identities, who both struggled to fight racism in their respective countries. Building on Brian Ward’s (1998) argument that civil rights songs “offer[ed] a glimpse into the state of black consciousness [in the U.S.A.] and [their] struggle for freedom and equality” (p. 6), I argue that Peterson’s music offered a glimpse into the consciousness of many Black people, including Black Canadians, who struggled for freedom and equality. Bernice Johnson Reagon (2006) established that freedom songs provided a window into the cultural conditions through which they were created: “Freedom songs are documents created by a collective voice...by those hundreds of people who gathered as a part of that struggle...These songs are very important in capturing the culture.” Music became an especially viable way for Black people to express their lived experiences to wider audiences during a time when Black people were kept out of mainstream media.

Reagon (2006) argued that popular music created by Black people found greater political purpose during the Civil Rights Movements:

Young people pulled songs from the hit parade and used them as freedom songs...The dominant popular commercial music genres were folk and topical songs. The freedom songs and the Civil Rights Movement...charged the national music culture. Popular music followed the concerns that were raised about justice, about getting along with each other, about challenging injustice. Black and white musicians of the day explored those issues in their music.

Reagon argued that the political content of “challenging injustice” in freedom songs contributed to new themes that popular music addressed in the U.S.A. I have argued that in addition to shaping the U.S.A.’s popular music scene, Canadian artists like Oscar

Peterson played a role in shaping Canada's political consciousness by addressing important issues of anti-Black racism and the need for more equality and freedom.

Like Eleanor Collins, Oscar Peterson used the power of education to help stimulate support for music traditionally associated with people with Black identities and to break down Black and white racial barriers in Canada. Music genres associated with people with Black identities, like jazz and R&B, received less funding in Canada than music genres traditionally associated with white identities, like rock and folk. In addition to stunting the growth of these music genre worlds in Canada, Black artists received few opportunities for representation and upward mobility in the Canadian music industry. According to Nicholas Jennings (2015), in Peterson's "commitment to music education," he made "what is now regarded as a bold move [by opening] a school in Toronto in 1960 at a time when little formal instruction was available in the world of jazz." In the 1960s, Peterson established the Advanced School of Contemporary Music in Toronto, for students who wanted to learn jazz. The school played a prominent role in stimulating music in Toronto and increasing the visibility of Toronto in a global community because "as the school became more popular and well-known, students from all over the world travelled to Toronto to learn music at the school" (Stanford Live, 2019). However, like Eleanor Collins, Peterson's contributions to Canadian culture were long overlooked.

For example, in 2003 the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) issued a call to the community's residents to name a new high school. Responses were considerably in favour of naming the school in honour of Oscar Peterson, yet WRDSB claimed that since Peterson was still alive, he was ineligible for name consideration (Davis, 2017). Instead, the school was named after Sir John A. Macdonald. Peterson was aged 78 at the time of the ruling and passed away just 4 years later in 2007. Teneile Warren (2020) challenged WRDSB for exercising racism and provided evidence that white Canadian figures were alive when schools were named after them:

schools across Canada [have been] named in honour of white Canadian figures who were alive at the time of their name[ing], and some are still alive today. Our current Minister of Transport, Marc Garneau has two schools named after him: Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute in Toronto, Ontario, and the E.S.P Marc Garneau in Trenton, Ontario. Astronaut Chris Hadfield has four different public

schools in Ontario named in his honour. So, it begs the question why not Oscar Peterson? Black people know the answer to that.

Due to the centrality of white Canadian perspectives in the recording of Canada's history, many valuable contributors to Canadian culture have been overlooked, ignored, and forgotten. Oscar Peterson helped build pride for Canadian culture, promoted Black Canadian identities, and stimulated the Canadian music industry while "MacDonald held dominion over Canada's mission to eradicate the First Nations of this land, and was responsible for overseeing the establishment of residential schooling" (Warren, 2020). An attempt was made by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario in 2017 to remove Sir John A. MacDonald's name from public schools in Ontario due to his role in supporting the oppression and genocide of Indigenous peoples. This proposal was rejected. According to Warren (2020), the failure to remove MacDonald's name from the school was "a telling testament to white supremacy and its commitment to upholding the structures on which it [was] founded. We cannot continue to laud historical figures who [were] responsible for genocide as founding fathers and pioneers." Like Collins, Peterson finally received some recognition for his contributions to Canadian music with the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2020s. Instead of a postage stamp, in 2022, Peterson's face was plastered on a one-dollar Canadian coin to celebrate his achievements as "a Canadian Legend [and a]...vehicle for change" (Royal Canadian Mint, 2022). In 2020, the Royal Conservatory School that Peterson originally founded was renamed the Oscar Peterson School of Music. In the fall of 2022, the school began a scholarship called the Oscar Peterson Program to offer free music instruction to underserved youth. Unfortunately, this recognition came after Peterson passed away.

### 2.3 1950s "Black Music": "Loving Black Culture Has Never Meant Loving Black People, Too"

During the 1950s, many U.S. radio advertisers supported radio stations that only played white pop, rock, and country artists while trying to reach white audiences (George, 1988) who were considered to have more buying power, better-paid jobs, more rights, and more opportunities than non-white audiences. In a vicious cycle, white artists would then receive more financial power and public visibility and perpetuate the hegemonic views



that Canadian music includes only white folk, rock, and country artists. Therefore, many Black Canadian R&B artists lacked radio support.

The few stations that played Black artists alongside white artists were primarily owned by white producers who controlled the representation of people with Black identities on these media channels. Rather than giving Black music industry personnel airtime, some radio stations gave them jobs to train “white deejay[s] to sound Black,” which, according to Nelson George (1988), “was blackface broadcasting in the extreme” (p. 52). Like minstrel performances in the 19th century, white deejays in the 1950s used codes that they believed would articulate Black identities, including accents and slang terminology.

In the U.S.A., Alan Freed played “R&B records on his Cleveland radio show in 1951, at a time when stations that targeted white listeners ignored black artists...[and] called [the music] ‘rock ‘n’ roll’” (Duke, 2014). Although Freed offered Black artists an opportunity to gain listeners on a U.S. radio station, he was also involved in payola scandals in which he accepted bribes for playing artists’ music. Later payola bribes included “hookers and blow...sports tickets, trips, [and] sneakers [for airtime]” (Leight, 2019b) and “one manager...[recalls having] spent approximately \$10,000 through a third party...paying radio DJs in the ‘urban’ and rhythmic formats to play a single” (Leight, 2019b). Hence, Black artists or artists participating in R&B remained in precarious positions across the U.S.A. and Canada.

Mark Anthony Neal (1999) argued that when race records “emerged on radio airwaves,” they became “a catalyst to advertise and sell to black audiences” (p. 17). By promoting music genres to exclusively Black markets, a music industry infrastructure was created for Black artists who remained on the periphery of mainstream society. These included popularity charts such as the “Harlem Hit Parade” in the 1940s. Tuma Basa, Director of Black Culture at YouTube, whom I interviewed, (2020) noted that a distinctly Black music chart allowed people with Black identities to gain some representation, visibility, and recognition in an industry dominated by white artists. Although ideologies of a “Black” identity and a “Black” lifestyle are signifiers that are under “constant contestation” (p. 29) according to Stuart Hall (1992), he contended that strategic

essentialism, “through which [multiple dimensions of Blackness] were condensed onto the signifier ‘black’” was a strategy required by Black people “to try to win some space” within hegemonic struggles. This is one way of thinking about how some Black artists chose to group themselves together in a distinctly Black genre style, to “win some space” in popular culture. However, these music genres were often limited to Black radio stations and record stores that were only accessible to Black people (L. Jones, 1963). A distinctly Black music chart created a space to celebrate Black life, but that space remained on the periphery of the Canadian and U.S. entertainment industries.

White radio engineer and music producer Sam Phillips opened an independent-record company and recording studio in Memphis in the 1950s to help Black artists record R&B (Thornton, 2013). The Memphis Recording Service was just a block away from Beale Street, the heart of the Memphis music scene. This recording studio was one of the few places in the South dedicated to recording Black talent (Menand, 2015). Sam Phillips recorded Riley King, under his radio name, B.B. King, a singing disc jockey on Memphis WDIA, the first all-Black radio station in the U.S.A. Following the success of Phillips’s production of Ike Turner’s “Rocket 88” in 1951, Turner “became Phillips’ unofficial talent scout, scouring the Mississippi Delta for acts” (Thornton, 2013). Turner identified how Phillips created a safe environment for Black artists in his recording studio and said: “I never felt any prejudice, [Phillips] you [never]...made me feel black, made me feel afraid, made me feel like I had to sit over there, or come around through the back door” (R. Pearce, 2003). Spaces that made Black people feel safe were few and far between in the southern U.S.A.; Phillips had little support in running an independent record company with primarily Black artists. Phillips even said that white artists would make racist comments when they came into his recording studio, where Black artists also recorded R&B music: “They could not understand why I was out here fooling around with a bunch of [N\*\*\*\*\*s]...they would come in and say, ‘well you must not have had a session yesterday...either that, or you use a lot of deodorant’” (R. Pearce, 2003). Racist beliefs that Black people smelled and were unkempt shaped the perception of the value of their music. In part, because R&B music has been traditionally associated with Black people, “R&B” was long undervalued in U.S. and Canadian society.

Phillips made the decision to start recording white artists singing “R&B” songs and marketed the music as “Rock ‘n’ Roll” to white audiences to generate more profit. Jerry Wexler argued that marketing R&B was difficult: “We were after a black man who would translate [R&B] to the white audience, [but Sam Phillips] had a bigger vision. He was looking for a white man and...that’s what Elvis did, he [sold] them the gift of Black music” (Thornton, 2013). Phillips recorded Elvis Presley singing R&B music and sold the record as Rock ‘n’ Roll—a re-classification intended to sidestep the racializing force of “R&B.”

A conversation between Ike Turner and Sam Phillips revealed the potential harm of commodifying R&B as Rock ‘n’ Roll music performed by white artists. Turner stated: "Back then music that we [Black people] played was called race records. And, you got the idea of getting some white kids to sing Black music, and this started Rock N’ Roll?" (R. Pearce, 2003). Phillips agreed by stating, “Black people just were not [what] white people wanted.” Phillips argued that renaming “R&B” to “Rock ‘n’ Roll” and delivering it through a white artist helped make white audiences more receptive to music traditionally classified as Black music:

we were successful in changing...[white people’s] attitude[s]...[and] receptivity to something that was good all along[, R&B music]...Sun Records is bigger than me, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, [Roy] Orbison...we broaden[ed] the base of rhythm and blues, race music, spiritual music, gospel music, and if you please, - rock & roll. (R. Pearce, 2003)

In the same conversation with Phillips, Turner argued that white artists covering R&B music as “Rock ‘n’ Roll” music further pushed Black artists outside of mainstream media: “But all the Black people that were recording[,] they couldn’t get their records on white radio stations. You could. You did” (R. Pearce, 2003). As a result, white artists could exercise their white privilege to dominate mainstream media. Therefore, Black artists and traditional R&B music continued to be undervalued compared to popular white artists Rock ‘n’ Roll artists.

Turner then said, “all this stuff was Black style” to argue that Rock ‘n’ Roll originated from Black music” and Phillips responded: “sure, there was a lot of southern [styles]...[white artists learned] how to imitate...they didn’t copy what [Black people]

did...they borrowed heavily from [them]...is that not a compliment? That's what it took to make what ya'll were doing...accepted" (R. Pearce, 2003). Lisa Tomlinson, a cultural critic at the University of the West Indies, explained that when white people adopted the music styles created by Black people, Black identities became disassociated from the music style: "in a lot of cases, [when Black] music becomes mainstream, it becomes disassociated from Black experience and Black context" (Jancelewicz, 2019). I emphasize Phillips' use above of the words "borrowed" and "compliment" and draw on the arguments made by Tomlinson who stated: "cultural appropriation [is often]...reduce[d]...to just borrowing, or sampling[, which] sound like nice words because they sound like an equal exchange. But there's a power dynamic embedded in that borrowing" (Jancelewicz, 2019). A white face and voice were required to popularize the sounds and styles of R&B music.

Denise Oliver Velez (2021) argued that when white artists "borrowed," "lifted," and "copied" music from Black artists they "made money" and garnered "both commercial success and awards...while leaving the Black originators with far less, or nothing." Seamus McGarvey stated that Black artists had limited spaces in which they could perform (Guercio, 2014). As a result, music careers were less profitable for Black R&B singers than for white artists, who dominated music charts, television, and radio with their pop, folk, and rock covers.

Neal Umphred (2019) argued that "black rhythm & blues records and white 'cover versions'...would be played and purchased in two different marketplaces," where R&B music continued to be marketed to Black people while white "cover versions" were marketed to white people. For example, the internationally-successful Canadian vocal group The Crew Cuts' cover version of "Sh-Boom (Life Could Be a Dream)," was marketed as "traditional pop," and spent nine weeks at Number 1 on the U.S. pop charts in the summer of 1954 (Hilburn, 1996). The original song was released earlier that year on a cerise-coloured record, classified as R&B, by the all-Black U.S. group The Chords. However, The Chords were unable to achieve similar success and airplay in popular culture due to their racially Black identities and the classification of their music as R&B. According to Floyd 'Buddy' McRae, member of The Chords, "racism was very rough"

and “The Crew Cuts...covered Sh-Boom and they took it to number one because they were a white group” (Guercio, 2014). In the documentary, *The Chords: The Quest For Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame*, produced by Michael Guercio, the argument was made that the Black R&B group The Chords failed to get the recognition they deserved, while white pop groups, like The Crew Cuts, were inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame in 1984 based on the success they received from covering songs originally created by Black R&B artists.

According to Elaine Keillor (2006), The Crew Cuts were successful as “one of the first white Canadian groups to perform Black rhythm and blues hits” (p. 229), because they incorporated “Black-based traditions without antagonizing their largely white-based audiences” (p. 230). To explore how The Crew Cuts did not “antagonize” their white audience, I draw on Barry Grant’s (1986) argument that “[The Crew Cuts’] name suggests [that] the Canadian group managed to establish a clean-cut wholesome image which allowed them to ‘crossover’ both the border and the pop market and to achieve commercial success” (p. 117). The Crew Cuts both perpetuated and benefitted from hegemonic views that valued white identities and celebrated white pop music while profiting from R&B songs initially created by Black U.S. artists.

Robert Hilburn (1996) argued that The Crew Cuts “opened the door in 1955 to ‘cover’ versions of R&B; hits by such white pop groups as the Fontane Sisters (‘Hearts of Stone’) and the McGuire Sisters (‘Sincerely’), as well as such solo acts as Pat Boone.” Keillor (2006) listed other white Canadian groups that covered “some Black groups.” Umphred (2019) argued that The Crew Cuts pop covers of R&B music increased audiences’ exposure to R&B styles. As white artists asserted their privileged racial positions in a white and conservative music industry to commodify R&B, the popularization of their music promulgated R&B style, helping some Black artists in R&B eventually gain recognition and respect. However, I challenge Umphred’s argument that “the need for white covers of black hits evaporated,” because the word “evaporated” may connote the incorrect notion that Black people ceased to face any obstacles to participate in mainstream media. Even when some Black artists’ music appeared on charts, Black people continued experiencing racial oppression in the music industry. When Denise

Oliver Velez (2021) asserted that “Loving black culture has never meant loving black people, too,” she suggested that the popularization of Black music neither immediately translated to an improved treatment of Black people, nor that the music celebrated was necessarily understood to be associated with people with Black identities. Although Black music became more popular, it was commodified by white people, and Black people continued to be mistreated. Black U.S. musician Eugene Thompkins stated that music should be celebrated across racial divides “as long as you know where it actually comes from [and who the original creators are]. That’s [what’s important]” (Guercio, 2014). Ryan Edwardson (2009) uses The Crew Cuts as an example of what he calls “Whitewashing” (p. 29) in which white artists perform rock covers of R&B songs created by Black artists because “the recording industry had little interest in groups that fell outside of [the] template [of young, energetic, clean cut, and white groups] because the big money came from white performers recording the songs of marginalized black performers” (p. 29).

White Canadian music critic Chris Jancelewicz (2019) echoed these arguments in his article titled “The ‘whitewashing’ of Black music: A dark chapter in rock history” when he admitted his unawareness that many of the songs popularized by white artists were originally created by Black musicians:

As a white person born and raised in Canada, I’ve grown up believing that Janis Joplin wrote all of her biggest hits, as did the Beatles, Elvis Presley and any other big artist from the ‘60s and ‘70s...I know that most songs have multiple collaborators — but what isn’t clear in pop culture history is how many songs were written by Black people and only made ‘famous’ by white artists...This is not to say that you should stop listening to the classic rock you know and love. It’s to push forward an understanding of where it came from, its origins, its roots. To truly appreciate something, we need to grasp where it all began. So next time you pop on some tunes, why not look up the original songwriter and develop a whole new appreciation for the birth of the genre? It’s a part of music history many rock fans choose to ignore. So let’s stop ignoring.

I agree that everyone has the right to enjoy the music of all Canadian and U.S. music artists if they understand the power imbalances that occur when white artists “borrow” songs created by Black artists and if they are knowledgeable of the battles that many Black R&B artists have faced to gain audibility and visibility in Canada and the U.S.A. The contributions of racially diverse Canadian artists to R&B music should be

celebrated—but while I rap to Drake’s bars, sway to Bieber’s voice, and belt out Reyez’s lyrics, I reminded myself of the long struggles faced by many Black U.S. and Canadian artists who fought to have R&B pushed into mainstream media. As I participate in “contemporary Canadian R&B,” a genre world created by multicultural Canadian artists, I respect and appreciate the generations of Canadian and U.S. artists that fought for the development of this music by battling racism, oppression, and xenophobia.

When blues musician John Lee Hooker defined the blues as “a feeling” and claimed that “anybody can have the blues,” (Pop Rock on MV, 2014), he suggested that, irrespective of the racial or national identity of the performer, music has the power to create shared experiences. Sam Phillips noted that while there are differences between Black and white experiences, white artists could have some shared experiences with Black people: “[white artists in the South] were exposed to so many of the same things [as Black artists]...[but not to the same] extent that black people [were]” (R. Pearce, 2003). Phillips noted that while these experiences could be shared across racial lines, these experiences will nevertheless still be different and not experienced to the “same extent.” Black U.S. R&B artist B. B. King also recognized that white U.S. artist Elvis Presley had shared experiences with Black people, when he stated, “the new stuff was R&B sung by a good-looking white boy...Elvis didn’t steal any music from anyone. He just had his own interpretation of the music he’d grown up on” (B. B. King & Ritz, 1996/ 2011, p. 185-186). Elvis was celebrated for offering his interpretation of Black coded music.

Similarly, white Canadian artists were celebrated in Canada for providing their interpretations of R&B and blues music, rebranded as rock music. Timothy Rice and Tammy Gutnik (1995) argued that white Canadian rock and folk artist Bruce Cockburn “embrace[d]...forms, and styles [brought to Canada by immigrants] from India, Iran, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Latin America” (p. 253). However, they claimed that Cockburn stylized these songs in different ways (through Caribbean styles that also heavily influenced Canadian R&B specifically, as I have noted below). Cockburn commodified this music in ways inaccessible to the racialized musicians he “borrow[ed]” from. He did advocate for Native rights in “songs like ‘Stolen Land,’ ‘Indian Wars’ and ‘Red Brother’ [which] have brought the plight of the Indigenous peoples of North America and around

the world into focus in the mainstream” (Windle, 2014). Cockburn created music that influenced Canadian culture and helped push the narratives of racialized Canadian identities into popular culture through his white face and folk-rock voice.

Blues and R&B music also played an important role in constructing Canadian national narratives. In 1997, Nicholas Jennings proposed the idea that blues music was integral to a Canadian identity:

The blues...run through Canadian music as distinctly as the sounds of a train whistle in the Rockies. From Vancouver’s Powder Blues Band to the Maritimes’ own Dutch Mason Blues Band, the music has enjoyed a long-standing national following. Today the torch is carried by the likes of Colin James and Colin Linden, who are boarding the audience for the blues. (p. 241)

Canadian artists’ interpretations of blues music, such as Colin James’s and Colin Linden’s, widely contributed to Canadian music culture and to ideologies of Canadian-ness. I argue that the metaphorical “torch” that Jennings (1997) articulated has been passed to Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, whose interpretations of R&B music today have continued to help (re)define Canadian-ness. In what follows, I examine the careers of selected Canadian artists to highlight their individual struggles, privileges, and inspirations in participating in R&B music, contending that they have collectively contributed to musical conceptions of a distinctly Canadian identity.

## 2.4 1960s R&B: “So, You Do Indeed Like Being a Canadian?”

According to Rupert Harvey, during the 1960s, R&B music was popular in Canada, and it uniquely mixed with different music genre styles brought over by Caribbean immigrants:

When a lot of Caribbean, West Indian people came to this country... ‘Club Jamaica’ was the spot [the nightclub they would meet at]...there was always a love for R&B music and reggae...and jazz [at Club Jamaica] and other places like Le Coq d’Or Tavern. (NWC, 2018)

A wave of Caribbean immigrants moved to Canada in the 1960s and many resided in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) when “major amendments were made to Canada’s immigration legislation” (Statistics Canada, 2016). They mixed R&B, soca, dancehall,



and reggae in bars and nightclubs, while Canadian radio stations continued to be dominated by white rock and country musical artists. Although these “Caribbean and West Indian immigrants created “a highly charged R&B and soul [music scene]...they [were] afforded...limited opportunities—in terms of media exposure, touring opportunities, radio play and major label backing when compared to Canadian rock” (Patrick, 2006).

While many Canadian-Caribbean immigrants resided in Toronto and created R&B music, so too did many Black U.S. immigrants. For example, *Historica Canada* (2022) described Black U.S. R&B artist Jackie Shane as “a central figure to the Toronto R&B scene” that contributed to a distinctly “Toronto[nian] sound.” R&B has continued to be an important element of Toronto’s sound, but U.S. artists were given more opportunities to grow the Canadian R&B scene. On Yonge Street, a larger-than-life mural included a portrait of Jackie Shane to commemorate her contributions to Canadian R&B music as a Black U.S. “openly gay...crossdresser with a flair for fashion” (Banks, 2010). Her Black U.S. identity authenticated her performances as an R&B singer. Like white Canadian artists, Black U.S. artist Jackie Shane also covered other Black U.S. R&B artists’ music and incorporated “dramatic horns and stuttering drums” (Lowers, 2021).

According to Mike Doherty (2011), many Black R&B U.S. artists moved to Canada in search of a better life, with less racism: “Yonge Street traces the history of the strip from the ‘50s, when African-American musicians, fed up with segregation, would find welcoming audiences at R&B clubs such as the Edison Hotel.” Jackie Shane explained that she faced less racism in Canada than in the U.S.A. She said,

Although I was born in and now live in the U.S.A., I do not recognize the United States as my country...There’s a reason I will always say Toronto is my hometown, you see. I came from the South during a time where Jim Crow was happening...It was a place where an African person couldn’t sit beside a white person in public. (as quoted in Iabbacci, 2017)

Shane called Canada her home because, compared to the racism she faced in Nashville, she felt more accepted in Canada. However, one of Shane’s band members explained that “if you were an entertainer you could get in [places] no problem [and] if you weren’t an entertainer the racism was there,” since Black and white people entered buildings through

different doors to follow racial segregation practices in Canada (Banks, 2010). Black performers had certain privileges that other Black Canadians did not. Black U.S.-Canadian blues artist, Phyllis Marshall, who performed with artists like Peterson, suggested that she may have circumvented racial prejudice by being an entertainer:

in Canada and Europe, I've never [faced prejudice]...Being coloured, I certainly wouldn't even consider living in the United States...I know some of my coloured friends and family have experienced prejudice right here in Toronto, but I never have. Maybe it's because I'm in show business. (CBC, 1960)

Despite the Canadian music industry continuing to exercise prejudice against racially diverse Canadian R&B artists, and non-white people more generally, Shane's and Marshall's intersectional identities may have offered them uniquely positive experiences in Canada as Black performers. The Canadian music industry may have also treated them more positively because these artists upheld the hegemonic belief that R&B music is created exclusively by Black artists. To fill this gap in the Canadian market for R&B music, Canadian music industry gatekeepers offered Shane and Marshall opportunities to perform R&B. This likely drew on the idea that Black U.S. artists created authentic R&B (even though Marshall was born in Canada of U.S. parents). Canadian media gatekeepers may have also offered Shane and Marshall more visibility because of their positive descriptions about Canada being less racist than the U.S.A., which upheld a hegemonic belief of Canada as a place of equal opportunity for everyone.

Although comparisons to racism in the U.S.A. may frame racial discrimination in Canada as less frequent or intensive, these comparisons have also helped to reveal how racism in Canada has been more covert and systemic. For example, one of Shane's band members stated that racism did exist in Canada, but it was less overt: "there wasn't the overt racism in Canada that there was in the States, we are working a lot of us in mixed raced bands, white, black didn't matter here as much, the racism was still here no doubt about that[,] but covert not overt" (Banks, 2010). Many studies have examined how Canada's covert racism has been hard to detect because it has been embedded in Canadian infrastructural systems that uphold white privilege (CBC News, 2021; Fonseca, 2020; Marom, 2019; Nkrumah, 2022; E. Samuel & Burney, 2003). Covert racism could be exercised through colour blindness "including [the] denial (or evasion) of White privileges in society

and...the existence of racism and rejection of the belief that social policies are needed to eradicate the negative consequences of institutional forms of racism” (Neville et al., p. 67). Lesley Jacobs (2011) described how comparisons between racism in the U.S.A. and Canada have often led to covert racism in Canadian being overlooked.

My TEDx talk discussed how covert racism has led many people with non-white, Canadian-born identities, like myself, to face slight interrogations every day about the authenticity of their Canadian identity (TEDx Talks, 2017). Although I was born in Canada, my brown skin has challenged the hegemonic belief that Canadians are exclusively white. In turn, when I have been asked “Where are you from?” and I have replied “Canada,” I am often subsequently asked, “Where are you really from?” Hegemonic beliefs of Canadians as exclusively white have often led people to challenge my authenticity as someone with a Canadian identity. Sunera Thobani (2007) argued that although “non-preferred races...acquired increased access to [Canadian] citizenship...their...unequal rights have been maintained through their ideological designation as immigrants, newcomers, new Canadians, and visible minorities” (p. 79). Thobani (2007) argued that the term “immigrant” was immediately associated with a racialized Other in Canada’s national imaginary:

The category immigrant undermines the very notion of the nation as a homogenous entity, as well as of the nation as a non-racial entity. It reveals the heterogeneous nature of the population by drawing attention to the presence of racial Others within the nation’s psychosocial and physical space...the racialized category immigrant also paradoxically helps sustain the myth of the nation as homogenous, by constructing as perpetual strangers those to whom the category is assigned...[including] second or third generation Canadian-born citizens. (p. 76)

The ideology that the Canadian nation is a racially homogenous group, unified as white people, positions racialized Others outside of Canada’s national imaginary. I bring Dyer’s (2017) argument that an unmarked “white” identity is defined in relation to a “raced” identity into dialogue with Thobani’s (2007) argument that a hegemonic Canadian identity is defined in relation to a racialized immigrant identity. People with white Canadian identities have been positioned as the norm and racialized immigrants have been positioned as Othered in order to uphold that norm.

A blatant example of the exclusion of Canadian-born racialized identities from Canada's cultural imaginary occurred in 1961, when then Canadian Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent argued that Canadian-born Japanese people were excluded from the cultural imaginary. St. Laurent stated that "blood is thicker than water" (Robinson, 2009) in response to the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War Two. Despite becoming formal citizens, non-white Canadian immigrants and natives have been excluded from Canada's national imaginary.

Although formally removed from immigration policies by the 1960s, the ideology of preferred races continued to shape the organization of Canada. For example, John Porter published a text called "The Vertical Mosaic" (1964) that provided statistical analyses of how white Anglo-Saxon Protestant British people dominated the top occupational positions in Canada and argued that they had more opportunities for social mobility and education in comparison to people with non-white Canadian identities. Building on Porter's (1964) and Thobani's (2007) arguments, I argue that in the 1960s, cultural practices associated with Black people, like R&B music, and non-white Canadian artists continued to be perceived as inauthentic representations of Canadian culture.

For example, Phyllis Marshall was born in Canada to two Black U.S. parents; however, in an interview with Allan Anderson in 1960, he challenged her claim as a Canadian when asking: "So, you do indeed like being a Canadian?" to which she replied "Yes, because I am Canadian...in fact, I am more than most, you see I'm not only part Negro, I'm one-third North American Indian...Mohawk" (CBC, 1960). Marshall argued that her mixed raced identity made her more authentically Canadian than other Black women. She somewhat excused her "Negro" identity and emphasized her "North American Indian" identity to authenticate her claim as a Canadian. Following Goffman's (1959) impression management theory, in which a performer could emphasize one of their masks—one of their social roles—at any given time to make their performance more authentic, I argue that Marshall emphasized her Mohawk mask, or social identity, and deemphasized her "Negro" identity to perform a more believable role as a Canadian. Her intersectional identity enabled her to exercise impression management in ways that built her authenticity as a Canadian. Despite being Canadian-born, her Black U.S. parents

positioned her, and presumably her music, as more authentically R&B because they helped uphold the hegemonic belief that R&B music is created by Black U.S. artists.

Beyond Toronto, Canadian cities like Calgary and Vancouver had mixed-raced R&B groups (Iabbari, 2017) that challenged hegemonic norms of an exclusively white Canadian population and of R&B as an exclusively U.S. cultural practice. Among the most successful were The Shades, who epitomized Canada's racially diverse R&B talent. An R&B group from Calgary who named themselves after the racial slur used to describe Black people due to the racism they faced in Canada, their members were: "Tommie, a descendant of [enslaved Black people]; Dick Bird, a Native American from the Sarcee tribe; and [Tommy Chong], of Chinese-Scottish-Irish descent. Together...[they] represented these different shades of [skin] color" (Chong, 2008, p. 20). After joining forces with Bobby Taylor, the band called themselves Bobby Taylor & the Vancouvers and were signed to the Black-owned Motown Records in Detroit. They produced a song about an interracial couple called "Does Your Mama Know About Me" (1968), which peaked at number 5 on Billboard's R&B chart. The band toured with Diana Ross and the Supremes (Mackie, 2017), and when they performed in Chicago in 1968, the Jackson 5 was their opening act (Billboard, 2017). This success story illustrates how talented Canadian R&B artists have long existed, despite being mostly unsupported in Canada.

## 2.5 Colour Coding the Term "Urban"

Black U.S. radio host Frankie Crocker has been credited with creating the term "urban contemporary" in the 1970s to replace R&B as a problematic descendant of "race music," in order to help mix Black and white music, musicians, and listeners in one radio show (M. Williams, 2000). "Race music...encompass[ed]...any music performed by [B]lack artists" (Murphy, 2018) and by re-labelling the music genre category from race to urban, the music could then be more easily remarketed to both Black and white audiences.

Music journalist Andrew Clark (1999) argued that the term urban did make music created by Black people more marketable to white audiences: "The label 'urban'...serve[d] as a veiled reference for any musical style that is predominantly performed by black musicians...by using such a racially neutral term, record companies can sell black music

to white fans” (p. 44). Urban became a rebranding tool to market music traditionally classified as “Black music” to racially white audiences.

In the 1990s, Nicole Chrysostom, Urban Music Representative at BMG Canada, also understood that the term urban was created in an attempt to eliminate the alienation of white audiences from music created by Black people when she stated: “in Canada, you cannot run around calling [music made by Black people] black music...you would alienate a large section of consumers” (as quoted in Clark, 1999, p. 44). Some music industry gatekeepers attempted to desegregate audiences by making music created by Black artists more marketable through the term urban. However, Director of Black Culture at YouTube, Tuma Basa, told me in our interview in 2020 that the music genre category “urban,” ultimately became a term that was “weaponized to regulate Black music, to box it in” to prevent Black artists from participating in other genres.

The problematic term “urban” continues to be used in 2023. For example, The Metro Metro Festival in Montreal, Quebec is described as “a highly anticipated three-day urban music festival” (Metro Metro, 2023a) intended to “become a staple in the Canadian hip-hop/rap scene.” In 2023, the festival features artists of different ethnicities, but headliners tend to be almost always male U.S. artists including: Black U.S. artists Lil Wayne; U.S. artist Jack Harlow of French, Jewish, and Irish descent; Black U.S. artist Lil Baby; and Australian-U.S. artist The Kid Laroi, of French-Aboriginal descent. Hence, the term “urban” continued to be employed by some Canadian music industry gatekeepers in ways that perpetuated views of hip-hop/rap as a hegemonically U.S. cultural practice.

## 2.6 1980s And 1990s Intersectionality in Hip-Hop

When Black Canadian artist Maestro Fresh Wes became a prominent figure in U.S. hip-hop in the early 1990s, radio announcer Alix Spiegel complained that “[Maestro Fresh Wes] delivers information about America to Americans. He interprets our culture for us. It’s like having some Czechoslovakian as your vice president. It’s just wrong” (as quoted in Villamere, 2017, p. 132). Nevertheless, Maestro Fresh Wes proved that he could relate to U.S. audiences through hip-hop when his song “Let Your Backbone Slide” (1989) reached number 13 on the U.S. Billboard Hot Rap Singles chart. Maestro Fresh Wes also

acknowledged the disbelief that Canadian artists could participate in hip-hop by titling his fourth studio album *Naaah, Dis Kid Can't Be from Canada?! (1994)*. Like Maestro Fresh Wes, Black Canadian hip-hop artist Infinite, a former member of the Canadian rap group Ghetto Concept, argued that when he visited the U.S.A. in the early 1990s, people there told him: “Ya’ll don’t look like you from Canada [because of your skin colour]. You look like you from Queens, you look like you from Brownsville” (Entertainment Report Podcast, 2020). Hegemonic beliefs that Canadians are exclusively white and practice pop, rock, and folk music had rendered Black Canadian artists as seemingly inauthentic participants in hip-hop and R&B music.

Before Maestro Fresh Wes, Michie Mee’s collaborative album with DJ L.A. Luv titled *Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style (1991)* also challenged hegemonic beliefs that Canadians were exclusively white and did not rap. The artist Michie Mee was born in Jamaica, but raised in Toronto. When CBC reporter David Kitching interviewed her, he stated: “When you think of rap you immediately relate it [to] American Black music[,] but you’re Canadian, you’re from Jamaica” (CBC, 1989). Michie Mee responded by suggesting that she approached hip-hop through her unique cultural influences in Canada and through her Jamaican background: “I add a lot of reggae to it...influenced by reggae, hip-hop [in Canada]” (CBC, 1989). When Michie Mee first expressed her interest in hip-hop to U.S. music producer Scott La Rock, Michie Mee said he replied: “shut up y’all don’t rap in Canada. Ain’t no hip-hop in Canada and you a female” (CBC Radio 2, 2011). A lack of diverse gendered representation in Canadian and U.S. hip-hop media added another element of struggle for Michie Mee to build authenticity as a Black Canadian female rapper. Michie Mee then started “spitting” rap bars, which impressed Scott La Rock enough to work with her and make her the first Canadian MC/rapper to sign with a U.S. record label. Michie Mee described how her gendered identity as a woman, her national identity as a Canadian, and her racialized Caribbean immigrant identity prevented her from being fully accepted in hip-hop:

The hardest thing for me coming up was I was a woman, I was an immigrant from Jamaica...and it was hip-hop...it was a man’s world...one of those three things could move against you...A, you’re a girl, B, you’re Jamaican...you...wear tablecloths...or [C,] you’re Canadian...[people asked] ‘they have ghettos in Canada?’ (CBC Radio 2, 2011)

Michie Mee argued that hegemonic views of Black U.S. male rappers excluded her intersecting Black Caribbean-Canadian female identity and positioned her interpretations of hip-hop as inauthentic. To examine how an artist's gendered, nationalized, and racialized identities render their authenticity in music genre categories and in Canada's national imaginary, I have employed the theoretical framework of intersectionality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectional experience” (p. 139) to describe how individuals that are classified as “Black” and “woman” face racism and sexism uniquely. Crenshaw used intersectionality to “bring to light dynamics within discrimination law” that often ignored how gendered and racialized identities intersect and interact to shape an individual's particular social experiences (Coaston, 2019). Intersectionality has been a valuable tool to explore how individuals are rendered as inauthentic participants in R&B based on juxtaposing ideologies of nationality, race, and gender. Although “intersectionality” has since been applied to the intersection of many other identities, I have considered how the term has also been misused in recent scholarship to avoid common pitfalls.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) argued that “race and gender [should not be studied] as separate or additive, but as simultaneous and linked” (p. 7) in shaping an individual's experience. Michie Mee was not first recognized as Black and then as a woman, or first perceived as a woman and then as Black; her racialized Blackness and her gendered woman-ness simultaneously shaped how she has been perceived in the music industry. Jane Coaston (2019) stated that intersectional theory can be misused as a “caste system” to rank identities through positions of the most oppressed or least oppressed. Although I have examined how some racialized or nationalized grouped identities have more power than others in certain situations throughout this dissertation, I have done so only to highlight hegemonic views of R&B music and Canadian identities. However, following Ijeoma Oluo's (2018) argument that “each of us has a myriad of identities—our gender, class, race, sexuality, and so much more—that inform our experiences in life and our interactions in the world” (p. 75), I have acknowledged how individuals have a unique set of identities that intersect and interact, creating both privilege and oppression in different environments at different times. For example, I will explore how Bieber's whiteness



offers him certain privileges to gain more visibility in Canadian mainstream media but his whiteness also becomes weaponized as a reason for his exclusion in “R&B” music. In addition to their Canadian-ness, Drake’s biracial identity and Reyez’s Latina and female identities complicate and challenge their acceptance in “R&B.” That said, hegemonic beliefs about certain identities, like race and nationality, have contributed to the evaluation of that individual’s authenticity in participating in cultural practices like hip-hop and R&B music.

In the 1980s, Ron Nelson hosted rap competitions, or what fans called “Monster Jams,” to forge relationships between Canadian and U.S. hip-hop scenes (Ritchie, 2017) and to help build the perception that Canadian artists were authentic participants in hip-hop. A substantial piece of evidence that these battles helped to increase awareness of Canadian hip-hop artists was documented on the inside cover of the ground-breaking studio album *Criminal Minded* (1987) by hip-hop group Boogie Down Productions, which included Scott La Rock, KRS-One, and D-Nice. Maestro Fresh Wes stated in an interview that the album cover included a “shout out to Ron Nelson and the Toronto posse...[which] was the changing of the guard [for Toronto hip-hop]...that was like the Bronx, where hip-hop originated...talking about us...we already knew we were dope but now...the world is actually...acknowledging us” (The Strombo Show, 2018). Although Canadian artists appreciated the acknowledgement that they received from U.S. artists, Maestro inadvertently implied the notion that Canadians were participating in music styles that was “originally” created in the U.S.A. In this dissertation I am interested in how racially diverse Canadians have been excluded from R&B and hip-hop based on hegemonic beliefs that these genres are exclusively practiced by Black and U.S. artists. This hegemonic belief has often rendered Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists as inauthentic participants in the genre space because they appear to be copying the “original” Black U.S. creators. Rather, I believe that as a performative art, R&B music can be experienced and participated in regardless of one’s racialized or nationalized identity.

For example, Drake discussed how despite not knowing the “origins” of the “Toronto mans” who inspired his and others’ distinctly Torontonian accent and particular ways of

life in Toronto, Drake's accent and values have ultimately been “nurtured” by Torontonians and “naturally” shaped by his personal beliefs:

it's just hardwiring...it's the lifelong argument of nature vs nurture...[it's] both... what values, what things were you raised on...like our accents...[how] we...all sound...being from Toronto [is just] because of...a place that we're from...I don't know who started talking like that but...I literally want to meet the first Toronto mans of all time. I don't know who he is. I don't know where he got that accent from. I don't know any of that I just...know that...he's influenced all of us and now...I'm like a full father talking like internet memes because that's my upbringing...traditions and values. (FUTUREMOOD, 2023)

Drake suggested that his lived intersectional experiences in Toronto “nurtured” his everyday behaviours and that his interests “naturally” contributed to his values and traditions. Being surrounded by certain lifestyles in Toronto at the specific time in which he lived there, Drake's age and his geographical location determined his exposure to social interactions that “influence” how he has approached everyday communications including speaking through “memes” and having a certain “accent.” While I argue that it is important to understand the histories of any cultural practice, I also recognize that by evaluating the authenticity of someone's participation in a cultural practice—based on its or their “origins” as anchored to a particular location or intersectional identity—offers an ineffective or incomplete understanding of how that cultural practice could be interpreted by other intersectional identities or exercised in other spaces, locations, and times. In fact, by describing his culture with words like “nature” and “hardwiring” even as he acknowledged “nurture,” Drake also fell prey to the essentialism lurking deep below so many authenticity claims. Therefore, an artist's racialized or nationalized identity should not determine their authenticity within a music genre world. An artists' exposure to and their interest in these music genre styles have been unaccounted for if music genres exclusively group artists based on their racialized, gendered, or national identities.

## 2.7 CRTC Blocks Black-Owned Radio Licensing: “Musically...We are the Last Slaves Freed”

In 1999, when Michie Mee said “musically...we are the last slaves freed” (as quoted in Clark, 1999, p. 45), she was metaphorically describing how racist Canadian music industry gatekeepers had, up to that point, continuously rejected applications for a single

“urban” radio station. This section examined the painful process through which Toronto achieved its first Black-owned, urban genre radio station in 2003. According to Kisrene McKenzie (2009), “the majority of the mainstream radio stations in Toronto did not play” music including “reggae, hip-hop and R&B” which in turn stunted the growth of the Canadian R&B genre world. Artists, audiences, and music gatekeepers could mostly participate in these genres through local “university and college radio stations” with limited reach, or through the physical exchanges of records, cassettes and CDs during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In seeking to comprehend how it took more than half a century for the multicultural metropolis of Toronto to get a Black-owned commercial radio station, I also delve into the history of Canadian cultural policy around multiculturalism.

### 2.7.1 The CRTC’s First Rejection of a Single Black-Owned Urban Radio Station: There’s “No Black Music Being Played”

In 1971, Can-Con regulations and the Multicultural Policy were put in place to develop a distinctly Canadian identity, invigorate Canadian pride, and create a music industry that could stand apart from the U.S.A. (Ross, 2018). Twenty years later, however, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) rejected the first application for a Black-owned, urban-dedicated radio station in Canada. Toronto photojournalist Rick McGinnis (2016) expressed that “there [was] a scene [,] an audience and plenty of momentum, but radio was still ignoring local hip hop and black music in general.”

Denham Jolly, a first-generation Canadian-Jamaican businessman, identified two gaping holes in Toronto’s music industry in the 1980s: “[One,] the lack of a local rap, jazz and world-beat [radio] station that reflected [Toronto’s] multiracial population and [two,] the lack of any black owners in the local broadcasting industry” (Schneider, 1997). Jolly stated that Canada needed a Black-owned, urban radio station because “there were a lot of promising Black artists but no Black music being played on any radio stations in Toronto — it was forbidden on some stations” (as quoted in Gaviola, 2020). When I interviewed Warner Music Canada Representative Donald Robins in 2020, he said that many Black Canadian artists were “hopping the border” and crossing over to the U.S.A. to find success because the U.S. music industry was bigger, older, and richer. Robins

stated that U.S. talent often outcompeted Canadian artists. Music scholar Alan Cross explained that Canadian artists were perceived as “substandard [that they] weren’t as good as what was coming out of the United States, and they weren’t as good as what was coming out of Britain” (Ross, 2018).

Stan Klees, one of the founders of RPM magazine and The Juno Awards (as discussed in Chapter 1), proposed Canadian Content rules (Can-Con) that were established in 1971, to provide funding opportunities and airtime for Canadian entertainers. The laws were intended to preclude the need for “border-hopping” practices, keep Canadian talent within Canada, stimulate Canada’s music industry, and support the growth of Canada’s culture and economy. Can-Con regulations have continued to require Canadian radio, television, and advertisement companies to incorporate a certain percentage of Canadian content into their programming (Chandler, 2022). Klees stated that “on January 18, 1971, after the press release came out that Canadian content was law, an executive came in that afternoon from RCA...said ‘This thing that you people are doing is against the law. It’s censorship!’” (as quoted in Capone, 2014). As Can-Con laws potentially expand to online platforms (Tuccille, 2022). Although Canada's Broadcasting Act, funded by the Canadian Government, “[set] out objectives to ensure that Canadian broadcasting content meets the needs and interests of Canadians,” it has been government gatekeepers that have had the power to determine what is in the best “interests” of the Canadian citizens. Rob Bowman (2018) attempted to explain why Canadian music industry gatekeepers enacted Can-Con laws to support white rock artists over Black hip-hop artists as follows:

the [Canadian music] industry at all levels [had] been dominated by white people...[who] came up in a world dominated by rock music...[it] doesn’t mean there is prejudice they just don’t even get it or think about it. It’s about numbers...if Canada [were] 50% white and 50% Black we might see a different world...we had great hip hop artists...Dream Warriors, Maestro, Michie...[who] never got what they should’ve or...what they might have had at a later period [or] what they might have had if they were based out of New York and not Toronto.

I agree that many Black Canadian artists did not receive the support they might have in the U.S.A., partly because the U.S.A. has a larger music industry infrastructure. Canadian hip-hop artists might have received more recognition at a later period, in part because Canada has begun to finally start recognizing the significant contributions that these

artists have made to Canadian culture. When Bowman argued that many white Canadians grew up with rock music and chose to support rock music because they “didn’t even think about” supporting other music genres, I argue that due to the overrepresentation of rock music in Canadian media, there continued to be a lack of awareness about music genre styles like hip-hop and R&B. However, people who hold power in regulating Canadian broadcast media should have “thought about” Canada’s diverse population and helped Canadian media accurately reflect Canadians’ growing interest in hip-hop and R&B music. I dispute Bowman’s claim that prejudice was not a significant factor when white Canadian music industry gatekeepers chose to support white rock artists instead of hip-hop or R&B artists. As a result, many talented racialized Canadian artists continued to “border hop” in the 1990s.

According to Ryan Patrick (2006), Canadian music industry gatekeepers did not know what to do with artists who mixed traditionally separated music genre categories like “soul, R&B and hip-hop hybrids” and “[left] it to the artists themselves to break ground and build a DIY touring circuit all their own.” For example, in an interview with CBC (2000), Black Canadian hip-hop artist Chocclair explained that in the 1990s, he founded a record label to release his music and that of his peers. Kardi also described how they “were actually pressing those singles [themselves and shipped]...thousands and thousands of records internationally...London, and Japan, New York, all these places around the world that were like, ‘yo, we love the sound coming out of Toronto’” (Kardi as quoted in TVO, 2017). Chocclair and Saukrates’s track “Father Time” (1995) attracted the attention of Warner Brothers in the U.S.A. and led Saukrates to sign a record deal with them. Subsequently, other Canadian artists in their group, like Kardi and Michie Mee also signed with U.S. music labels.

Michie Mee argued that, especially prior to the internet, Canadian artists had to travel to the U.S. to break into the music industry: “back then we didn’t have Internet...we actually had to go to Manhattan, go to the Bronx, go to Brooklyn, and be part of the scene” (r e z, 2009). Kardi echoed these sentiments when he described having to physically relocate to network with people in the music industry: “the whole [music] foundation for me was built pre-Internet. We actually had to go out there and meet people

face-to-face” (as quoted in Kameir, 2015). Dream Warriors illustrated the difficulties they faced in trying to network and market themselves before the internet: “the communication was so distant for us, being in Canada, in Jane-and-Finch, trying to get a message out to the world...Now people can push a button on Twitter and be instantly together” (as quoted in C. Pearce, 2011). Before the internet was invented, many artists, music video producers, radio deejays, and advocates struggled to forge the relationships needed to popularize Canadian R&B and hip-hop music. Many Canadians in positions of power had continually failed to support Canadian R&B and hip-hop music talents.

While some Canadians in Toronto accessed R&B through border radio stations or the few local college radio stations (The Strombo Show, 2018; Gladwell, 2020), other Canadians, like hip-hop artist Michie Mee, physically travelled to Buffalo to purchase rap records (CBC Radio 2, 2011). Local college radio stations played hip-hop and R&B music, but these stations lacked the same promotional support as mainstream media. Ron Nelson’s radio show (CKLN 88.1 FM) called Fantastic Voyage Show on Ryerson University [re-named Toronto Metropolitan University in 2022<sup>6</sup>] was a popular local college radio station that featured many Torontonians hip-hop and R&B acts including tracks by Michie Mee, Dream Warriors, Maestro Fresh Wes, and many others local acts. Conrad Collaco who worked at CKLN argued that “CKLN news was really good at filling in the gaps missed by the mainstream media” (as quoted in Morrow, 2011), including the voices of oppressed and racialized Canadians. However, as a college radio station, the signal range was weak in comparison to broadcast media. Former Vancouver radio host DJ Red Robinson stated that the few Canadians that circulated R&B music were isolated from one another because of Canada’s vast geographical space: “there was no national exchange in those days between radio stations” (as quoted in Capone, 2017). Hence, collaborations between the few music industry gatekeepers that supported R&B were limited and overpowered by the dominant support for white rock.

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<sup>6</sup> Ryerson University was re-named to Toronto Metropolitan University in 2022 to “cut ties with its former namesake, Egerton Ryerson, considered an architect of Canada's residential school system” (Griffins, 2023)

Black Canadian hip-hop duo, Dream Warriors, highlighted the continued lack of representation for Black Canadians by often bringing a sugar cane “from Jamaica...as a symbol of where [they] came from and where [they’re] going,” to assert their intersectional identities in television interviews or live on-stage performances (CBC, 1991). In 1991, a CBC interviewer asked Dream Warriors members King Lou and Capital Q about their rise to fame from Jane and Finch, a part of Toronto which the interviewer described as a “pretty rough part of town, poor, Black mostly, is that true?” (CBC, 1991). Capital Q challenged the interviewers’ implied beliefs that this specific area did not foster hip-hop and R&B talent by stating that “growing up there...educat[ed] [them] on a lot of things...the way we grew up helped us a lot [in participating in hip-hop music]” (CBC, 1991). King Lou also asserted the disbelief that Canadians did not create R&B and hip-hop by stating: “Canada has a reputation for not having hip hop or R&B music but yet it’s there” (CBC, 1991). King Lou stated that the duo participated in “graffiti, reggae, break dancing, all forms, as opposed to verbally...rapping” before signing a four-album deal with the UK record label Fourth and Broadway Records in 1991 to create a blend of “jazz” and “rap” music.

When the CBC interviewer asked the duo more about how they felt in regards to becoming successful stars by signing a record deal, King Lou replied: “people view ‘stars’ [from many different] perspectives...somebody whose successful people view a star...through Michie Mee and LA Love we felt the rise of success [for Canadian hip-hop] anyways...we wanted to be heard...we didn’t want to be number one in the charts, we just wanted to be heard” (CBC, 1991). King Lou’s response not only addressed how there are different perceptions of success but also described how hip-hop and R&B, as collective communities in Canada, were beginning to gain international recognition. He based his success on the success that Canadian hip-hop and R&B was finally gaining international recognition.

When King Lou described the unique-ness of Canadian hip-hop and R&B music he said:

all the artists in Canada have actually been grooming themselves and they haven’t realized it, they haven’t gotten record deals, the majority of them, and they’ve been doing something getting used to their voice, getting used to their style, getting used to their way of life...as opposed to a lot of American artists

and...European artists [who] get record deals [more easily]...[who] lip-sync [and perform] not even their own voice...Canada has more humans on wax. A multicultural country. (CBC, 1991)

When King Lou asserted that “Canada has more humans on wax” he implied that Canadian artists were more authentic in their performances because they spent more time cultivating their “voice[s],” “style[s],” and “way[s] of life” before gaining the opportunity to sign recording contracts. Unlike R&B and hip-hop artists in other countries, Canadian artists lacked infrastructural support which led to the collaborative efforts of multi-ethnic Canadian artists working together to produce music and develop their talents across hip-hop and R&B music genres. The collaborative nature of Canadian hip-hop and R&B music was, in part, key to its success as many artists worked together to gain recognition for Canadian participation in these genre styles.

For example, music video director Lil X (also known as Director X) “hopped” the border to produce music videos with successful U.S. hip-hop video director Hype Williams. Then Lil X came back to Canada to help R&B and hip-hop artists produce their music videos. Canadian R&B and hip-hop talent lacked government and media support to develop and polish their talents in Canada and “there was [already] a stigma of having a video that looked Canadian...so [artists] didn’t want to work with Canadian directors or Canadian production companies” (R. Music, 2019). Can-Con regulations were intended to build a positive reputation for Canadian music, but when these laws were enacted by white Canadian music industry gatekeepers they tended to exclusively support rock and folk music, so resources to develop Canadian R&B and hip-hop remained scarce.

In addition to Can-Con regulations, Canada also established a national Multicultural Policy in 1971. John Mallea and Jonathan Young (1990) argued that the Multicultural Policy was created by the “government [to] support and encourage the various cultures and ethnic groups that give structure and vitality to our society” (p. 519). The Canadian Multicultural Policy thus should have supported the development of R&B artists’ careers. However, Rinaldo Walcott (2003) explained the term multiculturalism was often used as code to mean the culture of non-whites: “these appropriations of the term are rife with the recurring myth of Canada as a benevolent, caring, and tolerant country that adapts to



‘strangers’ so that strangers do not have to adapt to it” (p. 119). This narrative of multiculturalism upheld hegemonic views that Canadians are racially white and that people with non-white identities are Othered in Canadian society. I build on Walcott’s (2003) argument that “Caribbean/black citizens are almost never imagined as inherently belonging to the national body” (p. 134), to further suggest that R&B and hip-hop music, coded as Black music, were not accepted as belonging to the Canadian national imaginary, particularly by white decision makers.

A Canadian policy of multiculturalism was a formal proclamation that Canada would provide equal opportunities for all Canadians. However, as a policy, white people in positions of power could implement it however they deemed appropriate. Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists lacked media outlets where they could speak and sing about their intersectional experiences. Jon Sinden (2021) stated that acquiring a radio station “wasn’t just a media company acquiring signals, [it] was the chance for a community to be represented.” White Canadian media gatekeepers often upheld white privilege and continued to craft hegemonically white representations of Canadian culture that excluded the many, racially diverse Canadians creating hip-hop and R&B music.

Denham Jolly filed a radio licence application in 1989, under the name Milestone radio, describing it as a “Black Urban Contemporary” station, with a tagline stating it would play “Black music” (Haines, 1999). The application included a collection of “6,500 letters [in support of this station written by]...labour unions, politicians, doctors, lawyers and people from all walks of life...and of course, from...[the] Black community” (CBC, 1990). The CRTC rejected the application and stated that “a country musical format will contribute the most to programming diversity...as well as the economic growth [and] potential of the market” (CRTC, 1990). I dispute this claim, given that there was not even one urban genre commercial radio station in Canadian mainstream media. Moreover, “Canada’s first full-time country music station” CFCW went on air in 1960 and several other country stations were already in existence in Canada when the CRTC made this decision (Canadian Communications Foundation, 2019).

Music executives in the U.S.A., like Will Comerford (2000) also noted the unfairness of the decision. Comerford stated: “In 1990, [Milestone radio] lost out to country-formatted CISS-FM, though Toronto already had several country stations.” The argument that there “was not a large enough market” (Clark, 1999) was patently false. Not only has there long been a market for Canadian R&B, but Canadian R&B bands like Crack of Dawn had outsold U.S. bands like Earth, Wind & Fire in album sales and concert ticket sales in Canada (NWC, 2018). In 1990, Justin Smallbridge from CBC News stated:

There is already a proven demand for a Black radio station here in Toronto, WBLK [FM] from Buffalo broadcasts nothing but Black music. It boasts a regular...some 400,000 [Torontonians listeners] and it knows the value of this market. It has a full time commercial sales office here. (CBC, 1990)

The ruling claimed to be about the market when it was more likely about supporting a hegemonically white, rock, and folk Canadian national identity. Chairman Keith Spicer voted in favour of an urban radio station and argued that the CRTC’s decision contributed to an outdated cultural imaginary of Canada as exclusively white and Anglo-Saxon:

Toronto in 1990 is not the city it was 30 years ago, or even 10 years ago. From predominantly Anglo-Saxon, then European, with a small but enterprising Chinese community, it has grown into a metropolis of many nationalities, including newcomers from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean...Canada’s broadcasting system must adapt to these new realities and embrace these communities by echoing new themes, new accents, new values, new music...the decision ignores the music of probably 200,000 Black Torontonians, largely from the Caribbean. (as quoted in CRTC, 1990)

Spicer argued that the CRTC’s cultural vision for Canada must be updated and adapted to include the diverse populations of Canadian immigrants. Spicer noted that the decision alienated a large group of Canadians, specifically Black Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. In addition to filling a gap in the market, and honestly reflecting the realities of Canada’s diverse population, Spicer stated that the urban radio station could have eased racial tensions in Canada:

diversity is not just a way of serving a specific audience [but the radio station could have helped in] opening other minds to a vital and growing dimension of Toronto, it is a way of serving the public interest - that is, the interest of all Canadians who make Toronto their home. (as quoted in CRTC, 1990)

By giving oppressed Canadians the means to participate and feel included in Canadian society, the urban radio station could have helped all Canadians open their hearts and minds to reimagining a more diverse Canadian society.

The CRTC demonstrated a continued preference for British-descended, English-speaking identities and cultural practices when they claimed that the decision was made because:

a majority of the Commission is of the belief that the introduction of an FM country voice in this city, which is also the heart of the English-language music industry, will foster interest and, in turn, increase the listening audience for this distinct type of music. (CRTC, 1990)

Expanding a white-dominated genre was thus more important to the CRTC than licensing the first Black-dominated station. Maestro Fresh Wes's manager, Farley Flex, said "The CRTC...has historically licensed on language not culture" (as quoted in Andrews, 2015) which has resulted in the exclusion of many cultural communities in Canada that fall outside of the preferred British, Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking ideal in Canada. Other English speakers, like Michie Mee who "[spat] rhymes in both English and Jamaican Patois" (CBC Music, 2019), were also overlooked.

With limited access to public platforms that could amplify their struggles, a "multi-racial [Canadian] artist collective called Dance Appeal" (D'Amico-Cuthbert, 2021, p. 334) produced a song and music video in response to the CRTC's decision. Called "Can't Repress the Cause" (1991b), its title was a cheeky take on the acronym CRTC. The song advocated for the "greater inclusion of hip hop, reggae, r&b, and dance on commercial radio" (D'Amico-Cuthbert, 2021, p. 334). Its music invoked iconic Canadian infrastructures like the CN Tower to brand the song and music video as "Canadian." Known as "the centre of telecommunications for Toronto, serving more than 17 Canadian television and FM radio stations," the CN Tower was also the "tallest freestanding structure in the world until it was surpassed by Dubai's Burj Khalifa in 2009" (La Tour CN Tower, 2022). Its prominence in Canadian mainstream media and culture, never mind its physical prominence on Toronto's skyline (the most populous city in Canada), have helped make the CN Tower a widely-acknowledged symbol of Canadian-ness. Maurice Charland's (1986) theory of technological nationalism explores how technologies, like railways, underpin Canadian nationalism by "offer[ing] Canadians a common experience

of signs and information” (p. 213). Following Charland’s argument, I argue that the video’s invocation of the CN Tower as a symbol of media communications was especially relevant to criticizing institutions like the CRTC. The CN Tower is a common sign for Canadian-ness and by featuring it in the video the artists align themselves with the Canadian community they believe that they are members of, despite hegemonic beliefs that Canada does not include racialized identities nor hip-hop nor R&B music.

“Can’t Repress the Cause” referenced multiple genres in its lyrics protesting the lack of infrastructural support: “we are all in the same game, hip- hop, house, and R&B is what we design, without dance radio, Toronto will get left behind...local radio ain’t got no soul.” Francesca D’Amico-Cuthbert (2021) noted how Michie Mee used the term “Hee Haw” in her lyrics to “Can’t Repress the Cause” to insert “a reference [to a] 1960s country music variety television show of the same name...[and thus allude to] the CRTC’s decision to grant the frequency to a country station over a Black format.” The song reminded listeners that Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists remained marginalized by Toronto’s music industry. Jesse Stewart and Niel Scobie (2019) listed the racially diverse group members:

Dance Appeal...included many Toronto performers of Caribbean and West Indian heritage. In addition to Devon, Michie Mee, Maestro Fresh-Wes, and the Dream Warriors, the track featured rappers B-Kool, HDV, and Self Defense; reggae artists Leroy Sibbles, Carla Marshall, and [Messenjah], dub poet Lillian Allen; as well as singers Dionne, Eria Fachin, Thando Hyman, Jillian Mendez, Lorraine Scott, Lorraine Segato (of Parachute Club fame), Thyron Lee Whyte, and Zama. The...goal was to advocate for greater inclusion of popular dance musics such as hiphop, reggae, and R&B on commercial radio in Toronto. (p. 325)

Like Canadian artists before them, including Oscar Peterson, who created protest songs to articulate issues of Black racism, in 1991, these racially diverse Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists continued to create protest songs to articulate their intersectional struggles and their “cause.”

### 2.7.2 The CRTC’s Second Rejection of a Black-Owned Urban Radio Station: “Canadian Music Didn’t Look Like Us”

When the 99.1 FM radio station frequency became available in 1997, the CRTC rejected three more applications for an urban radio station. Instead, they moved an existing AM

band CBC radio station there (CRTC, 1997). In efforts to appeal to CRTC members, Jolly had changed his approach for the Milestone radio license by removing the tagline specifying that the radio would play “Black music” and rebranded the proposed genre from “Black Urban Contemporary” to “World Urban Contemporary” (Haines, 1999). Nonetheless, the CRTC stated that a dedicated urban radio station would not meet the needs of the Toronto market and that the market already represented diverse voices across FM and AM radio stations. Nonetheless, no urban-dedicated station was actually available on FM radio to specifically play R&B, hip-hop, reggae, soca, or dancehall music. The CRTC also stated that “the best possible use of the 99.1 MHz frequency” is for “the CBC” (CRTC, 1997). Commissioner Gail Scott, one member who voted in favour of the urban radio station, stated that “the CBC’s argument [was] badly flawed” because other radio stations (such as Jolly’s) might better “[meet] the needs of the multicultural and aboriginal markets in this unique and diverse community” (as quoted in CRTC, 1997). Howard Schneider (1997) also argued that a Black-owned radio station could have offered a meaningful contribution to “a nation that prides itself on diversity and visualizes its society as a ‘mosaic’ of equal pieces [whereas, in reality, the] distribution of political, social and economic influence is still largely held by those of European heritage.” The CRTC’s decision was inherently racist because it was neither the best use of the station nor the best way to appeal to the true makeup of this Canadian market.

When Canadian artist Kardi was interviewed about the CRTC’s second decision to reject the bid for an urban radio station, he also invoked the theoretical framework of Canada as a mosaic: “[we felt] that our culture [had] not been accounted for and that we [were] not being taken into the codes for the cultural mosaic of Canada” (CBC Listen, 2020). Daniel Stoffman (2009) explained the tradition of defining Canada’s national identity as a mosaic to articulate Canada cultural diversity. Stoffman (2009) stated that Canada is made up of tiles, where each tile represents “a set of separate and distinct cultural entities” (Stoffman, 2009), and together the tiles form a pattern. In rejecting another bid for an urban radio station, the CRTC clearly did not value urban music as one of the valuable “codes” or “tiles” of Canada’s national identity.

William Callahan, a member of the CRTC, was in favour of Jolly's application because Jolly's station would:

Provide the opportunity for members of a large and diverse segment of the Toronto multicultural community to reflect their cultures on their own terms and in their own way, and a particular voice for Toronto's black music, artistic and business communities. (as quoted in CRTC, 1997)

Callahan suggested that in a Canadian society mostly controlled by white people, an urban radio station would have enabled Black Canadians to amplify their voices in society and would have given Black Canadians control over how they were represented.

But this was not only about denying Black Canadians access to the public airwaves. Charity Marsh (2013) argued that Inuit Canadians have created hip-hop music and online music videos to challenge "common stereotypes and reified [Inuit] identities that continue to circulate in political, cultural, and national discourses" (p. 112). So too have non-indigenous but racially diverse Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists used music lyrics and televised music videos to challenge common stereotypes (that Canadians are exclusively white or to challenge hegemonic beliefs that Canadians are inauthentic participants in hip-hop and R&B music genres).

The existence of a distinctly Canadian hip-hop and R&B genre world was further made evident in 1998 when the Vancouver hip-hop group Rascalz released a song called "Northern Touch," featuring Toronto artists Checkmate, Choclair, Kardinal Offishall, and Thrust. In an interview on a CBC podcast, Sol Guy acknowledged the significance of having diverse Canadian artists on the track by stating:

[it was] a seminal moment because Canadian music didn't look like us at that time. Canada is changing so much, and we were second generation immigrant kids who were coming up from all over the world who didn't look like the average Canadian, but we saw that it was a changing face. (as quoted in CBC, 2020a)

The artists in this music video for "Northern Touch" represented racially diverse Canadian identities on television at a time when Canadian media represented Canadians as hegemonically white. The music video for "Northern Touch" (1998), directed by Director X, was played on television in Canada on *MuchMusic* and in the U.S.A. on *Black Entertainment Television* (CBC, 2020a). A lyric in the song emphasized the

cultural diversity of Canadians by stating: “got people in Jamaica, Trini, and London, Australia.” Canadian producer Sol Guy stated that “Northern Touch” helped bridge coastal barriers “between hip-hop crews and cities in Canada” to unify the scenes in a national song (CBC, 2020a). In an interview with CBC (2000), Choclair claimed the song had a uniquely Canadian sound and style by stating: “[it] was a great [moment in] Canadian music history...[it showed that]...the music coming from Canada is its own significant thing.” The following bars from “Northern Touch” (1998) exemplified the idea that Canada’s hip-hop was unique because of its distinct vocabulary: “Check the lingo spread through the atmosphere, so distinctive no other style comes near.” The “Northern Touch” lyrics named Canadian cities and referenced Toronto as “T-dot.” The term T-dot originated with Ghetto Concept’s 1996 song “Much Love” to refer to Toronto’s hip-hop (Entertainment Report Podcast, 2020). Therefore, as a song and a music video, “Northern Touch” helped to articulate racially diverse Canadian identities.

When the Black Lives Matter Movement was reinvigorated in 2020, the CBC posted an article reflecting on the strong cultural impact “Northern Touch” had on ideas of Canadian-ness and called the song “an instant [Canadian] anthem” (CBC, 2020a; I have extensively discussed ideas about R&B “anthems” in chapter 5). When the CBC suggested that “for young aspiring rappers across the country, [“Northern Touch”] served as both inspiration and an invitation to carve out their own spot” (CBC, 2020a) the CBC was acknowledging that institutional support for and representation of Canadian rappers, essential to inspire future Canadian rappers to build on their craft, had indeed been lacking. Artists still had to look southward in the 1990s and early 2000s: Kardi, for example, stated that the dollar amount of the entire record contract offer that he received in Canada “didn’t even add up to half of [his] advance in America.” Kardi claimed that in Canada he only received record deals valued at about 50 to 60 thousand dollars Canadian, but in the U.S.A., he signed his first record deal at “half a million dollars USD” (Q with Tom Power, 2021). Kardi argued that because Canada failed to grow its own talents in hip-hop and R&B music, he had to seek refuge in the U.S.A.

While the JUNO Award for Best Rap Recording of the Year was introduced in 1991 (renamed Best Rap Recording between 1993 to 2002), there was still no commercial

Black radio station in Canada by the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, even the JUNOs minimized successful Black performers: when the Rap Recording Award was introduced, its presentation was not part of the televised segment of the show. In 1998, Rascalz won the Best Rap Recording JUNO, but they refused to accept it because their acceptance would be untelevised. DJ Kemo from the group stated that “we had to [make our speech] backstage...Not even five minutes into the untelevised portion, they’re like ‘Oh, let’s get this rap (stuff) out of the way’” (as quoted in Chidley-Hill, 2013).

Therefore, the contributions made by artists classified as Black were still being pushed to the periphery of mainstream media, which inhibited the growth of Canadian R&B music.

Kardi stated that Rascalz protesting of their acceptance of the Rap award in 1998 was important because:

it was the first time that awareness was brought about to the Canadian people, like the mainstream Canadian audience, because they were especially, in 1998, ‘99, very unaware [of Canadian rap and racism faced by racialized Canadians]. (as quoted in Callender & Kinos-Goodin, 2018)

Although Rascalz successfully pressured the JUNOS to televise the presentation of the rap award the subsequent year (1999), by 2000 the presentation of the award reverted to the untelevised portion of the show. Incredibly, it remained untelevised until 2018 (Higgins, 2018). When The JUNO Awards finally brought the rap award back to the televised portion of the show in 2018, they invited Rascalz, Kardinal Offishall, Choclaire, Thrust, and Checkmate to present the award to winner Tory Lanez and called them the “Northern Touch All-Stars.” The JUNOs also granted these artists airtime to perform an acapella version of “Northern Touch.” Dalton Higgins (2018) described how “Northern Touch” was “arguably one of the most important songs in Canada’s rocky rap history” in a blog on the JUNOS website. Ironically, when the song was released, the JUNOS, the CRTC, and many Canadian music industry labels failed to support the artists on the track and other hip-hop, R&B, and reggae artists that the track was advocating for. Andrew Clark (1999) noted that “critics [said the CRTC’s] decisions put Canadian hip-hop 15 years behind its U.S. counterparts” (p. 45). Thus, the prejudice of Canadian music industry gatekeepers stunted the growth of Canadian R&B and hip-hop music. Although Can-Con and the Multicultural Policy were intended to stimulate Canada’s music



industry and establish Canada's multicultural identity, Canadian music and media gatekeepers failed to support and develop many racialized Canadian participants in the music genres of hip-hop, R&B, and reggae.

### 2.7.3 The CRTC's Third Rejection of a Black-Owned Urban Radio Station "You Can't Imagine The Systemic Racism We've Faced"

For the third time, in 1999, Jolly reapplied for a radio license. This time he changed his marketing approach. Jolly applied with no tagline, though he again claimed that the music played would be branded as "urban." Kisrene McKenzie (2009) contended that calling the music urban, rather than Black, allowed Jolly to "de-politicize and thereby disconnect their proposed Black radio station from its social and political origins so that Blackness [could] be successfully commodified to appeal to market interests that [were] represented by 'diverse' audiences outside the Black community" (p. 102). In deploying "urban" as a code word for Black music and racialized artists, Jolly was perhaps attempting to sidestep any bias that CRTC gatekeepers may have had about Black people and broaden the appeal of the proposed radio station to wider audiences.

Nonetheless, Jolly noted in the application that the proposed station would make a cultural contribution to Canada by giving the Black community "the capacity to celebrate itself in all its richness, all its dimensions: music, culture, drama, and entrepreneurship, and to be able to share that celebration, knowledge and information with the broader community" (as quoted in CRTC, 2000). Jolly suggested in the application that the radio station would offer a valuable financial contribution to Toronto, because it could have attracted the local audience who had been tuning into Buffalo's WBLK radio station:

One foreign radio station, WBLK-FM Depew, New York, provides an 'Urban' format similar to that planned by the applicant. That station attracts a 1% audience share in the Toronto market, and Milestone estimates that approximately \$1.5 million in Toronto advertising revenue is annually lost to it. Milestone intends to repatriate a significant portion of tuning to WBLK-FM by offering more locally relevant spoken-word programming, local talent and a technically superior signal to that of WBLK-FM. (as quoted in CRTC, 2000)

Jolly addressed how the radio station could have developed local talent in these music genre categories to generate cultural and financial value for Toronto.

Jolly kept the name “Milestone” in his application to articulate the milestone it would achieve as the first Canadian Black-owned radio station dedicated to Black music. This application was finally approved with the condition that the radio station be renamed FLOW, not Milestone. Kisrene McKenzie (2009) argued that “the name ‘FLOW’ mask[ed] the identity, history, and struggle of the Black community to have a Black radio station. Flow is a name that is particularly devoid of context, not unlike the Urban sound it would offer” (p. 130). The approved radio station in 2001, named FLOW and playing urban music, had been branded in a way that minimized or removed overt associations to Black Canadian artists. For McKenzie, the name FLOW undercut the triumph of achieving a Black-owned radio station.

Although this was an achievement for all Canadians, Canadian Black music was still only dominant on one commercial radio station, and some viewed this urban format as constraining the complexity of the music Black Canadians create: the radio station’s playlists were dominated by with hip-hop and according to critics did not play enough soca or reggae music (Infantry, 2011; Higgins, 2001)

In 2001, Michael Hollett (2001) also noted that Can-Con was implemented by Canadian music industry gatekeepers who undervalued the potential marketability of urban artists due to their prejudice against racialized people:

Nelly [Furtado] gets what her Can-Con cronies don’t — hip-hop, or urban music, is not the next big thing, it’s the thing, and it’s happening right now. Urban sells tons of discs in the States to white suburban kids as well as African Americans.

By noting that hip-hop or urban music was “the thing,” Hollett began to identify the shift discussed in Chapter 1, when hip-hop and R&B music began blending with pop music styles to gain prominence in mainstream media.

Although FLOW was criticized for failing to fully represent Black diversity in Canada, Michael Hollett (2001) argued that “FLOW delivered an impressive array of Canadian urban talent to the stage.” FLOW was successful in helping develop some local talents and it was the first commercial radio station in Canada “to play Drake” (Gaviola, 2020). Additionally, Anne Gaviola (2020) stated that the radio station helped increase the visibility and audibility of Black Canadians while offering them opportunities for

employment: “With Jolly at the helm, the station hired Black employees ranging from accounting to its broadcasters, launching many careers.” The radio station finally gave racialized Canadians, specifically Black Canadians, an opportunity to represent themselves in the largest local media market in Canada.

#### 2.7.4 A Distinctly Canadian Contemporary R&B Genre World

However, a mere 10 years after FLOW’s license was approved in 2001, the station was sold and “none of the subsequent owners [were]...Black” (Weir, 2022). As ownership shifted from Black to white, the music played on the station shifted from hip-hop music to contemporary Canadian R&B music that included more racially diverse artists mixing pop, hip-hop, and R&B, in order to target younger audiences. As a result, Black voices were further pushed to the periphery of mainstream media, as they began competing with white artists participating in the same genre styles.

Even prior to the sale, FLOW was rebranded in 2008 to a Rhythmic CHR (Contemporary Hit Radio) format and shifted its brand positioning by changing its tagline from “Toronto’s hip hop and R&B station” to “hits that move you.” According to Ashante Infantry (2008) the shift to “a generic advertising campaign...confirmed the evolution of the seven-year-old station from a hip-hop based entity to a more Contemporary Hit Radio...format.” By shifting to a CHR or “pop” format, the focus on advocating for primarily Black artists was lost, according to some observers.

In an interview with Vice-president of Operations Nicole Jolly, Infantry explained that there is less of a “delineation between erstwhile mainstream pop acts like Nelly Furtado and Justin Timberlake and hip-hop/R&B stars Timbaland and Chris Brown” (Infantry, 2008). Black U.S. R&B artists like Timbaland and Chris Brown were now competing with white Canadians like Nelly Furtado and white U.S. artists like Justin Timberlake in contemporary R&B as a mixture of pop, hip-hop, and R&B styles. Jolly stated:

When we started out we were probably more urban, but the music has also changed...There used to be an urban chart and a Top 40 chart. Now you see a mom listening to Snoop beside her 14-year-old daughter. The music has come to the middle and we're going along with the times. We're playing rhythmic hits—the top of charts, excluding rock-based music. (as quoted in Infantry, 2008)

Traditional beliefs about R&B as a cultural practice for exclusively Black identities began changing with R&B's expansion and development through more "pop" styles, created by diverse ethnic identities, including white Canadian artists. The inclusion of multiple racial identities in R&B enabled more artists to participate in the genre style. The mixture of R&B with pop styles helped increase the visibility of R&B music in Canada. However, these shifts also made Black artists vulnerable to being overpowered by white artists in a society that has long privileged white people.

According to DJ Big Philly, "Flow started off 100% urban in 2001 but around 2006-07 it made a change to 'Rhythmic CHR', which basically means 'Top 40 with an urban twist.'" (as quoted in Urban Radio Nation, 2011). This argument by DJ Big Philly reinforced the shift of "urban" music as a distinct genre separate from "pop" music to the mixture of pop, hip-hop, and R&B styles which began dominating popular music charts. While acknowledging the important roles that Black artists played in the development of Canadian R&B music, it is significant that, in the first decades of the 2000s, multicultural artists mixed R&B, hip-hop, and pop music and this became a prominent sound in Canadian culture. While Black Canadian artists had a narrow avenue for audibility and visibility in Canadian society, Canadian R&B music, as performed by a range of Canadian artists, gained more audibility and visibility on national and international airwaves. Although the re-branding of the radio station from "hip hop and R&B" to mainstream "hits" created more competition for Black artists, it also raised the awareness and accessibility of Canadian hip-hop and R&B music.

Although narrow, FLOW continued to be a valuable avenue in helping audiences connect with Black contemporary Canadian R&B artists, like Drake, to help them build their careers. For example, "O.T.A. (Over The Air) Talk" was a segment on FLOW radio station, hosted by Black Canadian artists Ty Harper and Reza Dahya, that ran on Tuesday nights at 11 p.m., which Jabbari Weekes (2015) described as "serv[ing] as outlet for rising Toronto" (i.e., the "rising" Toronto R&B scene). O.T.A. broadcasted live interviews with local Canadian R&B artists, like Drake, on national airwaves. The show was also shared on social media platforms, like YouTube, to reach international

audiences (r e z, 2007). Harper described how O.T.A. helped establish Canadian R&B and hip-hop and described the culture as central to Toronto:

we [and the station] definitely made it clear that Toronto-centric hip-hop/R&B programming is commercially valid and for anybody testing that theory we passed with flying colours. Also during that time [our show] especially never lost credibility as the go-to place for that thing. (Harper as quoted in Weekes, 2015)

Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists, like Drake, could use the show O.T.A. to promote their music, their public personality, and their lifestyle. They could also publicize their backstory, grow their audience, and build their credibility in mainstream media as Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists. Harper described how the intention of O.T.A. was to:

creat[e] a culture that's not just hip-hop as this Americanized thing but is also very Toronto-centric...and O.T.A. Talk became a thing because it was there we could discuss issues not only in terms of industry stuff but also being racialized people here in Toronto. (Harper as quoted in Weekes, 2015)

Therefore, by promoting interviews with Canadian R&B and hip-hop artists, O.T.A. attempted to dismantle the belief that hip-hop and R&B were “Americanized” cultural practices. By popularizing the voices and faces of Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists, the radio station attempted to authenticate Canadians’ participation in these genres and help define a distinctly Canadian R&B genre world, one inclusive of multicultural Canadians who practiced genre-blending styles.

In an on-air O.T.A. discussion in 2006, Black Canadian club promoter and anti-Black racist activist Ian Andre Espinet said that defining a distinctly Canadian sound was difficult, in part, because of a lack of confidence and “Canadian pride” for our music (r e z, 2006), which echoed previous quotes in this dissertation about Canadian music industry’s inferiority complex (C. Porter, 2020; Patrick, 2006). Additionally, Espinet stated that “in Toronto, not having a homogenous sound...means that Kardi is trying to forward a section, a group of people [who] are down with that Canadian Jamaican sound, but that population is not enough to push that sound forward” (r e z, 2006). Reza Dahya agreed, suggesting that the multicultural truth of Canada may have also produced market fragmentation: “we are all different here, we all like different things...the bottom line is that there [is not] a large population of people that likes one thing [so we don’t have] the power to move one sound” (r e z, 2006). However, in response, Ty Harper proposed that

even within diversity, there was a possibility for defining a Canadian sound by supporting a hypothetical, singular Canadian artist, whom Canadian audiences could enjoy as representative of a distinctly Canadian sound:

a diverse amount of people [can like the same artist but]...we don't have that strong sense of a huge following of people that will follow one guy...you should be able to play big Toronto songs...and you get the kind of love that is blatantly biased...[with unconditional support]...where like a dude plays a song and you're like 'I'm not feeling it' and then the dude goes 'yo the dude's from Rexdale' and [you say] 'oh shoot! The guy's from Rexdale?' [and blindly support the song because the artist is from here]. (r e z, 2006)

Both Espinet and Dahya agreed that this sense of Toronto pride should be there to help define a distinctly Canadian sound. I propose that Drake, Jessie Reyez and Justin Bieber have been some of the artists that invigorated Canadian pride through the branding of their public personalities and performed lifestyles as contemporary Canadian R&B artists, which helped to define distinct Canadian R&B/hip-hop/pop sounds and styles.

In 2007, Drake did an interview on O.T.A. Live and spoke about his musical inspirations, his work ethic, his Toronto city pride, his charities, and his music. He attempted to build a large local audience by telling them more about his public persona and invited the audience to vote for his music video "Replacement Girl" to appear on the U.S. television music channel BET:

I need to talk to the city right now. I don't think you understand the importance of getting this video on the countdown...aside from Nelly Furtado...this is the first hip-hop video ever from Canada to make the countdown [on the US Black Entertainment Television's 106 & Park]...please, just take the time, if you're at work even tonight...go to BET.com slash 106 and park...and click the vote link...it's right there Drake featuring Trey Songz Replacement Girl whether you like me or don't like me, or like the song, or you like me but don't like the record...just do this for the city...this is about us...it's our time now...forget about what you like...just vote...when the floodgates open then you can talk...let's just get in the door first. (r e z, 2007)

By stating that we "just get in the door first," Drake highlighted the possibilities for Toronto music to rise to prominence on the international music charts. Drake was of course successful in mobilizing his local audience, which has been discussed in Chapter 3. However, this event was pertinent here in Chapter 2 to highlight a pivotal movement in the popularization of Canadian R&B music via this important broadcast radio station.

FLOW's "O.T.A." programme was a strategic tool to help cultivate what DJ Josephine Cruz (jayemkayem) described as the "trendy sounds now [of Canadian]...hip-hop and R&B [music]" (The Broken Mixtape, 2018).

The strong presence of Black voices, faces, and leaders on FLOW shifted in 2011 when Denham Jolly was removed as the owner and it was sold to CHUM Radio, becoming The New Flow 93.5 FM (Infantry, 2011). Teknique The Kingpin published an article in 2011 detailing the sad loss of Canadian R&B and hip-hop programming that occurred as a result of this sale and the firing of many Black employees:

on February 2nd Flow 93.5 let go of most of it's [*sic*] urban/hip-hop staff and programming...overall it is a serious blow to Canadian hip-hop's support system...As for those fired, these people put blood, sweat and tears into this station only to be abruptly stopped from sharing their talent on the airwaves, via this radio station. \*\*\*FYI, this now leaves the whole country of Canada WITHOUT even one urban formatted commercial radio station!\*\*\* And with the way they are getting rid of the community stations (ie. CIUT, CKLN, etc.), where the FAAACK ARE WE GONNA HEAR HIP-HOP and R&B???

Canadian hip-hop and R&B once again lost its only Canadian commercial urban formatted radio station. An intern at FLOW, Philip dos Santos (2011), argued that the mass firing and the cancellation "had little to nothing to do with ratings...but [it was about] the audience they intend to reach" which may have been a wider contemporary R&B style that focused less on traditional R&B/hip-hop, and more on pop/R&B songs. dos Santos (2011) supported Teknique The Kingpin's argument that the space for urban programming was continuing to shrink in Canadian media. dos Santos (2011) further argued that a local urban college radio station was also shut down at that time which decreased the representation of Black people in mainstream media and reduced the audibility of R&B and hip-hop artists on local radio airwaves.

However, that same year (2011) a Black-owned Canadian radio station branded as Caribbean African Radio Network, or CARN, on G98.7 FM was approved by the CRTC to play "a mix of reggae, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, gospel and soca music" (Battersby, 2011). In Gordon's application, he differentiated CARN G98.7 from FLOW 93.5 by stating that FLOW did not "serv[e] the Toronto Caribbean and African communities...FLOW 93.5 markets itself as an 'Urban and Hip-Hop' service that caters

to the younger Toronto audience” (CRTC, 2006). Therefore, FLOW’s focus on a “younger” Toronto audience also indicated a shift in the music that FLOW was playing, which included contemporary artists that mixed R&B with pop and hip-hop, rather than “reggae, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, gospel and soca music” which were genres traditionally associated with Black identities of all ages.

Blatant racism continued to be weaponized against CARN G98.7 and Jemini G (2020), a radio host at the station, said that racist sales reps in Canada pressured advertisers to blacklist this only Black-owned Canadian radio station because it represented people with Black Canadian identities:

you can’t imagine the systemic racism we’ve faced, the stereotypes, judgement and suppressing from advertisers, other huge corporations and radio conglomerates...[that have] spent time and money to cripple us at every turn...huge white owned tv and radio stations...who have privately told their black employees who listen to us that they are not allowed to mention our station or acknowledge it...white sales reps [at radio stations have told advertisers] that they wouldn’t play their ads [if they also paid to have ads running on G98.7]...BLACK artists [are challenged] on why they would want to do an interview on our BLACK station. This is the privilege...and systemic RACISM we have faced since we started.

As a result of systemic racism, this radio station lacked the funding, publicity, and revenue that it could have generated from advertisers and public mentions. Because it was labelled as a Black radio station, CARN G98.7 was undervalued and blacklisted by other Canadian media and entertainment platforms. The Black-ownership of this radio station was also short lived. When Fitzroy Gordon passed away in 2019, media conglomerates proposed to merge FLOW 93.5 and CARN G98.7 FM, resulting in G98.7 FM. Demar Grant (2022) argued that the merger “relegate[d] (many) Black music genres to one place without the possibility or the recognition of the importance of having a variety of different stations.” In 2020, right before the merger, Amanda Parris (2020) argued that the selling of CARN G98.7, like the sale of FLOW, would result in the loss of another safe space for members of the Black Canadian community to represent themselves.

Distinctly Canadian contemporary R&B music genre styles, mixing pop, hip-hop, and R&B, were championed and popularized by multicultural Canadian artists in the early



2000s to mid 2010s including Nelly Furtado, Massari, JRDN, and Shawn Desmon (as discussed in Chapter 1). While these artists helped distinguish a Canadian sound that found widespread popularity, at the same time many Black Canadian artists and traditional music genre styles associated with Black identities were being pushed back outside of mainstream Canadian media. This complex development of Canadian R&B pointed to how ideologies of race and nationality continued to shape the classification of music genre categories in Canada, even as the creation of distinctly Canadian sounds and styles increased.

## 2.8 “Canada’s Got Soul?” Defining Canadian R&B

In this chapter, I have examined the impact of hegemonic beliefs (Canadians as exclusively white, R&B as an exclusively U.S. cultural practice, and how racism and prejudice affect racialized Canadians) on the history and development of Canadian R&B music. This brief, episodic history revealed how relationships between race and music genre categories have intersected and interacted in different ways to shape ideologies of Canadian identities and R&B music. To conclude this chapter, I will examine the prominent role played by many Black Canadian Caribbean artists in the ultimate acceptance and popularization of contemporary Canadian R&B music mixing pop, hip-hop, and R&B. But first I wanted to discuss several key Canadian tracks that explicitly address racialization and racism.

Jesse Stewart and Niel Scobie (2019) argued that Maestro Fresh Wes’ song “Nothing At All” (1991) “offers a frank appraisal of race and racism in Canada and issues an urgent call for solidarity” (p. 317). Maestro’s lyrics reference white supremacy in the “Great White North” as he rapped: “we live...with racism, C-A-N-A-D-A...the Klan also move in the Great White North.” The lyrics “We got to hurdle the system” also suggested the struggle that Black Canadians face in a white-dominated Canadian society. Building on Ramsey’s (2003) argument that in the U.S., Black jazz artists have made their racial identities “a fundamental aspect of their music” (Ramsey, 2003, p. 122) to disrupt harmful stereotypes about Black people, R&B and hip-hop music likewise became an important medium for racialized Canadian artists, who faced experiences of racism and prejudice in Canada, to articulate multiple, yet equally Canadian identities. Black

Canadian artist Shad said the way “Maestro...represented the Black Canadian experience was influential [to Shad’s own music]” (Einenkel, 2019). The representation of the “Black Canadian experience” in music could help many Black Canadians feel more connected to Canada as their nation, despite its long failure to include Black people in its cultural imaginary.

Mark Campbell noted that Black Canadian hip-hop artist Devon created a music video for the song titled “Mr. Metro” that “reaffirmed some of the stories that [his] father would bring home [of being harassed by police]...[and demonstrated]...that it had nothing to do with [his] dad, but it was a larger trend in the rest of Canadian society” (CBC, 2020b). Racialized Canadians have articulated their intersectional experiences through music lyrics and music videos to offer audiences broader perspectives of Canadian identities outside of a hegemonically white British Anglo-Saxon experience. First-generation Canadian-Trinidadian Farley Flex, who managed the career of Maestro Fresh Wes, argued that “Hip-hop...is an oppressed culture. It comes from an oppressed culture. The content is a manifestation of the trauma that the creators have inter-generationally inherited” (as quoted in B. King, 2020). A distinctly Canadian R&B genre world would include many racialized hip-hop, reggae, and R&B Canadian artists who were pushed to the periphery of society but used music and music videos as powerful tools to articulate their stories about the oppression, racism, and exclusion that they have faced in Canada.

Mark Campbell (2014) also argued that the song “We Strive” by Canadian rap group Shing Shing Regime worked to “uncover...urban racial oppression [in Canada]” (p. 277). In the song, Shing Shing Regime rapped “If you Black, Brown, Yellow then you are strugglin’, simple. And can’t forget my people on rez too Yo its Black, Brown, Yellow and Red too” to highlight that many racially diverse Canadians were “strugglin’” to fight systemic oppression and racism in Canada. Canadian R&B should thus not have been limited to Black artists but rather include a diverse array of multiple, intersectional identities that have battled together against hegemonic views of an exclusively white rock and country Canadian music industry and culture.

The Canadian-Caribbean connection is particularly influential in this “strugglin’.” Ryan Patrick’s 2006 article titled “Canada’s Got Soul? Why our R&B artists get left in the cold” discussed how U.S. music label Light in the Attic released the album *Jamaica To Toronto*, featuring 16 songs recorded “by Canadian-based R&B singers in the 60s and 70s...[it resulted in a] flurry of media activity...[that] marveled at the fact that [Canadian] soul artists even existed and how much they influenced the contemporary Canadian sound.” Light in the Attic’s album revealed the unique contributions that Caribbean immigrants made to Canadian R&B music by mixing traditional R&B with reggae. Patrick argued that the exclusion of Canadian R&B music from Canadian popular culture in 2006 continued to result in a lack of awareness about Canadian R&B artists and a misunderstanding of Canada’s population as being exclusively white, despite the nation being strongly influenced by Caribbean-Canadian immigrants.

Joe Tangari (2006) also reviewed the album and noted how a distinctly Torontonion R&B scene has included the contributions of Caribbean-Canadian immigrants who mix reggae with R&B:

Reggae. Canada. If that doesn’t seem like a logical pairing to you, you’re hardly to be blamed, but since the mid-1960s musicians from Jamaica and other West Indian nations carved out a scene for themselves in Toronto—Canada’s most populous city. The music they made wasn’t all reggae—many of these musicians also helped create Canada’s funk and soul scenes—but nearly all of these Jamaicans, Barbadians, St. Vincentians, and Trinidadians had a background in ska, rocksteady, or reggae.

When he stated that pairing reggae and Canada may not seem logical, Tangari (2006) may have been suggesting that Canadians have been hegemonically viewed as exclusively white rock and folk artists. Tangari also argued that Caribbean artists have “carved out a scene for themselves” to articulate their lack of support in Canada’s music industry and point to the collaborative practice of racialized Canadian artists working together in the periphery of Canadian society to fight for audibility and visibility. Like Patrick (2006) and Tangari (2006), Rebecca Haines (1999) also noted that a distinctly Canadian sonic style has been influenced by reggae music and Caribbean Canadian immigrants: “[a] notable difference from American rap is the traditionally stronger influence of reggae music and Caribbean language [in Canadian rap], due to large

Jamaican communities in the major Canadian Hip-Hop [centres] of Toronto and Montreal” (p. 61). However, the strong contributions of Canadian Caribbean immigrants to Canadian national sounds have too often been hidden (and the fact that a U.S. label was telling our story on CD is, indeed, telling).

Mark Campbell (2014) argued a distinctly Canadian hip-hop music genre world is, in part, defined by Canadian-Caribbean branded public personalities: “the first generation of hip-hop acts in Toronto...[had] diasporic roots in and routes throughout the Caribbean...[and they] formulated stage personas that stressed their Caribbean origins and thus uniqueness in the emerging marketplace of emcees and crews” (p. 273). Artists like Kardi, Michie Mee, and Maestro Fresh Wes have articulated their intersectional Canadian-Caribbean identities in their public personas and music performances. Kardi argued that, after signing a record deal, he wanted his first single to reference the city of Toronto by using the term “T.O.” He stated, “my whole narrative has been one that has taken my city and my country and put it on my shoulders” (Q with Tom Power, 2021). Although these artists proudly articulated distinctively branded Caribbean-Canadian public personalities, Michie Mee explained that her genre-blending style and her Jamaican accent were “deemed as something lower level...yet unique — but not ready for marketing” (as quoted in CBC, 2021). In other words, Michie Mee argued that branding herself as a Canadian-Jamaican artist and mixing hip-hop with reggae, were not “marketable” strategies at that time since Canadian mainstream media continued to exclude minority identities and music associated with Black people. However, these artists confidently asserted their intersectional Canadian-Caribbean identities in their mixture of hip-hop, R&B, and reggae music to complicate and challenge hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

Prominent Canadian R&B artist Jully Black revealed how her experiences of being surrounded by immigrants in Canada shaped her perspectives in society: “being a born-and-raised Canadian, I know that if it weren’t for seeing and learning, and being among other ethnicities, such a diverse country, then the fabric of me wouldn’t be the same” (as quoted in CBC, 2016). When Black argued that “the fabric of” her Canadian identity was directly shaped by being exposed to many ethnicities in Canada, she was suggesting that

being surrounded by many immigrant Canadians is a distinctly Canadian experience. When I interviewed Jhyve in 2020, a Torontonion musician, he highlighted that ethnically diverse identities have created a distinctly Canadian R&B scene:

We're more eclectic [than in the U.S.]...as a people, we got white people here, we got brown people here, we got Asian people here...everybody here. It's one of the most diverse cities on the planet...and in country...not even city...even country on the planet...and so that kind of makes it way in what R&B is at.

By stating that Canadians are more eclectic, Jhyve pointed to the diversity represented in Canadian R&B music, which has been inspired by the mixing of many cultural sources, styles, and sounds. The role of the Caribbean diaspora in shaping Canadian music has been a crucial aspect of Canadian R&B and the cultural acceptance of multiple Canadian identities and music styles in popular culture.

Tangari (2006) argued that “Toronto was not entirely unlike what happened in the West Indian communities in London...England,” because other metropolitan areas also had a strong population of Caribbean immigrants; however, Toronto’s music was unique because of the “quality of the music,” “free mixing of English-speaking West Indians in Toronto,” and specific “stories” told through the music based on the experiences of many “Jamaican [immigrants who came] to Canada in search of a better life.” The “quality” of Canadian R&B reflected the strong talent that Canadian artists had in hip-hop, R&B, dancehall, and reggae music. The “mixing of English- speaking West Indians” in Canadian R&B music reflected the strong Caribbean immigrant population in Canada who worked together in Toronto to help foster Canadian R&B music while remaining at the periphery of Canadian society. Their cultural languages and diverse music styles intersected and interacted in musicking to create a uniquely Canadian R&B music genre world that began outside of mainstream media.

In an interview in 2023, Ron Nelson summarized many of my findings about Canadian R&B (Q with Tom Power, 2023) as a cultural practice, that is co-created by diverse Canadians, it is deeply indebted to U.S. influences, and that R&B in Canada is shaped by many intersecting styles of hip-hop, R&B, reggae, and soca music. Although many Canadian R&B artists were first- and second-generation immigrants that were forced to go to the U.S. to get record deals, in the U.S.A. these artists continued to reinforce their

“Canadian-ness” and Canadian pride in their music lyrics and music videos. These artists also collaborated in the periphery of a very racist Canadian society, but their collaboration resulted in a unique sound and style of Canadian R&B music.

When immigrating to Canada in 1979, Charlotte Gray (2016) claimed that she discovered “a wobbly sense of a national identity” and when she asked, “what being ‘a Canadian’ meant, [people’s] replies were often a stuttering medley of generalizations of what it did not mean. (Canadian meant not being American, or British, or like idents of other former colonies such as Australia” (p. xii-xiv). I argue that Canadian R&B artists can help musically resolve the question of “what being ‘a Canadian’ meant,” because together they represent mixes of multiple cultural identities and lifestyles. Canada’s unique history of race relations was enacted by Canadian policy makers and music industry gatekeepers to exclude R&B from the cultural imaginary of an exclusive white Canadian population of rock and folk artists. Yet, the development of Canadian culture is indebted to racially diverse Canadian R&B artists.

Following Jack Granatstein’s (1999) argument that “history is the key to Canadian identity” (p. 164), I have argued that many Canadian narratives involving Black Canadian slave trading practices, Black and white racial segregation, racist immigration policies, and Canadian R&B are still missing. Without records of Canadian R&B’s history, we are left with gaps in our understandings of Canadian culture, the formation of Canada as a nation, and the construction of the Canadian R&B genre world. When Rupert Harvey pointed out in 2018 that the history of R&B in Canada still needs to be documented, he echoed the sentiments of Toronto-based artist Maloney in a 2016 interview with Canadian hip-hop artist Don Carlito, who said that “with Toronto hip-hop...the history is there, but none of it is written” (Breaking Wreckords Radio, 2016). White British-English-speaking Canadian rock and folk artists were often chosen in Canadian television, music, and academic to exclusively represent Canadian culture. In 2023, Kardinal Offishall continues to argue that “we need to do a better job in Canada commemorating the history, the people, and their contributions... so many incredible things that have happened in [Canada’s] 50 years of hip-hop” (Offishall as quoted in Leuon, 2023). Despite their significant contributions to “Canadian-ness” and to “R&B-

ness,” Canadian R&B artists have lacked support from Canadian music industry executives, media companies, and academics. Mark Campbell and Charity Marsh’s collection from 2020, titled “We Still Here: Hip Hop North of The 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel,” argued that Canadian scholars and media have long excluded discussions of Canadian hip-hop and Black Canadians, stating “historically, [Canadian] archives have been manipulated to whitewash and straighten out histories and herstories [and that]...there had been little interest in documenting [Canadian hip-hop] stories and cataloguing [Canadian] hip-hop artifacts in the past” (p. 19-20). Therefore, please interpret any gaps in my brief, episodic overview as invitations to further inquiry. Many voices, faces, and events continue to remain undocumented in this important music genre category of “Canadian R&B.” Studies of Canadian R&B’s history and development continue to be overlooked.

This dissertation, in no way, is intended to encapsulate all artists, events, and themes related to Canada’s missing R&B history. Rather, my study is intended to help stimulate conversations and debates in academic texts and in popular culture discussions regarding the relationships between race, nation, and music genre categories. In this chapter, I investigated the struggles faced by many first- and second-generation Canadian artists who (1) lacked support from Canadian music industry executives that supported a hegemonically white folk and folk Canada, and (2) were challenged for their participation in R&B and hip-hop by U.S. music industry gatekeepers who believed Canadians were exclusively white and could not produce valuable music in genres traditionally associated with Black and U.S. identities. These first- and second-generation Canadian artists blurred music genre styles while collaborating in the periphery of Canadian society. They often moved to the U.S.A. to build successful careers, before being celebrated in Canadian media. I argue that many Canadian R&B artists have yet to be recognized for their contributions to the sounds and styles that we celebrate today, in Canadian culture. We must identify these artists, study their contributions to a distinctly Canadian R&B genre world, and critically reflect on why Canada has long failed to give these artists the representation that they deserve in Canadian music, media, and academia.

### 3 Chapter 3: How Bieber, Drake, And Reyez Broke into the Music Industry

In 2007, Drake revealed that the key to his success in breaking into the music industry and achieving a recording contract with a major record label was online marketing:

A lot of artists don't have a website...[and] don't have marketing...[but] they get disappointed when they only sell like 70 records...you gotta understand that...this whole thing is about marketing, it's about your image, it's about your story, you gotta be appealing to people...if you're gonna release a record in Canada you have to do something that nobody else has done...somebody...could be on my level in terms of awareness and buzz...that's very easy. You just gotta think and...have some money. That's all. (NotableInterviews, 2010a)

Drake harnessed the power of online communications to craft a public personality that would appeal to audiences and generate interest in his music.

A Rolling Stone article (2021) titled “How Social Media Broke and Birthed the Biggest Pop Star of Our Age: Justin Bieber” also argued that online marketing was key to his success was stating: “[Bieber] found his big break on YouTube [and his] meteoric trajectory has often coincided with the boom in social media that birthed some of its biggest names (The Weeknd, Psy, Shawn Mendes, Halsey, Charlie Puth).” However, the article contests the idea that it was not just social media but “his robust A&R<sup>7</sup> cemented the ascent of one of the world's most successful artists of all time.” In addition to online marketing and “robust A&R,” artists also need to be good storytellers.

According to Elle Magazine, Jessie Reyez's talents and her storytelling practices are key to her success: “an unmistakable once-in-a-generation kind of voice and capable of illustrating all-consuming infatuation with just a barbed snarl or delivering a targeted death wish to an ex-lover in a honeyed falsetto, Reyez has an aptitude for 360-degree story-telling” (Vincent, 2020). When I interviewed Jeff Van Driel in 2020, who acted as General Manager at Concord Music Group at the time of the interview, he argued that artists must have talent and a marketable backstory to have successful careers:

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<sup>7</sup> A&R represents "artists and repertoire" which is the team in a music company that is responsible for scouting new talent and developing talents' careers.



To be successful, it is so much more than [having] tens of millions of songs available. It is not just about the quality of a recording or talent of a performance but [it is about] what else is going on in their lives and [how it] can relate to the music they sing.

Alice Marwick (2010) argued that “self-branding” on “social media” is unique because of “the internet’s ability to distribute content globally, instantaneously, and cheaply sets it apart from other forms of mass media...Social media technologies allow people to self-consciously construct images of themselves that neatly map to an imagined business self” (p. 347-348). Additionally, Alison Hearn (2008) analyzed how “the production of a branded ‘self’ involves creating a...saleable image or narrative” (p. 198). Building on these arguments about a self-brand, Chapter 3 explores how Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s intersectional identities informed their constructed backstories, as “Canadian R&B artists.” I examined R&B-ness and Canadian-ness as separate discourses that interact with each of the artist’s constructed backstories. I looked for patterns in their backstories, like repeated R&B genre codes and repeated Canadian national codes and explore how differences in their constructed backstories align with their individual racialized, gendered, and nationalized identities. In analyzing their constructed backstories, I have determined that these digital stars uniquely reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

Building on Chapter 2’s examination of how Canadian R&B has contributed to Canadian identity and how it has been repressed, racialized, marginalized, this chapter (Chapter 3) examines how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have used various strategies to break into the music industry as racially diverse Canadian R&B artists and contribute to the growing international recognition of “Canadian R&B.” Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s articulations of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness” amplify and illustrate the long history of Canadian R&B as a site of contestation over who is included and excluded from the cultural imaginary of “Canada” and the genre category of “R&B.”

I examined how they each broke into the music industry through the online space and by developing relationships with key music industry gatekeepers. I argued that Drake, Bieber, and Reyez represent new generations of contemporary Canadian R&B artists as digital stars who are highly skilled online marketers capitalizing on innovation in digital

marketing. As digital stars, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez use the internet to somewhat circumvent traditional media gatekeepers by circulating their music online and accessing audiences through websites and mobile devices. I analyzed how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez exercised traditional networking practices and “relational labor...[which is] ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work” (Baym, 2015, p. 16). Bieber, Drake, and Reyez all established relationships with online audiences through social media marketing practices to help them build an audience that proved to music labels that they were marketable.

Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were early adaptors of digital marketing which helped them increase their visibility as Canadian R&B artists. However, I disrupt the misconception that digital stars break into the music industry exclusively through online communications. I investigated how they each developed relationships with key music industry gatekeepers that would help them to establish their careers. I agree with Marita Djupvik (2017) that although new technologies within the music industry seemingly enable musical artists to somewhat circumvent traditional music industry gatekeepers, often musical artists still require traditional music industry resources, including relationships with established music industry executives, to break into the music industry.

In this chapter, I analyzed published interviews with artists and industry executives who worked with Bieber, Drake, and Reyez and/or discussed their personal experiences of working in the music and entertainment industries. I referenced news articles about Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s first marketing campaigns. I also included insights from interviews I conducted with 35 music industry executives and marketing professionals in 2020 regarding how the internet and social media platforms have changed the landscape of the entertainment and music industries.

### 3.1 3 Generations of Canadian R&B Artists

In our interview (2020), Director of Black Culture at YouTube, Tuma Basa explained to me his framework of three generations of Black Canadian artists which highlights the long struggles that Black Canadian artists faced, as they fought for recognition in a hegemonically white Canada. Inspired by Basa’s framework, I also divide Canadian

R&B artists into three generations and address their generational differences in terms of the adoption of new technologies, the mixing of traditionally segregated music genres, and the degree of support offered to R&B artists by Canadian music industry infrastructures. As discussed in Chapter 1, this dividing process is problematic in that it relies on overgeneralization and tends to ignore many of the intersectional differences involved. That said, it also enables me to highlight the broader technological changes and wider shifts in the music industry and culture that will ultimately inform Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's marketing strategies. I argued that Bieber and Drake represent the second generation of Canadian R&B artists and Reyez represents the third generation of Canadian R&B artists through this framework, as defined below.

### 3.1.1 The First Generation of Canadian R&B Artists

The first generation of Canadian R&B artists extends across several decades of artists, including those discussed in the previous chapter, Crack of Dawn, The Shades, and contributors to songs like “Northern Touch” and “Can’t Repress the Cause.” The first generation of R&B artists asserted their intersectional Canadian experiences in their music, complicating ideologies of a hegemonically white rock and folk Canadian nation. The Toronto concert venue History, operated by Live Nation and Drake, hosted a concert in 2022 called All Canadian North Stars, which was described as “honour[ing] [Canadian] hip-hop and R&B history” (Ankrah, 2022). It featured Canadian artists whom I position in the first generation of Canadian R&B artists including Jully Black, Saukrates, Maestro Fresh Wes, Kardinal Offishall (Kardi), and Michie Mee, among others. Drake (2022b) posted the concert’s line up<sup>8</sup> in an image on Instagram with the caption “a celebration of the music that paved the way for all of us” to acknowledge the generation of Canadian R&B artists before him.

The first generation of Canadian R&B artists helped established R&B as a genre in Canada and paved the way for later generations of Canadian R&B artists to develop their

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<sup>8</sup> The planned order of acts that will perform at a concert.

careers. These artists created music at the periphery of Canadian mainstream media and worked together to circulate their music through independent record labels, live events, and self-promotional strategies such as handing out “flyers...[and] performing on the streets...parties...high schools...[or] roller-skating rinks” (PlayItLoudMusic, 2010). Without the support of many Canadian music industry gatekeepers, these artists relocated to the U.S.A. to sign with U.S. record labels, establishing networks between Canadian and U.S. R&B music genre worlds. These artists also helped push representations of racially diverse Canadian R&B artists into mainstream media and blurred traditional music genre categories of hip-hop, reggae, and R&B music.

### 3.1.2 The Second Generation of Canadian R&B Artists

The second generation of Canadian R&B artists includes biracial Black and white Canadian Drake and white Canadian Bieber. In the 2000s, Drake and Bieber expanded upon the networks, resources, and genre-blending styles created by the generation before them. For example, Canadian R&B artist Saukrates claims to have given Drake “free studio time” and introduced him to Noah “40” Shebib (CBC Music, 2014), a record producer who helped Drake develop his sonic style of blending rapping and singing on a single track (Tingen, 2012). Bieber’s and Drake’s performances continued the blurring of hip-hop and R&B that began with the first generation of Canadian R&B artists, but they further mixed their music with pop styles. By mixing R&B with pop, Bieber and Drake helped propel themselves and R&B music into mainstream media. As with some artists in the previous generation, Bieber and Drake temporarily relocated to the U.S.A. and signed with a U.S. record label. Unlike their predecessors, Bieber and Drake had the advantage of social networking platforms to build their musical careers online. Bieber and Drake both developed online community fanbases that circulated their music and advocated for their public personalities and lifestyle brands. Since first generation Canadian R&B artists established visibility for Canadian R&B stars, Bieber and Drake could build on this visibility and then differentiate their star images through the development of lifestyle brands. Hence, distinct from the first generation of Canadian R&B artists, second generation artists focused more on developing their lifestyle brands with new technologies, like the internet. These online fanbases became powerful mechanisms for

Bieber and Drake to grow their audibility and visibility as Canadian R&B artists. In 2007, Clive Thompson (2007) argued that the invention of technologies like cellphones, MP3 players, and online networked platforms, shifted the roles of musical artists, requiring them to focus more on developing deep relationships with audiences in the online space. According to Thompson (2007), by the early 2000s, audiences were not “hearing about bands from MTV or magazines anymore”; instead they learned about artists from “viral word-of-mouth, when a friend forwards a Web-site address, swaps an MP3, e-mails a link to a fan blog or posts a cellphone concert video on YouTube.” This shift to online media consumption made the internet a valuable tool to develop artist-audience relationships. In 2009, Drake stated that “us young rappers...have this tool called the internet now...all of us up-and-comers...our fanbases and our buzzes, are stemming from these blogs, and all these different things...just to keep those people entertained” (MTV, 2009/2019). As with the first generation of Canadian R&B artists, Bieber and Drake developed their star images through their performances, their audiences, their teams, their brand partnerships, commercial products and broadcast media. Different from previous generations, digital stars like Bieber and Drake also built their public images using online media texts.

Although I argue that Bieber and Drake marked a new era of digital stardom, when artists also had to become online marketers, I also examine their marketing techniques related to traditional marketing strategies. I agree with Jostein Gripsrud (2006), who stated: “when we talk about a ‘digital revolution’ it may be worth reminding ourselves the digitalization...could rather be described as a technological renewal that to some extent enhances the use of already existing possibilities” (p. 215). For example, when Henry Jenkins’ (2013) theory of “spreadable” media argued that social media creates new ways for information sharing, it is important to remember that versions of information-sharing already existed in print and broadcast media that were then enhanced through online communications. Socializing through technology is not new, but the vast adoption of social media has nonetheless shifted how we socialize. danah boyd (2015) said it best when she argued:

Social media have worked their way into everyday life. While these tools are not the first genre of technology designed to enable social interaction, they have been taken up around the globe at an unprecedented spread, revealing the extraordinary nature of the social media phenomenon. (p. 2)

Social media enables audiences to engage more frequently with digital stars and other audience members. Moving away from broadcast media to the online space, audiences can interact and exchange media texts about the digital star more frequently and easily and this can shift how the digital star is understood and perceived. In the second generation, the digital revolution helped develop global recognition of the “Canadian R&B” genre world.

Along with social media, online music videos play a prominent role in constructing the digital star. I agree with Richard Dyer (1998) that music videos, which he calls “star vehicle[s],” are rich tools for creating star personas. Like the previous generation of Canadian R&B artists, Bieber and Drake articulate Canadian and R&B social codes—like locations, activities, fashions, slang terminology, and behaviours—in their music videos. Bieber and Drake had access to new digital technologies that allowed their music videos and their articulations of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness to reach more audiences—at the audiences’ convenience—online. Previously, audiences relied on the schedules of broadcast media to interact with music and music videos (Pegley, 2008). Carol Vernallis (2004) and Maura Edmond (2014) both argued that when music videos moved from cable to the internet, they became an even more valuable star vehicle for artists to build their personas. Diane Railton and Paul Watson’s (2010) argument that music videos have “never been so culturally visible and accessible as [they are] in this historical moment” (p. 5) because “the internet has provided the music industry with new ways of broadcasting music videos to its audiences” (p. 6) is particularly relevant here. Building on Vernallis’ (2004) exploration of how music videos provide verbal, musical, and visual codes to create representations of race, gender, and performance, I examine below how Drake, Bieber, and Reyez have articulated visual and textual codes in their music videos and other online texts to define representations of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

### 3.1.3 The Third Generation of R&B Artists

Reyez represents what I classify as the third generation of contemporary Canadian R&B artists. Reyez, a second-generation Canadian and Columbian woman, who signed with a U.S. record label a decade after Bieber and Drake, has continued to redefine R&B-ness by mixing pop, R&B, hip-hop, and folk music. Jon Pareles (2020) described how Reyez's

“music [is] categorized as R&B [but] pulls together the impulses of folky singer-songwriters and syllable-spitting rappers as well as pop melody and hip-hop impact.” Unlike Bieber and Drake, Reyez had access to more local music industry networks to develop her R&B career, due to the development of the Canadian music scene. Canadian music was already pushed into international media outlets through the work of artists like Bieber, Drake, and The Weeknd and contemporary Canadian R&B finally started to gain recognition by Canadian music industry executives as a mixture of traditional R&B and pop music (CARAS, 2020). In a Toronto-based program (The Remix Project) meant to assist the next generation of hip-hop and R&B artists, she met mentors such as DVSN, learned about social media marketing, developed her songwriting and singing skills, and received access to recording studios and music production experts. Although the Canadian R&B music genre world was progressing, Reyez signed with a U.S. music label to benefit from wider U.S. R&B and hip-hop music infrastructures. Reyez continues to demonstrate how Canadian stardom intersects with the U.S. entertainment industry.

In the late 2010s, Josh Duboff (2016) states that “nowadays, we don’t read about celebrity engagements or pregnancies in newspapers, or even on blogs; we find out from the celebrities themselves, on their Twitter and Instagram accounts.” Like Bieber and Drake, Reyez used YouTube and Twitter to build her digital star. Unlike Bieber and Drake, Reyez used new social media platforms, like Instagram, to construct her lifestyle brand from the outset. Reyez used online platforms to articulate her experiences as a Columbian Canadian woman to inform the construction of her digital star image.

## 3.2 Building Authenticity as Canadian R&B Digital Stars

### 3.2.1 Narrating a Hustlin’ Backstory

Like the first generation of Canadian R&B artists, Reyez, Drake, and Bieber were challenged for their participation in R&B and hip-hop, as “Canadians.” As a result, all three artists constructed backstories that employed the traditional hip-hop genre code of “hustlin’” to gain credibility for their music that blurred hip-hop, R&B, and pop. Michael Eric Dyson (2019) said hustlin’ was used to describe the entrepreneurial endeavors of

Black U.S. people who generated income in creative ways, while “living off the books at the margins of white society” (p. 17). According to Connor Brooke (2016), the term “hustlin’” was adopted in hip-hop because artists in the genre lacked institutional support and artists had to find innovative ways to promote themselves and their music. Hip-hop and R&B artists alike tell stories of rags-to-riches narratives, of rising through the ranks of society based on their hard work and talent.

To increase the perceived authenticity of their music and public personalities, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez employed traditional hip-hop codes of hustlin’ in their constructed backstories across music, interviews, and social media posts. In a docuseries, Bieber (2020d) narrated a hustlin’ backstory of growing up in “poverty” in Stratford but working hard in the music industry to generate income for himself and his single mother. Similarly, Drake claimed in an interview with CBC News: The National (2013) that he had not lived in “some mansion[and] grew up with a mother that was deep in debt.” Keith Negus (1997) noted how musical artists could market their star images through a first-person narrative structure using lyrics. For example, Drake’s lyrics support his hustlin’ backstory of “start[ing] from the bottom” (Drake, 2013) but working hard and “spending every moment in the studio” (Drake & Lloyd, 2009). Simon Frith (1996) argued that the perceived authenticity of an artist’s performance depends on “something outside music...[It] is rooted in the person, the auteur, the community or the subculture that lies behind it [by creating] critical judgment[s] [to] measure performers’ ‘truth’ to the experiences or feelings they are describing or expressing” (p. 121). In interviews, Reyez claimed she had to hustle, like her immigrant parents, to build her career (BigBoyTV, 2017; Vibe Magazine, 2018). As digital stars, Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s everyday artist lifestyles and their curated lifestyle brands become enmeshed. This enables artists to reinforce their backstories online more frequently and thus to increase the believability of their public personalities. However, this also requires more maintenance for artists to mediate their digital star images, involving constant posts and multiple articulations of R&B genre codes to uphold their perceived authenticity.



### 3.2.2 Impression Management: Performing a Digital Star Persona

In 2009, Drake described how musical artists, in their unique role as stars, have to perform a public persona: “in any form of entertainment, everyone has to be an actor at some point...we all have to act...at certain points...the entertainment business is actually based off of acting. We are all actors in a sense” (MTV, 2009/2019). By claiming to be “actors” Drake highlights the performative role that artists play in building a public personality. Hovik Arshaguni (2018) explained that a rapper will create “a persona or character” to perform and deliver their music, “[and] over time, this [persona] becomes a rapper’s brand.” In this chapter, I do not seek to make any claims about what is true and authentic about the digital stars. Rather, I am more interested in how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have constructed backstories and public personas that have reinforced, complicated, and/or challenged hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness.

According to Dyer (1991), “there is nothing sophisticated about knowing [that stars are] manufactured and promoted” (p. 13). The sophistication lies in the blurring of the artist’s everyday life with that of the constructed public persona. Richard DeCordova (1990) identified how actors from the 1910s linked their off-screen private lives with their on-screen personalities to make their roles in films more believable. Circa 1910, film actors and their publicity teams began framing actors’ private lives in media texts, like newspapers and fan magazines, to reflect characteristics of the actors’ roles in films. The performer and their team created mutually reinforcing media texts to construct consistent ideas of the star (Dyer, 1991), making it harder for audiences to recognize the mediation of the actor’s everyday life. As discussed in Chapter 1, using George Santayana’s analogy that “masks are arrested expressions” (Goffman, 1959), in which people animate different “masks” (social roles) in different social situations, the peculiar role of the star is different from that of everyday individuals, who switch in and out of their masks whereas the star mask is fused to the artist-performer. Donald Horton and Richard Wohl’s (1956) discussion of the demands of the TV “personality programme” in their account of para-social interaction described this difference by stating that “unlike the theatrical drama [the performance of a celebrity] does not demand or even permit the aesthetic illusion...The audience not only accepts the symbol [of the performed

character] as reality but fully assimilates the symbolic role” (p. 218). In other words, the star appears to be the entire personality of the individual performer rather than a performed role. Drake (a.k.a. “Drizzy”) is both a star mask and the everyday personality of Aubrey Drake Graham. Justin Bieber (a.k.a. “Biebs”) is both a star mask and the everyday personality of Justin Drew Bieber. Jessie Reyez (a.k.a. “Yessie”) is both a star mask and the everyday personality of Jessica Reyez. Their star masks incorporate both the everyday personalities of the performers and their constructed lifestyle brands, mediated by the artists’ teams, media texts, and the artists’ performances. In this chapter, I examined how each artist constructed their star personas and how it blended with their lived experiences.

### 3.2.3 Building “Authenticity” as an R&B Artist

To build their “authenticity” Bieber, Drake, and Reyez all employ traditional hip-hop and R&B genre codes to increase their perceived believability. For example, Drake articulated traditional associations of R&B as “American.” Drake stated in an interview on BBC’s *1xtra Rap Show* that, “when [he] first came in the industry...[he] felt this pressure to “Be American” and sound “American” (utormusic, 2019). As in Goffman’s (1959) impression management theory, Drake performed the role of an R&B artist in a believable, having “to pretend like [he was] from New York” (Apple Music, 2016). However, Drake experienced a shift in the cultural script for the role of an R&B artist during his career, as evidenced when he stated, “I think now that we are all so proud to be from Toronto, we start talking more like how we talk” (utormusic, 2019). When Canadian R&B artists gained more prominence in popular culture, Drake could sound more Canadian while seemingly remaining authentic as an R&B artist. However, Drake had earlier described having “all the strikes against [him]...being from Canada, and being on a TV show, and being...super light-skinned” (MTV, 2009/2019), which seemingly discredits his participation in R&B. Drake’s authenticity as “Black” was challenged based on his intersectional identity.

Although Drake (2019a) defines himself “as a Black man,” Kern Carter (2019) argued that Drake often fails to get recognized as a Black artist, which extends beyond Drake’s light skin to his Canadian identity, his musical content, and his emotional public persona.

Carter (2019) speculated that “even though Drake identifies as black, he [may be seen as]...somewhat of an outsider because he wasn’t brought up inside [the U.S.] borders.” This suggests that Drake’s Canadian-ness contradicts hegemonic beliefs that R&B artists must be exclusively “Black Americans.” When Kyrell Grant (2015) stated that “it feels ridiculous to have to say this: Drake is black. Drake, born Aubrey Graham in a city where almost one in ten people are black,” Grant highlights the hegemonic views that Canadians are exclusively white. Carter (2019) argued that Drake’s musical content, which discusses “topics surrounding love and insecurity and ambition, [makes] his experience as a black man [seem] less authentic” than a Black U.S. artist speaking about their “hardcore” experiences of killing, racism, and gun violence. Drake attempted to shift hegemonic views of Black men through his music and stated: “I think my music shows that Black men can be intelligent, that Black men can have real thoughts as opposed to shooting guns and doing all the stupid stuff that maybe society thinks that we do as rappers, as Black men” (NotableInterviews, 2010a). Carter (2019) speculated that Drake’s emotional identity may position him as neither “tough enough” nor “outspoken enough...to warrant full acceptance [as Black].” Carter (2019) claimed that Drake’s emotional persona is perceived as “not [being] the right archetype” for “hyper-masculine” music genres of hip-hop and R&B. This lack of recognition largely stems from the underrepresentation of Black diversity, of Black Canadians, and of Canadian R&B artists in popular culture. As a self-identified Black Canadian, Carter (2019) asserts that Drake is undeniably a Black Canadian, and I agree with Carter that Drake has made a strong impact on Canadian music and on understandings of Canadian identities.

Kyrell Grant (2015) suggested that Drake’s intersectional identity renders his Black identity inauthentic: “Drake’s own identity – his nationality, his mixed race background that includes Jewish heritage and upbringing, the neighbourhood he once lived in, the schools he went to – is often taken to mean that his black experience is somehow inauthentic.” Despite that criticism, Drake’s racialized identity continues to shape his experiences in society and thereby his Black experience should not be rendered inauthentic. This argument clearly involves ongoing debates about authenticity, which Keir Keightley (2001) characterizes as follows:

‘Authentic’ is a term affixed to music which offers sincere expressions of genuine feeling, original creativity, or an organic sense of community. Authenticity is not something ‘in’ the music, though it is frequently experienced as such, believed to be actually audible, and taken to have a material form. Rather, authenticity is a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences. (p. 131)

If authenticity is not an inherent quality in music, authenticity can be evaluated differently by each audience member. Thus, some audience members may perceive Drake’s music as authentically R&B and some audience members may not, based on the individual’s interpretations of R&B and their perceptions of Drake. Consequently, there may be a tension between the artist and the audience. Some audiences want to see recognizable codes of R&B-ness, whereas Drake, Bieber, and Reyez immediately challenge these codes based on their racial and national identities.

Matthew Stahl (2012), for example, argued that in music contest shows, like *American Idol*, artists create “authentication narratives...articulated by contestants or family, friends or fans [that] contribute to the ever-expanding back story on which all of the contestants’ musical and nonmusical performances build” (p. 50). These “authentication narratives” are backstories that help to foster relationships between the artist and audiences and enhance audiences’ belief in the artist’s public personality and musical performances.

Drake explained how audiences make assumptions about his lived experiences based on the narratives he expresses in his music when he said, “I’m so sick of people saying that I’m lonely and emotional, and...longing for a woman...my life is...not some sad depressing story...I make my music strictly for the purpose of...driving at nighttime [to match the] scenery [of Toronto at night]” (CBC News: The National, 2013). Drake argued that by constructing his public persona as a Canadian, who is not surrounded by “drugs and killing,” he limits what he can then discuss in his music, stating, “when I’m writing a rap...I think if I could just throw in a gun bar, in there and man, it’d be done...I can’t rap about that because I’m not going to step out my character” (CBC News: The National, 2013). Drake, the artist, cannot contradict his constructed lifestyle brand. Drake argued that by rapping about experiences of “drugs and killing” in his music, he might risk appearing inauthentic (CBC News: The National, 2013). Therefore, the artist’s

intersectional identity and constructed backstories both contribute to the perceived authenticity of their digital stardom and their music.

Unlike biracial Drake, who emphasizes his Blackness to reinforce traditional R&B genre codes, Bieber's whiteness became a point of contention for Bieber's perceived authenticity in R&B. At 14-years-old, Bieber was already expressing his interest in R&B as demonstrated in an interview on *etalk Canada*, in 2008 (etalk, 2020b). However, to participate in R&B, Bieber performed behaviours and styles that are hegemonically associated with Black people. For example, Black U.S. rapper Lil Twist claimed that he introduced Bieber to [music producer] Poo Bear to help Bieber "sound Black" (Lil Twist as quoted in Kennedy, 2020) which highlights how Blackness continued to be a kind of script for R&B artists, a code which white Canadian Bieber fails to articulate through his racial identity. As a racially white Canadian artist, Bieber participated in R&B in ways both similar to and different from minstrelsy (which, as discussed in Chapter 2, often involved white people performing racist stereotypes of Black people on stage, as a form of entertainment). Like a minstrel, Bieber is trained to sing and dance in ways that support hegemonic beliefs about "Black people" and commodifies these performances of Black culture through a popular music genre style. However, unlike minstrelsy, Bieber claims to celebrate rather than mock Black culture. Additionally, Bieber does not claim to be performing a Black stereotype. Rather, Bieber addresses his whiteness and recognized his white privilege while sourcing Black culture as his inspiration. When Bieber said "I'm very influenced by black culture, but I don't think of it as black or white...It's not me trying to act or pose in a certain way. It's a lifestyle — like a suaveness" (Bieber as quoted in Halperin, 2013), Bieber highlighted the crux of a complex contradiction: that R&B music is deeply rooted in a type of Black culture yet as a musical performance practice, R&B can be exercised by anyone regardless of race. Unlike the intention of minstrelsy, designed to perpetuate harmful ideologies of Black people for entertainment, Bieber is participating in a music genre category of R&B by adopting and celebrating styles and practices traditionally associated with Black people. While it is important to recognize that racialized people fought to gain mainstream recognition in R&B, I do not wish to reinforce the very classifications I critique by addressing R&B as exclusively Black. As discussed in Chapter 2, classificatory processes in music and identity are

complex because social rules and social codes can change over time, across contexts, and are in and of themselves unstable categories (Foucault, 1969/ 2014). However, in my discussion of R&B in Chapter 2, I acknowledged the importance of recognizing how R&B has been “rooted and routed” (Gilroy, 1993) in Black culture and understand that Bieber’s whiteness in the context of R&B is often subject to skepticism and criticism.

In this context, it is crucial to address what power dynamics are involved as those with different intersectional identities participate in R&B. By Bieber arguing that Black culture is a lifestyle and not limited to Black and white racial divides, Bieber suggested that, even as a white Canadian, he should be allowed to participate in that way of life. However, Bieber’s “white privilege...[enabled] Bieber...to emulate his black contemporaries and generate massive profits beyond their reach” (D. Smith, 2014). As discussed in the previous chapter, white people participating in Black culture may prevent Black people from representing their own lifestyles in mainstream media, due to hegemonic values privileging white people. To echo my previous arguments in Chapters 1 and 2, there is a power imbalance through which Bieber’s participation in R&B, as a white artist, enables Bieber to commodify his performances and gain public visibility in ways that are less accessible to his Black counterparts. Bieber’s whiteness nonetheless may undercut or challenge his perceived authenticity in R&B.

According to Dr. Darron Smith (2014), Bieber harmfully commodifies Black lifestyles in popular culture by building a marketable public persona as a white R&B artist:

Bieber's appeal, couched in his public image of coolness and swagger (i.e., hats, clothing, gold chains, tats, etc.), makes him very marketable indeed. But it is well known that he had little interaction with black folk prior to his musical success (as seen in images of him with his group of all white friends from Canada). Thus, to maximize his believability as an R&B crooner with crossover appeal, Bieber was assigned a ‘swagger coach’ to learn the tools of the trade. Ryan Good was hired to refine his image in ways acceptable to white audiences while optimizing coolness. The message — be cool, but not too black.

Smith (2014) reinforced the hegemonic belief of an exclusively white Canada when he argued that Bieber’s early experiences in Canada lacked interactions with Black people, as he was surrounded by “his group of all white friends from Canada.” Of course, it is extremely unlikely that Bieber had the same interactions that Drake had in Toronto,

amongst the large population of Black Torontonians immigrants. Yet I do not agree that Bieber's authenticity in R&B can simply be evaluated through his degree of exposure to "Black folk." How would an adequate amount of exposure to "Black folk" be evaluated to determine Bieber's authenticity in R&B? Through this measure, we would need to examine at what age, and at what period in their life, did Bieber come to be "influenced by Black culture," as he himself puts it. But when do we begin examining the moment of his "musical success," to determine whether he had a significant amount of exposure to Black culture in order to evaluate his participation as authentic?

Bieber grew up in Stratford, Ontario, with a relatively small music scene, but in the online space, Bieber would have been able to access a plethora of music that resonated with him, including R&B music. Hence, gauging Bieber's degree of exposure to R&B based on his geographical location in the digital age is a somewhat narrow view. Black U.S. R&B artist Usher, who mentored Bieber, argued that Bieber has a longstanding investment in R&B: "[Bieber] has always wanted to be a person who's...well rounded, has a pop sensibility, but still is...based in soul, the writing, the way he sings it" (Bieber, 2020h). Building on Bieber's interests in R&B, Ryan Good confirmed that Usher did indeed hire him to be Bieber's "swagger coach" beginning in 2009, to train Bieber to behave in certain ways and wear certain clothing styles that supported traditional R&B scripts and codes (Bieber, 2020d). More recently, Bieber (2020b) addressed how the contributions of Black artists to R&B music have influenced his performances as a white artist, by stating:

I am inspired by Black culture. I have benefited off of Black culture. My style, how I sing, dance, perform, and my fashion have all been influenced and inspired by Black culture. I am committed to using my platform from this day forward to learn, to speak up about racial injustice and systemic oppression, and to identify ways to be a part of much needed change.

Bieber addressed his white privilege when arguing that he has "benefited" from Black culture. When Bieber stated that the ways he "sing[s], dance[s], perform[s], and [his] fashion," are "inspired" and "influenced" by Black culture, he situated himself as a participant in and contributor to R&B and not simply an appropriator of the culture. Rather than saying he borrows from the culture, Bieber strategically used the words "inspired" and "influenced."

Bieber further emphasized his position as an ally to Black people by stating he will use his “platform” and white privilege to address “racial injustice and systemic oppression.” In 2017, Bieber identified as “a white Canadian” and argues that he “will never know what it feels like to be an African American” (Bieber, 2017) but he claimed to use his white privilege to be an ally to Black people:

...I am willing to stand up and use my voice to shine light on racism, because it’s a real thing and it’s more prevalent now than I have ever seen in my lifetime...we are all God’s children and we are ALL EQUAL. (Bieber, 2017)

While Bieber engages in the same cultural practices as many Black people, he does so without having to face the same “racism” and difficult “experience[s]” that Black people may face. On Instagram, Bieber (2020v) states “racism is ingrained in our culture” and while he can use his platform to stimulate important discussions about Black racism in Canada, he simultaneously continues to capitalize on it in his R&B performances as a white artist. Despite his best intentions to be a Black ally, Bieber continues to have more visibility as a white artist in music industry than other Black artists in the same genre. Bieber follows the history of white artists, like Elvis, adopting Black music and being more palatable to a wider audience as a white participant (as discussed in Chapter 2). I thus consider Bieber’s position in R&B as both problematic and progressive. It matters that more Canadians are beginning to gain some acceptance in R&B, a music genre traditionally classified as exclusively associated with Black U.S. identities. Certainly, Bieber created R&B music at a young age, and later Bieber’s digital star image drew on genres codes of Blackness to market and commodify his music and his performances. His stardom has been part of R&B’s emergence as definitive of contemporary mainstream pop that potentially includes all Canadians.

Drake, like Bieber, also argued that he is “inspired” by other cultures in his R&B performances and denies that he is exercising appropriation by stating:

[Appropriation is] not supporting that culture, [not] doing songs with people who are deeply rooted in that culture, [not] giving opportunity to people who are in that culture...Appropriating is taking it for your own personal gain and denying that it was ever inspired from this. That’s the true disservice that somebody could do to the U.K. [music scene], to dancehall, to Afrobeats...I ensure that not only paying all due respects verbally but...I make it a point to give opportunity (Drake 2019a).



Drake suggests that he does not participate in diverse cultures only for his “own personal gain” and raises the problematic question of how participation in certain cultural practices could or should be regulated by ideas of race or national identities. Drake argues that he should have a right to participate in any cultural practice if he “pay[s] all due respects” and gives opportunities for musical artists in those music genres to grow their careers. Drake underscores a larger discussion that this study points to regarding rules of inclusion and exclusion in cultural practices. Drake engages in multiple cultural practices through his interpretations of R&B music, which blends pop, hip-hop, and traditional R&B styles. Drake, too, has certain forms of privilege to commodify these cultural styles through his prominent position in popular culture as a former television star, with the abilities to fund his music career as he broke into the music industry. Like Bieber, Drake early on accessed online streaming platforms to create covers of U.S. hip-hop and R&B (Setaro, 2017), and provide his interpretations of the songs he consumed by mixing pop, hip-hop, and R&B styles.

Unlike Drake and Bieber, Reyez faced a unique struggle as a woman to break into the music industry. In Reyez’s song (2017c) and short film “Gatekeepers” (2017a), she describes a personal experience of “confront[ing] the dark part of the music industry where people in power take advantage of up-and-coming artists, especially women” (Pigeons & Planes, 2017) in a male-dominated music industry. Reyez said “Gatekeeper” is about:

Sucking dick to get a deal... telling little girls or even boys...you better get on your knees and...give [the music industry gatekeeper sexual favours] for this dream [to break into the music industry]...Gatekeeper [is about] me being presented with that [situation]...struggling with that decision but then by the grace of God [deciding] not to. (BigBoyTV, 2017)

In the film, Reyez (2017a) played herself and was speaking with a “big producer” who said he would listen to her music. However, in exchange, the producer assumed that Reyez would sleep with him. In the film, Reyez (2017a) responded that she “comes from a Catholic family” and when she refused to sleep with him, the producer in the film (and potentially in the real-life situation) stated, “you are fucking up your chance right now...if you’re not using your pussy you ain’t serious about your fucking dream.” In the film, a woman tells Reyez: “girls in this industry have to give it up. It’s part of the game.”

At the end of the film, Reyez (2017a) said that she did not sleep with the producer but claimed that it “fucked her up” because she debated it since the gatekeeper “[held] in his hands...the dream” that Reyez had been chasing after for “so many years.” The film and music video powerfully demonstrated the pressures and potentially precarious positions that artists are placed in while trying to establish their careers. Reyez’s intersectional struggles included facing sexism to break into the male-dominated R&B music industry. However, with the help of a few trusted gatekeepers, their powerful use of the internet, and Reyez’s cultivated skills, she successfully broke into the music industry with a favourable record deal.

This chapter will explore the intersectional struggles Bieber, Drake, and Reyez each experienced while breaking into the music industry. I examine how each artist crafted a public personality and backstory that reinforced, complicated and/or challenged ideologies of R&B-ness and Canadian-ness to shape their perceived authenticity as a contemporary Canadian R&B artist.

### 3.3 A “Fifteen Thousand Dollar” Co-Sign: How Drake, the “Self-Made” Digital Star was Born

Atkilt Geleta (2013) claimed that Drake’s rise to fame is relatively unknown “as a bi-racial suburbanite ex-child actor from Canada [who conquered] the hyper competitive and uber-macho hip-hop world with sensitive, R&B infused rap music, while earning the respect of the genre’s elite.” Several aspects of Drake’s intersectional identity created points of contention in classifying him as an R&B artist; yet, Drake “cap[ped]” 2022 as Billboard’s Top “R&B/Hip-Hop Artist of the year” for a seventh time (T. Anderson, 2022). This subsection uncovers how Drake broke into the music industry through both traditional networking practices and online marketing strategies.

Drake’s public personality was already associated with Jimmy Brooks, the character he portrayed on the Canadian teen drama television show *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, which was far from his musical artist public persona as Drake the Canadian “hip-hop/R&B artist.” Kadeen Griffiths (2015) highlighted Drake’s contradictory professional-musical-national identity by stating that “After spending so many seasons

watching the Canadian TV show *Degrassi*, on which Drake...played popular-though-bland jock Jimmy Brooks, telling me that Jimmy had moved to America to become a rapper was just a laughable image to me.” Drake’s character seemed to also challenge the “uber-macho” hip-hop world. When the character Jimmy became paralyzed and began using a wheelchair, Drake threatened to leave the show, allegedly claiming “all [his] friends in the rap game [said] [he was] soft because [he was] in a wheelchair” (as quoted in Gallagher, 2021); however, Drake stayed on the show for 7 consecutive seasons before leaving to focus on his music career. Canadian hip-hop researcher Dalton Higgins also argued that “nowhere did we think, as hip-hop scholars, critics and journalists, that a biracial, black Jewish kid...would be the most popular rapper on the planet” because of rap culture’s “obsession and fixation around being from the streets and hardcore, coming from low-income environments” (Higgins as quoted in Benchetrit, 2021). Hegemonic views of rap culture being “hardcore” were in conflict with Drake’s character on television and his intersectional experiences of growing up in Canada as a child actor.

While claiming to have a rags-to-riches narrative, Drake lived in Forest Hill, an affluent Toronto neighbourhood and attended the prestigious Vaughn Road Academy High School. In this community and school, Drake was given access to people and resources that helped him break into the entertainment industry. At 15-years-old, Drake was introduced to his classmate’s father, who was an entertainment industry agent. That agent helped Drake secure an acting role as Jimmy Brooks on the long-running Canadian television series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Lowers, 2016). From 2001 to 2009, Drake starred in the show, appearing in 145 episodes. In 2007, in an episode titled “It’s Tricky,” Drake rapped for the first time on the show, performing a song called “Tell Me Lies.” This helped introduce his existing *Degrassi* fanbase to his musical talents. On *Degrassi*, he began building a fanbase to help launch his career as an R&B artist.

I attended the 25<sup>th</sup> *Degrassi* Anniversary Reunion in Vancouver in 2018, where former *Degrassi* actors Pat Mastroianni and Stacie Mistysyn mentioned that Drake struggled to simultaneously act and build a music career, which eventually led him to choose music over acting. They said he would perform locally when he was not on set. In 2003 and 2004, Drake performed with a cover group called The Renaissance, at The Avocado

Supper Club on Adelaide Street in Toronto. The group also featured Melanie Fiona and VOYCE. Fiona said that they were about “16, 17, and 18” when they performed together but the group disbanded when the artists began their solo careers (djvlad, 2012). Drake’s early performances helped him to network in the music industry and grow his fanbase.

As part of Drake’s rags-to-riches narrative to establish himself as an authentic struggling R&B artist, Drake claimed to have an absentee father (Drake, “Look What You’ve Done,” 2011). Contrarily, Jonah Weiner (2014) stated “[Drake’s father, Dennis Graham, introduced Drake] to classic soul and R&B” during summers together in Memphis and “told Drake to develop his singing in addition to his rhyming.” Dennis was well integrated in the U.S.’s R&B music genre world and performed with Rock N’ Roll legend Jerry Lee Lewis and other U.S. blues and R&B artists, which may have helped Drake network in the music industry and gain access to more music industry executives and R&B musical artists in the U.S.A. To address Drake’s claim, Dennis Graham stated,

I have always been with Drake...I said ‘Drake why are you saying all that stuff about me...that’s not true’...and he said ‘Dad it sells records’...I took Drake down through [Memphis]...he’s always been around music. My family has always been all about music. My Uncle Willy Mitchell who discovered Al Green from Royal studios from 1956 or 7 in Memphis Tennessee...I took him...there...I used to let [Drake] shake a tambourine on stage with me...every Sunday...I exposed him at an early age...he started out ...[appearing in commercials] when he was five...[I] started him out in the business. (Power 106 Los Angeles, 2019)

The backstory of an absentee father could “sell records” because it fulfils a hip-hop genre code of being a self-made individual. However, Dennis Graham insisted that he helped develop his son’s interest in music and encouraged his skill development in music at a young age. Drake refuted his father’s rebuttal in an Instagram story on October 8, 2020, stating: “my father will say anything to anyone that’s willing to listen to him...every bar I ever spit [freestyle rap] was the truth.”

However, in previous interviews, Drake appeared to contradict himself and admitted that his father exposed him to music when he said:

There’s definitely photographic evidence of my father having me around music and there’s a picture of me performing with a band when I’m like really, really young. My dad used to gig around the city and eventually he integrated me in his act, so I would come up and sing...[when he was in jail, my dad’s cellmate]...my

dad used to share his phone time with this [cellmate]...who used to rap...over the phone...so I'd spit with him...until it cut off...[my dad] definitely gets a lot of credit in those early years. (CBC News: The National, 2013)

Drake may have understated the assistance he received from his father to break into the music industry to uphold a hustlin' backstory. I speculate that Drake's early exposure to the entertainment industry through advertisements at 5-years-old, performing locally in Toronto, and meeting artists through his father, helped catapult Drake's musical career. For example, in 2007, Drake admitted that mobilizing his existing fanbase helped him to establish his career as a musical artist: "If it wasn't for Degrassi...[my fanbase] wouldn't be as grand as it is...the fanbase of Degrassi was a steppingstone...I have to give credit to the show" (NotableInterviews, 2010a). Additionally, as an actor, Drake likely learned self-promotional strategies to guide him on how to market himself in the music industry.

Drake was an early adopter of social media in 2010s to market his Canadian-ness. In 2011 interviews, Drake identified himself as a distinctly Torontonion artist and directed audiences to his BlogSpot page and his MySpace account:

This is Drake from Toronto Ontario. You can check me out at MySpace dot com slash this is Drake...[and the Blogspot website account called] October's Very Own...is...the epicenter of this whole Drake movement...[it's called] October's Very Own because [mine and my team member's] birthdays are in October...it's the place to go...to and get all the songs and be in tune with the lifestyle. (1587 Roslynn Alba Cobarrubias, 2011)

MySpace and BlogSpot were two different websites that Drake used to build his digital stardom. BlogSpot was a free Blogger platform on which users could create an account under the web address "yourblogname.blogspot.com." Blogger was invented in 1999 by a team of three San Francisco developers during the dot-com boom. Users could upload images and videos and write texts in the form of a traditional blog to share their opinions, hobbies, and everyday activities (Blogger, 2010). By 2002, the platform had thousands of users and was eventually bought by Google (Blogger, 2010). The platform became a very popular way for musical artists to interact with their audiences and build their lifestyle brands. Clive Thompson (2007) highlighted the prominent role that blogs played in building audience-artist relationships when stating how musical artist Jonathan Coulton had "fans [who] do not want merely to buy his music [but] [t]hey want to be his

friend...they want to interact with him all day long online. They pore [*sic*] over his blog entries, commenting with sympathy and support.” Like Coulton, Drake also seized the power of an online blog to seemingly befriend his audience and build his public persona.

Drake created a BlogSpot page for OVO (October’s Very Own), a company that Drake created with Oliver El-Khatib (40). OVO marketed the R&B artist Drake and his Torontonion lifestyle by promoting Drake’s interests, fashion, career development, activities, and everyday behaviours. OVO became “the creative umbrella under which all of Drake’s projects fall” (Welch, 2010) to promote and expand Drake’s constructed lifestyle brand into an empire, in which Drake eventually created a record label, different clothing lines, products and merchandise, and physical storefronts across the world, beginning with a few stores in Canada. A description provided by one of the storefronts in Mississauga, Ontario, described the business: “OVO designs and manufactures premium clothing, outerwear, accessories, and home goods inspired by its Canadian roots” (Square One, n.d.). OVO became central to Drake’s distinctly Torontonion lifestyle brand.

On OVO’s BlogSpot, he posted miscellaneous images, videos, and texts depicting Drake’s everyday life, interests, and inspirations to construct Drake’s public personality and his lifestyle brand (Capital XTRA, 2016). For example, in October 2008, Drake created a blog post on OVO citing Black U.S. R&B artist “Chris Brown” as a musical inspiration and stated: “In my opinion is the best young entertainer in the entire world...this dude is a legend to me” (as quoted in Capital XTRA, 2016). I note that online, audiences “seemingly” gain access to Drake’s direct thoughts and everyday life. Marwick and boyd (2010) employed Erving Goffman’s (1959) theory of impression management to argue that what seems to be an unmediated performance of a celebrity’s identity on Twitter is heavily mediated. For example, model Emily Ratajkowski stated that “there is a separation between your private life and social media... You don’t post your whole life. You’re editing, and you’re curating the image you’re putting out there...I think that ultimately people [are]...not actually as connected as they maybe feel” (as quoted in Duboff, 2016). Artists reveal and conceal information about themselves online to build believable and seemingly authentic public personalities. When Drake

seemingly gives audiences private access to his hotel room on BlogSpot (as quoted in Capital XTRA, 2016), he may be motivated to do so to depict that he is on the road working hard, to build his career as an R&B artist. Drake exercised impression management through images, songs, lyrics, and posts on MySpace and BlogSpot to build his authenticity as a Canadian R&B star and to build his distinctly Torontonion lifestyle.

Unlike the first-generation of Canadian R&B artists that had to rely on broadcast media and in-person interactions to circulate information about their music, Drake had an exponential reach to international audiences online. Nancy Baym (2018) stated that “labels are using social media vehicles to attract and retain audiences for developing and established acts...[to] aid in developing brand personality, which can be the basis of relationships that artists have with their fans” (p. 72). This highlights the important role social media plays in developing the lifestyle brand of the digital star. Additionally, Baym (2018) argues that social media posts can keep audiences interested in a star, “even when [the artist does not have] a new CD [nor] a tour” (p. 72). Therefore, social media can help initially build a digital star and then maintain the star’s relevancy in popular culture. According to Kiana Fitzgerald (2018), BlogSpot created a space for audience members to engage with Drake, and with one another:

It was on BlogSpot that we fans got to know each other, but it developed beyond that. We became Facebook friends and followed each other on Twitter, some of us creating accounts just to be side-by-side as Drake took a leap into mainstream.

Audiences could consume Drake’s music at their leisure and interact with other audience members more easily and more quickly. Therefore, online communication could help foster a community through the Drake brand.

Alison Hearn (2010) described the popular practice of “self-promotion” (p. 427) which was enabled through “social network sites, such as Facebook [in which online users could] craft [a] profile...or attempt to compose compelling 140 character messages on Twitter” (p. 427). Drake used Twitter to reinforce his song lyrics and build brand consistency between his performed online profile and his music. For example, he created Tweets with texts like “Spending every moment in the studio...” (Drake, 2009b) to reflect his song lyrics “spending every moment in the studio” (Drake & Llyod, 2009). Drake

also Tweeted song lyrics like “I better find your loving...I better find your heart” (Drake, 2010), from the hook of his song “Find Your Love” (2010). When Drake thanked audiences who “download[ed] [his music], listen[ed] to it, quote[d] it[s] lines in their Twitters and Facebooks” (MTV, 2009/2019) he encouraged the production of user-generated content (UGC). UGC involves audiences creating media texts promoting someone or something in the form of social media posts, web articles, print articles, drawings, and other content (Huang, et al., 2018). Although UGC can be a form of expression for the online user, Drake capitalizes on audiences’ free labour in promoting his digital star. By Tweeting Drake’s lyrics, or posting about him on Facebook, audiences increase Drake’s brand visibility and Drake’s relevancy in popular culture.

MySpace was another online platform that led to Drake’s successful music career. Following the advice of a rapper named Promise, Drake created a MySpace profile under the name “Drake” to share his music with fans “for free” (NotableInterviews, 2010a). Drake recognized the potential power of branding himself on MySpace. He said, “MySpace has been essential to [his] buzz. It’s a place for people to go to listen to [his] music” (NotableInterviews, 2010a). Baym (2018) explains how MySpace was a central tool for musical artists building their careers in the early 2000s:

MySpace was the first social network site to explode globally...MySpace seeded its network with people in the L.A. music scene, betting that musicians’ need to build and reach audiences...For musicians, the potential seemed clear: make a profile, upload your songs so people can hear them, start collecting friends...Get enough friends to up your friend count to where it demonstrates marketability and you can parlay that into gigs, recording contracts. (p. 11)

Drake used MySpace to circulate his music, build his visibility online, and cultivate a fanbase by “friending” individuals. The more friends Drake had on MySpace, the larger his online audience became. MySpace helped create today’s common practice of evaluating a brand’s market value based on its online audience size. The number of friends Drake had on MySpace became a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) to digitally quantify his market value. The more “friends” Drake had on MySpace, the larger his perceived audience is, which makes Drake appear more marketable. Audiences may also increase their perception of Drake’s authenticity based on the higher number of “friends” Drake has.



To encourage audience members to interact with Drake's MySpace profile and grow his audience, the page listed a now-defunct Gmail address that encouraged fans to "talk to Drake" and email him feedback on his music (Fitzgerald, 2018). "Drake" would sometimes reply to these emails, simply saying "THANKS!!" (Fitzgerald, 2018). These interactions enabled audiences to build relationships with Drake, creating the illusion of intimacy and transparency between Drake and his MySpace "friends." Building on Donald Horton and Richard Wohl's (1956) theory of "para-social interactions" and Philip Auslander's (2015) application of "parasocial communications," I argue that Drake created the illusion of intimacy with individual audience members online by enabling online users to email him. Even without Drake responding to all his emails, or by having other people respond to his emails as "Drake," his audiences may feel as if they are intimately interacting with the digital star Drake.

Due to the growing popularity of his MySpace profile in 2007, Drake attracted the attention of 19-year-old Jas Prince, son of James Prince the founder of Rap-A-Lot Records. When Jas Prince wanted to begin managing artists, he "went searching [on MySpace] for an artist [in hip-hop] of his own to groom" (Payne, 2017) and found Drake's MySpace profile in 2007. Jas Prince described how he used MySpace to find Drake's profile and his music:

Back in 2006, I was in school [and mentioned to my father that] I wanted to get into the music business. He told me that I had to look for the hottest thing, to find someone who had a buzz. MySpace had a music explore page at the time, and you could see who was trending by zip code...I ran across all types of artists...but Drake was the one that caught my eye. He was ranked number one or two on the unsigned trending artists list. His page just said that his name was Drake, and he was from Toronto...MySpace had a little radio player on the right side [of someone's profile]...He had a couple of songs on there. (as quoted in Golden, 2015)

The inclusion of Drake's MySpace page on the "trending artists lists" was a result of the number of engagements (listens, likes, comments, and shared posts) he received on his page and the number of friends his page had. Since Drake had built a large online following, he was also able to build the visibility of his online profile and garner Jas Prince's attention. For Jas Prince, who wanted to make a name for himself in the hip-hop music industry, Drake's profile appeared to be marketable. Jas Prince allegedly messaged

Drake on MySpace “[to let] him know who [he] was and that [he] wanted to work with him [and] get his music to [people in the music industry]” (Weisman, 2012). Drake eventually accepted Jas Prince’s help, and as part of their working relationship Jas Prince would send Drake’s music to people he knew through his father’s music label (MTV, 2009/2019). Historically, A&R people would scout potential stars through open mics or showcases, but this practice of scouting talent was shifting to the online space which saved industry executives time and money in travelling to find talent. Artists with existing popularity could also be more easily found online.

While remaining unsigned in 2006, Drake released a mixtape, *Room for Improvement*, on Florida DJ Smallz’s bespoke series under the unofficial label All Things Fresh, founded by Drake and his friend Oliver. Drake enlisted 40, Boi-1da, Frank Dukes, Dan “DFS” Johnson, Amir, and Soundtrakk to produce the mixtape. The mixtape included the single “Special,” created with his former Renaissance group member Voyce and the song was “an early precursor to the melodic flow that helped Drake conquer hip-hop just a few years later” (Grove, 2022). Drake also worked with U.S. rapper Nickelus F, who claimed that “people knew [him and Drake] together...in [the] hip-hop and R&B [scene]” (Shaketa Speaks, 2015). Drake created public associations between himself and successful R&B artists to help establish his authenticity as an R&B artist. While claiming the narrative that he remained unsigned, Drake had already begun working with Jas Prince and had developed relationships with other R&B artists. Even without a record label, Drake’s mixtape was a success: Drake and his mother mailed out over 60 thousand copies of the mixtape to buyers. In an interview with DJ Semtex, Drake claimed that he belonged to a new generation of artists who could successfully commodify an online audience to create music careers, without the help of a music label:

Without [a] label...I think...people underestimate...[me thinking it’s] just the internet buzz [that]...can’t materialize...if I did put out an album with no label I could really prove a point which is a change in the generation...because we don’t have the same marketing tools that...that Master P used to sell albums...the game has changed...we’ve done something already that people are saying is legendary. I kind of feel like if I signed to a label...and go platinum first week they’re just gonna be like well it was probably the label’s push...the internet is a powerful tool and when you use it the right way, you can make magic happen so I really think it would be legendary. (iExclusive TV, 2009)

The narrative of claiming to be unsigned makes Drake's accomplishments appear more impressive, framing his success story through his skills and hard work rather than his expansive network of music industry executives, gatekeepers, artists, and previous experiences in the entertainment industry. At 21-years-old, unsigned Drake stated that he has the "final decisions" on all "corporate and business decisions" of his music, but admitted that "a lot of people deserve credit...like T-Slack...Noah...Oliver...my uncle, my mother...[who] help me, and there's a list of producers, it's not just me, and it'll never be just me...an artist has a great team, that's why they're a great artist" (NotableInterviews, 2010b). While acknowledging that he had a team of people who helped him establish his career, Drake also tried to represent himself as a self-made artist. In 2007, Drake claimed that his musical talents continue to be overlooked and stated: "maybe Corporate America doesn't get it yet and maybe the right labels don't get it but definitely I think that people really appreciate [my music]" (NotableInterviews, 2010a). Drake's argument that he lacks support from U.S. music labels undercuts the support Drake did indeed receive from many U.S. music industry executives and musical artists. Nevertheless, by successfully commodifying a mixtape online, Drake represented a shift in the music industry in which artists optimize online platforms to build their careers.

Daniella Etienne, former Brand Partnerships Organizer at Universal Music's Urban division and Director of The Remix Project (a nonprofit Canadian arts and entertainment mentoring program), a program that shaped Reyez's sound, stated in our interview (2020) that "because of social media and the internet, there are a lot more avenues to put out music, without the help of major labels." Even without a music label's financial and promotional support, Drake did not only rely on the online space to build his career, he was also able to rely on the economic capital (and fame) he achieved from acting on *Degrassi* to fund his music.

For example, in 2007, Drake released his second self-funded mixtape, *Comeback Season*, with T-Minus and Boi-1da, which included the single "Replacement Girl" with Trey Songz. Trey Songz admitted that Drake gave him "about ten thousand or fifteen thousand dollars" for his feature on the track and an interviewer joked "that [it was Drake's]

Degrassi money” that helped Drake pay to get Trey Songz’s co-sign<sup>9</sup> in the U.S. R&B music industry (McClanahan, 2017). This payment to Trey Songz was instrumental in building Drake’s digital star as a Canadian R&B artist to build his visibility and perceived authenticity as a Canadian R&B star. Patrick Bierut (2022) argues that *Comeback Season* helped introduce Drake’s “versatile approach to hip-hop & R&B” and that “it was *Comeback Season* that put the gears in motion for Aubrey Graham [Drake’s birth name], the actor, to transition into Drake, the MC.”

Trey Songz, whom Drake met through Terrill Slack, helped introduce Drake’s blended hip-hop and R&B sonic style. DJ Smallz introduced Drake to Terrill Slack, the A&R manager of Bigger Picture Entertainment, a company which helped new artists grow their brands and increase their online presence. Slack helped Drake build his online presence and he introduced Drake to Trey Songz. Slack worked with Drake and Trey Songz to produce their collaborative song and music video for “Replacement Girl” (2007). Drake stated that the collaboration with Trey Songz made sense because:

when I met Trey Songz, like he had a MySpace...so...it just made sense to him to put the record up there and see how it did...I love r&b, but I can’t do it as well as you know [Trey Songz] can...vice-versa...he loves rap. (NotableInterviews, 2010a)

Trey Songz posted the music video on his MySpace profile page which may have been part of their deal to help Drake gain more visibility and more MySpace followers. With the help and influence of Trey Songz, the music video for “Replacement Girl” aired on Black Entertainment Television’s (BET) *106 & Park*, which positioned Drake on a U.S. Black music entertainment platform alongside Trey Songz, a successful Black U.S. R&B artist. Thus, his association with Trey Songz helped authenticate Drake’s R&B persona.

According to Hip-Hop DX, “to get [a Canadian hip-hop artist] on an American music station was almost unthinkable at the time” (Hip-Hop DX, 2021), yet with the help of Trey Songz, Drake became the first unsigned Canadian artist on BET. This created a ripple effect in media outlets, increasing Drake’s visibility in U.S. mainstream media.

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<sup>9</sup> A co-sign refers to the support and endorsement an artist receives from another artist.

Trey Songz stated in an interview (HipHopAddict, 2015) that he “took Drake to many executives and a lot of them said nope...[he had] to fight to get Replacement Girl on BET’s 106 & Park.” Evidently, Drake had the funds to invest in his music and pay artists like Trey Songz to help him amplify his visibility and build his authenticity in the R&B music industry. Although a few Canadian artists in the previous generation had achieved visibility on BET, including Maestro Fresh Wes with his 1989 music video “Let Your Backbone Slide,” Drake could uniquely position himself as the first unsigned Canadian artist to get airtime. Being unsigned added mystique to Drake’s sudden rise to fame.

In the first six seconds of the “Replacement Girl” (2007) music video, Drake immediately identified himself as Torontonion when he rapped “I was birthed up top,” and the word “Toronto” flashes across the screen. The music video’s images, the song lyrics, and Drake’s actions of pointing his index finger upward all suggest that Drake is from the North. Drake branded himself as Canadian by saying that he was born in Canada. Drake also positioned his brand as heavily influenced by the U.S. with lyrics like “I was raised at the bottom of the map,” which could have referred to Drake’s time with his father in Memphis. He situates himself within the U.S.A. to support the hegemonic code of R&B as a U.S. practice while also expanding its social script to include his Canadian-ness.

Drake also asserted his Canadian-ness and Blackness in other media texts on YouTube to build his R&B persona and grow his online fanbase. In 2009, Drake wrote and acted in a sitcom created with his childhood friend Mazin Elsadig, called “Us and Them” which they uploaded to YouTube (bamnfilms, 2011). Drake described the online show as “comedy comparable to Judd Apatow and Michael Cera but...with Black people in it” (MTV, 2009/2019). Drake and Elsadig ironically articulate harmful stereotypes about Black people to position themselves as authentic Black identities that have the power to satirize these stereotypes. Scenes included Elsadig eating watermelon to address harmful stereotypes about Black people. The skit trailer describes “Aubrey” as “charming, carefree, irresponsible” who wears Chanel hoodies (bamnfilms, 2008), “smash[es]” girls and plays rap music (bamnfilms, 2011). Drake’s character satirized the hegemonic views of Black rappers as heterosexual, rich, and machismo. Harmful hegemonic views of Black rappers may position Drake as an inauthentic R&B artist, so in the skit, Drake

challenges these stereotypes for audiences, encouraging them to reflect on these taken-for-granted norms, and to potentially create a space for Drake's acceptance as a biracial, rapping and singing, Canadian R&B artist that blends pop, hip-hop, and R&B.

Although Drake had achieved popularity online, he told MTV: "I can go independent, but you need distribution, period. You need somebody to distribute your record and you need [an] army [meaning you need] a label [is going] to really push the record" (Reid, 2009). Jas Prince kept pushing Drake's music to Lil Wayne and finally, in 2008, Drake's single "Replacement Girl" (2007) and cover of Lil Wayne's track "A Milli" (2008) impressed Lil Wayne enough to fly Drake out to tour with him for two weeks. After the tour, Jas Prince introduced Drake to Lil Wayne's manager, "Cortez 'Tez' Bryant" (Setaro, 2017) and asked for Bryant to use his influence to get Drake signed. Bryant also introduced Drake to Bryant's business manager, Gee Roberson, who was Ye's (Kanye West) manager at the time. Bryant and Roberson co-managed Drake and introduced him to artists like Ye. In 2009, Drake continued claiming the narrative of an unsigned artist while still working with musicians like Ye, Lil Wayne, Omarion, Trey Songz, and more on his eighteen-track "R&B-influenced project," (Hot New Hip-Hop, 2017) called *So Far Gone* (2009) and released under his own label and company, October's Very Own.

Drake stated that he wanted to release the project as "an R&B mixtape" rather than a "store album," to avoid "the pressures of making an album" (Janel, 2010). Drake reinforces his desire to create and not commodify his R&B music when further claiming: "me and 40 really, we love R&B music. We sit and listen to R&B music. We draw a lot of influence from it...I just wanted to put out a project" (Janel, 2010). Although I will further discuss the problematic and inaccurate dichotomies often created between art and commerce in Chapter 4, I point to this statement here to address how Drake seemed to distance himself from the commodification and traditional networking processes that he enacted early in his career, to develop a more marketable "rags to riches" backstory for his Canadian R&B artist persona. Charles Holmes (2019) described the project as "defin[ing] a generation of rap coming to terms with the internet" and although I do not deny the importance the internet played in popularizing the mixtape and recognize the significance of releasing the body of work online, I also argue that Drake's large network

in the music industry certainly helped increase its popularity. The mixtape was released as a zshare link on Drake's BlogSpot page (OctobersVeryOwn, 2009) which was a link that enables audiences members to click and downloaded Drake's music online. This file-sharing practice was new to online communications which enabled Drake to disseminate his music in ways inaccessible to generations of artists before him.

According to Lauren Alvarez (2019) in *So Far Gone* (2009), "the core themes that Drake raps about...I[e] identity crisis, growing up in Toronto in a middle-class family and feeling as though you're on the brink of success but also not quite there as well," which upheld Drake's persona as a humble Canadian artist with a rags-to-riches backstory. The sonic style of the project also "established Drake's signature sound" (Fu, 2019) which mixes traditionally separated hip-hop and R&B genres.

According to a source at Billboard, the success of the mixtape pushed Drake into "one of the biggest bidding wars ever in the music industry as three major record labels were battling "in hopes of signing Drake" (Concepcion, 2009). It was rumoured that Universal Motown, Atlantic Records, and Warner Music Group were all courting Drake (S. Samuel, 2010). During this time, Lil Wayne was preparing to release his sixth album. He and the founders of the Cash Money record label wanted to launch a new label called Young Money to sign and develop new artists. In an interview with Rap Rader's Alexa Chung, Drake confirmed that he signed directly with his managers, Cortez 'Tez' Bryant and Gee Roberson in a joint venture with Young Money and said: "the courting was nice...I had some great dinners, like in hotels...I got some nice things" (Rap Radar, 2009). Drake's deal with Young Money reportedly included a "\$2 million advance" (Lee, 2009). Therefore, Drake strategically built relationships in the music industry and released collaborations with reputable artists for free to demonstrate his potential marketability to record labels, resulting in favourable offers from multiple music companies.

Kris Singh and Dale Tracy (2015) argued that in interviews about his rise to fame "Drake never mention[ed] the fact that as an artist he is part of the wider music corporation, Universal Music Group, and that his own record label, OVO Sound, is held within Warner Music Group" (p. 101). When Drake officially joined "Young Money" Lil

Wayne's imprint of the Cash Money label, Drake gained access to a network of Black U.S. hip-hop/ R&B artists, who, by association, could help Drake build his authenticity in R&B. Resultantly, Drake collaborated with artists like Ye, Lil Wayne, and Eminem on tracks "Forever" (2009). By 2010, Drake was featured on Brown's track "Deuces Remix," alongside T.I., Ye, Fabolous, Tyga, and Ace Kali. Drake's collaborations with these artists demonstrate Drake's strong network within the music industry, early in his career.

In 2009, *So Far Gone* was re-released as an official project under Young Money, Cash Money, and OVO record labels as an EP<sup>10</sup> with a shortened track list and it became widely successful. The single "Best I Ever Had" (Drake, 2009a) stayed on the Billboard charts for 24 weeks. Other popular tracks included "Thank Me Later" and "Nothing Was the Same" (Caldwell, 2015), which listed Jas Prince as the executive producer. Drake's successful break into the music industry was the result of many strategic relationships. When Drake rereleased *So Far Gone* on multiple streaming platforms a decade later, in 2019, he created an Instagram post (2019b) that revealed the many people who created, promoted, and inspired the original mixtape:

@benballer a decade ago you promoted me...@treysongz a decade ago you were the first person to recognize potential and give me a co-sign...@omarion a decade ago you came to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel and laid a verse for an unknown artist from Canada...@darkiemade a decade ago you emailed me the cover art for something that would change my life forever....@kingjames a decade ago you came to my release party at 6 Degrees and made me the biggest artist in the city off your presence alone...@kanyewest a decade ago I rapped over your beat cause you just made the best shit...I will never forget what you contributed to the game and my career...Portia...a decade ago you told me to rap over June 27<sup>th</sup> and bonded me and Houston Texas forever...@jas.prince a decade ago you took a chance on MySpace and introduced me to Wayne...@liltunечи a decade ago you took me out of Toronto...I will never forget anybody involved in this journey even if you don't fit in this caption...🙏

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<sup>10</sup> EP or "extended play" is a musical recording project that consists of several songs but fewer songs than a full-length album or LP record.



In the post, Drake not only addressed the diverse inspirations and support he received to accomplish such a successful mixtape, but he also used this post to reinforce his backstory of a hustlin' artist who worked with other hustlin' people in the industry:

@futuretheprince a decade ago you were Dj'ing all ages parties...@oliverelkhatib a decade ago you worked at a clothing store selling someone else's product...@boilda a decade ago you were in a basement with pink insulation walls figuring out fruity loops...@ovoniko a decade ago we were handing out flyers promoting club nights...@realbriamyles a decade ago you were working the makeup counter at Beverly Centre...

Drake acknowledged several people who helped him break into the music industry but claimed that they also had rags-to-riches backstories to position his rise to fame narrative as something achieved by a team of self-made people. Drake continued to uphold the hustlin' genre code of R&B while providing transparency to audiences about the team of people who helped him establish his musical career.

In my interview with Ra Kumar (2020), an agent at United Talent Agency, he stated (2020) that to make it in entertainment, "it's about doing the work, putting in the time, [and] building relationships." The relationship Drake had with Jas Prince got his music in front of Lil Wayne and Ye, which led him to sign a record deal with Young Money records. The co-signs from Black U.S. artists Trey Songz, Ye, and Lil Wayne led Drake to meet and collaborate with artists like Nicki Minaj, Travis Scott, and Rihanna, boosting Drake's authenticity and audibility in R&B. When Jas Prince introduced Bryant to Drake, they verbally agreed that Jas Prince would take the lead on Drake's business decisions and split the profits of Drake's career. However, Bryant cut Jas Prince out of the deal and created a new deal between himself, Drake, and Ye's manager to get Drake signed. In 2009, Drake signed a record deal with Young Money, and, according to Forbes magazine, by 2011 Drake had earned \$257 million (Greenburg, 2019). Jas Prince sued (Caldwell, 2015; Setaro, 2017; Weisman, 2012), arguing that he was entitled to a larger portion of Drake's generated revenue because he had introduced Drake to his network of music industry executives and artists, which helped Drake break into the music industry and build his OVO empire. The initial time and promotional efforts Jas Prince had invested in Drake were crucial in developing Drake's R&B career. Building on Ra

Kumar's statement, key relationships with individuals, like Jas Prince and Trey Songz helped Drake access key people and resources to develop his R&B career.

Within a year of being signed to a major record label, on August 1, 2010, Drake hosted his first annual October's Very Own music festival (OVO Fest) at the Budweiser Stage. The one-day event, which expanded to two days in subsequent years, was notable for featuring an impressive list of surprise appearances by artists, Jay-Z, Eminem, Rick Ross, Young Jeezy, Bun B, Fabolous, Mack Maine and Kardi. This roster indicates the long-term relationships Drake built early in his musical career.

Drake's OVO Fest was co-created with Canadian company BlackBerry. In 2009, Drake appeared on HOT 97 radio station in the U.S., where he freestyled and referenced Toronto several times while reading rhymes from his BlackBerry phone. The performance was uploaded on YouTube, which associated Drake with BlackBerry's brand and further positioned Drake's lifestyle brand as Canadian. In an article titled "Drake: I Write All My Raps on My BlackBerry" (2010), Us Weekly claims Drake stated that he writes his music on his BlackBerry because "[his] thumbs were made for touching...The BlackBerry keys." Hence, Drake integrated the product BlackBerry into his constructed persona to reinforce his Canadian branded lifestyle.

Backstage at the second OVO Fest, RapCity's T-RexXx asked Drake how he had gotten Stevie Wonder to perform six songs on stage at the festival and Drake stated: "we partied together in L.A. I brought him to a Lil Wayne after party...[where I] asked [Stevie Wonder to come to Toronto]" (DrakeInterviews, 2011b). Hence, Drake had exclusive access to musical artists and music industry gatekeepers who could help Drake gain brand visibility and authenticity in the R&B music genre world. Drake described "calling in all [his] favours and bringing all [his] friends down [to his OVO Fest and stated]...it's a great night to celebrate Toronto" (DrakeInterviews, 2011a). The OVO show would serve as a way for Drake to publicly assert his relationships with established hip-hop and R&B artists at the concert and to reinforce his Canadian-ness.

In an interview with Reka Janel (2010), Drake highlighted the strategic decisions behind scheduling OVO Fest when he stated:

I've just formed great relationships in this business. This is something for Canada...it's rare that artists start their own festival...usually they start other ways so I started my own festival in Canada that I hope other artists can come and recognizing that Caribana is...the biggest [festival] in Toronto so really wanted it to be on the weekend when there's a lot of people in the city...there just wasn't a prominent event [for the Caribana festival].

As discussed in previous chapters, Caribbean immigrants contributed to Canada's R&B music scene. Drake may have anticipated that Caribana attendees in Toronto would also be interested in attending his OVO concert featuring a mixture of hip-hop, R&B, and blues artists. By scheduling OVO Fest that weekend in Toronto, Drake could direct local and international audiences to his brand and music, which would grow his visibility as a distinctly Canadian R&B artist.

By 2010, Drake continued establishing brand partnerships with other Canadian brands, including clothing and accessories company Canada Goose. 40 described the OVO partnership with Canada Goose (CG) as "organic" and emphasized OVO and CG's shared values of Canadian patriotism and heritage:

We've all worn Canada Goose in the past. It's really the warmest jacket available and that's what matters living through Toronto winters. We admire CG's dedication, standard of quality, patriotism, heritage, and their fifty years in the game...They recognized that we were young kids who were talented, passionate, and obsessive-compulsive, so it's been really organic. We'd be wearing Canada Goose regardless, but now we've applied our sensibilities to a jacket and we're wearing them across the world. (Welch, 2010)

By partnering with CG, Drake situated his lifestyle brand in Canada. Canada Goose sells luxury winter wear, specifically branded to reflect a Canadian lifestyle, which is a motif Drake has used to inspire his music creation process. For example, in his album *Views* (Drake, 2016b), Drake included an image of the CN tower as the album's cover and discussed in an interview that the inspiration of the album was based on Toronto's harsh winters:

[The album] starts off in the winter to summer, and back to winter...you get the two extremes [in Toronto]...we are very grateful for our summers...we make our winters work but the summers are hot...really, it's a very unique place you start to value your days a lot more when 7 months are spent in icy cold most people wouldn't even go outside...I thought it was important to make [the album] here...a lot of elements unique to the city. (Apple Music, 2016)

Drake's description *Views* as inspired by Torontonians align with CG's target audience. Canada Goose's CEO Dani Reiss (2019), described how "owning a Canada Goose jacket is like owning a little piece of Canada," which reflects Drake's argument that his album *Views* (Drake, 2016b) enabled audiences to experience Canadian seasons. Shortly after the release of *Views* in April 2016, OVO and CG announced an exclusive "winter 2016 collection" in December of 2016 (Blais-Billie, 2016). The collaboration included a co-branded "OVO x CG" Chilliwack Bomber jacket and other co-branded items. By working with CG, Drake expanded his Canadian lifestyle brand to luxury fashion products.

Drake used online networking platforms and strategic relationships with first generation Canadian R&B artists, U.S. musical artists, U.S. industry gatekeepers, and Canadian companies, to construct his public persona as a Canadian R&B artist and to build his marketable backstory. Therefore, digital star Drake was created through both traditional networking practices and contemporary online marketing strategies.

### 3.4 "You are a Product of Marketing Hype": How Justin Bieber, The "Overnight" Digital Star was Born

Justin Bieber (2012a) has stated: "a lot of people think I was an overnight success, but that wouldn't be exactly true...it has...been a lot of hard work that took time, sacrifices, and relentless dedication" (p. 9). In this section, I examine how Bieber became "the number one most subscribed musician in Canada on YouTube, and 20th in the world" (100huntley, 2009). Although Melissa Avdeeff (2019) described Bieber "as a success story" (p. 273), who broke into the music industry exclusively through the online space and "popularized new pathways to stardom through YouTube" (p. 273), I will explore how Bieber, like Drake, strategically used online platforms and relationships and music industry gatekeepers to break into the music industry as a Canadian R&B artist. Unlike biracial Drake, who is from Toronto, Bieber constructed a lifestyle brand as a young white boy from Stratford, Ontario. Bieber was identified as a pop-infused singer who discussed his young love life and was branded as the "perfect white boyfriend" (Sloan, 2017). He cultivated a persona of the "clean-cut" (Brown, 2014), "'boy-next-door' from Canada with good looks (and luscious locks)" (Smith, 2014). Similar to my previous

discussion (in Chapter 2) about Barry Grant's (1986) argument that "[The Crew Cuts]...establish[ed] a clean-cut wholesome image which allowed them to 'crossover' both the border and the pop market and to achieve commercial success" (p. 117), Bieber's image was mediated in a similar way to help facilitate his participation in R&B, traditionally associated with Black U.S. identities, as a white Canadian "clean-cut" artist.

Bieber was younger than Drake when he started building his online presence. Bieber's mother, Pattie Mallette, helped Bieber create his YouTube page under the name "Justin Bieber." Mallette uploaded video recordings to YouTube, of Bieber singing R&B covers, to share with family and friends (Bieber, 2012a). In the early 2000s, YouTube was a new social media platform that allowed users to upload audio-visual media that other online users could view, comment on, like, and share as a web link. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argued that YouTube's "dynamic capacity for displaying both individual and public performances and viewers' comments and feedback [makes this site] an ideal space to craft a self-brand" (p. 64). Bieber's star brand was first built on YouTube. Like Jas Prince, who discovered Drake on MySpace, U.S. music industry executive Scott Samuel Braun (Scooter Braun), discovered Bieber on YouTube. Bieber's discovery was the result of a strategic online search.

Like Jas Prince, Braun was also searching for unsigned artists to represent. Braun had developed a large music industry network after working in "Atlanta's nightlife scene" (Bhattacharji, 2017) and working as the Vice President of producer Jermaine Dupree's music company, to help represent successful Black U.S. R&B artists like Usher, Mariah Carey, and J-Kwon. Braun recognized the growing capabilities of social media and claimed that he "had all these ideas about [using] social media [to build talent] but no one [in the music industry] was listening to me...in 2003, 2004" (Goalcast, 2018). As a result, Braun started his own record label management company and went to the internet to seek talent he could develop himself. Braun first found Asher Roth on MySpace and signed him (using the same site that Jas Prince found Drake). Two months later, Braun found Bieber on YouTube. Braun had been searching on YouTube for a clip of another, 18-year-old singer he had heard about, who had posted a video of himself singing an Aretha Franklin song. Instead, Braun stumbled onto a YouTube post of 13-year-old Bieber

singing the song “Respect” during a local contest held at his church in Stratford (Bieber, 2007). The post was titled “Justin singing Aretha Franklin” and the inclusion of the keywords “Aretha Franklin” in the title of Bieber’s YouTube post, in combination with Braun searching for a post using the keywords “Aretha Franklin” on YouTube, led Braun to Bieber. After finding Bieber’s first video, Braun continued to view other videos of Bieber singing. Braun stated: “when I saw [Bieber] sing ‘So Sick’ by [Ne-Yo in one of his YouTube posts], he had so much soul in his voice [and] ‘I said this is the kid I’ve been looking for” (100 Thieves Valorant, 2019). When Braun identified Bieber’s elementary school through a poster in one of Bieber’s uploaded video clips, he asked the school for Bieber’s home telephone number and spoke with Bieber’s mother several times on the phone before flying her and Bieber out to meet him in Los Angeles. After meeting in person, Braun and Bieber’s mother agreed to work together to optimize Bieber’s YouTube profile page, create more content, and attract more followers (Bieber, 2010a). Together as a team they recorded, edited, and uploaded videos of Bieber singing covers of R&B songs and playing guitar on YouTube.

Bieber began his career by targeting his music to local Canadian audiences. He first released his music online, like Drake, but through iTunes Canada, including a version of his song “One Less Lonely Girl” (2009c) in French, Canada’s second official language. Like Drake, Bieber used email communications to engage with audience members online through the email address “memberships@bieberfever.com.” After building Bieber’s online audience and successfully garnering thousands of followers on YouTube, Braun still struggled to get Bieber signed because, according to Bieber (2010a) “everyone understood the concept of a viral video, but no one had ever used that to successfully launch a major act” (p. 125). Bieber, like Drake, had developed a large online following but needed the co-sign of Black U.S. music industry gatekeepers to obtain a record deal.

While white U.S. citizen Braun was managing white Canadian internet star Bieber; they both required support from successful U.S. R&B artists to help authenticate Bieber’s potential marketability in R&B. Bieber needed help to be taken seriously by music labels in R&B because of his online stardom, and I argue, because of his white Canadian intersectional identity. Bieber networked with R&B acts in the U.S. and stated:

We needed some star power...[to] go into these record-label meetings with somebody who had some flash and could give that stamp [of approval]. Scooter knew two guys who were perfect for the job: [Usher and Timberlake]. They'd both made it big as teens, and then went on to make the successful transition to major stars as adults. (Bieber, 2010a, p. 138)

Bieber formed alliances with successful U.S. R&B artists through Braun's existing relationships in the music industry. In an interview in 2008, Bieber stated "my manager [Braun] he has lots of connections and...he kind of set it up [for me to meet Usher]...I [also] met with Justin Timberlake's people...his executives...[and met musical artist] Esmée" (etalk, 2020b). Timberlake had himself found another performer, Esmée Denters, on YouTube. Timberlake then signed Esmée as the first artist in his new record label Tenman Records, in a joint venture with Interscope Records in 2007 (McCarthy, 2007). Timberlake was in the process of building Esmée's public persona, just as Braun was attempting to build Bieber's career. Bieber posted a video in 2008 of him singing Brown's track "With You" to Esmée (Bieber, 2008b). His interactions with Usher, Timberlake, and Esmée demonstrate how well-connected Braun was in the music industry. They also show a shift in the music industry, where artists like Timberlake believed in the potential star power of child singers who had large online followings.

Braun claims that "2 weeks before finding Justin" he told Ludacris' manager Chaka Zulu that he was looking for a kid that could perform like Michael Jackson, who "sang incredible love songs with an angelic, child-like voice," to fill that missing gap "in the marketplace" (100 Thieves Valorant, 2019). Whether or not it was an accident that Braun discovered Bieber's YouTube post, Braun was actively looking for talent that he could develop to follow Jackson's artist persona. Braun strategically selected Bieber to fill that existing "character type" in the music industry. In Dyer's (1998) theory of the "star image," he suggested that film actors fill "star stereotype[s]" (p. 42) modelled on the careers of previously successful actors. Dyer (1998) argued that in "type-casting...only actors who look the part get the part" (p. 175). Building on Frith's (1996) argument that a musical artist's racialized, aged, and gendered identities shape their classification in music genres, I argue that Braun crafted the star "Justin Bieber" through the pre-existing star personality of Michael Jackson, that is, as a boy who could dance and sing R&B and pop music. When Kristin Lieb (2018) argued that in the contemporary music industry,

music labels “are notorious for looking in the rearview mirror to determine what will be successful” (p. 27), Lieb was suggesting that music companies model artists’ brands on previously successful artists and their performance styles. Bieber’s age and gender made him an optimal candidate to follow the career of Michael Jackson, with the key difference of race.

Kobena Mercer (1986) argued that through facial reconstruction procedures and stylistic choices Michael Jackson’s racial identity became more ambiguous:

The cute child dressed in gaudy flower-power gear and sporting a huge ‘Afro’ hairstyle has become, as a young adult...the glossy sheen of his complexion appears lighter in colour than before; the nose seems sharper, more aquiline, less rounded and ‘African’ and the lips seem tighter, less pronounced. Above all, the large ‘Afro’ has dissolved into a shock of wet look permed curls and a new stylistic trademark, the single lock over the forehead, appears. (p. 308)

Jackson’s racial ambiguity enabled him to blur traditionally segregated music genre styles. Jackson transformed his appearance to include less “African” coded features and “lighter” skin to become an authentic pop artist that blended pop with R&B, based on existing hegemonic codes of pop as “white” music. Bieber arguably then took the problematic logic this racial blurring further to fill the role of a pop and R&B artist as a white boy.

In a 2008 interview on *etalk Canada*, Bieber was asked what kind of career he would like to have, and Bieber highlighted the character types he wished to follow by stating: “I see myself doing more like R&B like...Usher...Justin...an old Michael Jackson” (etalk, 2020b). By claiming to fill the role of the “old Michael Jackson,” Bieber was referring to Jackson’s earlier career as a young boy with a high-pitched voice, singing R&B. However, young Jackson had not undergone any cosmetic procedures as a child. Hence, I contend that as a young white artist in R&B, Bieber also filled an “Elvis Presley” character type similar to that of white artist Justin Timberlake who had achieved success in R&B right before Bieber.

Jamilah King (2013) discussed Timberlake’s whiteness as an obstacle to his participation in R&B, and relates it to Presley’s problematic participation in race music:



[There is an] anxiety about white artists ‘borrowing’ black music and style then taking a break when it becomes inconvenient... Timberlake has rightfully earned his place among modern pop music legends, but he also embodies the historical mistrust that exists between white performers and black listeners that dates at least as far back as Elvis Presley’s 1950s foray into what was then called ‘race music’.

Timberlake and Bieber follow a long history of white artists “borrowing” from music styles traditionally associated with Black artists (as discussed in Chapter 2). In 2020, Charles Holmes (2020) directly compared Timberlake and Bieber by stating that they are both white artists who commodified R&B to break into the music industry, later ventured into other music genres, and then returned to R&B:

Timberlake is far from the first pop star to return to his roots, then double back... Justin Bieber’s [2020 album] finds the Canadian singer returning to classic R&B after the EDM [electronic music] flourishes of 2015’s Purpose [Bieber’s album] were no longer en vogue (that was after his long and complicated flirtation with a full-on Bieber rap album).

Although Holmes discusses Bieber’s later albums, after breaking into the music industry, I draw on this quote here to illustrate that many journalists identify Bieber’s roots as R&B, while his later albums incorporate other music genre styles. Unlike Holmes (2020), however, I understand Bieber as an artist not simply returning to R&B later in his career, but rather, I view Bieber as an artist that constantly engaged in a mixed pop, hip-hop, and R&B style. I assert this because Bieber, like Jackson, blurred traditionally segregated styles not just sonically, but also through audio-visual music videos. Mercer (1986) argued that in music videos, including “Beat it” (1982) and “Thriller” (1988)

Jackson has not ‘crossed over’ from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has [popularized] black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style which have always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson has opened up a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface between the boundaries defined by ‘race’. (Mercer, 1986, p. 308)

Jackson approached music videos through a cinematic style, enabling him to blend traditionally distinct genres such as using costumes, props, and elaborate storylines through audio and visual media. These music videos “breached the boundaries of race on which the music industry [genre classifications] ha[d] been based” (Mercer, 1986, p. 308) and allowed Jackson, as a Black musical artist, to participate in pop music.

White Canadian artist Bieber benefitted from Jackson “open[ing] up a space in which [he could]...operat[e]” (Mercer, 1986, p. 308) at the intersection of traditionally segregated genre styles. One of Bieber’s first music videos “Baby” (Bieber, 2010b) featured Black U.S. artist Ludacris and exemplified Bieber’s interplay of pop, rap, and R&B; however, Bieber’s race and nationality were viewed as points of tension for Bieber’s acceptance and his perceived authenticity in R&B. Barbara Bradby (2017) compared his whiteness and Canadian-ness to Ludacris’ “African-ness” and “American-ness,” stating:

Their socially constructed ‘racial’ identities [are] white and black: Bieber is usually described as 'white Canadian' and Ludacris as 'African-American'. If these identities manifest within the song as a dialogue between musical genres generally coded white (pop) and black (rap)...this involves social and historical knowledge exterior to the song itself, and different listeners may have different narratives through which to hear. (p. 17)

According to Bradby (2017), the presence of these different identities in the same song immediately created a dialogue between traditionally white and Black genre categories. Building on Frith’s (1996) argument that an artist’s racial identity affects audiences’ expectations of how their music will sound, I contend that by placing Bieber and Ludacris on the same song, their racial differences and expected music genre differences were heightened.

On the track, Bieber sang and Ludacris rapped. However, in the audio-visual music video, Bieber attempted to build his authenticity in R&B by lip-synching some of Ludacris’ rap lyrics in frames beside Ludacris. Bieber also mirrored Ludacris’ dance moves, gestures, and facial expressions in the music video to align himself with the rap segments of the song and with Ludacris’ reputation as a popular hip-hop artist. Bieber also wore a watch on the same left hand as Ludacris to associate himself with Ludacris and emphasize their similar hand gestures in the video. Bieber built on Ludacris’ existing reputation in the hip-hop music industry, and his accepted Black U.S. identity in hip-hop and R&B, to gain credibility as a white Canadian artist participating in a mixed or blurred hip-hop, R&B, and pop music genre style. In the video, Bieber also moonwalked, a classic Michael Jackson dance move, to align himself with Michael Jackson’s archetype.

Additionally, Drake appeared in frames of the music video, which publicly highlighted Bieber and Drake's relationship. That same year, Drake also appeared on stage at Bieber's concert. When Drake commented on his surprise appearance at Bieber's concert, he described Bieber as "like a little brother to [him]" (Janel, 2010). Braun described Bieber and Drake's relationship by saying "They're two friends from Canada" (MSNBC, 2022). Therefore, Bieber and Drake's public relationship reinforced their Canadian-ness. Bieber continually aligned himself with Drake and in 2012, on Bieber's third studio album, *Believe* (2012d), Bieber and Drake collaborated on the track "Right here" (2012c) which blended R&B, pop, and hip-hop. Together, Drake and Bieber both attempted to push contemporary Canadian R&B music and their star images into popular culture.

When Braun and Mallette helped Bieber upload videos to YouTube to build his online following in 2008, they uploaded a video of Bieber singing a live cover of Brown's track "With You" (Bieber, 2008a). Bieber's career and intention for creating R&B covers was to break into the music industry as an R&B artist and he attempted to build credibility in the R&B genre by continually associating himself with the popular Black U.S. R&B artists. In 2011, Bieber was featured in Brown's song and music video "Next To You." Years later, Bieber created an Instagram post that cited Michael Jackson and Brown as the source of his inspiration (Bieber, 2019b). The Instagram post included an image with the text "THE LEGENDARY EQUATION," with the equation being "Michael Jackson + 2 Pac = Chris Brown," to suggest that Brown's career was developed as a carbon copy combination of Jackson's blended pop and R&B style and Tupac's rap talents. Brown represents a mix of pop, hip-hop, and R&B music which Bieber cites as his inspiration in his approaches to R&B. Brown claimed that Jackson's career inspired his own music and performance style (BigBoyTV, 2022). Therefore, Bieber and Brown both follow Jackson's star type. I argue that these performers each filled Jackson's "star stereotype" (Dyer, 1991, p. 42) in unique ways, through their intersectional identities.

Black U.S. R&B artist Usher who began working with Bieber in 2010, claimed that "the objective is never to create a copy. It's to create something unique, and one of a kind. [Justin Bieber] is one of a kind" (NRJ - Hit Music Only, 2010). I believe that although Bieber's digital star was modelled on Michael Jackson, it was crafted uniquely to follow

the intersectional experiences of Bieber, a young white Canadian boy who likes skateboarding, hockey, and singing R&B music. For example, Bieber's fashion in his "As Long As You Love Me" (2012b) music video articulated his Canadian pop image, as he wore a plaid shirt in some scenes and a black leather jacket in other scenes. The black leather jacket paid homage to Michael Jackson, as it was a staple of Michael Jackson's fashion style and the plaid shirt referenced a Canadian stereotype (similar to how Drake fashioned himself in the SNL skit, as discussed in the Introduction).

In addition to blurring genre styles in YouTube music videos, Braun's guidance and network helped Bieber secure a recording contract. Bieber and Braun strategically used their relationships with Usher and Timberlake to achieve a recording contract for Bieber. Braun claimed to be fielding two separate deals with Timberlake and Usher. However, when Usher brought record executive producer L.A. Reid to the table, Braun admitted to using "Timberlake as leverage... And L.A. stepped up" (Braun as quoted in Halperin, 2011). As a result of Braun's strategic negotiations with music industry gatekeepers, L.A. Reid signed Bieber to a production deal with Island Def Jam, partnered with the Raymond-Braun Media Group. (RBMG). Hence, Bieber broke into the music industry with the help of successful musical artists and managers, and not exclusively through the online space.

According to Shirley Halperin (2011), "L.A. Reid signed Bieber to a 360 deal in October 2008," which "entitles the label to a cut of Bieber's ancillary income, or as Reid calls it, 'a very small piece of the pie', including merchandising, publishing royalties, endorsements and sponsorships." Despite Reid calling this "a very small piece of the pie," I argue that 15 to 20 percent of a star like Bieber adds up to quite a substantial amount of money. According to Ananya Swaroop (2023), in 2023 Bieber's net worth is \$300 million USD. A 360-degree contract entitles the music company to a percentage of an artist's generated revenue from brand partnerships, touring, merchandising, modelling, motion pictures, acting, and their lifestyle-branded products and services (Marshall, 2013; Stahl & Meier, 2012). Other R&B stars like Rhianna (Berg, 2021) and allegedly Drake (Coleman II, 2022b) have become billionaires. In Drake's 2022 song "Major

Distribution” (2022) with 21 Savage, Drake potentially confirmed rumours that he signed a \$550 million record deal (Cummings-Grady, 2022).

The rationale behind a 360 degree contract is that a music company helps the artist create and build their star persona or brand, which the artist can then commodify in other products and services like films, merchandise, brand partnerships, and more. So, in exchange for the music company's initial promotional efforts in building the artist's brand and by investing a substantial amount of money in the production of their music (although the money is often a loan), the music company believes it should not only be limited to the revenue generated for the artist's music but entitled to the artist's overall generated income. In my interview with Jeff Van Driel, General Manager at Concord, he explained (2020) that these 360 deals also help offset the music companies' costs of failed musical careers, as very few artists become profitable lifestyle brands.

In 1999, Keith Negus also identified the risk for labels in investing money into artists, explaining that “record companies face considerable uncertainty about the success of the products that they distribute” (p. 32). Today, digital stars like Bieber and Drake have the potential power to generate multiple streams of revenue for music labels online in ways that did not exist for the generations before them. This includes integrating branded products in social media posts or through co-branded online marketing campaigns. By signing a 360 contract, Bieber gained the support of a music company and a network of music executives who directly profit from the expansion of Bieber's brand and, therefore, would help Bieber to establish his brand as a Canadian R&B artist across multiple markets, within and outside of the music industry.

Like Drake, Bieber did not attain instant celebrity status. Marita Djupvik (2017) reminds us how artists often require traditional music industry resources, like relationships with key individuals when using the internet to build their careers. Bieber had a robust team of people helping him to record music and to create his public personality. Usher claimed that he and Braun would “prepare the tour [for Bieber], [and] set the schedule for [Bieber] to go and work, do promotion and radio” (NRJ - Hit Music Only, 2010). Even at the age of 15, Bieber worked within a grueling schedule to maintain his visibility by

attending interviews, concerts, and promotional events that involved sacrificing “time with friends” (NRJ - Hit Music Only, 2010) to build his brand and maintain his popularity.

With the invention of social media, Bieber was forced to perform his public persona at a highly demanding rate. Scooter Braun recently described how Bieber was in a unique position growing up as a star in the digital age:

I don't think anyone has ever grown the way he's grow up...all the other stars never had social media...he was growing up with social media...[and was] the most followed person [during] his entire adolescence on Google, on Twitter, on Instagram...No one in the history of humanity ever grew up like that...blueprint or not, it doesn't work unless you got someone like him...David Bowie before could wear the costume and then disappear into his life...now in today's age because of social media and because of smartphones it's more important than ever to be real and authentic and true to your...brand. (MSNBC, 2022)

When Braun said that even with a “blueprint,” Bieber had a unique experience growing up with social media, he also acknowledged that despite following star types in building Bieber's brand, there were still nuances in Bieber's generational experiences that made his career development different from stars before him. Bieber's exposure to audiences through social media, at a very young age, made Bieber's rise to fame unique compared to many other celebrities at that time. When Braun said that stars before social media “could disappear,” he was suggesting that Bieber's scrutiny in the public eye was almost never-ending. Audiences demanded continuous updates from Bieber on his social media pages and these audiences could easily capture images and videos of him that they could instantaneously upload online and circulate. This level of surveillance was new with Bieber and Drake's generation of Canadian R&B artists as digital stars.

The new responsibilities of digital star performances in the online space were coupled with traditional responsibilities of a musical artist, which demanded a lot from Bieber at a young age. At the age of 16, Bieber admitted in an interview that he had not had much time to rehearse and dance because he had “been travelling so much to do different promo stuff” (q100atlanta, 2010). At one point while being a musical artist, he claimed to have spent more time marketing himself and “do[ing]” more “promo stuff” than actually

making music. An Official W5 reporter stated to Bieber that “critics will say that you are a product of marketing hype” (Official W5, 2017) and Bieber replied to that criticism:

I already had a fanbase on YouTube before I was signed...[I got famous] because my fans liked me...and coming from Stratford Ontario...it gives people hope...I come from somewhere no one really famous comes from there...no one has really come out of Stratford Ontario and become famous...there hasn't been someone [whose come from there] and been [famous] worldwide.

In his response, Bieber attempted to redirect attention away from his strong marketing team and promotional pushes and toward his ordinary beginnings and rags-to-riches narrative, to make his star persona seem more inspirational as well as authentic. In reality, him and his teams' strong promotional efforts both online and offline enabled Bieber to break into the music industry and build his Canadian R&B, pop star persona.

Despite Bieber and his teams' best efforts to control his star image, Bieber constantly fought with media gatekeepers who also constructed images of his star persona. Bieber said that he has struggled with a lot of anxiety due to “growing up...in front of cameras...sipping lean<sup>11</sup>, popping pills, doing Molly...shrooms...drinking...smoking” (Bieber, 2020e). As he made mistakes growing up, he was constantly judged and scrutinized in the media. In 2020, Bieber posted an old image of himself at 15 years old, on Instagram, with a lyric from his and fellow Canadian artist Shawn Mendes' song “Monster” that stated: “I was 15 when the world put me on a pedestal” (Bieber, 2020f). Bieber claims that the song was about “being put on a pedestal at a very young age and having [to live up to] expectations of being perfect” (Bieber, 2020g). In Bieber's song “I'll Show You” (2015), Bieber sang “I'm not made out of steel, don't forget that I'm human, don't forget that I'm real,” suggesting that, because he is a star, audiences often judge him through the impossible lens of perfection. Jeffery C. Alexander (2010) argued that stars are “hallowed images...[and are not] forgiven [for] the degradation of [their] surface form. Actresses cannot age if they are to be beautiful. Actors, if they are to

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<sup>11</sup> a mix of cough syrup and soft drink, which has become a drink that many U.S. rappers mention in their lyrics as a common drink to have in the hip-hop music industry. “Lean is known to cause euphoria, motor-skill impairment, and drowsiness” (Kumar, 2019).

remain heroes, cannot become fat or gay” (p. 321). Selena Gomez (2022) illuminated the treatment of celebrities not as humans but as objects when she stated that media gatekeepers have treated her like “a product” and not a person (Keshishian, 2022). Artists, like actresses and actors, are held up to impossible standards of perfection and are pressured to perform accordingly. When Russel Brand says (2021) that “[Kim Kardashian and Kanye West]...are the human beings, [but] Kim Kardashian and Kanye West themselves...are these projected images” (Brand, 2021), Brand suggested that as a projected image, the depth of a star image is more limited to the dynamism of a fluctuating human being. J. C. Alexander (2010) also described how the duality of surface and depth is created in a star by arguing that the celebrity “is structured by the interplay of surface and depth. The surface of the celebrity-icon is an aesthetic structure whose sensuous qualities command attention and compel attachment” (p. 324). Bieber’s struggles in the industry remind us of the labour and the emotional work behind crafting a seemingly perfected digital star image.

Recent online discussions have explored how “Bieber was...oversexualized by society at such a young age” (K. Stanford, 2023). For example, at 18 years old, Bieber was accepting a Pop/Rock Album Award on stage at the American Music Awards from Jenny McCarthy, aged 40 at the time, who aggressively kissed him on the neck and groped him. Bieber moved away from her on stage and began his acceptance speech by stating “wow I feel violated right now” (American Music Awards, 2015). Shortly after, McCarthy commented on the interaction and said “I did grab his butt. I’m single but I think that’s cougar rape...I just couldn’t help it. He was just so delicious” (ArtisanNewsService, 2012). Although musical artist Jessie Reyez has spoken outwardly about the sexual harassment she has faced in the industry, Bieber has yet comment on his potential intersectional experiences of sexual harassment as a young man in the industry. Wency Leung (2012) posted an article about the incident stating “Was what Jenny McCarthy did to Justin Bieber sexual assault?” and noted that many people made jokes about the incident which led Leung to highlight that “attitudes like these are troubling as they reinforce the misguided notion that hot-blooded men (or in Bieber's case, teen boys) can't possibly be victims of sexual assault perpetrated by women... sexual assaults on male victims tend to be underreported.” Nevertheless, Bieber faced many unique struggles



navigating the music industry at a young age, but he had a team of people mediating his public image and guiding his business-making decisions.

Unlike Drake, when Bieber released his first EP, *My World* (2009), he had already signed with a music label and produced the EP with Island Records, Schoolboy Records, and Raymond-Braun Media Group (RBMG). RBMG is a joint venture between R&B artist Usher Raymond and Braun, with a special profit-sharing business deal with Def Jam Recordings, owned by Universal Music Group. A week after the *My World* (2009) EP was released, it debuted at number six on the U.S. Billboard 200 albums chart. The success of Bieber's first EP was, in part, due to his promotional support from U.S. music industry executives Usher and Braun, along with the power of a major U.S. label.

Bieber's brand partnerships were established through a well thought-out plan by his marketing company that, in return, helped him grow his online and offline audiences. In 2009, the marketing company, The Substance Group, was hired by Universal Music to facilitate a partnership between Bieber and Canadian clothing brand Urban Behavior. Urban Behavior funded in-store autograph signings with Bieber at Urban Behavior stores in five major Canadian cities and called it the "Urban Behavior Tour." Through the partnership, "major cross-media campaigns [were created] to promote the appearances and sale of Bieber merchandise in stores through social media, major radio, local news and Much Music" (The Substance Group). The Substance Group stated that the objective of the brand partnership was to "buil[d] Justin Bieber's exposure [and]...generat[e] revenue for the record label through a Bieber merchandise deal, that in exchange would raise the store's profile, create foot traffic and increase sales" (The Substance Group). Bieber also constructed his brand identity through Canadian Urban Behavior's style of oversized t-shirts, sweatpants, and hoodies, which supported Bieber's "swagger." Urban Behavior, as a Canadian brand, also emphasized Bieber's Canadian-ness. Both companies shared the same target audience of youth in Canada. The results of the partnerships involved:

4 successful mall campaigns with 3,000 – 4,000 fans in attendance at each store to meet Justin Bieber...[and] Major media and press exposure for Justin Bieber throughout the country with no cost to record label (The Substance Group).

In addition to press coverage from traditional media outlets that circulated articles about the events, online audiences uploaded video files of their interactions with Bieber at malls, to increase Bieber's brand awareness through UGC.

Bieber encouraged audiences to create UGC to promote his first single "One Time" on iTunes, by creating a contest asking fans to create YouTube videos of themselves lip-synching "One Time" for a chance to win the opportunity to meet him (Bieber, 2009a). I participated in the contest with thousands of other Bieber fans (Miltenburg, 2009), by filming myself lip-synching "One Time" in public spaces offline and uploading the video online. We all worked to promote Bieber's visibility and audibility across online and offline environments. Though drawing a sharp dichotomy between online and offline interactions can be problematic, as these interactions are intertwined and intersect, Alice Marwick (2013) applied the dichotomy to outline how social capital built online can transfer offline, in the form of financial gain and creditability. For example, Brian Ries (2017) recognized how Bieber has transferred his online engagement with audiences to build his credibility in award shows, stating that Bieber "interacts multiple times a day with his legion of 5.1 million devoted followers, asking them to vote on various awards and nominations." By successfully mobilizing online audiences to help himself gain award nominations, Bieber capitalized on audiences' labour to build his visibility and authenticity in R&B.

When describing the immense fandom that he acquired, Bieber said in 2010 that he is part of "a new generation...people have been introduced to the internet and it's a great outlet for young talent" (q100atlanta, 2010). In the 1850s, "Lindmania" described the fandom for opera singer Jenny Lind and in the 1970s, "Beatlemania" described the fandom for the musical group The Beatles (Tate et al., 2019, p. 2). In the 2010s, and continuing in the 2020s, "Biebermania" (Gibson, 2011) describes the fandom for Bieber. *Beliebers* is a term that describes audience members who support Bieber's music and star image and rhetorically framed Bieber as an artist who is supported by many fans. Biebermania described the awe-struck audience Bieber created through his young bachelor and heartthrob persona.

For example, in 2009, Bieber stated on the television show *Much On Demand* that he is “single,” may date a fan, and that his second single “One Less Lonely Girl” (2009) “[was not] about a specific girl...[and that] it goes out to all you girls [in the audience].”

Bieber’s single-ness represented a fantasy through which fans could believe in the opportunity of a romantic relationship with him. “One Less Lonely Girl” later evolved into a continual performance set on Bieber’s concert tour to connect with an individual female fan: in every concert venue, Bieber’s team would select one girl from the audience, bring her on stage, and then Bieber would give her flowers and serenade her while performing “One Less Lonely Girl.” In these ways, Bieber engaged audiences to reinforce his star persona as a desirable single bachelor and build up Biebermania fandom.

Like Drake, who collaborated with Trey Songz in his first music video to help build his authenticity, Bieber’s first music video “One Time” (2009b) depicted Usher as Bieber’s mentor to help Bieber gain authenticity in R&B. The music video began with Bieber playing video games with his childhood friend and getting a call from Usher asking Bieber to “hold the house down til [he] gets back.” In the video, Bieber agreed but then threw a house party. The video ended with Usher coming home to the party, and Usher laughing and chasing Bieber off camera. The music video’s narrative established Bieber’s comedic and youthful personality while publicly illustrating Bieber and Usher’s relationship. Although challenged for his participation in R&B as a white Canadian, Bieber was able to commodify R&B through the help of “Black male mentors who have produced his music, offered advice, coached and guided him” (Sloan, 2017). Bieber collaborated with artists he met through L.A. Reid’s label, Braun, and Usher including Ludacris, Sean Kingston, Busta Rhymes, Big Sean, and Nicki Minaj.

Unlike his Black counterparts, Bieber could more easily build his marketability in Canadian and U.S. broadcast media because he upheld hegemonic codes of Canadian whiteness and could support media gatekeepers’ preferences for publicizing white identities and white pop music. When Bieber released the single “One Time,” his team helped him gain many opportunities to perform the song across prominent broadcast television shows, which may have been easier to secure by pitching the hegemonic appeal

of a clean-cut white boy. Bieber performed “One Time” at the MTV Video Music Awards, on YTV's *The Next Star*, the *Today* show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Good Morning America* television broadcast, *Lopez Tonight*, and *The Wendy Williams Show*, all in 2009. These performances amplified Bieber's visibility and perhaps were afforded by Bieber's white privilege. The buzz around his star persona continued to grow after consecutive performances across different media channels. In addition, Bieber also had the opportunity to perform “One Time” as a supporting act on Taylor Swift's *Fearless Tour*, which enabled Bieber to reach a similar target audience of young women.

Bieber was not always successful in his attempt to brand himself as R&B and when he released his first R&B album, he classified it as an experimental project to potentially circumvent criticism for participating in R&B music genre styles. In 2014, Bieber released his album *Journals* and, like Drake's argument about his mixtapes, Bieber argued that he did not have any promotion or marketing behind this R&B music project:

Poo Bear...writes R&B music like real R&B music like he wrote peaches and cream...I [told him that I] want to do an R&B album [to which Poo Bear said] ‘nah you’re a pop artist I want to write you pop music’ and [I said] ‘naw I want to make an R&B album’, so we spent about 6 weeks making this R&B album, *Journals*...I only released it online and I did that for myself because I just wanted to do R&B music and it did...pretty well...wasn't a super huge album and I wasn't planning for it to be like that...I didn't do any promotion...but got to express myself creatively and then after that I said I want to incorporate this style into my pop lane and...found Diplo [who Braun ran into in a bar] and him and Skrillex mixed with it. (The Bert Show, 2016).

In this quote, Bieber affirmed his attempts to mix R&B into pop styles, as part of his need to “express himself.” Denying “promotion,” Bieber attempted to frame *Journals* (2013) as an album that did not have the constraints and pressures of a full marketing plan traditionally associated with an album.

Black U.S. artist T-Pain commented on Bieber's R&B album in 2014 and stated,

[Justin Bieber's] record is really, really R&B...He's doing some great R&B music right now, and it's like literally the best R&B music I've heard in years. I haven't heard music like this since like early 2000s, '90s. It's insane. He's doing really good right now. (as quoted in Fleischer, 2014)

On the other hand, critics including Rich Juzwiak (2014) from *Fader* magazine stated that Bieber was singing “soul music without soul” and claimed that his “raw emotion comes out like a whine.” Juzwiak (2014) further argued that R&B is “the genre [Bieber] most often works within these days” yet “[Bieber] very well fills the role of a white person who’s bad at discussing race.” Juzwiak (2014) challenges Bieber’s ability to participate in R&B via to his claim that Bieber is unable to deeply discuss the racial complexities and histories involved in traditional classifications of R&B or racialized experiences of Black folk. Bieber’s whiteness, and potentially his age at the time, contributed to his inability to be accepted as an R&B singer by some media gatekeepers. I disagree with Juzwiak (2014) when he said that Drake’s work is a predecessor to Bieber’s R&B album: “the record is indebted to the more recent, atmospheric R&B popularized by Drake and his producer 40.” I group Bieber and Drake in the second-generation of Canadian R&B artists to highlight how Bieber’s interest in R&B is longstanding and that R&B styles, fashions, and music have consistently contributed to the creation of his public personality. Both artists entered the industry around the same time, but Bieber’s intersectional identity pushed him into more pop classifications rather than R&B that mixed traditionally separated R&B, hip-hop and pop. Bieber and Drake have both blurred genre lines throughout their careers by mixing traditionally separated pop, hip-hop, and R&B music in their performances.

Ultimately, Bieber and Drake’s successful entries into the music industry were similar: both artists garnered a large online following with strategic marketing, which increased each artist’s online visibility and attracted the attention of key U.S. music industry gatekeepers, who then worked with them to develop their careers by helping them create relationships with successful Black U.S. R&B musical artists, eventually landing them a music label contract with a major U.S. record labels as they mixed pop, hip-hop, and R&B genre styles.

### 3.5 “The Weeknd Kissing Strippers”: Jessie Reyez’s Digital Stardom was Born Using Clickbait

Unlike Drake and Bieber, who had to move to the U.S.A. to establish their careers as Canadian R&B artists, Reyez represents a third generation of Canadian R&B artists who

built their careers through the support of local Canadian music industry infrastructures. That said, her career success is also deeply indebted to U.S. media organizations and U.S. hip-hop and R&B musical artists, as well as her optimized use of social media.

Jessie Reyez describes how “luck has played a big role in [her] success,” and that “hard work” and 9-month program in Toronto “introduced [her] to mentorship...[which] made [her music career] so much more attainable” and that (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Reyez represents what I classify as the third generation of Canadian R&B artists, who have been supported by local Canadian music industry infrastructures. Reyez explained that in her generation, Canadian hip-hop and R&B acts finally began getting international recognition based on the hard work of their predecessors, and this was key to her music:

We have a crazy hip-hop history that a lot of people don't know about...we have people in our city that were very influential. We've got...[K-OS] [*sic*], we've got Kardi, we have some songs that are Toronto anthems. I remember being in the States a few years ago, and when I said I was from Toronto, it doesn't really make a difference. Now you say you're from Toronto and people want to talk to you a little longer. Drake's...bringing a lot of eyes to the city, but I feel like the seeds and the flowers have always been here. (Rolling Stone, 2017)

Although “the seeds and the flowers” of Canadian hip-hop and R&B have existed since at least the 1960s, institutional racism in Canada and the overpowering U.S. music industry had, until recently, stunted the growth and awareness of these talented Canadian artists.

Reyez identifies “Northern Touch,” a song collaboration by several first generation Canadian R&B artists, as an “anthem” that inspired her music (CBC, 2018a; I discuss Reyez's own performance of anthems in Chapter 5). Reyez has also discussed the impact Drake has had on her music by stating: “He's a legend...I feel patriotic when I work with Drake...I was born in Toronto and what Drake has done for the city, you can't really quantify” (Cordero, 2020). In addition to Drake, Reyez argued that Bieber has also created respect for Canadian artists, which has assisted her career development in music: “people are more inclined to listen [to Canadians]; people are more inclined to give [Canadian artists] a chance...why? Because we had these wicked successful artists...[like] Justin Bieber” (Q with Tom Power, 2018). Drake and Bieber helped push distinctly Canadian personas that mixed hip-hop, R&B, and pop genres into mainstream media, which artists like Reyez could then follow and build on.

Like Bieber, who early on busked on the streets of Stratford, Reyez busked at Kensington Market in Toronto to cultivate a local audience. Like Bieber and Drake, Reyez used social media to build a fanbase and attract the attention of a key music industry gatekeeper who helped her achieve a music label contract. In this subsection, I explore how Reyez broke into the music industry as part of the third generation of Canadian R&B artists, using both social media and traditional marketing methods and with the help of Canadian and U.S. music industry gatekeepers.

Reyez was born in Toronto and has said that growing up with Columbian parents, she “didn’t know a lick of English,” but neither did many other kids in her community because “there were so many immigrants in the area” (Reyez as quoted in Edwards, 2018). However, when she moved to Brampton, Reyez said that she was one of only a few non-white kids and “other kids would make fun of [her Spanish] accent” (Reyez as quoted in Edwards, 2018). Her upbringing across different parts of the GTA, with her immigrant Columbian parents, shaped her understanding of identity and her approach to making music. Reyez stated: “I got the opportunity to grow up around different cultures, especially being a child of an immigrant family” (H. Collins, 2017), which exposed Reyez to multiple perspectives and shaped her unique approach to R&B. Like many first generation Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists before her, Reyez articulated her immigrant and diasporic experiences in her social media posts with captions written Spanish (Reyez, 2020l), videos of her father speaking Spanish (Reyez 2020h), and videos of Reyez making empanadas with her mother (2020n). Reyez uses her parents as authentication tools to reinforce her experiences as a second-generation Canadian-Columbian and branch into music content creation in Spanish. Reyez has written and performed songs in both English and Spanish (Reyez, 2020i; 2020j; 2022d). Her immigrant upbringing and speaking Spanish at home shaped her performances style and her approaches to music (Ameida, 2022). Following Devon (Scobie & Stewart, 2019, p. 323) and Michie Mee (Cowie, 2015), who claimed to have been influenced by Black, first-generation Jamaican-Canadian, Lillian Allen’s poetry, Reyez also said her songwriting skills were developed through writing poetry (BigBoyTV, 2017).

Reyez highlighted how the internet offered new career opportunities for minorities and artists who lacked infrastructural support from Canada's music industry:

The internet has given a platform for artists that didn't have a chance before and even a voice for minorities...the way we've been able to...having people be able to connect with your music, I think is so cool...there are artists who don't have their music on the radio but that have like people that love them and that can say... 'I'm gonna play a show at the park in two hours in this city' ...at this park...I don't think that was possible years ago...there were more gatekeepers radio was essential for you to become some massive thing...but there are massive artists out there [now] who do not have radio support. It's just a testament to the new times that we are living in. (The Strombo Show, 2017)

When Reyez argues that there are "less gatekeepers," what she may have meant is that the internet has enabled artists to somewhat circumvent traditional gatekeepers, reducing barriers for artists to build online audiences. Despite lacking music label and mainstream media backing, Reyez was able to network with other artists and share her music to online audiences. For example, Reyez described messaging artists through social media and recording music in home-made recording studios (HOT 97, 2017), which she could then upload to SoundCloud, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, to attract local followings. Reyez confirmed that through this process she met and worked with artists, like Toronto rapper Junia-T, who later featured Reyez on his Soundcloud tracks like "Asi" (Junia-T, 2013a) and "We Got This" (Junia-T, 2013b).

Reyez (2017b) identified Jhyve as one of the first artists to give her a chance and collaborate with her in Toronto. When I interviewed Jhyve (2020), he described having worked with Reyez and claimed that they would collaborate by messaging over Instagram and meeting up in person to record and play music together. Reyez's local collaborations and live performances helped her to craft her skills, build her online visibility, and grow her music network. When I interviewed emerging Torontonian artist Robbie Ahmed (2020), he stated that artists in Toronto often collaborate through "online networking...[artists can find each other] in the city and DM [Direct Message each other] on Instagram and have instant access to [people] online...and collaborate with them by meeting up or working virtually." Unlike the first generation of Canadian R&B artists who may have wished to collaborate but were limited to live settings and communications prior to online technologies, Reyez's generation could more easily



interact to produce music together and promote it to wider audiences on social media. An independent artist in Canada told me in an interview (2020) that “Instagram has [also] become the new business card” because the platform enables artists to network in the music industry with other artists. On *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (2018), actor Cole Sprouse stated that with social media, “celebrity” is redefined, and an online presence is now a requirement of their businesses: “the nature of celebrity has kind of changed now...for the first time social media [has] really become a fundamental [and] professional component of your business.” Strong social media profiles are a requirement for today’s musical artists.

Early in her career, Reyez used clickbait to purposefully mislabel links of her music recordings with sensationalized phrases, to encourage people to click on the link and hear her music:

[I’d post links to my covers] on Twitter but with clickbait stuff to get producers and artists to see it...I wanted The Weeknd to see my stuff so I’d [include texts] like ‘The Weeknd kissing strippers’ [with a link to her song]. (ItsTheReal, 2020)

“Clickbait is writing sensationalized or misleading headlines to attract clicks on a piece of content” (CoSchedule) and Reyez crafted eye-catching headlines to drive online traffic to her music and to build her brand awareness. This strategy was a success because, according to Reyez, Grammy-award-winning producer Doc McKinney saw one of her uploaded recordings from her clickbait strategy and they ended up working together (ItsTheReal, 2020). Clickbait can often discredit an artist’s authenticity by purposefully misleading online users to unexpected content; however, it worked in Reyez’s favour. In 2012, Reyez moved to Florida with her family, but Reyez maintained her relationship with Doc, whom she would video call. Reyez said, “I got so much advice...and wisdom from him” about breaking into the music industry (ItsTheReal, 2020).

During our interview in 2020, independent Toronto musical artist Robbie Ahmed also stated the importance of mentorship in the industry:

Not all artists know [how to navigate the music industry] even with social media making it easier...you have to...learn [from] people who know how to play the game...[to optimize the online space to break into the industry like]...hiring producers to pitch your music to your blog post [and outsourcing] work.

Reyez built relationships with people who could teach her how to “play the game” and provide her support to break into the music industry. However, Florida, was also where Reyez experienced the aforementioned incident with a music industry gatekeeper who made sexual advances towards her and suggested that she would not make it in the industry unless she accepted his advances (BigBoyTV, 2017). Reyez was struggling to break into the industry as a racialized woman, but continued to circulate her music wherever she could. Reyez bartended at a Miami club where she gave deejays her home-made CDs. When she complained to Doc in a video call that her “first management...wasn’t a perfect fit” (ItsTheReal, 2020) and she was struggling to catapult her music career, Doc gave her some words of encouragement and said “you gotta do what you can, where you’re at, with whatever you got” (ItsTheReal, 2020). Reyez decided to shoot a music video with her friend on the beach that evening. Reyez edited the video herself and uploaded it to YouTube. Reyez says that she “spammed everybody” that she could on Facebook with the YouTube link and one of those people she spammed is her current manager, Mauricio Ruiz (ItsTheReal, 2020).

Ruiz confirmed with me that he first interacted with Reyez on Facebook when she sent him the link to her music video. Reyez explained why Facebook was a strategic platform for her to target specific music industry gatekeepers with links to her music:

[On Facebook] you used to be able to look up professions...if you [searched] 93.5 flow...anybody [who] was affiliated or listed them as their employer would come up so I would spam everybody and be like, ‘hey, my name is Jessie. Listen to my shit’...Ruiz...at the time was doing music videos affiliated with The Remix Project. (ItsTheReal, 2020)

On Facebook, Reyez targeted people she believed would have the most potential power to help her build her music career, a successful strategy that paid off.

Like Reyez, Ruiz is a Canadian-Colombian born in Toronto. When Ruiz saw Reyez’s music video on YouTube he said, “that video was horrible but I thought that her voice and the song was really dope” (Reyez, 2017b). At the time, Ruiz ran a content production agency, Mad Ruk Entertainment, that serviced Canadian R&B artists like The Weeknd (Canadian Music Week, 2021). Ruiz also worked with artists affiliated with The Remix Project which he encouraged Reyez to audition for. Founded in 2006, The Remix Project

was created to stimulate the Canadian music industry and help Toronto youth begin a career in the creative arts. It is a government funded organization that helps Canadian youth get access to formal music education, resources, and training in music production, music video editing, directing, promotion strategies, digital marketing, brand partnerships, and more (OAC CAO, 2020).

An article by Chaka Grier (2019) describes the evolution of The Remix Project:

Remix started as the drop-in program Inner City Visions in 1999, co-founded by Gavin Sheppard and Drex Jancar. It was renamed the Remix Project in 2006 and formalized as a registered charity in 2009, the same year it received a United Nations Habitat Program award for excellence in community safety and crime prevention. Once a six-month mainly mentorship-based training program, it is now an in-demand, nine-month alternative training school. Today, Remix's mission is similar to how it started but on a bigger scale: support youth in harnessing their creativity in everything from music to film production, design and culinary careers, to overcome new and existing challenges.

According to The Remix Project's official website (2023), the organization is now funded by the Government of Canada, the Ministry of Ontario, Toronto Arts Council, Sony Music, Live Nation, Universal Music Canada, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, and many other large organizations and corporations.

Reyez explained that The Remix Project

is an art incubator for at risk youth. It's the hub of a lot of urban culture, specifically music in Toronto. You kind of go in there a rookie; videographers, photographers, graphic designers need to build their portfolio and musicians need music videos, photographs, artwork, so you [are creating] material and helping each other get better in the process. (Bliss, 2017)

Reyez tried out for The Remix Project and secured a spot in the 2014 program. That year, Reyez moved back to Toronto to attend The Remix Project program, where she gained access to experts and resources that could help her craft her Canadian R&B star "Jessie Reyez." She spent nine months creating music under the mentorship of Daniel Daley, one half of Toronto's local R&B act Dvsn. Reyez received some formal training that helped to improve her songwriting skills and she began recording her own music using technology provided by The Remix Project. She also learned how to market her music online using Instagram. The Remix Project helped expand her technical skills as a singer

and a writer and gave her tools that she could use to record her music. Eventually, in 2022, Reyez would come back to The Remix Project and become a mentor for rising stars, attesting to the success that she achieved through the program and her debt to it.

Reyez stated that one day, famous Chicago Black rap artist “King Louie [who had collaborated with artists like Ye ]...came to speak [to The Remix Project students] as a mentor” (as quoted in Bliss, 2017). This put Reyez in the same room as King Louie, who might otherwise have been difficult to contact directly. Reyez explained that when King Louie visited, one of the founders of The Remix Project, Gavin Sheppard, showed King Louie Reyez’s song “Statuses” (H. Collins, 2017). Reyez had previously promoted the song “about subtweets” on her own social media pages and said “[with the help of The Remix Project she] put [the song] out on Instagram as an installation with a bunch of different posts” (ItsTheReal, 2020). After playing King Louie the song, Louie’s manager invited Reyez to meet with them later that afternoon at a condo in Toronto. Reyez stated that when she arrived, she saw:

Sean Leon, a dope rapper from Toronto [,] Wonder Girl [,] Red Way, another dope rapper that we list who was also from Toronto, Doc McKinney [was] there, Spooky Blacks is in there, and Louis and his manager, and Ruiz...not my manager yet...I’m the only singer...Everyone else is a producer or a rapper. (ItsTheReal, 2020).

That night, Reyez received introductions to more musical artists and producers who could help her continue to build her network in the music industry. Reyez said she worked with King Louie from that night on: “‘Living In the sky’ [which was their] first song together” (ItsTheReal, 2020). That same night, Ruiz also became Reyez’s official manager.

According to Reyez: “[when] we had to leave [Ricardo’s apartment]...me and Ruiz...go down the block [to this chicken spot]” and they sat there, ate together, and decided to make their professional relationship official (ItsTheReal, 2020).

Ruiz, like Braun and Jas Prince, met Reyez at a time when he was also trying to break into the music industry as a manager searching for talent. Ruiz stated: “I was just fortunate to meet [Reyez] at a time when we both were trying to get our foot in the door. We quickly realized our work ethics were equally matched...from that point on, it was ‘go’ time” (Havens, 2020). Ruiz helped Reyez secure performance opportunities on

various stages through his music industry connections. Between Ruiz and the relationships Reyez built through The Remix Project, Reyez had already begun growing her knowledge, skills, and brand awareness in the music industry.

King Louie and Jessie Reyez officially released “Living in the Sky” in 2014 and “It Hurts (Selena)” in 2015. As a result of her collaboration with King Louie, Reyez achieved recognition from artists like “Chance the Rapper [who] heard [the song with King Louie] ...tweeted about it, and [opportunities had] just been rolling since [that Tweet]” (as quoted in Bliss, 2017). By getting recognition (and promotion) from U.S. hip-hop artist Chance the Rapper, in an online Tweet, Reyez attracted his audience and built her authenticity as an R&B artist. Ruiz and Reyez practiced traditional networking strategies and online marketing approaches to try and attract a music label company’s attention. Reyez said that her manager, Ruiz, “linked up with [other music executives]” while Reyez was using social media to build her fanbase (ItsTheReal, 2020).

Reyez also used Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to offer audiences a seemingly intimate view of her everyday life in the studio (Reyez, 2014) and links to unpolished “Practice session [recordings] of a few covers/originals on [her] acoustic [guitar] at home. No production, just [her]” (Reyez, 2015). Reyez also posted covers of herself singing popular songs on Instagram to attract the attention of other musical artists to collaborate with (ItsTheReal, 2020). By posting covers online, Reyez followed similar content creation strategies to Bieber and Drake as they tried to build their star personas. However, in Reyez’s Instagram posts, she would tag manager’s accounts in the caption in hopes they would view her posts, because according to Reyez:

If you tag the artist [you want to work with] and they’re getting like inundated with different tags [and messages] it’s just difficult [to get their attention] but if you tag a manager [who has] less [online] traffic...you have more probability of getting in contact with their team. (ItsTheReal, 2020)

Therefore, Reyez and Ruiz were both trying to garner the attention of music companies, artists, and music industry executives who could help Reyez get a record deal.

Reyez was also continuing to develop her songwriting skills, when she met U.S. producer/composer/artist Tim Suby in 2015 through “an old friend in the Toronto area.”

Together they created a song “[called] ‘Fuck It,’ which [later become] the first song on [Reyez’s first EP] *Kiddo*” (Nelson Jr., 2020). Suby then helped Reyez produce and write several other songs on her later EP. Buzz about Reyez’s music and digital star continued to grow within the music industry and in online spaces.

Reyez received a message on Instagram from famous D.J. Calvin Harris on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017, stating “You’re awesome 🙏 big uppp.” Harris also said, “My manager said he saw you at soho house and I should look u cos you’re so good and he was right lol He also said u sing in Spanish which is incredibly sick...a lot of people talking about U tho” (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Reyez had attracted an online following and Ruiz had been managing Reyez for a year, but he needed more power to help her develop her career. He asked Byron Wilson (whom Reyez calls “Busy”) to help manage Reyez.

Byron “Busy” Wilson is a music talent manager who was working with Canadian singer, rapper, and songwriter SonReal at the time. Wilson partnered with Ruiz to be her co-manager and introduced Reyez to producer/artist Jermī Thomas who was working at the music production company BMG at the time. Thomas had just signed a record label with SonReal. Reyez met with Thomas in Los Angeles and they “immediately clicked” (Havens, 2020). At that point BMG wanted to sign her as a writer, but Reyez was unsure and said, “they courted [her] for 9 months” (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Reyez also claimed: “I wanted to see how hard they were willing to ride” (as quoted in Bliss, 2017). BMG sent her to a songwriting camp in Sweden where Reyez said she wrote her first single “Figures” and worked on the track with “Shy Carter and Priest” (McCormick, 2016). Subsequently, Reyez signed a deal with BMG as a songwriter (Bliss, 2017).

On August 23, 2016, while remaining unsigned as a singer but already working with BMG as a writer, Reyez released her first single “Figures” on Zane Lowe’s (2016) Apple streaming radio station Beats 1. Unlike Bieber and Drake, who published their first songs on their personal social media accounts, Reyez released her first official single on this streaming channel which had a large hip-hop and R&B audience. Lowe also worked to rhetorically frame audiences’ reception of Reyez’s song by offering commentary before playing “Figures”:

Coming out of Toronto, but out of Colombia originally, the debut release of an unsigned artist called Jessie Reyez came up through The Remix Project...she hasn't signed with anybody, she has no structure around her, and she still has the confidence to just...use her gut...and create something beautiful like that.

By stating that Reyez has “no structure around her” as an unsigned artist, Lowe reiterated Reyez’s self-made and hustlin’ star persona, but clearly understated the established network of people and relationships Reyez had already acquired, perhaps in order to enhance her authenticity. Although Reyez had not signed a recording contract, I am skeptical of using the word “unsigned” since she had already been working with two managers and BMG. Lowe introduced Reyez to his global audience as a Torontonian and a Colombian artist who had confidence. This could have been an introduction that Reyez and her team crafted themselves. I make this argument based on my experiences on radio as well as a promotional document Ruiz published online, that identified Reyez’s three brand values as “Canadian & Colombian pride,” “unapologetically herself,” and “women empowerment” (STEM, 2020).

Through his partnership with STEM (a music distribution and payment platform that claims to bring transparency to the music industry), Ruiz published a step-by-step pdf guide on how to build an artist’s brand titled “Artist Management playbook” (STEM, 2020). Ruiz included marketing techniques that artists can follow and provided examples of how he has followed these techniques in building Reyez’s brand. For example, Ruiz encourages artists to “identify 3 foundational values to your brand” (STEM, 2020) to inform the artist’s content creation strategies. The technique of creating core brand values is similar to Lieb’s (2018) idea of artist “themes.” Lieb stated that “celebrities have become dynamic brands that maintain overarching themes while adapting the specific communication of these themes through music” (p. 7). The purpose of maintaining overarching themes and core brand values is to create a consistent experience for audiences as they interact with the artist’s lifestyle brand across various products, services, and media texts. Reyez recently stated that there was a “blueprint...[they’ve had for the] last...five years with [her] management [team]” (ItsTheReal, 2020), which they used to meticulously craft her digital star personality and lifestyle. Reyez has reinforced her aforementioned three brand values across multiple media to create brand consistency.

Apple's Beats 1 was a strategic media outlet for Reyez and her team to inform audiences about how they wanted Reyez's persona to be perceived.

Unlike Bieber and Drake, whose first music video featured key successful Black U.S. R&B artists, Reyez's first music video for "Figures" (2016) included a stripped-down video of Reyez alone, singing and playing guitar on a chair, with her hair messy, and wearing an oversized shirt. Reyez was able to build her persona as an authentic Canadian R&B artist without needing the public co-sign of a Black U.S. R&B artist likely due to the authenticity afforded to her by previous generations of Canadian R&B artists.

Assistant music video director, Raha Euphoria stated in our interview (2020) that this "stripped down" approach to Reyez's music video was "strategic" to make Reyez appear "like her authentic self." Hence, Reyez's brand value of being authentic and confident is reinforced in the video. According to Reyez, this music video led to publishing companies and record labels expressing an interest in signing her (ItsTheReal, 2020).

Similar to Drake and Bieber, Reyez said she met with "a lot of different record label teams" (The Angie Martinez Show, 2019) and argued that there was a "bidding war...a lot of tasty ass dinners...a lot of meeting execs" (IDEA GENERATION, 2022).

Producer/artist Jermī Thomas who was originally courting Reyez was leaving BMG when Reyez was deciding between labels, so the labels were "all trying to offer him a job" knowing that Reyez would probably go with the label Thomas decided to work at (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Indeed, when Reyez found out that Thomas went to Island Records, she decided to sign with that music company (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Like Drake and Bieber, Reyez had already developed relationships with people at the music label she signed to. Although Reyez signed with a U.S. music company, like Bieber and Drake, I argue that Reyez was able to do so through the help of The Remix Project, a local and dedicated Canadian organization that provided Reyez with the tools, skill development, and relationships she needed to build her music career.

Like Drake, Reyez had completed a body of work that she could show music labels and use to negotiate her contracts. Reyez argued that her first album *Kiddo* (2017d) was already completed when music companies reached out to her:



everyone started coming...because we had put out ‘Figures’...*Kiddo* was done...locked and loaded so...we played that in the meetings [and]...set a precedence for what kind of creative control was expected...because we had everything done...we didn’t need any meddling, we just needed money...and trust...and we were able to get it. (IDEA GENERATION, 2022)

Having achieved online success and a completed album, Reyez had some negotiating power in conversations regarding her recording contracts. Record executive Jimmy Lovine discussed how Reyez represents a new generation of artists that can negotiate favourable record deals by growing their online presence:

[artists now] build a buzz [with online] technology on their own...Jessie Reyez...just got a deal that no one would have got ten years ago...she deserves it...technology is building artists’ communication with its audiences...so record companies...have to figure out where they fit...artists that are getting traction [online] are getting better deals with more control. (iamother, 2017)

Although the details of Reyez’s contract with Island Records remain undisclosed, she was able to use her online following to negotiate creative freedom over her music.

Reyez’s first EP *Kiddo* ranged from “raw ballads to rap-fire flows over electronic production...even as she experiments with different styles at the heart Jessie’s music is her incredible voice” (Pigeons & Planes, 2017), exemplifying a mixing or blurring of traditionally segregated genre styles. In an interview in 2017, Reyez stated that she disliked being pigeonholed in a genre category: “When people ask me what kind of music I make, I hate saying a genre cuz that like a chain. So, I’m like Quentin Tarantino” from whom she sources inspiration in terms of the aesthetic and the feel of his movies (Shepherd, 2017). Reyez says that *Kiddo* (2017d) and her second EP *Being Human In Public* (2018) were intended to pique audiences’ interest in a type of playlist format, and that later she would release her full album to hopefully maintain audiences’ attention, so they would listen to her body of work from start to end (Q with Tom Power, 2020). As a songwriter, she wanted to hold audiences’ attention for her full album, so she created analogies between songs, themes, duality, contrasts, and Easter Eggs<sup>12</sup> “for people who

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<sup>12</sup> An Easter Egg refers to a subtle message in a media text intended by the publisher of the media text to be recognized by audiences who are carefully paying attention to the media text

will step back [and appreciate her work] in its entirety” (Q with Tom Power, 2020). When she began her career, she may have been primarily focused on spreading her brand awareness. Hence, early in her career, pigeonholing herself in a single genre would have been counterproductive to her marketing and branding efforts. According to Lyndsey Havens (2020) “Reyez believes her upbringing has directly influenced her musical style, which she best describes as ‘a mutt,’ though it often falls under R&B on streaming services.” From the beginning of her career, Reyez has always blended a type of R&B, hip-hop, and pop sound, embracing the hybridity characterizing so much Canadian R&B. Ruiz has credited Drake, and other Canadian artists after him, like The Weeknd, for helping pave the way for contemporary Canadian artists, like Reyez, to build their careers in genre-bending/blending R&B and hip-hop performances:

It’s crazy because Drake completely broke that door down and he opened it up for all of us. And it took about five or six years for everybody to come in and really infiltrate that, especially in the hip-hop and R&B scene. After Drake, I think there’s no argument that there was [T]he Weeknd and XO and they did a phenomenal job as well. And it’s like, ‘Oh, okay, so rap can do this. Oh, R&B can do this and we’re from Toronto, Canada.’ (Narváez, 2020)

Reyez built on Drake’s music style of blurring traditionally separated music genres of hip-hop and R&B, something which had become a more common practice by the time she broke into the music industry.

Another practice that had become more common when Reyez entered the music industry was brand partnerships between Canadian companies and Canadian R&B artists. Stefan Calabrese (2017) argued “that 2017...point[ed] to a new chapter in the Canadian [hip-hop] scene [in part, because of]...the incredible amount of brands that have started to put Canadian artists at the forefront...like “Roots...[and] Jessie Reyez.” Thus, with financial backing and entertainment industry support, Canadian hip-hop and R&B artists could grow their revenue, increase their audibility, and reinforce their Canadian lifestyle brand values. In 2017, Reyez worked with Canadian clothing brand Roots, which primarily sells hoodies, track pants, and shoes. Roots clothing aligns with her brand values of having Canadian pride and a relaxed persona.

In a Roots (2017) commercial, Reyez is seen in some scenes with her hair styled in her signature bun on the top of her head, wearing a large purple sweater, with her makeup done neatly. In other scenes, Reyez seemingly wears less bold makeup, with her hair tucked under a hat and a hood, and she wears an oversized grey hoodie. Some scenes are grey and dulled and other scenes are purple and vibrant to showcase different aspects of her personality. These two contrasting aspects of Reyez's persona appeal to feminine and masculine traits, with the hoodie aligning Reyez with traditionally masculine hip-hop and R&B styles while other scenes showcase Reyez's traditionally feminine persona.



**Figure 2: Reyez in overlapping scenes showcasing contrasting representations of her persona in Roots commercial (Roots, 2017)**

When Reyez began her career, she challenged hegemonic views of female beauty standards even as she appropriated traditional codes of masculinity in hip-hop. Reyez dressed and acted more traditionally masculine, which may have helped to increase her authenticity as a participant in a male-dominated R&B music genre world. Reyez wore her hair in a messy bun and argued: “I often heard, 'Little girls are supposed to be in pink' and 'Little girls are supposed to be groomed,' because my hair was in the perennial ponytail, and I was always wearing my brother's clothes” (as quoted in Price, 2021). Her promotional video with Roots articulates Reyez's gender and genre bending styles. Roots

(2017) captioned the advertisement by stating: “Meet Jessie Reyez, a rising Canadian musician inspiring new sounds and individual style.” Not only does this statement suggest Reyez was creating “new sounds,” but it also frames Reyez’s “style” as inspirational; an ideal that audiences can strive to emulate. Reyez, being inspirational and supporting the Roots brand, also enhanced the belief that Roots-branded clothing was inspirational and thus, a more desirable product. Reyez’s and Roots’ brand values of being Canadian aligned, enabling them to work together to reinforce their Canadian-ness in ways similar to Drake and Canada Goose or Bieber and Urban Behavior.

Brand partnerships are not a new concept. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (1993) argued that in the 1990s white “pop icons [were] seen in beer, pop, fashion and car commercials” (p. 31). However, Duncan Lambden (2022) highlighted the different dynamics of brand partnerships that emerged with the introduction of social media when stating: “[with] the arrival of [social media] people [can] interact with their favorite drinks or...companies firsthand – something unimaginable in the 90s.” The digitization of brands online has enabled audience-company relationships to seem more intimate. Roots created content to amplify Reyez’s inspirational digital star image and simultaneously positioned Roots products through these values, by having Reyez incorporate Roots clothing into her branded lifestyle. Catherine Carstairs (2006) describes how Canadian-branded products enable Canadians to assert their Canadian-branded lifestyles and identities when stating: “Canadians have been willing to drape themselves in branded products such as Roots and Molson Canadian gear, embracing them as part of a Canadian way of life” (p. 241). Therefore, together Reyez and Roots reinforce Canadian-branded lifestyles.

In a video advertisement for Roots, Reyez said: “I feel what you wear is a reflection of yourself...since I’m a lot of things, I wear a lot of different things” (Roots, 2017) which speaks to the hybridity of her persona, as mixing different styles and fashions through her multicultural influences from Toronto (ItsTheReal, 2020). Reyez was inviting audiences to wear the clothes she felt were a reflection of herself so that they could emulate her lifestyle. I put David Buxton’s (1983/1990) theory of a “rock star as a life-style model” (p. 396), where consumers purchase products and services to live the “life-style” of a

rock star, in dialogue with Catherine Carstairs (2006) who argues that “by buying Roots, one could be proudly Canadian, while imagining an idealized Canadian life filled with summer camp, wilder-ness parks, successful athletes and celebrities, and urban fashion” (p. 241). Building on David Buxton’s and Carstairs’ studies (2006), I argue that Reyez built and commodified a lifestyle brand through her music, music videos, and brand partnerships (like Roots) that reinforced her core brand values of Canadian & Colombian pride, women empowerment, and being unapologetically herself, while selling audiences her version of a Canadian-branded lifestyle. Reyez is able to sell a lifestyle brand that enables audiences to purchase her versions of Canadian-ness, of women-empowerment, and of authenticity. Reyez is showing audiences that they can express themselves by emulating her constructed lifestyle brand and its sense of artistic freedom by consuming her branded and endorsed products and services.

Reyez sells “Canadian-ness” in her brand partnership with Roots and in her musical performances. Artists and their teams exercise what Michel Foucault (1975) called a form of discipline, where people are sold the idea of liberation but encouraged to express that freedom and liberation in a specific, disciplined way. Similarly, in a 2011 interview, Drake told Complex “I want to give you a product [with OVO]. I want to give people a piece of myself, that’s me” (Drake as quoted in Johnson, 2011), suggesting that he commodifies and embodies his lifestyle brand in these OVO products and experiences. Drake offers audiences his Torontonion lifestyle experiences in his clothing, products, and music. Nancy Baym (2018) also described how musical artist “Keating sells beautiful music in part by offering her audience *herself*. They listen to her music already. They buy it because they know her” (p. 5), which illustrates how an artist’s personality becomes commodified and sold through products, like their music.

In Calabrese’s (2017) discussion of Reyez’s and Roots’ brand partnership, Calabrese further stated that:

For Canadian artists...brand partnerships have opened many doors, and in some cases, funded various projects which would not have been possible otherwise. Whether you want to call them partnerships, sponsorships or co-signs, these brand activations have been a crucial part of the Canadian music landscape in 2017.

Reyez's brand partnership in 2017 helped pave the way for her future projects and developing music career. Brand partnerships can offer Canadian artists the opportunity to reinforce their brand, reach broader audiences, and attain financial rewards that support their music careers.

Although traditional forms of marketing were critical in building Reyez's career as a Canadian R&B artist, Reyez represents a new generation of musical artists who were required to have an online presence to break into the music industry space. When I interviewed music event producer Asad Ali (2020), he said that he had negotiated contracts with artists like Tyga, ASAP Ferg, Saint Jhn, Loud Luxury, What So Not, and TroyBoi, based on the performers' online Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), like their number of Instagram followers and engagement rates on posts. Ali used these online KPIs to determine the potential brand awareness and audiences that these artists could bring to the concert, which affected the monetary value and compensation he offered the artist for their concert performance. I also interviewed graphic designer of Swan Media, Jeremy Horn, in 2020, who helps artists design press kits which are to music companies and brand partners. Horn told me in our interview (2020) that the kits always include the artist's "Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, SoundCloud, and Spotify [KPIs]." In the 2020 Innovative Artist Management & Diversity in the Music Business Conference, Kelvyn Colt, artist at TBHG Records, explained that music labels use heat maps and temperature tracking technologies to scout for potential individuals to sign who are gaining traction on social media platforms (INOCON MUSIC & TECH CONFERENCE, 2020). Therefore, an artist's online KPIs directly equate to their perceived market value. David Arditi (2020) highlighted how "record labels can extract data not just on consumption and demographics (which become even more data rich in the digital environment), but also by using tracking cookies and following consumers across sites" to determine the "profitability" of the artist's "fan bases" (p. 98). Therefore, artists in Reyez's generation are pressured to create online profiles with a high number of engaging users to prove to record labels that they are worth the label's investment.

Record labels now have more online data to help them curate an artist's digital star.


Thomas Davenport, Paul Bath, and Randy Bean (2012) argued that as big data evolves,

“the architecture will develop into an information ecosystem” that “will generat[e] new insights for businesses” and will help them to “optimi[ze] decisions” (p. 23). Independent artist Robbie Ahmed stated in our interview in 2020 that “social media is crucial to also tracking where artists tour– based on where your followers are mostly located. The city breakdown helps to establish where it is profitable to play a show without money loss.” Similarly, in my interview with Tom Russell, Vice President of Media Strategy and Planning at CNBC, in 2020, he stated that before online communications, there was more “guesswork” when it came to marketing and creative strategies; however, he suggested that today there are more granular metrics available through big data collection to target audiences and optimize marketing campaigns. Thus, Reyez and her team are more equipped than previous generations of R&B artists, to use online data in making marketing decisions to build her digital star.

Reyez, like Bieber and Drake, used online communications, mentorship from a key U.S. music industry gatekeeper, and a U.S. record label to break into the music industry. As a third generation Canadian R&B artist, Reyez had access to local Canadian resources to help construct and develop her career as an R&B artist. Nonetheless, her heavy reliance on U.S. media and music industry gatekeepers to establish her career also points to a continued lack of support for Canadian R&B artists in Canada.

### 3.6 Diverse Representation Still Required in Canadian Music Industries

Kardi (2021) has pointed out that while Canadians may know stories about himself, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, they often do not know the deeply-rooted histories of the treatment of Black people in Canada, and its long-term effects on Black Canadians:

We always tell the stories of Drake...Jessie Reyez...Justin Bieber...myself and others-but do you really know about  [Canada?]. . .injustice happened/happens around the world, not just in America. . .[there is a] legacy and [a] history of slavery in Canada. . .[and many] people of African descent have made [rich contributions] to our city and country. . .For over 400 years, more than 15 million men, women, and children of African descent were the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. . .there are legacies of slavery that continue to impact the lives of people of African descent around the world and in our own City (Toronto), that we need to collectively address. . .Canadians have some unpacking to do too.

In this chapter, I have sought to tell the stories of Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's successful entries into the music industry, as racially diverse Canadian artists who perform R&B. However, I also reaffirm that the development of the Canadian R&B music genre world is intertwined with histories of Black slavery and the mistreatment of Black people in Canada as well as the United States. I agree with Kardi that some "unpacking" must be done to better understand that there "are legacies of slavery [that] continue to impact" Black people in Toronto, in Canada, and in global communities. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez offer their unique interpretations of R&B as new generations of contemporary Canadian R&B artists, through their intersectional identities and experiences, but many unsigned Black Canadians helped create and develop the genre. I connect Kardi's argument to the continued lack of Black representation at the executive level in the broader music industry. A recent study conducted by the University of Southern California examining CEOs, Chairmen, and Presidents across 70 major and independent music companies found that only 4.2% were Black, 13.9% were women, and there were 17.7 white male executives to every one Black female executive (S. Smith et al., 2021). The music industry needs more diverse identities in positions of power to recognize talent in different genres, protect emerging artists from exploitative practices, and reflect on racism still exercised in Canada and elsewhere.

In 2020, Jessie Reyez (2020a) argued that if more people with diverse identities are given the power and opportunities to be music gatekeepers, it could help racialized artists in underrepresented genres, like R&B, achieve more success in Canada:

90 employees in Sony in Canada but only 8 are Black, at Warner it's 86 employees and only 7 are Black, and...I'm personally signed with Universal but...[of their] 175 employees....11 [of them are] Black...if their Black employee [advocates for a Black artist] but they have to say 'mother may I?' because they are not in a position where they have the freedom to pull the trigger...then...do you think that artists are going to stay in Canada...people [will] have to leave and get more traction [and support] in the States.

Having diversity represented in the music industry is a missed opportunity that could have helped more Canadians forge communities through shared lifestyles that remained underrepresented in Canadian media. I agree with David Thomas and Kerr Inkson (2009) that acknowledging diverse viewpoints in a society can help strengthen that society's



identity: “Just as biodiversity has a value in allowing ecosystems to deal with major change, so too does cultural diversity [which] offer[s] us a wider range of viewpoints and ways of doing things” (p. 30). If Canadian music industry gatekeepers have diverse experiences and viewpoints, they can recognize talent in music styles, like R&B, that remain underrecognized and under supported in Canada. If more R&B artists are supported, they have the potential to appeal to untapped markets and build more robust economic and social infrastructures in Canadian music. Canadian music industry gatekeepers of diverse racial identities can help ensure that Canadian artists and Canadian mainstream media honestly reflect (and inspire) Canada’s diverse population. This reflection, in turn, can help to shape hegemonic views of Canadian identities as people with diverse racial identities who have different lifestyles.

As digital stars, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez are new generations of Canadian R&B artists who represent multiple Canadian identities and lifestyles in popular culture through R&B music and in the online space. Their unique entries into the music industry, based on their intersectional identities, digital technologies, and traditional networking strategies, are useful narratives to illuminate existing power dynamics in the Canadian music industry that have long failed to include people with racialized identities. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez co-contribute to the contemporary Canadian R&B genre world in ways that reinforce, complicate, and challenge hegemonic views of Canadian national identities and traditional classifications of R&B music.

## 4 Chapter 4: Pandemic Promotional Strategies, 2019-2022

In 2023, Justin Bieber, Jessie Reyez, and Drake represent different aspects of Canadian identity in R&B music. Bieber is a white Canadian coffee-drinking, hockey-playing, loving husband. Reyez is a second-generation Canadian-Columbian, working-class, heartbroken woman. Drake is a biracial Black and white Canadian, basketball fan, lover boy, and father. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they created Canadian R&B “musicking experiences” (Small, 1998) that included different cultural communities, lifestyles, and sonic styles. Considering Charlotte Grey’s (2016) statement that “[Canada] has reimagined and embellished its self-image in every generation” (p. xiv), this chapter argues that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have “reimagined and embellished” ideologies of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness as new generations of Canadian R&B artists. I explore how these artists reinforce, complicate, and/or challenge such hegemonic ideologies in a particular historical juncture during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movements. Specifically, I conducted textual analyses of Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s marketing campaigns, social media posts, and brand partnerships between 2019 and 2022. In addition, in 2020, I interviewed 35 marketing and music industry executives to better understand contemporary brand management and digital marketing trends. Using these analyses and interviews, this chapter highlights how the unique intersections of Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s respective racial, national, and gendered identities mediate their articulations of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness” in their marketing campaigns and brand management strategies.

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In his first autobiography, published in 2010, Bieber called Canada his “home” and reinforced Canadian stereotypes: “I love hockey, maple syrup and Caramilk bars. Canada is an awesome country in general, and Stratford is an excellent place to call home. The people are nice...[t]he air is clean. Everything smells like wet pine trees” (Bieber, 2010a, p. 26-27). Bieber thus summons up a vision of Canada as “The Great White North” (Abdel-Shehid, 1999; Baldwin, et al., 2014; Moss, 2003), which evokes Canada as a tree-filled, rural landscape populated by hegemonically white people and governed by Anglo-

Saxon ideals. A decade later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bieber continued to articulate Canada as his “home.” For example, on Instagram on Canada Day 2020 he stated that he is “[h]onored and proud to be a Canadian” (Bieber, 2020z). However, he used the U.S. spelling for “honored,” which ironically articulated the strong U.S. cultural influence in the construction of his “Canadian” branded star persona (as discussed in Chapter 3). In this chapter, I first examine how Bieber continued to articulate Canada as “The Great White North” and through U.S. cultural ideals, from 2019 to 2022, using descriptions of his Christian traditions, his love for the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team, and his endorsement of Tim Hortons coffee (a Canadian symbol but a U.S. company).

Distinct from Bieber’s articulations of a hegemonically “white” Canada, biracial Black and white Drake, who was born and grew up in Toronto, articulates Canada as a cultural space of diverse identities interacting and intersecting. Drake has said, “in Toronto, we have cultural areas...this is Little India, this is Chinatown, this is where there [*sic*] the Greek people are...but it’s not segregated [like in the U.S.]” (as quoted in Smooth, 2011). Drake has represented Jewish affiliations in one music video and Catholic affiliations in another (Pope, 2016) to highlight how multiple cultural influences affect the construction of his star persona. I interviewed Raha Euphoria, the assistant director on Drake’s “Started From the Bottom” (2013) music video. Raha Euphoria stated in our interview that Drake had told Director X: “I want to make everything as Canadian as fucking possible...the snow, the scenes.” In the music video, Drake articulated his version of Canadian-ness by including a Toronto Parks and Recreation sign, winter weather, and scenes of Toronto (Pope, 2016). In other songs, Drake highlighted his diverse cultural influences by providing Caribbean terminology like “tingz” in songs like “No Long Talk” (Drake & Giggs, 2017), singing in Arabic (Drake & One, 2020), and rapping in Spanish (Bad Bunny & Drake, 2018). During the pandemic, Drake continued to outline a view of Canada as a highly diverse community, a “Multicultural Metropolitan” space (Trotman, 2006), through his ongoing references to and descriptions of Toronto and his prominent endorsement of the Toronto Raptors basketball team.

Like Drake, Jessie Reyez also situates her “Canada” in Toronto but, unlike Drake, Reyez emphasizes how her experiences as a second-generation Colombian immigrant shaped her Canadian-ness: “Toronto in particular encourages you to wave both flags. Maybe if I wasn’t raised in Toronto, I wouldn’t be as connected, but I definitely feel every bit of the title, ‘Colombian-Canadian’” (Almeida, 2022). Reyez expressed her ability to celebrate multiculturalism in Toronto, stating that it is a place where she can “wave [her] Canadian flag and Colombian flag both high and proud” (ItsTheReal, 2020), but she has also highlighted that changes still have to be made to create equal opportunities for all Canadians:

especially in Toronto, there are a lot of immigrants and a lot of kids of immigrants that have made this place so unique...Had I been born somewhere else that was more exclusive with their nationalism, I don’t think I would have been granted the luxury to be as connected to my parents’ culture as I have been...in Toronto things are very diverse...if go to Kensington [Market]...you hop the globe in a second...despite that, there’s room for growth...I don’t want to paint this picture of this utopian place, because it insinuates that there’s no room for growth and there still is...There’s still privilege...and there’s still equality that can be addressed and there’s still things that can grow and move forward. (CBC, 2022)

Reyez suggested that Canada, as a post-colonial country, is populated by diverse peoples, but criticized overly optimistic or utopian views of Canada by stating that there is still “room for growth” in deconstructing Canada’s racist infrastructure that continues to operate through white “privilege.” Reyez articulates a view of Canada as a “Post-Colonial Utopia” by “expressing a desire for social change alongside its challenges and obstacles” (B. Jones, 2018, p. 642). Canada is a former colony of the British Empire and has been acknowledged as a post-colonial space. It was among the first nations under British rule to join the commonwealth (including Australia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Jamaica, and many other countries), a modern political structure deeply implicated in the history of British imperialism and rooted in the complex cultural values of colonization (Mensah, 2010; Moss, 2003; Walker, 1985). With ancestry in Spanish-colonized Colombia, Reyez describes “how her Colombian-Canadian roots shape her music” (Almeida, 2022) in the R&B genre world (including her music, music videos, and brand partnerships campaigns). Reyez has vocally addressed how privilege continues to be exercised through sexism, racism, and xenophobia.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's lifestyle brands and marketing narratives are not intrinsically Canadian nor "R&B" in the traditional senses: rather, this study explores how they each articulate and redefine their versions Canadian-ness and R&B-ness through their music, brand partnerships, and social media posts. Although I will never know the specific intentions behind Drake's, Bieber's, and Reyez's content creation strategies, this chapter identifies marketing strategies that enhanced their Canadian digital stardom between 2019 to 2022.

## 4.1 Shifting Ideologies of Canadian-ness in Brand Partnerships

As discussed in Chapter 3, brand partnerships are at the core of building a digital star persona. Brand partnerships help generate revenue for the artist and their teams while also operating as a strategic tool to craft and/or expand the digital star's lifestyle brand. Jessie Reyez's manager Mauricio Ruiz recommended that artists "identify [and secure a partnership with] 3 corporate brands that reflect" their brand values. For example, Canadian R&B artist Jully Black discussed her partnership with Canadian brand Mark's Work Warehouse (Mark's) in 2019, contending that it was a process of authentically mirroring their respective "Canadian" values:

I wanted to represent my country beyond the music, beyond the Jully Black brand to represent authenticity and the everyday Canadian. It was a natural fit. Our core values: passion, dedication, commitment and how we impact those around us are a mirror of each other. And now, we are partnering and building an amazing Canadian bridge. (Black as quoted in A. Harris, 2019)

Although merchandising and brand partnerships have always been an important source of revenue for musical artists, Lauren Cochrane (2022) stresses the importance for artists to profit from merchandise sales after the "pandemic when the income stream from live gigs disappeared." I further examine how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez attempted to reinforce their Canadian-ness and other brand values through brand partnerships.

### 4.1.1 Reyez, Secret, and RBC

As Reyez built her career, she has worked with several brand partners to reinforce her brand values. Feminism and women empowerment, especially as a Latina, have been at

the core of her marketing efforts. Manager Ruiz argued that in Reyez's partnership with Secret Deodorant, Reyez had the opportunity to discuss "what adversities she had to overcome [in the music industry]" to reinforce her brand value of "women-empowerment" (STEM, 2020). This is a brand value that Secret Deodorant have also infused into their own brand by establishing that they were "helping women bring out the best in themselves" (Secret, 2023). Reyez wrote a song for the Secret Deodorant commercial titled "No Sweat" (Reyez, 2020q), which has been described by Kitty Empire (2020) as an "all-out feminist party banger." One of Secret Deodorant's video advertisements involved Reyez swinging a guitar around her back to portray herself as a strong, empowered, female artist with the message "supporting and inspiring women not to sweat any obstacles in their way" (Reyez, 2020r). This promotional text was posted on YouTube. YouTube has become the primary site for musical artists to premiere their music videos (Holt, 2011; Oh & Choeh, 2022; Kim, 2012; Vernallis, 2014) and for companies to share promotional texts (Howard, et. al., 2014; Stark, 2017). Therefore, it is beneficial for artists to promote their brand partnerships and their music on the same YouTube platform.

Another promotional text created through this partnership presented Reyez as a hard-working artist and used the messaging: "supporting/working towards equal pay for women" (Reyez, 2019c) in an Instagram video post. An Instagram post or story can include a location tag, where the user can indicate where the photo was taken; a textual caption that can include emojis, hashtags, and words that help frame how the user wants the image to be interpreted; and it can be "tagged" with other Instagram accounts. In the aforementioned video advertisement, Reyez (2019c) "tagged" @secretdeodorant and included a caption that reinforced her confidence and authenticity while promoting Secret Deodorant's products: "getting loud and spreading truth. #ad Excited to announce my partnership with @secretdeodorant to let you in on one of my biggest secrets – the new Secret Dry Sprays help me stay dry and fresh." By suggesting that she is "loud" and "spreading truth," Reyez reinforced her brand value of being authentic. Users can also select stories and music to play in the background of their posts by choosing sounds from the Apple Music library integrated with Instagram. Reyez included the sound of the original video; however, her promotional song through the partnership, "No Sweat"

(Reyez, 2020q), remained available on the Instagram app for users to apply to their own posts and stories. In an Instagram story, the song appears on the screen using either the artist's name and song name, the song lyrics, or the album cover art, all of which can be adjusted by the user. In an Instagram post that includes a song, its name and the artist's name appear at the top of the post. In addition to the app being a popular online communication tool, Reyez actively used Instagram to promote her brand partnerships and drive audiences to her streamed music on the same app.

Reyez also partnered with one of Canada's largest banks, Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), to promote her Canadian-ness and build her authenticity while also reinforcing her rags-to-riches narrative. Together, Reyez and RBC created a series of short educational YouTube video posts regarding financial literacy (RBC, 2019). When I interviewed Adam Burchill in 2020, who was Senior Director of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Partnership (MLSE), Music, and Live Entertainment at the time, he suggested that Reyez's lifestyle is reflected in her music lyrics and aligns with the values of her brand partner, RBC:

There is a line in a Jessie song[:] I could drive a Benz but I'm still in my broke ass Honda...[and] Jessie [worked] with RBC through the LiveNation partnership that I was involved in[, and we created] short RBC branded clips where she was talking about...[how] she was broke, and paying a cellphone bill[,] it was a challenge at one point and [the brand partnerships was] essentially meant to encourage financial literacy to the up-and-coming generation and say [how] to grapple with all sorts of financial decisions, whether it be about school or mortgages.

The song that Burchill was referring to was Reyez's (2020k) song "ROOF" and the lyrics are: "I could drive a Benz, But I'm still in my old ass Honda." The song's lyrics were presented as Reyez's personal experiences with saving money, and that narrative was then used to authenticate Reyez's promotional partnership with RBC. Although RBC benefitted from positioning Reyez as a spokesperson for their company to access her fanbase, Reyez also used the partnership to reinforce how she navigated through the music industry as a young woman. In the videos with RBC, Reyez described growing up in Canada and remaining uneducated about financial literacy for a long time, but addressed its importance in everyday life (RBC, 2018). RBC's Canadian target audience and Reyez's discussions of growing up in Canada enabled both brands to reinforce their

Canadian-ness. Hence, artist-company partnerships can be mutually beneficial to reinforce shared brand values.

#### 4.1.2 Bieber, Toronto Maple Leafs, and Tim Hortons

Justin Bieber represents different brand values as a traditional hockey-loving, coffee-drinking Canadian male, by working with Tim Hortons, and the Toronto Maple Leafs to target younger audiences and to reinforce their Canadian-ness in cross-branded marketing campaigns. Bieber used the digital marketing strategy of generating user engagement, subsequently helping Tim Horton's market their new coffee cup lids. On December 26, 2019, Bieber posted an Instagram story in reference to Tim Hortons having redesigned their lids with a digital voting sticker that enabled audiences to vote "yes" or "no" to the question: "Who's Canadian and misses these lids at Tim Hortons like I do?" Bieber posted the poll results in a subsequent Instagram story which stated that 70% of his audience members felt the old Tim Hortons cups were better. Bieber then repurposed this story and shared it as an Instagram post (Bieber, 2019d). The post included the caption, "these new lids are uncomfortable on the mouth, and you get very little liquid each drink" (Bieber, 2019b). Tim Hortons's official Instagram (2019) commented on Bieber's post: "sorry you aren't loving our new lids, but the good news is that they're made with 100% recyclable plastic. We'd love to have you join our team that's working to make them even better! DM us." Bieber screenshotted their comment and turned it into another Instagram post (Bieber, 2019e). Not only did Tim Hortons use the stereotypical Canadian term "sorry" (and a famous Bieber song title), but the public request to "join our team" foreshadowed their partnership. Bieber then posted an image of his hand holding a cup of Tim Hortons coffee with the old lid stating, "This is where it's at @timhortons" and reposted a similar image (Bieber, 2019f) a few weeks later.

Patricia Cormack and James Cosgrave (2012) describe how Tim Hortons has become "a purveyor of [a Canadian]" (p. 65), offers consumers a "status as a Canadian icon" (p. 65), and "represents 'home'" (p. 66) for many Canadians. In 2020, Bieber continued to reference his home town of Stratford, Ontario, Canada (Bieber, 2020d; 2020q) and his image as a Canadian coffee drinker image by posting an photo with him and his wife in the snow, drinking coffee, with the caption "Just a couple, with matching jackets, beanies



(tuques) if ur Canadian[,] and coffee ready to bring in the new year with our friends and family!!” (2020r). Bieber included the Canadian term “tuques” to align himself with the Canadian national identity while still using the word “beanies” to resonate with his international audience. By stating that they are holding coffee and bundled up in jackets, Bieber depicted a traditional Canadian “Great White North” cultural imaginary.

The increased visibility of both Canadian music and Canadian sports have worked together to amplify national and international awareness of Canadian identities and Canadian culture. In our interview (2020), Adam Burchill stated:

Justin seems to be proud and engaged with the things that emanate out of Canada...he went off on Tim Hortons about their new lids [and] he feels unapologetically Canadian, which is great. And his support for the Toronto Maple Leafs is tremendous.

To further solidify his Canadian identity, Bieber has frequently used his Instagram platform to demonstrate his love of hockey and his support for the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team (Bieber, 2021a; 2020s). Between 2019 and 2020, Bieber created over 25 Instagram posts that featured only an image of the Leafs’ logo to demonstrate his support (Bieber, 2020ae). He often posted on the day the Leafs were playing (Bieber, 2020s). In addition, he uploaded a video of himself watching the Leafs play hockey as an Instagram story, which showed him cheering loudly from his bedroom or living room (Bieber, 2020af). In 2019, when Bieber and his hometown friends played a friendly hockey game with the Leafs (Bieber, 2019g; 2019h), he posted images of their game on his Instagram profile. Bieber has repeatedly posted Instagram photos and videos of himself playing hockey (Bieber, 2019i; 2019j; 2019k) and watching hockey games (Bieber, 2019c). These Instagram posts demonstrate Bieber’s interest in the Canadian national game.

None of Bieber’s posts about hockey and coffee are accidental: his marketing team likely pushed Bieber’s symbology of coffee and hockey to align Bieber’s claimed experiences and lifestyle with the values and products that Tim Hortons and the Toronto Maple Leafs also promote. According to Michael Robidoux (2002):

Hockey was born out of post confederation Canada...in a period of political uncertainty and unrest. Canada was a disparate nation, divided in terms of language, region, and ethnicity—lacking in identity and national unity. Thus,

while hockey was used ideologically to express national sentiment, its value as a vernacular entity was equal to, if not greater than, its symbolic value.

As a hegemonic tool, the sport of ice hockey has long been used to unify the Canadian cultural community and has been embedded in Canada's national imaginary. Adam Burchill connected the rise of Toronto music and the success of Toronto sports to a sense of national pride in contemporary Canadian R&B music:

Toronto music [is] killer [including the work of] Drake, and The Weeknd, and Jessie Reyez...there is so much music bubbling out of Toronto and you get so much great basketball coming out of here...it's all bubbling up...and 'We the North' is an extension of that...I think the synergies of the Raptors and OVO allowed you to be proud of where you come from.

Bieber (2021c) aligned his music with the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team by including a montage of celebrated game plays with his single "Anyone" as the video's soundtrack. Bieber released the video in a Tweet captioned, "A love letter to the @MapleLeafs. Special thanks to the Leafs and the @NHL #HoldOn" (Bieber, 2021t). The video served as a promotional tool for Bieber's song, while its inspirational tone functioned as a rhetorically empowering framework to promote the Toronto Maple Leafs. Together, the Leafs and Bieber instilled a sense of Canadian national pride.

In 2022, Justin Bieber and the Toronto Maple Leafs further solidified their partnership and developed a cross-branded reversible hockey jersey (Merola, 2022) which became the top-selling hockey jersey among fans (Ad Age, 2022). The campaign successfully generated sales and brand visibility for the Toronto Maple Leafs, while arguably also enhancing Bieber's masculine appeal.

Coffee and hockey have been intrinsically connected in Tim Horton's marketing and brand management. The former Toronto Maple Leafs hockey player, Miles Gilbert "Tim" Horton (1930-1974), co-founded the company Tim Horton Donuts, which opened its first store in 1964 in Hamilton, Ontario. According to Ontario Heritage Trust (2023):

"Although the Tim Hortons brand has its origins in sport, it is now emblematic of community identity." Bieber partnered with the company Tim Hortons to further position himself as emblematic of the Canadian community. Although Tim Hortons traditionally partnered with "professional hockey players" (Bundale, 2021) Tim Hortons established a

partnership with Bieber in 2021 to release new menu items called “Timbiebs,” a spin on their traditional Timbits. Paul Hiebert (2021) suggested that, like Tim Hortons, which was founded in Canada, “Justin Bieber was also born in Canada.” As such, the organic nature of their brand partnership reinforced Canadian national codes.

According to Paul Hiebert (2021), “for decades the coffee-and-doughnut shop [Tim Hortons] has run patriotic commercials that position it as part of the Canadian identity—right up there with hockey, beavers, multiculturalism and universal healthcare.” In 2020, Tanya Doucette, a member of Tim Hortons’s franchisee-elected advisory board stated: “[Tim Hortons is] as Canadian as you get” (Sagan, 2020). Although the brand was founded in the 1960s by “Canadians, Ron Joyce and hockey pro Tim Horton” (Sagan, 2020), it is now owned by a U.S. conglomerate, which “sowed accusations from some that the company was no longer Canadian” (Sagan, 2020). Despite the recent controversy over the national ownership of “Tims,” it continues to be a dominant symbol of the Canadian experience. The synergy of Canadian hockey, coffee, and a Canadian R&B artist worked to reinforce dominant codes of Canadian-ness for each.

Bieber and Tim Hortons aligned their brands through social media. They released co-branded tuques which related back to Bieber’s aforementioned post (Bieber, 2020r) of him and his wife drinking coffee and wearing winter clothing. Bieber also posted images of him with the Timbieb products on Instagram (Bieber, 2021r). Tim Hortons (2021a) also released a comedic promotional video of Bieber brainstorming ideas for new Timbieb flavours with the prominent Canadian Maple Leaf symbol on a branded Tim Hortons coffee cup visible in the video, to reinforce Tim Hortons’ and Bieber’s Canadian-ness. The promotional video also featured Bieber wearing a hockey helmet to again reinforce Bieber’s white Canadian hockey playing stereotype (as discussed in Chapter 1). The hockey helmet also reinforces Bieber’s hockey interests to build his authenticity in partnering with Tim Hortons and with the Toronto Maple Leafs.



Figure 3: Bieber in Tim Hortons' promotional video for Timbits with Canadian Maple Leaf logo prominent on Tim Hortons' cup (Tim Hortons, 2021a)



Figure 4: Bieber in Tim Hortons' promotional video for Timbits wearing hockey helmet (Tim Hortons, 2021a)

By purchasing Timbiebs, customers could win concert tickets to Bieber's show (Tim Hortons, 2021b). Therefore, the partnership worked to intertwine Bieber's and Tim Hortons's brands, and also supported Bieber's music career during a downturn in live music revenues as well as restaurant dining.

According to Nick Hobson (2022), the partnership with Bieber was meant to bring "brand awareness" to Tim Hortons, given that Bieber had "more than 200 million followers online [so] a collab with Bieber [was] guaranteed to attract an army of young, dedicated fans." RBI CEO Jose Cil attested that the Timbiebs promotion "was one of the more successful traffic-driving initiatives in recent memory and outperformed [their] internal expectations" (Valinsky, 2022). Tim Horton's parent company, Restaurant Brands International, said "sales rose 10.3%...in the fourth quarter of 2021. That reversed a 11% decline for the same quarter a year [prior]" (Valinsky, 2022). According to Hobson (2022), the timing of the campaign was strategic and in part led to its success because "body dissatisfaction tends to be the...lowest in the winter. In other words, if you want customers to make room in their diet for delicious doughnuts, winter is the time to strike." Therefore, the campaign for Timbiebs was more likely to be successful in the winter. For Bieber, the campaign ran between his album releases, and it helped him maintain visibility and relevancy during that time. The limited-edition nature of the merchandise and products also created more interest in and demand for these items.

Bieber and Tim Hortons partnered up again for a cold brew coffee campaign called "Biebs Brews" (Newswire, 2022), which launched on June 6, 2022. This launch date was represented on Tim Horton's Instagram posts, as "6/6" for audiences to easily remember the release date. Additionally, paid advertisements and full-length commercials, such as "Biebs Brew: Tims x Justin Bieber" (Tim Hortons, 2022), were posted on Tim Hortons's YouTube page, which introduced the hashtag "#BiebsBrew." In addition to creating co-branded language, Tim Hortons changed its Instagram profile picture to a graphic logo of Biebs Brews and changed its Instagram bio to "Justin's back with a brand new brew. It's worth the wait. [www.biebsbrew.ca](http://www.biebsbrew.ca)," to fully enmesh their brand with that of Justin Bieber. The jingle for Justin Bieber's "brand new brew" was reminiscent of R&B singer James Brown's song "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" (1965), underscoring Bieber's

R&B-ness. Using a “.ca” domain for Biebsbrew’s official website further articulated Bieber’s Canadian-ness. 50 years prior to Bieber’s jingle, Brown’s song “Papa's Got a Brand New Bag” (1965) track was “#8 on [Billboard’s] pop charts and reigning atop the R&B charts for eight weeks straight” (REBEAT Magazine, 2015). James Brown has been described as “invent[ing] a sound that dramatically changed R&B, and pop music” (REBEAT Magazine, 2015) by blurring the two styles (and providing the funk foundation for so much of early hip hop). During the time of Bieber’s campaign with Tim Hortons, Bieber was attempting to emphasize his blended pop and R&B style with his albums *Changes* (2020a) and *Justice (The Complete Edition)* (2021s). Therefore, by connecting with James Brown’s famous blended pop and R&B track “Papa's Got a Brand New Bag” (1965) in the Tim Hortons and Bieber jingle “a brand new brew,” Bieber further aligns himself with his blended R&B/pop style, reinforcing Bieber’s authenticity in both of these traditionally separated (and historically segregated) music genre spaces.

In addition to Bieber posting about the partnership on his Instagram profile (Bieber, 2022n) by posing with a box of Timbiebs and a Biebs Brew, on June 7, 2022, fellow contemporary Canadian R&B artist Drake posted an Instagram story with a branded Tim Hortons package of 200 Timbiebs and tagged Justin Bieber’s Instagram profile. Bieber reposted the story on his profile to increase the visibility of his partnership with Tim Hortons and reinforce his continued relationship with Drake. Tim Hortons and Bieber made several Instagram posts to promote the campaign and reposted other users who included the hashtag and products. A decade after Usher vouched for his musical authenticity, Bieber continued to align himself with Black R&B artists like Drake.

The official Twitter account for the Toronto Maple Leafs (2021) posted a video of players eating Timbiebs and rating them a 10 out of 10 in taste. The NHL posted an article (Merola, 2021) that stated: “Thanks to Justin Bieber, the Toronto Maple Leafs are carbo-loading ahead of Wednesday night's game...after consuming boxes of Timbiebs, the Maple Leafs defeated the Colorado Avalanche 8-3.” According to retail analyst Bruce Winder “Justin Bieber [was] a good opportunity to connect with Gen Z and young millennials [and helped Tim Hortons] appeal to a younger demographic” (Bundale, 2021). Brendan Shanahan, the Toronto Maple Leafs President and Alternate Governor

stated that Bieber helped reach the “next generation of Maple Leafs fans” (Kirkpatrick, 2022). All of Bieber’s brand partnerships worked together to reach a target demographic in different niches while expanding the reach of his brand and tying that to Canadian-ness.

#### 4.1.3 Drake, The Raptors, and Toronto

Drake’s promotional representations of his home in Canada look different from those of Bieber and his small-town in The Great White North. Drake’s relationship is focused on the metropolis of Toronto, accompanied by pictures of basketball rather than hockey, and imagined through urban cityscapes rather than rural landscapes. Drake partnered with the Toronto Raptors as an “official ambassador” (ESPN, 2013) for their team, and is known for his “wild sideline antics” during televised games (SportsNet, 2019). Drake’s OVO logo appears on official Raptors jerseys. In fact, the Raptors’ “City Edition uniform” was designed in collaboration with OVO to pay “tribute to...Toronto...with key design features that showcase[d] the uniqueness of Toronto...[and] celebrate[d] Toronto’s diversity, with the word ‘North’ translated into some of the spoken languages in [the] city” (Curiocity, 2022). According to the MLSE, the jersey featured an “embossed pattern of Toronto’s six boroughs” (Curiocity, 2022). Like Bieber’s Toronto Maple Leafs hockey jersey, Drake’s Toronto Raptors basketball jersey reinforce Drake’s Canadian-ness and it functioned as a promotional tool to commodify his OVO product line.

Drake’s brand has thus become synonymous with that of the Toronto Raptors. In 2019, the Raptors’ NBA Championship win was effectively Drake’s championship win. Drake capitalized on the national pride for the Raptors winning Canada’s first-ever NBA title by subsequently releasing new music. One day after the win, Drake released a mixtape titled *The Best In The World Pack* that featured two new singles “Omertà” (Drake, 2019f) and “Money in the Grave” (Drake & Ross, 2019). Hence, a country-wide celebration of the Raptors’ achievements became entwined with the perfectly timed release of Drake’s new music (with both tagged as “The Best”). The extension of Drake’s lifestyle brand became interwoven with that of the Toronto basketball team’s and their brand values began to merge.

Drake's star image has been used to brand buildings, including the "OVO Athletic Centre, the official training facility for the Toronto Raptors" (Drake, 2019e). In the Instagram post that introduced the facility to the public, Drake stated: "just wanted to add that I am so proud of my brothers and so proud to be from this city" (Drake, 2019e). He positioned himself alongside the Raptors and located the star brand of Drake in Toronto. Burchill helped facilitate partnerships between OVO and the Raptors and stated:

in-and-of themselves OVO emblems [became] signs for 'Canadian-ness' ...people [were] walking around the country with a little owl on to prove 'hey I'm Canadian, I'm from Toronto', and it [had] nothing to do with anybody in the sports world...Drake is Toronto...OVO is Toronto.

Drake's star brand was interwoven with partner companies tied explicitly to the spaces of Toronto and all of Canada. As a result of his growing visibility, Drake's star image became a representation of the imagined community of Canada on an international scale. Burchill states, "if the team wasn't good you might not want to rep the dinosaur [Raptor's "official" log] but you'll rep the [OVO] owl." Drake's star brand became important to national and international understandings of Canada and Canadian-ness. Many Raptors promotional materials, including commercials and promo-videos, integrated Drake's track "Started From the Bottom" (2013), especially during their play-off season. Together, the Canadian-branded artist and Canadian-branded sports team reinforced Canadian-ness and propagated Canadian pride.

During the Raptors playoffs in 2019, Drake made an Instagram post (Drake, 2019d) with a comedic video of Raptors' players running through the streets, with animated and enlarged heads, accompanied by soca<sup>13</sup> music—specifically, "Run Wid It" (Stadic & Killa, 2019) as the backing track. By using a soca song alongside an animated video of Drake and The Raptors running through the streets of Toronto, Drake aligned himself with the team and suggested he was also heavily influenced by Caribbean music and Toronto's Caribbean diasporic culture. Black Caribbean identities and Black U.S. styles

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<sup>13</sup> Soca music is an upbeat style of music created in Trinidad and Tobago during the 1970s as a mixture of calypso music and soul music genre styles. This style of music is prominent in Toronto with larger Trinidadian and Caribbean immigrant populations



have been influential in Toronto: “The diasporic [B]lack community in Toronto...is heavily Caribbean, from diverse islands and outposts, and hip-hop in Canada has long been as much inflected by reggae and dancehall...as by black American styles” (Wilson, 2015a). Similarly, Canadian sports teams, like the Raptors have also traditionally been influenced by Black U.S. identities, as many of the players have been Black and from the United States (Statmuse, 2019). Drake articulated Canadian-ness through the Raptors, imagery of Toronto, and codes of Caribbean identities, and reinforced his R&B-ness through traditional codes of Black U.S. identities.

In 2019, Drake continued to claim Toronto as his city, with Instagram posts of the CN Tower and captions such as: “I love my city and this is my real sign of love” (Drake, 2019c). On January 1, 2020, Drake posted a picture of himself on Instagram with the caption “To another year of taking my work home with me” and used the location tag of “Toronto, Ontario” to claim “Toronto” as “home” (Drake, 2020o). A behind-the-scenes video was posted on Drake’s Instagram in 2020 captioned “VIEWS 2016” (Drake, 2020m). This not only suggested to audiences that he was working on music, but also reminded audiences of the album cover from his previous *Views* album (Drake, 2016b), which included an image of him sitting on the CN Tower. Instagram posts promoting music videos for singles from Drake’s *Certified Lover Boy* album used the location tag for “Toronto” (Drake, 2020n) to suggest that Drake’s musicking experiences were created and performed there. In 2020, Drake’s promotional video for his track “Dark Lanes” (Drake, 2020f) included scenes of him standing on a car driving around downtown Toronto, with the CN Tower brightly illuminated in dark purple colours in the background. Hence, Drake’s brand has heavily utilized imagery of the city of Toronto.

In 2020, Drake made several posts of Toronto’s landscape covered in billboard advertisements for his new clothing brand, Nocta. To launch the clothing brand and anchor it in Toronto, Drake published an Instagram post captioned “CN Tower - @officialnocta 🌐” (Drake, 2020h). The clothing line consisted of hoodies, jackets, and winter wear but also incorporated the star’s music brand imagery, including curvy, yellow letters spelling “C.L.” on the back of the clothing to promote his *Certified Lover Boy* album. The promotional video for *Certified Lover Boy* included an aerial view of

Toronto, and included footage of a roof that showed the same yellow, curvy typography on it (Drake, 2020d). Drake's digital star brand consistently worked to associate his music and branded products with images of Toronto.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Drake's "sensitive" persona challenges traditional hegemonic understandings of hip-hop artists as having tougher or even violent personas. Thus Drake attempts to build his authenticity as a sensitive and romantic R&B artist persona by emphasizing how his *Certified Lover Boy* (2021j) persona is anchored in his lived experiences in multicultural Toronto. His seemingly believable persona as a sensitive "lover boy" from Toronto helps authenticate his musical narrations of love and loss in his blended R&B, hip-hop, and pop tracks. Drake's intersecting Torontonian-ness and "certified lover boy" persona become branding tools that position him as unique, particularly in comparison to his U.S. counterparts, in the R&B and hip-hop space.

## 4.2 Shifting Ideas of R&B in The Online Space

In December 2019, Billboard announced that video and audio data from YouTube would be factored into the Billboard 200 albums chart and "impact Billboard's genre album consumption charts, such as...R&B/Hip-Hop." This shift increased the value of online audiences, as they could directly impact an artist's album rankings on the charts of traditional music industry gatekeepers. Including YouTube videos in Billboard album chart rankings increased the importance of artists engaging with audiences through online audio-visual texts. Rather than only tracking audiences' purchasing and listening interactions with audio-only albums or streams to calculate the chart rankings, Billboard now valued how audiences interacted with audio-visual narratives on YouTube music videos. These changes indicated the increasing development of online audience-artist relationships.

Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were part of these trending patterns, continuing to build their star images by creating many audio-visual posts on Instagram and YouTube. Between January 2019 and December 2020, Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's Instagram profiles collectively included over 15,700 Instagram posts. In addition, they produced over 400 Instagram stories from January 2020 to December 2020, inclusive of livestreams, images,

and videos. Their YouTube posts from 2019 to 2020 included over 730 hours of audio-visual media texts, including music videos, interviews, documentaries, and live performances. Therefore, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez helped push their R&B music further into popular culture by creating a strong cadence of online audio-visual content.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the JUNOS split the original R&B Recording of the Year award into two separate categories in 2021, “to represent the sonic differences of the genres” (CARAS, 2020): “Contemporary R&B/Soul Recording of the Year” and “Traditional R&B/Soul Recording of the Year” The shift signalled that Canadian media gatekeepers were finally acknowledging some diversity in music historically coded as “Black.” The two awards have also enabled more artists to be represented in the music genre category and highlighted R&B’s growing prominence in Canadian popular culture. When Reyez won the “Contemporary R&B Recording of the Year” at The JUNO Awards in 2023, for her album *YESSIE*, she said, “shoutout to Canada, man” (CBC Music, 2023b) to highlight the long struggle Canadian R&B artists had faced gaining recognition in the Canadian music industry.

In the U.S.A., Canadian artists were also gaining more recognition in R&B by 2021. For example, after Bieber (2020c) challenged the *Grammy Awards* in 2020 for classifying his album *Changes* as “pop” and not “R&B” (Bieber, 2020c), in 2021, he finally achieved recognition from the *Grammy Awards* in his “first-ever R&B nomination” (Weatherby, 2022). His song “Peaches” (Bieber, 2021e) was nominated for the “Best R&B Performance” of the year award. Furthermore, in 2021, Pitchfork classified Bieber’s *Justice* album in the “pop/ R&B” genre (Kameir, 2021). Although Bieber had long participated in contemporary Canadian R&B, by producing a mixture of hip-hop, pop, and R&B music (as discussed in Chapter 3), he finally gained wider recognition for participation in R&B in 2021, suggesting a shift in hegemonic views of “R&B music.”

The “2021 Study of the economic impacts of music streaming on the Canadian music industry” conducted by Wall Communications suggested:

Of the total 1.15 billion streams by Canadian artists in the top 50 songs streamed in Canada (2020), 700.2 million streams (more than 60%) were by just 4 artists: Drake, The Weeknd, Justin Bieber and Shawn Mendes....the dominant genre in

[Canadian] music streaming [is] Hip-Hop. According to the Nielsen midyear report, nine of the 10 most-consumed artists come from Hip-Hop and R&B, including A-listers such as Drake, The Weeknd, [and Justin Bieber]. (Government of Canada, 2021)

No longer restricted to the choices of radio's and television's gatekeepers, Canadian audiences in the current digital era have had greater control over what music they listen to—and they tend to choose R&B music. R&B music has become more accessible to audiences beyond the mediations of music industry gatekeepers' segregating music genres to different racialized audiences. Toronto-based musical artist Jhyve stated in our interview in 2020 that R&B is also becoming more popular, in part, due to a growing interest in Canadian artists' experimental hip-hop, pop, and R&B blended styles.

The growing recognition of Canadian R&B music also led to SiriusXM launching a new digital streaming channel in 2022 called “Mixtape: North,” which exclusively featured Canadian Hip-Hop and R&B music. The company's website stated:

Hip-hop and R&B dominate the globe, and Canada has birthed some of its biggest stars in modern music. From Drake and The Weeknd to Tory Lanez and Jesse Reyez to the legends that paved the way like Kardinal, K-OS and Choclaire, Mixtape: North... We're playing the greatest home-grown bangers from across Canada, 24/7. (SiriusXM, 2022)

Canadian artist Mastermind was hired as the host of this new station and highlighted the reach of the streaming channel by stating: “(Channel 164) is broadcast across North America as well as worldwide on the SiriusXM App and on-line Streaming platform” (Mastermind, 2022). Through this platform, Canadian R&B voices were widely accessible to both national and international audiences. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez contributed to these shifting classifications of R&B music and the increasing recognition of a distinctly Canadian R&B music genre, by creating complex online marketing campaigns that kept their blended pop, hip-hop, and R&B music visible and audible in popular culture.

#### 4.2.1 “I am a POPSTAR Not a Doctor”: Mixing R&B and Pop Personas

So, what is it about R&B that allows (re)interpretations of Canada? In 2020, Justin Bieber and Drake used social media to disrupt hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and R&B-

ness in their YouTube music video post “POPSTAR” (DJ Khaled 2020a). The song “POPSTAR” exemplifies contemporary Canadian R&B styles as a mixture of pop, hip-hop and R&B. The video was created by “almost an entirely Canadian creative team” (etalk, 2020b), including two Black Canadian directors, Director X and Taj Critchlow. With a Canadian team and two prominent Canadian stars, Bieber and Drake, represented in this music video, the media text asserts “Canadian-ness” in contemporary R&B. Bieber as white, Drake as biracial, the directors as Black, and the Canadian team articulating racially diverse identities (etalk, 2020b) together articulate Canadian multiculturalism.

The video visually and audibly blended traditional white pop and Black hip-hop music genre codes with contemporary Canadian R&B styles. Drake only appeared in the introductory scenes of the music video but disappears when the actual song “POPSTAR” begins to play. Rather, Justin Bieber plays the main character of the music video and lip-synched Drake’s heartily delivered bars in the soundtrack.



**Figure 5: Bieber lip-synching Drake's rap bars in "POPSTAR" (DJ Khaled, 2020)**

Similar to how Bieber lip-synched Ludacris’ rap bars in their collaborative song “Baby” (Bieber, 2010b), as discussed in Chapter 3, Bieber takes this one step further and lip-synchs the full song “POPSTAR” for Drake in the video, without Drake present in those scenes. Bieber, originally known as a Canadian teen heartthrob, lip-synched Drake’s bars

to suggest that he could rap (although it could also be interpreted as a return to minstrelsy). Bieber, wearing traditional hip-hop clothing like puffy jackets, sneakers and chains (Baller, 2011), stood among symbols of traditional hip-hop tropes of wealth and success, including expensive cars and alcohol. He showcased his tattooed torso, and performed hip hop street dance styles. He lip-synced Drake's bar, "I'm a popstar but this shit ain't bubblegum" (DJ Khaled, 2020a) to convey the idea that Bieber and Drake are artists who self-consciously mix pop with hip-hop, rap, and R&B music.



**Figure 6: Bieber lip-synching "I'm a popstar not a doctor" in music video "POPSTAR" (DJ Khaled, 2020)**

Together, Bieber and Drake upheld the idea of combining traditional pop, hip-hop, and R&B as Canadian artists of diverse racial identities. Central to their success has been their continuous mixing of traditional R&B and pop music (as discussed in Chapter 3). Yet it was only in the early 2020s that their interpretations of R&B music were officially recognized by U.S. and Canadian music industry gatekeepers, who had long classified R&B via exclusively Black U.S. identities. In the contemporary R&B music video for "POPSTAR" (DJ Khaled 2020a), multi-raced artists Bieber and Drake worked with the creative power of two Black Canadian video makers to challenge traditional classifications of R&B. As Bieber and Drake battled to gain recognition as R&B artists through their mixture of pop, hip-hop, and R&B styles, they used the "POPSTAR" music

video to blend traditionally segregated sonic styles, fashions, and behaviours as Canadian pop/R&B artists.

Jessie Reyez has been described by her production team as “the anti-pop popstar. She successfully straddles the divide between contemporary, marketable music and the unabashed appeal of the provocateur” (8 Til Faint, 2020). This reminds us that Reyez also participates in pop music while blending it with other music genre styles. Hence, Canadian-branded digital stars Bieber, Drake, and Reyez all interpret R&B music through elements of pop styles in their performances. They complicate traditional understandings of Canada as a rock and folk nation by asserting their R&B-ness and Canadian-ness. They strategically brand themselves as both “anti-pop” and “pop”/“R&B” stars, highlighting how they complicate traditionally separated (and segregated) music genres and affiliated values, through online music videos and performances.

#### 4.2.2 COVID-19 Results in a Constant Flow of Canadian R&B

Following government restrictions that cancelled live concerts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Leight, 2020), Drake stated that “[2020 was the] hardest time to ever connect with people, relate to people” (Gill, 2022) because the pandemic shifted how audiences and artists could interact. In our interview in 2020, independent Toronto artist Robbie Ahmed stated that one of his mentors, Luther Mallory (a Junos Performance Coach), said that especially during the pandemic “the digital is the new live stage.” Therefore, during the early 2020s, the value of online communications became even more important.

Reyez said that releasing music without in-person promotional performances “was scary because then we were just pretty much the guinea pigs for putting out a project in the beginning of what was going to be a fucking long ass pandemic” (IDEA GENERATION, 2022). Her tour with Billie Eilish was cancelled along with all in-person promotional events for Reyez’s new album (Alcántara, 2022). Drake also commented on releasing music during the pandemic when he stated:

It’s an interesting time for us all, as musicians, to figure out how this works and what people need. And I just felt like people would appreciate maybe a body of something to listen to as opposed to just one isolated song. (as quoted in Daly, 2020)

During the pandemic, Drake released a large amount of music: albums *Certified Lover Boy* (2021j), with 21 songs and *Honestly, Nevermind* (2022c), with 14 tracks; the mixtapes *Dark Lane Demo Tapes* (2020e), with 14 tracks; and EP *Scary Hours 2* (2021i), with two tracks. Drake also co-created an album with 21 Savage, *Her Loss* (2022d), with 16 tracks and a track called “Only You Freestyle” with Headie One (Headie One & Drake, 2020). Reyez released two albums: *BEFORE LOVE CAME TO KILL US* (2020g), with 14 tracks and *YESSIE* (Reyez, 2022c), with 11 tracks. Additionally, Bieber released two albums: *Changes* (2020a), with 17 tracks and *Justice (The Complete Edition)* (2021s), with 25 tracks; and the EP *Freedom* (2021u), with 6 tracks. Bieber also released a collaborative track and music video with Ariana Grande called “Stuck with U” (Bieber, 2020m), a track and music video with Black Nigerian Afro-beat/R&B singer Omah Lay, “Attention” (Bieber, 2022b), and another collaborative track and music video titled “Honest” (Bieber, 2022o) with Black U.S. rapper and R&B artist Don Toliver. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez continued to build relationships with audiences across several digital media platforms, including Spotify, Instagram, and YouTube, to create a sense of intimacy between audiences and their personas at a time when audiences likely felt lonely and were seeking comfort and connection.

Pamela Rutledge stated that social media “makes people feel less lonely...[and]...helps alleviate feelings of isolation” (as quoted in Molla, 2021), and Bieber (2021d) echoed these arguments in an Instagram post promoting his album *Justice* (2021):

Music is a great way of reminding each other that we aren’t alone. Music can be a way to relate to one another and connect with one another. I know that I cannot simply solve injustice by making music, but I do know that if we all do our part by using our gifts to serve this planet, and each other, that we are that much closer to being united.

Additionally, in 2020, Justin Bieber performed at a socially distanced concert for 240 guests. The concert was live-streamed, recorded, and uploaded to Amazon Prime as a documentary to engage audiences during the pandemic. Bieber stated in the documentary “it’s been a rough year... I just wanted to create a night that was gonna bring people together” (Ratner, 2021) to highlight how music could be used to forge communities, especially during the pandemic, when many people felt isolated and “craved” human interactions (Azab, 2021). As this was a promotional performance, Bieber could also



commodify these relationships in his musical performance. Although Olena Khlystova, Yelena Kalyuzhnova, and Maksim Belitski (2022) argued that “the COVID-19 pandemic...significantly restricted traditional forms of networking between creative workers and the communities...[and] created the demand for new business models for creative industries” (p. 139), the networking strategies used by artists during the pandemic were not necessarily new. Rather, I contend they involved traditional marketing strategies reconfigured for online experiences. When I interviewed 35 marketing and music industry executives about the importance of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rocky Singh, a Corporate Branding Specialist, echoed many of their sentiments when he stated to me in our interview in 2020 that “[businesses without] a social media presence [are] failing to connect with audiences and failing to promote [themselves]. Before you would have to connect with people at a physical location, but [online] there are no limitations.” Social media has enabled businesses, including artists and other companies, to reach more audiences, in more intimate ways, and at frequent rates. Lion Shirdan (2020), for example, argued that social media became a valuable tool in “centralizing businesses.” I argue below that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez helped centralize their musical “business” on social media by creating promotional tools that held together their R&B projects, particularly through the brand value of colour consistency in their marketing strategies.

#### 4.2.3 Colour Consistency for Brand Recognition

According to Lieb (2018), “top artists...now develop intricate, marketing campaigns promoting the release of new studio albums” (p. 77). Reyez, Bieber, and Drake exemplified this intricacy through their use of colour consistency across different branding efforts. Colour branding is crucial to businesses and artists seeking to increase their brand recognition. The Toronto Maple Leafs, for example, may have used “blue [to] represent[t] clear Canadian skies and the white [to] signif[y] snow” (Fox, 2015) or simply to align themselves with other Toronto “major sports teams [like the]...Blue Jays” (Fox, 2015). Although we may speculate about the intended meanings behind the chosen colours used for Toronto sports teams and Drake’s, Bieber’s, and Reyez’s promotional strategies, I am more interested in the visual coherence created between their music texts

and social media posts to reinforce their brand recognition. Many studies have examined the psychological effects of certain colours (Le Bigot & Gil, 2014; Wright & Rainwater, 1962; Won & Westland, 2017) and the symbolism of colours (Parikh, 2011). The meaning of colours is contextually dependent and shifts across time, places, spaces, and cultures. As a media studies researcher, I will never know the true intention behind the artist's selected colours nor have the means to develop a psychological study that examines the sentiments that these colours create within each audience member's mind. Nonetheless, an artist's Canadian R&B lifestyle brand can build a unique history, meaning, and personality through multiple performances, and we can see how these may be tied together and anchored through the consistent use of specific colours.

Several of Drake's music projects, particularly those that experimented with the intersection of multiple genres, were connected by the use of the colour black. The album cover for Drake's *Dark Lane Demo Tapes* (2020) album, which mixed "[trap], R&B, [and] rap" (Schube, 2020), featured Drake in black apparel with his torso blended into a black-shadowed background. A promotional image of Drake's album *Certified Lover Boy* (2021), which mixed "rap...hip-hop...[and] R&B" (C. Jenkins, 2021), featured Drake sitting in a black car, wearing a black puffer jacket (Drake, 2021f; 2021c). Drake's album *Honestly, Nevermind*, "his first true multi-genre project, attempting to marry his rap style with traditional house sounds" (Calvert, 2022), was announced in an Instagram post (Drake, 2022a) featuring Drake's dark, silhouetted figure in a puffer jacket, blending into a shadowed black background. Drake also released the EP *Scary Hours 2*, described as a rap project (McKinney, et al., 2021), using an image of a dark blue background (Drake, 2021i). When it "[debuted] in the top three spots on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in week one" (Trust, 2021), the imagery for the dark toned cover album spread across online and printed music charts. The EP bridged Drake's genre-blending albums: *Honestly, Nevermind*, joined together his "R&B Lover boy [with his] introspective, fully-[rap style]" (Pavlakos, 2022), which Paul Thompson (2022) called "rap Drake and R&B Drake." Despite some public backlash against the album (Coleman II, 2022a), Thompson (2022) suggested that this was the first album produced by Drake to overlap and intersect various genres on the same tracks successfully. Drake used the colour black to help bridge his experimental approaches to his R&B, hip-hop, rap blended style of music.

Across these album releases, Drake and his team posted several black and white images on his Instagram grid<sup>14</sup> to showcase his private life and to promote his scented candle line, which was branded with black packaging (Drake, 2020g; 2021d; 2021e; 2021i; 2021g; 2021h; 2021k; 2021m). Drake's music videos (Drake, 2020b), Instagram posts (Drake, 2020l), and Nocta's and OVO's Instagram grids also featured black elements (Nocta, 2021a; 2021b; 2020), (OVO, 2021a; 2021b). The show *Euphoria*, which Drake is affiliated with, also includes dark lighting (Grobar, 2020). *Dark Lane Demo Tapes*, *Scary Hours*, and *Euphoria* are also about human darkness and thematically relate to one another. While experimenting sonically, Drake created consistency through his visual brand image to help audiences recognize his brand across different ventures.

Bieber's branding followed a similar logic but using a very different palette: pink instead of black. One of Bieber's Instagram posts (2019a) included the text "R&Bieber" with a pink background to create an association between Bieber and R&B through the colour pink. Bieber's subsequent music video "Yummy" (Bieber, 2020n), included many pink accented items. In addition, other YouTube posts (Bieber, 2020t; 2020aa), Instagram posts (2020u), and his appearance on television shows (The Late Late Show with James Corden, 2020; The Ellen Show, 2020) incorporated Bieber wearing pink, standing near pink items, or holding pink objects (like pink roses on The Ellen Show). Meanwhile, promotional media for Bieber's 2021 R&B album *Justice* foregrounded the colour green. During that time, many of Bieber's Instagram posts incorporated the colour green (Bieber, 2022g; 2022d; 2022e; 2022f; 2022c; 2021g; 2021f; 2021m; 2021n; 2021o; 2021h; 2021p; 2021j; 2021i; 2021l; 2022h; 2022i; 2022j; 2021k; 2021q). This creates a sense of continuity for his audiences as they interacted with his R&B music and lifestyle brand across different environments.

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<sup>14</sup> An Instagram grid refers to the display format of posts on a user's profile. On an Instagram profile, posts are cropped as squares of the same size and shape, evenly spaced in a three-column grid, and appear in reverse chronological order. Instagram grids display all of a user's posts in a thumbnail format, structured like a grid. The grid is what a user will see when they visit an Instagram account's profile.

Reyez used purple in 2020 to promote her R&B album *Before Love Came To Kill Us* (2020), which mixed “R&B...folk...pop...[and] hip-hop” (Pareles, 2020). This was reflected in music videos “LOVE IN THE DARK” (Reyez, 2020s) and “INTRUDERS” (Reyez, 2020d), as well as her behind-the-scenes video (Reyez, 2020t). Reyez’s cover art for her second studio album *YESSIE* (2022c) included her name in bright red text over her black and white background image. Her music video “FRAUD” (Reyez, 2022a) and Instagram posts promoting the new album also incorporated the colour red (Reyez 2022b).

Using specific colours, Drake, Reyez, and Bieber attempted to reinforce, complicate, and/or challenge traditional R&B parameters by blending traditionally separated styles of pop, hip-hop, and R&B across various music projects and brand venues. Colour often operated as a marketing tool helping to unify the diverse sounds their genre blurring projects mixed together under their respective lifestyle brands.

### 4.3 Commodifying the Artist’s Lifestyle Brands

As demonstrated through the extensive reach of strategic marketing campaigns through simple colour consistency, and the references to “anti-pop” and “ain’t bubblegum” above, popular music culture has long voiced anxieties about its place inside capitalism. I agree with Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), who suggested that although “the idea of [an artist] selling out implies two discrete, bound spaces, the creative [authentic] and the commercial” (p. 120), there’s an argument to be made that these spaces are interwoven and not separate. Structuring commerce and art in a dichotomy is flawed because commercial art exchanges have existed for centuries through commission-based work (H. Foster et al., 2004). Art and commerce are interwoven practices and to be a popular musical artist today, one must also be an exceptional online marketer. Nancy Baym (2018) argued that the commodification of public performances began hundreds of years ago in Vienna with the advent of the ticket, where individuals paid to experience musicking in formal settings (p. 57). Music was then industrialized when recordings went from a communal activity of music-making to a mass-produced industrial product sold privately (Frith, 1983). When Russel Brand (2021) argued that “a performer, an entertainer, creator in the public space likely has...twin[ned] motivations (1) an earnest

and sincere desire to create things” and (2) “a desire for attention,” he highlighted the complex intentions that could prompt an artist to participate in popular culture by creating and potentially commodifying their “art.” Although multiple motivations can co-exist, many artists have still attempted to distance themselves from appearing to have sold out. Reyez, for example, attempted to distinguish between commerce and creativity when she stated that she “doesn’t love but...has had to learn about...marketing, strategy...and stats [in creating and selling her music]” and states that marketing is “a thing that I’ve thought about but I don’t think about when creating [music]. It’s something that’s after the fact so that it doesn’t poison and taint this [art and music]” (Sidedoor Magazine, 2022). Her use of the words “poison” and “taint” suggested a negative association with creative processes that are seemingly driven by marketing and commodification strategies. Reyez made this argument to continue building authenticity in the music industry as a musical artist fueled by a desire to express herself, rather than being motivated solely by the opportunity to build wealth. Bethany Klein, Leslie Meier, and Devon Powers (2017) argued that popular music is both a means of cultural expression and commercial profit, and they explained that cultural autonomy, the degree of control one has over their music, helps determine if music is an act of creativity or a means for financial profit. Artists have built authenticity by articulating their autonomy over the digital star while commodifying their lifestyle brands. Kay Dickinson (2008) identified the difficulty that artists face when seeking to demonstrate autonomy, by suggesting that artists and film stars are always performing their own identities along with the commodified star persona and stated: “musicians, like film stars, balance upon a knife edge between autonomy (they are seen as the primary site of what is produced...) and becoming commodities (selling out, comprising...[being] something that is traded, rather than ‘just themselves’)” (p. 177). My view is that performers Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have aligned their claimed personal experiences with that of their digital stars to build the perceived authenticity of their lifestyle brands and thus potentially generate more audience investment and sell more music.

According to David Buxton (1983/1990), the role of the rock star in the 1980s became primarily oriented around the commodification of a lifestyle rather than the production of music itself: “Previously the style of singers and their music was supposed to flow

naturally from their personality. Style was now constructed to suit the music and was arbitrarily related to the singer's 'personality'...Styles were reproduced instead of personalities" (p. 373). Although this statement reflected the increasing commodification of musical artists' lifestyle brands, through their expansive brand partnerships and sold products and services, David Buxton's (1983/1990) statement overemphasized the power of mediators and brand partners while failing to acknowledge the level of creativity that the human musical artist has in animating the star image mask. It also oversimplified the affective relationships that audiences have with digital stars.

Audiences have played a pivotal role in producing shared meanings about a brand, especially through online networked platforms, where audiences have been able to engage with one another and create discussions about a company (Evans, 2008, Ritzer et. al., 2012). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) also makes this argument when stating that: "build[ing] a brand is about building an affective, authentic relationship with an audience, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 66).

Head Trends commentator, Agus Panzoni, argues that in 2022, "as aesthetic fatigue grows our notion of authenticity in the digital world is changing" (deathstock, 2022). As a result, a perfectly curated social media post is less important than building relationships with audiences through more frequent posts. Artists have developed relationships with audiences through online content to build positive sentiments about their digital star. For example, when Bieber got married, his bachelor lifestyle brand shifted to that of a devoted husband. Additionally, when Drake became a parent, his heartbroken player lifestyle brand shifted to that of a supportive father. Reyez has incorporated aspects of her immigrant experiences in her content, which enabled her to capitalize on political discussions of immigration policies and racism. I delve further into the meanings of their respective star images as they intersect with branded promotions in the sections that follow.

### 4.3.1 Bieber is an R&B Artist and a Devoted Husband

While continuing to be challenged for his participation in R&B music, Bieber released a YouTube documentary series in 2020 to illuminate the behind-the-scenes music making process of his album *Changes* (2020). He branded his *Changes* album on Instagram as “R&Bieber” (Bieber, 2019a). The YouTube documentary series included scenes of Bieber creating music in a recording studio (Bieber, 2020d) and depicted him working hard to build his musical career (Bieber, 2020e). These posts reinforced Bieber’s backstory and authenticity in R&B (discussed in Chapter 3). In the documentary, Bieber also cited his relationship with his new wife Hailey as the inspiration behind his album. Every public outing and social media post involving or featuring their relationship then became a promotional text for his new album. In January of 2020, Bieber’s Instagram included several posts depicting the couple’s loving relationship (Bieber, 2020k; 2020i; 2020l; 2020j). Bieber’s songs, social media posts, and real-life relationship with Hailey all worked together to promote his album and build the authenticity of his digital star as a newly devoted and loving husband. Shortly after the release of his song and music video “Yummy” (Bieber, 2020n) in January 2020, Bieber was asked what the song was about in an interview and he stated: “my sex life...I’m married” (The Ellen Show, 2020). Bieber directly tied his music to his intimate relationship with Hailey, which turned his marriage into a marketing campaign for his new album. The couple also purchased a home in Canada, where they resided for much of the pandemic (Mier, 2020) which reinforces the seriousness of their relationship and his “Canadian-ness.” This demonstrated how artists can turn their personal experiences into an opportunity to (re)build their lifestyle brands.

The plot line for the “POPSTAR” music video (DJ Khaled 2020a) also presented Bieber as a loving husband. At the end of the video, Bieber wakes up in bed beside his wife Hailey and says that he had a “crazy dream.” He kisses Hailey and said, “I love you baby, let’s go walk the dog.” Director X explained the intended messaging of the video:

[Bieber] needed to let the world know he had let that life go. Really, that’s what that’s about at the end. That big ‘Sigh. I love you, babe’ [to Hailey]—that’s a sigh of relief, like, ‘I’m out of that life.’ The subtext is ‘That’s not me and I’m so happy to be with you and walking the dog. (Jacobs, 2020).

Bieber's new personal life thus meant a reimagining of his brand. Artists use their music and social media posts to help steer the narratives of their digital star brand.

On November 19, 2020, Bieber recorded himself searching the name "Justin Bieber" on Google Images and showed how the top search results were images of him looking disheveled. Bieber further stated that he had provided the media with recent photos of himself, but the algorithms were prioritizing negative images. Although many factors impact online search results—including previous searches and the searcher's location—this example highlighted the increasing power of media conglomerates in the curation of the digital star image. When Lindsay Lohan, for example, stated, "in the press, if you sneeze, they'll make it look like you were crying" (Wilkinson, 2018) she suggested that the paparazzi would capture images of her and fabricate stories that sensationalized the star in order to sell more stories. Online, paparazzi images have typically had a higher potential for global distribution and circulation. Hence, digital stars have had to strategically curate their brand values online to help steer audiences' preferred perceptions of their public personalities.

#### 4.3.2 Drake is an R&B Artist and a Father

If undesired details about artists are exposed, these details have been known to be incorporated in the digital star's lifestyle brand to build or undermine the artist's authenticity. For example, after Pusha-T revealed to the world in a rap battle (Yzola, 2018) that Drake had a secret child (Penrose & Lamarre, 2020), the digital star Drake went on to integrate aspects of fatherhood into his R&B lifestyle brand. Prior to this revelation, Drake conveyed the lifestyle of a heartbroken player. However, when he was exposed as a father, he and his team used social media posts and songs to reframe the narrative: Drake was now being a responsible father by hiding his son and protecting him from celebrity life. To address the issue, Drake then released the song "Emotionless" (Drake, 2018). He sang: "I wasn't hidin' my kid from the world, I was hidin' the world from my kid." In 2019, Drake said he could not imagine putting his son in the public eye (Drake, 2019a); however, several months later, his son Adonis was incorporated into Drake's lifestyle brand and a photo of him was published on Drake's Instagram profile. One post included Drake with Adonis on Adonis' birthday (Drake, 2020g) and on



December 18, 2020, Drake's Instagram story showed him helping his son to put on a durag, a type of head covering that has become part of the iconography of hip hop culture and a code for Black identities (Singleton, 2022). In this image, Drake was portrayed as a teacher and an educator of Black culture. Drake also created an Instagram post during the pandemic that featured him and Adonis and was captioned with "Happy Father[']s Day to all the real g'z handling business 🌍" (Drake, 2020a). Mar Piera (2022) defined a "real G" as a person who is "true to their style, who don't make up their essence to please others and who, despite the circumstances, [is] confident in themselves." Drake used this terminology to express his central position in Black music culture while rearticulating the term to define himself as a proud father. Drake also reworked his traditional brand in a post on Instagram that included Adonis and another child in a ball pit with the caption "Pool parties at the YOLO sure do look different these days 😂💕" (Drake, 2021a). In 2011, Drake defined YOLO as "you only live once" in the song "The Motto" (Drake, 2011) and rapped that he was "clubbing hard, fucking women, there ain't much to do." In this post, he used it to imply that his lifestyle had changed to the role of "father."

By 2021, Drake also began taking on the role of an educator in the R&B genre world, positioning himself as a nurturing force for new acts in Toronto by providing them with career-building resources. He announced the opening of History, a venue in Toronto that would showcase famous Canadian hip-hop and R&B acts that had contributed to Canadian culture. He framed the opening by stating that when he was "younger in Toronto," there were parties he tried to get into but "never made it in....[but] now thanks to this partnership with @michaelrapino[,] artists from all across the world can come to Toronto and make their own History" (Drake, 2021b).

#### 4.3.3 R&B artist Reyez is "Latina," "Indigenous," and "Black"

The new, nurturing Drake also aligned his digital star with rising Canadian R&B digital star Jessie Reyez. Reyez (2020c) posted an image of her and Drake at her launch party to convey Drake's mentorship and support. Drake and Reyez even collaborated on a track "Zodiac Sign," and although the track was not released on Drake's official album, it was leaked online (Bar Miztah, 2020). Reyez commented:

He's a legend...I feel patriotic when I work with Drake. Like, f— yeah. I was born in Toronto and what Drake has done for the city, you can't really quantify. So the fact that, not only did I get to work with him but to get his support publicly, it's mad love. (Cordero, 2020)

When Reyez said that she feels “patriotic” by working with Drake, she articulated a view of Drake as an icon of Canadian-ness. Drake's established career and his support of Reyez helped reinforce Reyez's R&B-ness as well. Drake's and Reyez's “Canadian-ness” was anchored in Toronto but Reyez's music which has been described as a “genre-bending mashup representative of her Canadian and Colombian roots — equal parts soul, R&B, and rap, with a Latino twist” (Cordero, 2020), includes Reyez's music influences from “Toronto” and her “Spanish” language from her Columbian upbringing.

#### 4.3.3.1 Reyez Is “Latina”

To generate more visibility, artists can strategically release content to fit into existing popular culture conversations. Reyez exemplified this practice in 2020, by engaging in conversations about Trump's re-election campaign, Canadian conversations about the treatment of Indigenous peoples, and Black Lives Matter movements. Reyez stated (2020m) in a clip posted on YouTube that the inspiration behind her music video “Far Away” (Reyez, 2019b) was based on a video of a young Hispanic girl crying when she was separated from her father because he was an illegal immigrant being deported from the U.S. Reyez's reposted the video on Instagram (2019a) with the caption:

I'm in tears...I'm Canadian but as a Latina coming from an immigrant family my heart aches for these kids.” In the YouTube video, Reyez used the original video of the little girl as a framing device and stated that the “little girl who look just like me...[She] could have just as easily been me. I'm Latino...my parents are from Colombia...[there are] Latino stereotypes that we're dealing with...[and] social issues...in regards to...immigration. (Reyez, 2020m)

Reyez's Latin identity and her parents' Colombian identity positioned her as an authentic and educated speaker about immigration and racism in the U.S.A. and in Canada. Reyez used the music video to shed light on these important political issues when stating the in the video “you get to see the faces of the officers...there is this human base line. If we are able to respect, switch shoes, and empathize, solutions will come a lot easier” (Reyez,

2020m). Simultaneously, Reyez was able to capitalize on these conversations by framing her music through these important issues to drive more online traffic to her music video.

It is likely that Reyez and her team strategically titled Reyez's YouTube post (2020m) "Trump Sucks (Far Away Confessed)" during Trump's re-election campaign in 2020 since online users may have frequently searched for the word "Trump" on search engines like Google. Reyez used search engine optimization (SEO) to promote her online content, which refers to the process of designing online content that is more likely to show up in high positions on search engine result pages (SERPs). Instead of targeting her audiences with online advertisement, Reyez created content that may attract what is known as organic traffic<sup>15</sup>. Organic brand discoveries may make the online user feel more in control over an interaction with a star "to gradually get to know, like, and trust them" (McDowell, 2021), as opposed to a paid advertisement where the star intrudes on the audience's online behaviours. Greg Digneo, who was Head of Content and SEO for Time Doctor at the time when I interviewed him (2020), argued that there is a large market for SEO research where an entire industry is built around identifying and incorporating trending keywords into companies' website to help boost their online traffic. A highly optimized post in a networked online space would have helped users find Reyez's content "organically." Therefore, by tying her music video to this contemporary conversation in popular culture, Reyez was also able to increase the visibility and audibility of her R&B music as well as her perceived authenticity.

#### 4.3.3.2 Reyez "Got Indigenous Blood"

"2020 was the year of Indigenous activism in Canada" (Noakes, 2020) and in that year Reyez released a politically-charged, animated music video called "INTRUDERS" (Reyez, 2020d). It served as an allegory about the detrimental effects of governmental

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<sup>15</sup> An organic online, also known as a 'natural, search result provides results of webpages when an online user types in keywords on a search engine website, whose placement has not been paid for but appear based on the number of users that have gone to their website, the predicted relevancy to the user's search query, and a list of other factors. Websites and social media posts can be optimized to include certain keywords so that when a user searches that word, the optimized website or social media post appears in the search results.

and economic institutions who cultivated and stole Indigenous land and harmed lives. Reyez (2020d) included a short clip of the music video in an Instagram post with the caption “Colonialism is in the mitochondria of racism. INTRUDERS.” Reyez used this song and audio-visual media text to promote the rights of Indigenous peoples. In a confessional, behind-the-scenes YouTube video Reyez (2020f) claimed “I got Indigenous blood in me, this shit just felt right to do.” By self-identifying as having “Indigenous blood,” Reyez aligned herself with Indigenous people and positioned herself as an authoritative, authentic speaker on the historical injustices against Indigenous people. Although Reyez (2020f) claimed she wished the music video could have been a “live-action” performance, releasing this powerful story through an animated video may have enabled the narrative of violence to be more palatable to wider audiences. The animation of the video also heightened its allegorical status. Rather than a direct statement about Canadian Indigenous peoples, it enabled Reyez to be less confrontational while still engaging in political discussions about the tragedies of colonization. Reyez may also have reduced the risk of being criticized for participating in this political discussion by presenting her animated music video as a more open-ended text, one less anchored specifically in the struggles of Canadian Indigenous communities. In 2020, Reyez’s manager, Mauricio Ruiz, stated to me that the music video “was created before the current political climate but resonated with the state of [North America] at the time and currently.” Although the video was created beforehand, it was strategically released during the political unrest of 2020, which brought more attention to issues faced by marginalized communities in Canada, including Indigenous and Black Canadians. When Ruiz confirmed that the music video is about “North America,” I note Reyez’s (2020d) official music video and song lyrics do not specify the location or setting of the invader-settler narrative, which allowed the video to resonate with audiences beyond Canada.

#### 4.3.3.3 Reyez Is “Black”

In response to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, Reyez announced that 100% of her royalties earned from “INTRUDERS” streamed in the United States up to December 31, 2020, would be donated to Colin Kaepernick’s Know Your Rights organization

(Reyez, 2020d; Reyez's connections to Kaepernick's activism are discussed further in Chapter 5). In an interview, Reyez built her credibility by stating:

A lot of Latinx people have African blood; my grandfather was Black, I have family members that are Afro-Latinos, so this is also personal for me; however, I could be yellow and pink with not a drop of Black lineage but it wouldn't matter because it's a matter of injustice, it's a matter of being tired of inequality and it's a matter of human rights, and right now we have to fight for those that have been the most hurt by the system. There's colorism in the Hispanic community as well, and I think that it's important to acknowledge that because although we as a Latinx community have also faced adversity and racism, it's something that we need to eradicate internally as well — not just externally. (Roiz, 2020)

Reyez rhetorically framed her Black “blood” as an authentication tool to position her as an educated speaker about the oppression faced by Black people. As Hilary Gibson-Wood and Sarah Wakefield (2013) argued, the oppression faced by “Hispanics as a group” in Toronto who are “geographically dispersed” included being “more likely to be poor, un- or under-employed, and are overrepresented in manufacturing jobs” in comparison to other Canadians and Torontonians (p. 648). Rachel Hatzipanagos (2022) addressed the “internal” racism that Reyez may be referring to in the “Hispanic” community:

While Latinos in the United States are often described simply as “Brown,” that term does not capture the spectrum of skin tones and races within the country's Hispanic population. These differences in appearance can affect how Hispanics are treated in the United States, even by other Latinos.

Reyez claimed a Black identity that could speak directly to experiences of Black struggle while also anchoring her experiences of racism to her particular intersectional identity as a Latina. Reyez's statement about her bloodline, her ancestry, and internal colourism within the Hispanic community demonstrated the tensions between who is included and excluded within identity groups. This connects to broader discussions about who and who is not seen as “authentic” within the R&B scene, and who is included in the cultural imaginary of Canada. Across these multiple and shifting definitions of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness, contemporary Canadian R&B may be understood as a music genre created by multiple and co-existing intersectional identities, including white Canadian Justin Bieber, biracial Black and white Canadian, Drake, and second-generation Canadian-Colombian

Jessie Reyez. However, colourism may also work to position these digital stars as differently “authentic” in R&B music and in the Canadian national community.

Similar to how Drake marketed his intersectional identity to resonate with different cultural groups in different music videos (Pope, 2016), Reyez continued this trend but took it a step further in 2020 by framing and releasing content at times that very explicitly reflected on contemporary political conversations, to help maintain her relevancy and her visibility in popular culture. Reyez’s music and social media posts were curated in ways that reinforced her intersectional identity, and her intersectional identity was framed in ways that reinforced the narratives in her music, creating a cyclical, authenticating loop.

#### 4.3.4 Perceived Intimacy Increased with Online Communications: “Takin a 🍑”

Building on Nancy Baym’s (2018) argument that relationships between artists and audiences are continually unfolding because “relationships are always becoming, never done” (p. 23), I stressed the importance for musical artists to continually create content so that they can profitably steer audiences’ perceptions of the digital star. While travelling and gathering was limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media still provided opportunities for artists “to make and keep up relationships with people from all over the world” (de la Punte, 2022, p. 5). The limitations of travelling during this time, coupled with the artists’ constant need to post content to stay relevant, resulted in Bieber, Drake, and Reyez posting increasingly intimate stories from their homes.

For example, on June 19, 2020, Bieber posted a selfie on Instagram of himself with a constipated facial expression, possibly while sitting on the toilet, with overlaid text that read “Takin a 🍑.” Reyez’s Instagram stories included videos of her showering naked (from her shoulders up) and singing live without editing her sound (November 15, 2022). Drake, meanwhile, posted a story of himself in bed, tucked under blankets and laying on a pillow, with his hair in a silk bonnet (November 11, 2020). The “blurring...line between personal and professional identities” (Gilman, 2009) was exemplified by these musical artists, especially during the pandemic, as audiences gained new forms of seemingly intimate access to their private lives, straight from bathrooms and bedrooms.

As audiences seemingly gained more access, artists continued to create content that promoted their music and integrated brand partners' products and services. These seemingly intimate moments between audiences and stars made distinctions between the art forms (the lifestyle brands) and the artists (Bieber, Drake, and Reyez) harder for audiences to identify. This perceived intimacy may have increased audiences' trust in the star, which could become problematic when audiences failed to understand or recognize when artists were selling products, services, and ideologies.

#### 4.4 Disclosed #Ad: Brand Integration Strategies Using Social Media Posts and Emojis ✨

The advent of social media made it much more common for stars to integrate branded products into their constructed lifestyles. To protect “consumers” (2017), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States and the Ad Standards (ADS) in Canada created regulations in 2020 that required social media users to post disclosures if they were compensated for integrating a brand in their posts. ADS demanded that promotional posts should include the hashtag #ad or #sponsored above the fold<sup>16</sup> in the caption; ambiguous hashtags would be penalized and simply tagging the brand was not enough of a disclosure (Ad Standards, 2020). The FTC, meanwhile, gave artists DJ Khaled and Nicki Minaj warnings about their failure to use disclosures regarding brand-integrated products in their Instagram posts (Sabin, 2018). In a video commercial, the FTC (2017) highlighted the responsibilities of a public personality to disclose when they were trying to convince their trusting audience to purchase something:

Say you meet someone who tells you about a great, new product. Would their glowing endorsement factor into your decision to buy it? Maybe so. But what if you find out that the person works for the company or is being paid to endorse it? Wouldn't you want to know that?

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<sup>16</sup> Above the fold is a term originally used to refer to the top half of a newspaper's front page, which is visible when the newspaper is folded in the middle. Online, the term refers to the top of a webpage that website visitors see before having to scroll. On a social media post, the phrase refers to the first few characters of a long caption that appears before the “more” button where users then have to click to read the rest of the caption.

The need for public personalities to use disclosures for brand-integrated posts demonstrates the potential power and influence that a peer recommendation can have. Companies ask stars to recommend their company's product, service, or brand to capitalize on the trust that audiences place in public personalities. Although audiences actively negotiate media's representation of ideas, Digital Marketing Coach Marsha Lynn Hudson argued in our interview (2020) that peer-recommendations strongly affect audiences' purchasing decisions. Hudson described how "a simple like on a social media post can function as an endorsement for the message in the post." In practice, a like or a positive comment would work as a rhetorical device to positively frame the message in the post and encourage other online audience members to view the post (and product) in a positive way. As artists have engaged with more brand partnerships and created online content, their roles have blended with those of social media stars (Budzinski & Gaenssle, 2018). Artists should thus comply with the FTC, ADS and other regulations. Despite including many Nike and Raptors products, Drake's music video "Laugh Now Cry Later" (2020b), posted on YouTube, did not include any disclosures. Drake's mention of "Louis V[uitton]" in the song "Greece" (DJ Khaled, 2020b) did not include a disclosure. Both podcasts and songs exist as audio files on Spotify, yet while a podcast would have required the speaker to include a disclosure if they are paid to promote a product or service, songs do not. Since artists are offered compensation for mentioning branded products or services, how then can the disclosure of brand integration strategies in art forms like songs and music videos be effectively regulated?

With no disclosure applied to the songs, audiences may not have recognized the multitude of brand integration strategies applied across digital stars' performances. For example, Bieber's track "Yummy" (Bieber, 2020n) included the lyric "Drew House slippers on with a smile on my face," to reference his fashion line Drew House: most Drew products were stamped with a smiley face and the word "Drew." The song promoted the star Justin Drew Bieber and the song lyrics promoted his Drew lifestyle brand. Together, the song "Yummy," the digital star Justin Bieber, and Drew-branded products created an ecosystem of media texts, products, and ideas that supported the Justin Drew Bieber lifestyle brand.



During the pandemic, Reyez's (2020e) livestream of the first "concert from her bedroom" included images of a bottle of Jameson Irish Whiskey, which was in the background throughout her entire performance. Although Reyez audibly disclosed that the livestream was sponsored by Jameson Irish Whiskey, Reyez also created three YouTube posts that integrated the Jameson brand without using a disclosure. These include her official music video for her track "Same Side" Reyez, which showed a bottle of whiskey in one scene (Reyez, 2020y). Plus, in a behind-the-scenes YouTube post of the music video "Same Side" (Reyez, 2020p), the director, Davin Karrington, showed Reyez how to sit on a chair, with a gun on her lap, and said: "you can check your watch, and then maybe while you wait, have a little sip of whiskey" from a Jameson branded bottle, under the chair. In a third YouTube video that is part of a series Reyez created called "Confessions," where she narrated the experience she had creating the music video, Reyez again showed the scene of the bottle and said: "I was cheezed when I fucking tasted...ginger ale...[I told] Doc its cold...I could use some whiskey" (Reyez, 2020o). By including the bottle of Jameson in one scene in the official music video (Reyez, 2020y), the Jameson brand then got more visibility in the "Behind The Scenes" (Reyez, 2020p) and "Confessions" (Reyez, 2020o) YouTube posts. All three YouTube posts became promotional tools for Jameson Irish Whiskey without disclosures included in the video texts.

It would be difficult to mediate disclosures in an artist's everyday life because seemingly spontaneous performances of the star persona would be difficult to identify, regulate, and enforce. For example, in 2019, Kendall Jenner abruptly stopped her car to go to a convenience store to buy a single can of Orange Vanilla Coke while wearing an orange dress that matched the can. Jenner may have had a partnership deal with Coca Cola and when paparazzi took photos of her in her orange dress and holding the can of Orange Vanilla Coke, every paparazzi picture became a free Coca Cola ad. When the paparazzi images circulated on the internet, Madeline Buxton (2017) questioned: "Was this colour harmony a coincidence or have Jenner and Coca-Cola been scheming to skirt around the FTC's social media advertising guidelines?" A celebrity's public appearance with a product immediately gives that product's company free publicity, but the internet intimacies of social media blur the lines between promotion and consumption.

A star could exercise brand-integration strategies at any given moment but rarely have celebrities revealed that they were paid to do or say certain things as a condition of a brand partnership. For example, when Jimmy Fallon interviewed comedian Pete Davidson on the *Tonight Show* (2019), Fallon stated, “tell me about...what you're doing with Mortal Combat” to which Davidson replied, “well they are paying me to be here to talk about it.” Jimmy laughed and said, “thank you for being honest,” to which Davidson jokingly replied, “well I'm trying to get a helicopter to Coachella...they were like, do you like this game? And I said sure.” Davidson later added: “I'm actually wearing...I have to give a shout-out to ‘Mortal Combat’ sneakers” to suggest that Mortal Combat also paid him to wear those shoes and maybe even talk about them in the interview. As such, the potential opportunities for brand partnerships integrated into a star's everyday life have become limitless.

Drake even attempted to associate himself with the ✨ emoji, which resembled the Nocta logo. Nocta clothing, named for Drake’s “nocturnal creative process” (Wolf, 2020), was an extension of Drake's partnership with Nike, and was actually a Nike subsidiary brand. Drake’s Instagram posts promoting Nocta have used the emoji ✨ (Drake, 2020k) and Nocta’s posts also used the ✨ emoji (Nocta 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e; 2022f). Drake and his team may have tried to associate the brand with an easily accessible emoji so that Nocta and the Drake brand could potentially become integrated ads in everyday conversations using “✨.” According to Drake, his Nocta product line targeted “the grinders, the hard workers — trying to accomplish their goals and taking no short cuts” (J. Campbell, 2020), which reinforced the hip-hop genre code of hustlin’ and hard work. If the ✨ emoji became associated with Drake’s Nocta brand and his articulations of hustlin’, then the emoji could continue to reinforce Drake’s brand value in everyday conversations.

#### 4.4.1 Bieber and Churchome

Building on Bieber’s backstory of having a close relationship with God while growing up in the small, predominantly Christian community of Stratford, Ontario (Bieber, 2020w), his song “Holy” (Bieber, 2020ad), featuring Chance the Rapper, is a contemporary R&B

gospel track that mixes pop, hip-hop, and R&B music. “Holy” was promoted through a livestream discussion between both artists, where they spoke about their relationships with their pastors. The livestream included Bieber wearing a Drew-branded robe and, although a recording of the livestream was posted on YouTube (Bieber, 2020p) to further circulate the marketable interaction, neither the livestream nor the post included an #ad disclosure. Bieber also created a YouTube video of the song where the lyrics appeared on the screen as the song played across different background images (Bieber, 2020o), many of which depicted landscapes with sunlight to reflect Christian ideologies of God being the Light. In 2017, Bieber was featured in a YouTube commercial for the Churchome app (Churchome, 2018), an online platform that provided app users with prayers, seminars, and audio-visual texts to participate in Christianity. Bieber (2020ag) created an Instagram post promoting his Christianity and his use of Churchome. He created over 70 Instagram stories and posts between 2020 and 2021 that expressed his spirituality (Bieber, 2020y), with references to “Jesus” (Bieber, 2020x), “God” (Bieber, 2020p), and “the creator” (Bieber 2021b). Bieber posted a selfie on September 23, 2020, using a Bieber-branded “HOLY” Instagram filter to promote the song of the same name. The “HOLY” filter was displayed on Instagram as “HOLY by justinbieber” and illuminated the online user’s face in white light while blurring the background, intended to reinforce Bieber’s association to Christian imagery. Instagram users were able to save that filter from Bieber’s selfie and apply it to any future Instagram stories they themselves created. In a chain reaction, whoever used the filter then exposed it to their viewers, who could also save and apply the filter to their stories. All of these texts did not include a disclosure, yet they worked together to promote Bieber’s song “HOLY,” and reinforce the authenticity of both Bieber’s lifestyle brand and the Churchome brand.

Katheryn Post (2021) connected Bieber’s track “Holy” (2020ad) to his 2021 EP *Freedom* (2021u) by stating that “musically the songs [on *Freedom*] retain Bieber’s signature lilting pop/R&B style...Bieber’s songs have included spiritual themes before—see ‘Holy’ and ‘Pray’—but ‘Freedom’ is the first instance of the artist situating an entire project in an unapologetically Christian framework.” Bieber entered a new market with his contemporary gospel music, while asserting his soulfulness and authenticity in the Canadian R&B genre world, by employing traditional codes of Christianity in his music.

According to Paul McGuinness (2022) “gospel music has always had a major influence on R&B” so Bieber may have created R&B/gospel music to further reinforce his authenticity in R&B. Bieber’s EP *Freedom* in 2021 (2021u) was strategically released on April 4th to celebrate the Christian holiday of Easter (Post, 2021). According to Hannah Gillihan (2021), the song “BEAM” on the EP “blends the style of Jamaican, gospel and pop beats...that cements the song’s tropical flair.” The EP became Bieber’s first Christian music project and “all six songs featured on [the] EP debut on...[Billboard’s] Hot Christian Songs chart” (McIntyre, 2021). Bieber’s Christian-ness is reflected in his music and his position on the Billboard Christian music charts. Bieber simultaneously reinforced his Canadian-ness, his gospel and R&B roots, and created an advertisement.

Bieber’s 2021 album *Justice* combined his Christian values and his allyship with Black people, expressed in an Instagram post (Bieber, 2022a) with the caption “HAPPY JUNETEENTH @churchome.” Juneteenth refers to “an annual commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States after the Civil War [which] has been celebrated by African Americans since the late 1800s” (Taylor, 2022). It is often celebrated by “churchgoers [who] commemorate and celebrate Juneteenth during their worship services” (T. Foster, 2022). Bieber capitalized on discussions about Christianity on Monday June 19, 2022 while promoting the app and driving audiences to the @churchome Instagram account from the caption of his post. My discussion of Oscar Peterson’s 1962 “Hymn To Freedom” gospel song in Chapter 2 touched on traditional R&B codes of advocating for Black rights through Canadian R&B music. Bieber, as a white, contemporary R&B artist seized this particular day to market his Christian brand values, position himself as an ally to Black people, and promote his contemporary approaches to R&B and “Christian” music.

While artists have long balanced on the edge between generating important political discussions and commodifying aspects of these discussions, the required disclosures for these types of promotional messages have become ever more important. For example, Churchome is a non-profit organization; their Annual 2019-2022 report showed that the church generated \$16.3 million in revenue, with \$14.4 million generated from tithes and offerings (Churchome, 2022). This could be partly attributable to Bieber’s promotion of

the brand. Their annual report included social media KPIs, such as the number of followers the organization and the founders of Churchome<sup>17</sup> had on Instagram (851,982), Twitter (425,019), Facebook (223,812), and YouTube (78,781), as well as the number of podcast downloads (3,700,000). This highlighted the organization's strong focus on social media campaigns for generating revenue. Jennifer Swann (2019) posed the question: "Is their Instagrammable message truly reframing Christianity or simply helping their church rake in millions?" Swann challenged the organization's distribution of money and highlighted how Christian-ness has become commodified. Justin Bieber's affiliation with Churchome may have reflected his personal beliefs, but as a digital star, his affiliations with the app also helped him enter a new market where he could share his interpretations of "Gospel songs" in his own style of contemporary Canadian R&B music.

The motivations behind the commodification strategies of Bieber's Christianity and allyship to Black people came into further question when he included excerpts of Martin Luther King's speeches on his album *Justice*. As Brittney Spanos (2021) from Rolling Stone said, "the powerful speeches [were] a jarring musical misstep" and self-serving. Justin Curto (2021) from Vulture stated, "the album barely even [alluded] to social justice issues, even as Bieber [continued] to talk about his new music in that context." Lauryn Bayley (2021) called the *Justice* album "strong but incredibly tone-deaf" and stated that "although it seems Bieber's heart [was] in the right place, as he [was] using his platform to bring attention to and support the BLM movement, his execution was flawed." Bieber responded to the backlash by stating "I'm not trying to be a white savior. My heart is just to amplify Martin Luther King's voice" and further situated his developing knowledge in racial justice by acknowledging, "I think for me, coming from Canada and being uneducated and making insensitive jokes when I was a kid and being insensitive and being honestly just a part of the problem because I just didn't know better" (Bieber as quoted in Mamo, 2021). Although Bieber received public support from Dr. King's daughter Bernice King (Be A King, 2021), many people criticized how Bieber failed to

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<sup>17</sup> Judah and Chelsea Smith

“acknowledge how this [use of MLK’s vocals benefitted] him” (Capital XTRA, 2021). Here, disclosures could provide transparency to the production and intentional use of media texts to help circumvent these critiques or to shed light on potentially harmful commodification strategies of social movements, religions, and other cultural practices. Unlike Drake and Reyez, who are visible minorities, Bieber continues to face a unique struggle to gain acceptance for his participation in R&B as a white man. Rather than relying on his own voice, Bieber continued to try and build his authenticity by integrating Black voices in his R&B music, to participate in a genre traditionally associated with Black people.

Erving Goffman (1959) described that with a disclosure, audiences would be less likely to be offended if a person was impersonating someone else and could even praise them for accomplishing a believable performance: “When a disclosure shows that we have been participating with a performer who has a higher status than he led us to believe, there is good Christian precedent for our reacting with wonderment and chagrin rather than with hostility” (p. 39). The same is true here: if digital stars included fuller disclosures in brand integration strategies, they could build trust with their audiences and even earn respect for their brand integration strategies. However, including a disclosure could also diminish the perceived authenticity of an artist. Artists have long been living advertisements for their lifestyle brand. Their expression of fashion, language, and behaviours have operated in tandem with the artist’s paid brand integration campaigns. Although artists may have positioned brand integration strategies as vehicles for them to express creative autonomy, audiences should be informed about the benefits and compensation the artist received for their public support of that company.

#### 4.4.2 MEMEs Further Circulate Brand Integration Strategies

Drake’s music videos, potentially intended for memeification processes, may have helped him somewhat circumvent FTC and ADS regulations. Drake has been described as “the king of ‘MEMEs’” for his ability to create media texts that encouraged the creation of user-generated content (Ihaza, 2015). Building on the Greek word *mīmēma*, meaning “imitated thing,” and the French word *même*, meaning “same,” Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term meme in 1976 to describe a process of “cultural evolution” (p. 190). A

meme was meant to be “an analogy” (p. 191) for the process in which a cultural activity, idea, or object is created with the intention of becoming adopted and imitated by other people in society, thereby causing that activity, idea, or object to be disseminated across culture through its adopters. This idea persisted in contemporary applications of the term on the internet, where online users would circulate a meme through their application and use of an online text (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Memeification occurred when online users downloaded and edited images, videos, and texts from the internet; altered the original text in a way that is satirical, comedic, or in opposition to its original meaning; and uploaded their new text to the internet for other online audiences to engage and consume. I defined an internet meme as a static image or short loopable video (also known as a GIF) taken from an original, longer-form media text and applied to convey a different idea from its original meaning.

In 2016, Drake asserted that “memes...are our new form of entertainment” (Apple Music, 2016) and, in 2015, Drake’s “Hotline Bling” music video was called the video that “sparked a thousand MEMES” (95-106 Capital FM, 2015). Memes have continually underscored participatory culture, which Henry Jenkins (2009) defined as a new process in the digital age that “supports widespread participation in the production and distribution of media” (p. 4). In my interview with Raha Euphoria in 2020, who was on the set of the “Hotline Bling” music video, she stated that “[online memes work] like marketing tools...by giving little teasers on social media.” Each meme created from the “Hotline Bling” music video became an advertisement that promoted Drake’s brand and his music. Raha Euphoria told me that “[Director] X had this...edit with a bunch of dancers dancing in [that light box in the video] and Drake was like ‘no I want this to be...more focused on me’...[dancing alone]. Even X would say maybe Drake did know that if he danced all goofy it would catch on [and become a meme].” Based on Raha Euphoria’s observations on set, it seems Drake chose to perform exaggerated and unusual dance moves to increase the video’s virality and build a goofy digital star image. Raha Euphoria (2020) stated that “[Before Drake] Americans would literally laugh at Canadian artists,” and that may have resulted in Drake’s decision to lean into the creation of a “goofy” personality for his musical artist identity in this video.



**Figure 7: Drake dancing alone Hotline Bling music video (Drake, 2015)**

Perhaps Drake intentionally met audiences' expectations by working within hegemonic views of a laughable Canadian R&B artist, by being goofy, but then attempted to complicate and disrupt this stereotype through his singing and rapping talents (and the highly sexist subtexts of the video). He maintained this goofy personality to capitalize on the memeification process again with his dramatic expressions in the music video for "Laugh Now Cry Later" (Drake, 2020b) when he lip-synced the words "Baby."

In 2020, Dave Meyers, who produced Drake's music video "Laugh Now Cry Later" (Drake, 2020b), promoted an intended memeification of the music video online, but then quickly hid these intentions. Meyers (2020) made an Instagram post captioned "ME: But it might be a MEME...DRAKE: Baby..." and several frames from the video that featured individuals dramatically lip-syncing the word "baby" to highlight the intended memeification design of the video. Several minutes later I commented on the post stating, "Check your dms 🙌🙌🙌 so many baby MEMEs to come" to emphasize my recognition of Meyers' intention for the video to be memeified. A few minutes later, Meyers edited the Instagram caption to only say "Baby" and removed any mention of the video as a potential meme. It seems clear that Meyers edited out his stated intention of memeifying



the video, perhaps to avoid explicitly acknowledging designing the video for memeification processes.



**Figure 8: Drake dramatically lip-synching the word "Baby" in music video "Laugh Now Cry Later" (Drake, 2020b)**

Designing the video for MEME creation could have diminished Drake's authenticity in the eyes of his audiences who may perceive that his musical content follows marketing strategies rather than leading his content with Drake's musically creative processes. However, the intentions of designing content for marketing purposes and for emphasizing Drake's musical talents and creative skills could work synonymously. What Meyers may have attempted to avoid is being challenged for prioritizing marketing, commodification, and brand integrated strategies in the creation of the video rather than leading with the emphasis on showcasing the actual song. Throughout the "Laugh Now Cry Later" music video, Drake used exaggerated gestures in scenes that integrated Nike and Raptors branded products (Drake, 2020d). The first few seconds of the video were overlaid with text indicating that the music video was filmed at "Nike World Headquarters." The "Nike Company Store" sign also flashed across the screen and Drake was then portrayed in multiple scenes walking and playing hide-and-seek through the store packed from floor to

ceiling with bright orange Nike-branded boxes and Nike-branded apparel. The storyline of the music video integrates the Nike brand to reinforce Drake's relationship with Nike, but it can potentially distract audiences with images of logos and detract from their experiences with the sounds of the music.



**Figure 9: Drake surrounded by orange Nike branded boxes in music video "Laugh Now Cry Later" (Drake, 2020b)**

Throughout the video, Drake was wearing various Nike-branded clothing items, including an illuminated pair of sneakers. The latter was later identified as an advertisement for an upcoming shoe collaboration between Drake and Nike (Gorsler, 2020). Drake is the Toronto Raptors' official ambassador (Parker, 2019) and in the music video, he could be seen wearing a Raptors hat. As online users shared memes created from the video, they worked to increase Drake's visibility as a goofy persona but also promoted Drake, Nike, the Raptors, and their cross-branded associations in the memes. The music video "Laugh Now, Cry Later" was not just a singular promotional campaign but it also encouraged the production of MEMES and GIFs which became a series of advertising texts for Drake, Nike, and the Raptors, all amplified by user-generated memes.



**Figure 10: Drake wearing Raptors hat in music video "Laugh Now Cry Later" (Drake, 2020b)**

Like music video frames, an artist's everyday actions offline could also be staged for meme creation. In 2022, *Complex* writer Trace Cowen (2022) described how “Drake [continued to] inspire a new MEME after being filmed staring at his phone at [a] [Toronto] Raptors [basketball] game” with an exaggerated expression of anger. Online users edited the picture of Drake to superimpose ideas of what he could be looking at on his phone to make him so angry. Hence, Drake may have designed content and shaped his everyday actions in ways intended for potential memeification, hence viral promotion.

## 4.5 TikTok Contests and Concerts

Viral promotion is a key affordance of TikTok, an entertainment and social media platform that lets online users upload short audio-visual posts, using textual captions, filters, effects, and music clips embedded in the application. Like Instagram, TikTok integrated with Apple Music so online users could search for songs and make them the soundtrack of their uploaded videos. According to Stacey McLachlan (2020) “[Songs] on TikTok have high [virality] potential, and [it] turned the app into something of a hitmaker.” This was due to the platform’s short-video sharing design, and the ease for

users to mix backing videos with an “extensive music library.” Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo (2021) identified how TikTok has been used to promote artists’ music and stated that “as sound is central to viral trends...a TikTok marketing strategy [was] imperative to any music artist’s album rollout” (p. 142). In Cynthia Littleton’s (2021) article titled “Why TikTok’s Popularity Exploded During the Pandemic,” Littleton noted that “[TikTok] kept more than 100 million users engaged in lockdown conditions.” Although TikTok became available internationally in 2018, “TikTok saw a significant increase in popularity during the coronavirus (COVID-19)...after the pandemic broke out and people started working and studying primarily from home” (Ceci, 2020). Bieber, Drake, and Reyez all used the platform to increase the audibility of their R&B songs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reyez strategically partnered with Avenue Beat, an all-female musical group that shared her feelings of frustration towards social restrictions during the pandemic. They grappled with the trauma of loss through the release of the track “F2020” on TikTok. The song’s lyrics included “I got really sad and bored at the same time...And that's why I'm like...Lowkey fuck 2020...I don't know about everybody else, But I think that I am kinda done, Can we just get to 2021? Please?” (Avenue Beat & Jessie Reyez, 2020). In Jon Pareles’ list “Best songs of 2020,” he ranked the track “F2020 (Remix)” as number one and highlighted the song’s prominence on TikTok when he said:

What the “F” stands for sums up a simple, nigh-universal sentiment about this year, which helped this song easily explode on TikTok. It’s delivered with a droll, self-conscious shrug, airy harmonies and twitchy percussion; for the remix, Jessie Reyez adds some survivor’s guilt. (Pareles et al., 2019)

Reyez capitalized on shared experiences during the pandemic through this remixed song and stated: “‘F2020’...felt like hearing the state of humanity sing for a few minutes [the song]...[felt] like the world [was] collectively holding the microphone” (Moore, 2020). By resonating with audiences, the song generated extensive UGC on the social media platform, where audiences posted videos of themselves on TikTok as they lip-synched the lyrics of the song to demonstrate their shared frustrations with the pandemic.

In the same year, Drake released the song and music video “TOOSIE SLIDE” (Drake, 2020c). The song’s lyrics included instructions for how to participate in a new dance

trend: “It go, right foot up, left foot slide, left foot up, right foot slide.” In the official music video, Drake demonstrates how to do the simple dance (Drake, 2020c) so that viewers can repeat it. Werner Geyser (2022) identified the Toosie Slide among the “25 Best TikTok Challenges” and stated:

Over the past few years, TikTok has turned into a source of viral dance challenges that sweep across the world... These dance challenges are great to capitalize on because people can conduct searches using TikTok sounds. That means if someone clicks on the song, some of the top videos featuring the song will turn up in the search results... TikTok influencers like Tony Lopez have also implemented the [Toosie slide] into their content, receiving 6.5 million likes and over 25,000 comments. Partly due to its catchy lyrics, the track has seen immense popularity on the platform and has been used in 3.6 million videos so far.

As content creators on the platform participated in a dance challenge, the sound associated with the challenge became more popular and pushed beyond platform users and into the wider popular culture. Drake posted “I didn’t know it was gona be a dance song like this...album is on the way...about to slap...shoutout to Toosie...when I made that song...I was only talking about the moon walk...but Toosie made a dance to that shit” (Hotfreestyle, 2020). Drake references the “moon walk” to reinforce Michael Jackson as his inspiration behind his performance style, similar to Justin Bieber (as discussed in Chapter 3). Despite claiming that the intention was not to make a “dance song” for TikTok, this was clearly an intentional marketing campaign designed to engage audiences, create UGC, and thus promote Drake’s new album. Daquan, a dancer who goes by the stage name Toosie, had connections with music artists “Future, Rae Sremmurd, 2 Chainz, Tory Lanez, Migos, Lil Wayne, Diddy, Playboy Carti, and Usher” (Schultz, 2020). Drake hired Toosie to choreograph the “Toosie Slide” dance, and subsequently posted a screenshot of a text message exchanged between Drake and Toosie discussing the dance on Instagram (Drake, 2020i). Drake’s collaboration with respected dancer Toosie reinforced Drake authenticity in the contemporary R&B music scene. The screenshot also created a CTA for audiences to try the dance. Audience participation in the dance challenge prompted the creation of UGC to build Drake’s online audibility and potentially deepened their affective relationship with digital star Drake, at a time when in-person appearances were all but impossible.

Some live performances did take, place, however. On February 14, 2021, one month before releasing his *Justice* album (Bieber, 2021s) and exactly one year after releasing *Changes*, Bieber held a TikTok concert where he sang songs from his 2013 R&B digital project *Journals*. According to Andrea Zarczynski (2021) “the #JournalsLive event, which streamed live on Valentine’s Day on TikTok, attracted more than four million unique views over two broadcasts,” and drove many audience members to his music and his products. Bieber wore a tuque with the Drew logo name right above his eyes and a baggy sweater with the Drew logo name in large letters on the arms. The concert was branded as “live from the Drew House” (Spangler, 2021) which refers to Bieber’s company “Drew House” that sells clothing, accessories, and more (Eckardt, 2019). Although the “Drew House” is not a physical “house” it positions Bieber as a metaphorical “branded house” (Gillum, 2018) in his world of Bieber-branded products. He frames his concert in a room adorned with “Drew” branded imagery and by wearing Drew branded clothing. The setting of the livestream concert thus functions as a product integration strategy for his Drew brand, similar to how Drake staged his “Laugh Now Cry Later” (Drake, 2020b) video at the Nike headquarters. The concert was the first time Bieber had performed his *Journals* album live and the first full-length, single-artist live performance on TikTok. According to MRC Data, the project is said to have increased his “on-demand streams of Journals’ songs [by] 37% in the U.S. on Feb. 14-16” (as quoted in Atkinson, 2021). This concert helped build visibility for his Drew brand, reinforced his R&B-ness, and successfully increased the volume of digital streams for his songs.

#### 4.5.1.1 Circumventing Traditional Broadcast Television Restrictions and Social Media Regulations On TikTok

Justin Bieber used TikTok in his partnership with Chipotle restaurants to promote his song “Yummy.” Chipotle and Bieber somewhat circumvented traditional television media advertising during Superbowl LIV by hiring “12 of the biggest TikTok influencers...to post [content they created themselves] during each of the game’s timeouts” (The Drum, 2021). This advertisement strategy won The Drum Awards’ Most Effective Use of Mobile in 2020. The campaign promoted Bieber’s single “Yummy,” and

Chipotle's limited-time offer of free delivery every Sunday on all orders \$10 or more when using the Chipotle app or Chipotle.com. Chipotle (2020) stated that "on the busiest day of the year for delivery, Chipotle [was] teaming up with TikTok's biggest stars to create their very own Chipotle delivery ads that [would] showcase their content creation styles set to Justin Bieber's hit song 'Yummy.'" This not only outsourced the content creation, but the cross-branded ad directly reached the existing audiences of some of the most popular TikTok accounts. According to David Cohen (2020) "The campaign reached a combined audience of over 95 million, generating more than 2.5 million engagements," including likes, shares, and comments. Bieber's first TikTok post of him performing simple dance moves to the song "Yummy," "generated over 117 million views and spawned a TikTok trend that had more than 5 million videos created to the track" (Oganesyan, 2021). Bieber also created a YouTube post with a compilation video of TikTok users dancing to "Yummy" (Bieber, 2020ab) and shared a link to the YouTube post on Twitter (Bieber, 2020ac), promoting the upcoming #TikTokTimeout campaign right before the Superbowl's kickoff.

Some of the TikTok influencers involved in the campaign included David Dobrik, Zach King, Avani Gregg, Nick Uhas, Brittany Broski, Joshua Sadowski, Zahra, Kyle Shaffer, and Greg Auerbach (Chipotle, 2020). All of their TikTok posts included the hashtag #TikTokTimeout and, according to Jorge Vázquez-Herrero, María-Cruz Negreira-Rey, and Xosé López-García (2022), the "use of trending hashtags [helped] to position...content and [helped posts] reach higher levels of circulation" (p. 1792). Robert Williams (2020) noted the abilities of Chipotle and Bieber to circumvent the high costs of a Superbowl ad while capitalizing on this moment of high audience viewership:

Chipotle's branded hashtag challenge on TikTok generated significant traffic for the fast-casual restaurant chain as millions of people spent time browsing apps on their smartphones during the Super Bowl. The campaign showed how marketers are using mobile platforms to drive engagement or an action such as a delivery order during major televised events without spending as much as \$5.6 million on a 30-second TV commercial.

Chipotle and Bieber used online platforms to engage audiences during the Superbowl and the pandemic. However, Bieber and Chipotle did incur costs, paying TikTok influencers to promote the song and delivery deal. One TikTok user revealed that "music labels will

pay influencers [hundreds of dollars just] to use the song in their videos...and that...is how TikTok songs become viral...they're...being paid. [So, artist's songs are] being boosted [by paid audience members]" (Barbosa, 2022). However, whether or not a TikTok user has been paid to use a song is often left undisclosed. TikTok was covered under the FTC regulations and many TikTok users are required to disclose paid content because it was understood to be in the public's interest to know when it was being marketed or served promotional content (Damiani, 2020; S. Morrison, 2023; TikTok, 2023). When a music label paid a TikTok user to promote a song, the TikTok post would become a paid advertisement for the song and for the musical artist singing the song. However, as on other platforms, many TikTok users do often not include a disclosure if they were paid to use a song; this is likely so that they appeared to be motivated purely by creating content for their audiences rather than for profit. If virality was to be taken as a sign of "organic" popularity, then music labels would also likely not want it to be public knowledge that they were paying a TikTok user to integrate an artist's branded products and songs; in this way, the advocacy could appear to be more "authentic."

Musical artists supported by large music labels have more funds to pay TikTok users to promote music and help push its visibility and relevancy in popular culture. Additionally, videos downloaded directly from the TikTok app "[don't] migrate any text other than the logo and the username;" hence, even if #ad was included in the caption, the promotional text could continue to circulate as a downloaded video online in ways that failed to include the disclosure hashtag. TikTok thus became a unique space for artists to have content created in ways that could somewhat circumvent FTC guidelines if the content was downloaded and reshared without the caption. These cross-platform promotional strategies maximized Bieber's visibility and audibility online in part by coordinating with a legacy media broadcast (the Superbowl) in which he was not explicitly involved, and capitalized on paid partnerships that were not explicitly disclosed.

Elias Leight (2020b) said that during the pandemic "[many] artists are starting to use TikTok [to] creat[e] demand for singles before they are even out" by generating conversations about their music, through dance contests and other forms of participation, before actually releasing their music online. In 2021, for example, "over 175 songs that



trended on TikTok charted on the Billboard Hot 100” (Capoot, 2022). Thus “TikTok has a significant influence on music thanks to the trends, dance, and challenges” and in 2023 “many of today's top hits gain popularity because of TikTok [and] artists...[have] gained a massive following because their songs went viral on the app” (Muharjan, 2023). Bieber and Drake began using TikTok to successfully market their music in 2020, which continues to be a popular strategy for popularizing music in 2023 (Muharjan, 2023).

#### 4.5.2 Gaming the System

In 2019, Billboard (2019) began including metrics from online streaming platforms to determine what artists, songs, and albums appeared on their official music charts. I asked Andrew Martin, a Senior Software Engineer at Spotify, (2020) about his work on building Spotify’s “big data and machine learning infrastructure” that powered music recommendations and ad serving, and ultimately mediated artists’ online visibility. In our interview, Martin (2020) highlighted how the engineers’ interpretations of online users’ behaviours informed how Spotify’s algorithms—which ranked and organized the content on the platform—were built:

A fundamental aspect of our music recommendation technology is the simple fact that if you and I listen to very similar playlists / genres / types of music, and there’s a song that you listen to a lot in that space that I have not heard before, it is a good candidate for a recommendation. The signal becomes a very strong one if there are many users with similar profiles that also all happen to like this song.

Algorithms designed by Spotify engineers mediated an artist’s visibility<sup>18</sup> in organizing online users’ behaviours and, in turn, the number of users who saw and interacted with an artist on Spotify. At the same time, this shaped how the artists and their music are positioned on Billboard music charts. Although other factors affected an artist’s position on Billboard charts, like the number of song sales, digital downloads, and amount of radio airplay, it would seem that the Spotify engineers who designed these algorithms, did so to benefit the Spotify platform, playing a strategic role in mediating an artist’s audibility and visibility in popular culture.

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<sup>18</sup> The term “visibility” is applied to how the artist’s profile and their songs are accessible to online users on the audio platform Spotify.

To help increase his ranking on Billboard charts in 2020, Bieber created five Instagram posts with instructions on how fans could increase the number of streams of his single “Yummy” across different platforms. Understandably, he was criticized for “gaming the system” (Deahl, 2020). Although these posts were eventually deleted, screenshots of the original posts can still be found online (Karl, 2020). Billboard only included digital streams from a U.S. IP address when calculating its rankings, so one of Bieber’s posts outlined how to fake a U.S. IP address (Karl, 2020). These posts were initially created by another Instagram user [@outlying] and were reposted to Bieber’s profile with the caption: “#repost from @outlying.” Dani Deahl (2020) stated that it was unclear if Bieber created these posts himself, or if someone on his team posted them but, either way, the posts somewhat tarnished his credibility. In exploiting his fans to increase his ranking on the Billboard charts, Bieber was repeatedly accused of “gaming the system” (Kroi, 2020). Another critic noted that “while not illegal, it’s fair to say the act [was] frowned upon” (Cowen, 2020).

Prior to Bieber’s gambit, in 2017 Chris Brown created an Instagram post that taught fans how to increase the streaming metrics of his 45-track album in order to improve its rank on the Billboard charts (Sanchez, 2017). Artists like Bieber and Brown have worked with their teams to try to manipulate these online platforms’ algorithms by mobilizing their audiences to improve their positions in the charts. In the past, Bieber (2009a) created YouTube posts and asked fans to “go buy” his music. Andrew Barber (2020) described that this practice was exercised well before streaming platforms existed:

Back when you had to actually buy physical CDs, major labels would buy enough boxes of their artists’ product to fill a warehouse, just to ensure they’d go #1. Gaming the system is nothing new, the rules have just changed.

Although the practice was not new, the advent of the inclusion of digital album streams and songs in the Billboard charts enabled Bieber and his team to mobilize his fans to help Bieber achieve high-ranking songs. In 2020, “Yummy” “debuted at No. 2 on this week’s #Hot100, earning him his 17th career top 10 hit” (Billboard Charts, 2020b) and it also “hit No. 1 on the Hot R&B Songs chart” (Billboard Charts, 2020a). Whether or not it was ethical to ask fans to purchase or stream a product, Bieber successfully mobilized his audiences to build his visibility in R&B.

## 4.6 Digital Stars Help Unite Canadians: “We Need our Artists to Continue to Make Us Dream, Particularly in Dark Times”

During the pandemic, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recognized the power of digital stars to unite Canadian communities. The federal government provided assistance for musicians and the arts in the form of \$500 million dollars in funding programs and Trudeau stated that “we need our artists to continue to make us dream, particularly in dark times” (CP24, 2020). Bieber and Drake both participated in the 2020 “Stronger Together, Tous Ensemble” broadcast, where popular Canadian icons gathered to promote positivity during COVID-19. It became the most watched non-sports broadcast in Canadian history (K. Scott, 2020). Justin Trudeau made closing remarks, but Drake closed the broadcast with a thank you message to all front-line care workers. Featuring Trudeau and then Drake at the end of the broadcast conveyed a hierarchy of importance: by being shown last, Drake was positioned as having the most influence in Canadian mainstream media.

The growing cultural influence of artists has been recognized and utilized by political leaders, businesses, and other entertainment media outlets to build relationships with audiences, circulate brand awareness, and garner visibility and audibility. John Street (2012) and Dana Gorzelany-Mostak (2015) explored how President Barack Obama used popular music to resonate with audiences and intensify the impact of his election campaign messaging. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine if the cultural power of contemporary artists is comparable to that of political leaders, it is worth noting that former *American Idol* singer Clay Aiken ran for U.S. congress (Willman, 2022) and that Ye has been quoted as considering a second run for the U.S. Presidency (BBC, 2020). Given this, it can be argued that the cultural influence of digital stars and musical artists has become so powerful that Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez are able to reinforce, complicate, and challenge not only hegemonic views of R&B-ness, but of Canadian-ness itself.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital stars Bieber, Drake, and Reyez used social media, brand partnerships, and music to engage audiences in discussions about important

political issues such as immigration, Black Lives Matter movements (discussed further in chapter 5), and Canadian nationalism. In 2013, Ira Basen (2013) stated that “in the age of social media...we now routinely hear parties and politicians referred to as ‘brands,’ and we hear about ‘Starbucks voters’ versus ‘Tim Horton’s voters.’” Such trends of blurring politicians and brands with social media were exemplified and amplified in 2020, as social media arguably expanded as a primary medium for everyday communications. In conclusion, I believe musical artists are participating in more political discussions, their company brands are expanding across different markets, and they are engaging deeply with audiences across social media platforms. As a result, musical artists are further expanding their public personalities and brand awareness to become prominent political figures in society, able to champion ideologies of national identity and community, while providing forms of entertainment to audiences.

## 5 Coda: Contemporary Canadian R&B Music as Canadian National Anthems

This chapter treats Jessie Reyez’s internationally-broadcast performance of national anthems before a major sporting event, during a resurgence of Black Lives Matter movements in 2020, as a culmination of many key themes of the dissertation. It begins by approaching national anthems as critical tools for nation-building practices. It then explores the theory of “cultural branding” and how it applies to musical artists as national symbols and marketers. The chapter then spends some time exploring the significant cultural branding moment when contemporary Canadian R&B artist Jessie Reyez performed the Canadian and U.S. national anthems atop the CN Tower, prior to a Toronto Raptors playoff game in 2020; Reyez was wearing a branded La Tour CN Tower jacket and a black neck gaiter (a short scarf that operates like a mask) that had the words “Breonna Taylor” written across it, thereby aligning herself with multiple identities.



**Figure 11: Reyez performing the Canadian national anthem atop the CN Tower for a Toronto Raptors playoff game while taking a knee (Reyez, 2020x)**

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To begin this chapter, I point to two important moments in which Canadian R&B artists expressed their versions of Canadian patriotism and pride in multi-cultural identity. The first involves second-generation Black Jamaican-Canadian immigrant Kardinal Offishall (Kardi). His song “The Anthem” (Offishall, 2011) has the following lyrics, rapped in his Torontonion-Jamaican accent:

Eh, where you from Canada?...let them know where you from. I'm from the T dot Oh, Rep it everywhere I go...Everybody from the cold. This is where we're calling home...Home of the blocko<sup>19</sup>, patois and proper English...Every area reppin' the home team, My Italians hold me down, Africans same thing, Portuguese get it in, Filipinos rock with me, Enough Trinis<sup>20</sup> and Yardies<sup>21</sup>...Immigrants from long distances. Working class people and some others with some privileges. Any way you look at it we seeing past differences. Yo, I am multicultural.

The lyrics frame Canada as “multicultural,” underscoring Canada’s diversity through its large immigrant population. The lyrics suggest that despite their different “privileges,” people of different ethnicities and classes are unified as “Canadians.” By self-identifying as “multiculture,” although not a “proper” word, Kardi is proposing that not only is he influenced by the diverse cultures that many Canadians are “from,” but that as a Canadian, he is (“I am”) that diversity. The track’s title, “The Anthem” (2011) makes Kardi’s Canadian patriotism most explicit.

The music video for “The Anthem” (2011) shows Toronto’s well known-building facades including the CN Tower, the Ontario Science Centre, the CP24 main office (a Canadian English news channel), Masonic Temple Hall in Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canadian Broadcasting Centre on Toronto’s Front Street West, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Soho Hotel Metropolitan, the Bank of Montreal Stadium, the Spirit of Hockey (the official retail store of the Hockey Hall of Fame), Maple Leaf Gardens, images of street signs in Toronto like “Queen Street,” images of Toronto’s public

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<sup>19</sup> Blocko is slang terminology often used in Trinidad and Tobago to refer to a large outdoor party held by a community.

<sup>20</sup> Trinis is a common slang terminology often used to refer to people from Trinidad and Tobago

<sup>21</sup> Yardies is a common slang terminology often used to refer to people from Jamaica

transportation buses also known as the TTC (Toronto Transit Commission), and numerous places, foods, and racially diverse people interacting in what appears to be concert halls with deejays. As I argued in my discussion of Maurice Charland's (1986) theory of "technological nationalism" in Chapter 2, Kardí brands himself as distinctly Canadian and evokes Canadian nationalism by including scenes of various geographical spaces (not least of which is the CN Tower, itself part of the railway infrastructure, Charland discusses as laying the groundwork for media institutions like the CBC). These images invoke Kardí's views of "Canada" through his claimed experiences in "Toronto." The video depicts the unification of diverse Canadians through hip-hop music, blending hip-hop, reggae, and R&B sonic styles. "The Anthem," both song and music video, depict Kardí's version of Canada, set distinctly in Toronto, in 2011, based on Kardí's intersectional experiences and interest in hip-hop. By calling his song "The Anthem," Kardí works within traditions that assert an anthem as a song meant to represent a nation, but his style challenges traditional notions of who gets to write anthems.

While Kardí's "Anthem" may be unofficial, Canada's official national anthem has recently been the subject of debate for failing to reflect Canada's history and people accurately. In my second moment of R&B patriotism, Black second-generation R&B artist July Black performed the Canadian national anthem at a 2023 NBA All-Star Game. She altered the word "and" in the line "O Canada! Our home and native land!" rendering it instead as "O Canada! Our home on native land." The new lyric acknowledged Canada's history of colonialism and helped to raise awareness of the losses and harms suffered by our Indigenous peoples (University of Toronto, 2014). Black was conscious that "aside from the Super Bowl, [the NBA All-Star Game] is the largest global sporting event that includes the Canadian anthem" (Jean-Baptiste, 2023), and so she capitalized on this prominent musical appearance to assert a "subtle alteration" (Morris, 2023) to the Canadian anthem. Black's performance was celebrated within the Canadian Indigenous community, and she was subsequently "presented with an eagle feather and wrapped with a blanket during a Blanketing Ceremony by AFN Knowledge Keepers and National Chief RoseAnne Archibald" (CBC, 2023).

Black was not the first person to make this controversial change to the Canadian anthem (CBC Sports, 2021), but her performance sparked online debates regarding Black's right to change the words to the official anthem and whether her change was indeed patriotic (Lev, 2023). Black posted a screenshot of a hateful email she received that called her a "[n\*\*\*\*]", an "uncivilized jungle monkey," and challenged her right to call herself a Canadian by stating "you have lived in Canada for 45 years...while living in a white majority country, you have the audacity to single handedly change our national anthem! HOW DARE YOU!! Who the [f\*\*\*] do you think you are?" Black captioned the post: "This is what I'm getting as a BORN and raised Canadian #HateRunsDeep" (Black, 2023). As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, despite an external image of excessive politeness or fantasies of being better than its immediate neighbour to the south, Canada still has a long history of racist policies and racism. Hegemonic views of an exclusively white Canada persist, and such ideologies license the racist comments that challenge Black's humanity and inclusion in Canada's national imaginary. Kardi and Jully Black assert their views of Canadian-ness as proud Black, second-generation, Jamaican-Canadian artists who have moved from the periphery to the center of mainstream society precisely by challenging increasingly residual hegemonic beliefs.

## 5.1 National Anthems as Problematic Symbols of Nationhood

National anthems are both positive, unification tools in society and problematic symbols through which nationalism as an exclusionary ideology may be articulated. Nationalism has a long, painful history of being intertwined with racism. In both the U.S.A. and in Canada, the national anthems tend to imply racial homogeneity. To begin this discussion, I point to a moment in 2016, when Black U.S. quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat instead of standing during the performance of the U.S. national anthem before a football game to protest against the U.S.'s anti-Black racism. This demonstration led many observers to revisit the history of the U.S.A.'s national anthem and question its relationship to structural racism.

Francis Scott Key composed the original U.S. anthem in 1814 (US National Achieves, 2014). The text was retitled "The Star-Spangled Banner," and then became the U.S.A.'s



official national anthem in 1931. Given that Key was himself a slave owner, his text was created in a particular historical juncture that commonly practiced slave trading and Black slave ownership (AL.com, 2016). Author and journalist Jefferson Morley (2020) states that integral to Key's text are ideologies of "white supremacy," exemplified in the section that states "No refuge could save the hireling and slave." According to Morley (2020) "Key served as the chief law enforcement officer...[and] presided over the daily enforcement of enslavement laws... to bolster enslavers' power" and further oppress Black slaves. White U.S. journalist Justin King (2021) argued that although the intended use of the term "slaves" has been debated, there "is no good way to read [the original poem]."

Ada Limón, who became the 24th Poet Laureate of the U.S.A. in 2022 (Cannon, 2022), wrote a poem called "A New National Anthem" (2018) that challenges the "unsung" third stanza and highlighted how the anthem continues to uphold racist ideologies that underpin U.S. society: "Perhaps the truth is, every song of this country has an unsung third stanza, something brutal, snaking underneath us as we blindly sing, the high notes with a beer sloshing in the stands, hoping our team wins." Limón (2018) addressed how people "blindly" participate in the cultural practice of singing the anthem at sporting events without knowing the underlying racist ideologies that underpin the song and that frame other aspects of U.S. culture. Key's history of oppressing Black slaves, coupled with the idea that the anthem "wasn't adopted until the 1930s [and] it [is not a relatively] long-running tradition," led Justin King (2021) to argue that "there is no reason [the anthem] can't be changed." On the other hand, Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated against changing the anthem by noting that her family has served in the military and the anthem is an important way of "bringing people together;" thus changing the anthem would be divisive for the nation (Fox News, 2017). Clearly, national anthems may divide, and they may unify.

White U.S. former Seahawks player and Green Beret in the U.S. army, Nate Boyer, did not support Kaepernick sitting during the anthem. Boyer claimed that although he will never have to face racism as Kaepernick has, Kaepernick does not have the same experiences as Boyer in "go[ing] to war" for their country (Boyer, 2016). Their different

intersectional experiences resulted in their differing opinions about Kaepernick sitting during the national anthem. Boyer met with Kaepernick in 2016 and they agreed that Kaepernick would “tak[e] a knee alongside his teammates” instead of sitting during the anthem, which Boyer stated would be less “misconstrued as...disrespectful... in fighting for his right to protest” (The Rich Eisen Show, 2016). Former President Barack Obama outlined how Kaepernick’s stance might polarize groups when stating:

as this debate surfaces...I want Mr. Kaepernick and others who are on a knee...to listen to the pain that may cause somebody who might have had a spouse or a child who was killed in combat and why it hurts them to see somebody not standing, but I also want people to think about the pain that he may be expressing whose lost a loved one that they think was unfairly shot. (Diaz, 2016)

Building on Benedict Anderson's (1991) theory of an imagined community, Yalçın Erden (2019) argued that as a national symbol “anthems...serve the unification of the members of a country” (p. 50) and thus are intended to bring “solidarity in the society” (p. 50). Karen Cerulo (1989) argued that “national anthems are official patriotic symbols--the musical equivalent of a country's motto, crest, or flag. As such, they represent the nation's identity or character--its mood, desires, and goals as put forth by those in power” (p. 78). Hence, it is important to understand the particular histories and ideologies an anthem articulates.

An anthem is “accessible” and “[its] meaning is contained in its lyrics and can comfortably be read, sung and even remembered...they are mundane symbols, played at a variety of national events, ranging from international sporting competitions to national holidays” (Lauenstein, et. al., 2015, p. 316). Hence, it is important to critically assess the creation of an anthem and to examine what ideologies it articulates because it is representative of what a nation “stands” for, and it is deeply embedded in the national imaginary of the country. Professor of History Nicole Eustace evaluated the racist ideologies embedded in the U.S. anthem’s lyrics and stated that in “almost any of the nations’ founding documents you will find slavery kind of hiding in plain sight” because they were created within a slave-trading U.S. culture (New York University, 2016). Eustace commented on the idea of whether the anthem continues to circulate racist ideologies by stating:

The meaning of the song is really what each person makes of it...I think plenty of patriotic African Americans starting back in 1814 made something very positive of it but I also think it does have long associations of white supremacy and just like so many of our American documents it [is] simultaneously...a record of our problems and a resource for progress. (New York University, 2016)

While I agree that the song can be interpreted differently by each individual, as a “record of [U.S. racist] problems” it should not continue to circulate these ideologies if it is really to act as a “resource for progress.” As “fossilised reminders of the ideologies” created by those in power (Cusack, 2005, p. 235), the anthems often exclude the perspectives of Othered cultural groups, including the experiences of women (Cusack, 2005). Continuing to celebrate the author and composer of the anthem who believed in these exclusions in the construction of the nation is equally problematic.

Eustace’s argument that many “African Americans” who have embraced the anthem may be questioned by drawing on Timothy Askew (1996) discussion of how the song, “Lift Every Voice,” was also known as the “Negro National Anthem” or “Negro National Hymn.” It was created by “Black Americans” in opposition to “The Star Spangled Banner” in order to celebrate “the history and the impending triumphs of an oppressed race of people” (p. 12), precisely because they believed the original anthem failed to include their experiences. Supporters of either anthem celebrate their respective songs, which highlights a shared belief in the power songs possess to operate as unification tools when enacted in ways that include their singers’ identities.

Building on Cerulo’s (1989) statement that “music composition, while influenced by social forces, is also a product of a composer's training, inclinations, talent, and available resource” (p. 94), it is therefore crucial to understand who created our Canadian National Anthem. In Canada, the official anthem was composed by “French Canadians Calixa Lavallée (melody) and Adolphe-Basile Routhier (lyrics)” (Kennedy & Guerrini, 2013, p. 80). The Government of Canada (2018) heralds Lavallée as “Canada’s national musician,” and created a webpage with Lavallée’s biography (Government of Canada, n.d.), which describes Lavallée’s experiences of working with the “Northern army during the American Civil War” and giving “a series of concert tours” in the U.S.A.

Lavallée's biography fails to include how he spent much of his life as a musician in the U.S.A. and, most significantly, performing as a blackface minstrel. Brian Thompson (2015) described how Lavallée was "behind the creation of a local group called the Plantation Minstrels" (p. 8) and later performed mostly in the U.S., between 1866 and 1873, "first with Charles Duprez's New Orleans Minstrels, and later with the San Francisco Minstrels and Morris Brothers' Minstrels" (p. xxv). According to Robert Harris (2018), Calixa Lavallée "left home in 1855 at 12 years old, worked as a blackface minstrel throughout the United States, fought in the American Civil War, produced operas, and became a leading figure in American music" (my emphasis). Like many of Canada's most treasured popular musicians, Canada's National Anthem is also deeply indebted to U.S. popular culture. "O Canada" bears traces of anti-Black, racist ideologies.

In 1967, Canada's centenary year, "O Canada" was approved as our national song. Official parliamentary approval followed in 1980. In 1980, the CBC (2018b) broadcast people singing the anthem "coast to coast" with scenes of singers across various Canadian cities including St. John's, Halifax, Charlottetown, Montreal, Toronto, Regina, and Calgary, in celebration of Canada's 113th birthday. This broadcast reinforces an important type of unification through song. The anthem brought citizens together across the nation, singing the same words and thus chanting the same ideologies of "Canadian-ness." Yet, its lyrics originally excluded women in referring only to Canada's "sons." In 2018, legislation was enacted with the goal of "ensuring gender parity" (Government of Canada, 2018), by changing "True patriot love in all thy sons command" to "True patriot love in all of us command." Thus, Jully Black's recent revival/revision of the lyrics, changing them to "our home on native land," suggests that continuing work is required in re-writing a more truly inclusive Canadian national anthem.

John Lehr (1983) noted that, "as a nation linguistically and regionally fragmented, Canada faces unique problems of national unity and identity" (p. 4). A national anthem can help bridge diverse identities together. Yet, as a colonized nation, historically the anthem excludes the "non-European people" (Gerster, 2019). Referencing Homi Bhabha's (1990) theory of "cultural pluralism," Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) argue that Canada's national imaginary includes racial and cultural tensions which

“do not have to come...from immigrant minorities” but also from the experiences of Indigenous peoples “in Canada...[who present counter-narratives] from within” the nation (p. 27). While multiple Canadian identities co-exist within the national community of Canada, some voices and faces continue to overpower others. I explore below how a national anthem is one tool for wielding power via musically hegemonic views of Canadian-ness.

Canada continues to experience a wave of immigration (Government of Canada, 2022), while still allowing covert racism to shape social interactions (as discussed in Chapter 2). In this context, Laura Benjamins (2018) stated that music can be a powerful tool “in the integration of immigrants in their new culture...musical activities can positively impact the process of acculturation and integration for immigrants” (p. 8). I relate Benjamins’ argument to the theory of musicking as an experience (Small, 1998) to propose that anthems can create notions of solidarity, unity, and self-reflection that enable Canadians of diverse races to *feel* Canadian and be included in Canada’s national imaginary. I agree with Nina Hollington (2005) who stated that “music can be a vehicle to promote Canadian identity [and] Canadian music [can be used to] celebrate the riches of our music and unique cultural heritage.” However, I question what type of music would best reflect Canada’s diversity and articulate Canadian lifestyles. Although John Street (2012) observed that “no international sporting event is complete without the sound of national anthems” (p. 25), we might ask what (and who) makes up that sound? As Bieber's and Drake's songs become increasingly integral to national sports brands like the Raptors and The Maple Leafs, it leads me to ask, what happens if the sounds of Canadian R&B music become our new national anthems? I believe that contemporary Canadian R&B music, more than our national anthem, has enormous potential to help us as Canadians celebrate our unique cultural heritage and brand our ways of life as distinct.

Clearly, Canadian R&B music has become a prominent, national sound of Canada. The CBC recently proclaimed that the song “Northern Touch” (1998, featuring Toronto artists Checkmate, Choclair, Kardinal Offishall, and Thrust; discussed in Chapter 2), had become “an instant [Canadian] anthem” (CBC, 2020a). Drake reiterated this claim, calling the song a Canadian anthem in 2022 at his Canadian North Stars concert precisely

because of its celebration of “Canadian hip-hop and R&B history” (Ankrah, 2022). When Göran Folkestad (2017) argued that the music used to “develo[p] and negotiat[e]...identities” can “rang[e] from the most established and formal national anthem) to something antagonistic and informal (e.g., a revolutionary song)” (p. 134), this resonates with the possibility that, for many Canadians, Canadian R&B songs, like “Northern Touch,” or Drake’s (2013) “Started From The Bottom,” or Bieber’s (2021c) “Hold On,” may feel and sound more emblematic of Canadian experiences than the Canadian national anthem does. As Kardi’s track “The Anthem” (2011) proposes, Canadian hip-hop and R&B music can become the dominant sounds of Canadian identities. Stanley Brunn (2022) argued that “for many citizens the words and music [of an anthem] not only generate deep emotions about the state’s heritage, but familiar landscapes and what the words convey about places and events” (p. 165) may be called up by such music. Contemporary R&B music also articulates Canadian-ness through imagery, sounds, lyrics, and audio-visual narratives. Contemporary Canadian R&B music exemplifies Canada’s diversity through articulations of Canada’s multiple, co-existing cultural identities.

Nevertheless, based on Lavallée’s participation in U.S. popular culture as a minstrel performer, I apply Ada Limón’s (2018) words to propose that the Canadian anthem, like the U.S. anthem, also has “something brutal, snaking underneath us as we blindly sing.” As discussed in Chapter 2, the centrality of white colonists’ values in the construction of Canadian culture continues to manifest in national symbols and cultural practices, which, I argue, include our national anthem. Although the lyrics and the melody, (apart from the debate about the “our/on” native land lyric), may not necessarily be perceived as explicitly racist, do contemporary Canadians want to make a minstrel performer central to our national identity? I certainly do not. I apply King’s (2021) words to argue that Canada’s anthem is not a relatively long-running “tradition” since Canada’s national anthem was only made official a little over forty years ago, so “there is no reason it can’t be changed.”

In discussing the Canadian anthem, Tyler Stewart (2021) began by identifying his intersectional identity “as a white, cis-gendered, settler male” and then stated that “I don’t

believe it is for me...to decide which is the correct interpretation of these Indigenous-language versions of the anthem” (p. 87). Instead, he argued that it is more appropriate for him to determine how he identifies with Canadian-ness, based on his unique experiences and intersectional identity. I also believe that I am not in the position to declare the most appropriate words for any anthem, but neither should any single person have that privilege. To Matthew Wills’ question, “How can a single song represent an entire nation?” (Wills, 2016), I respond that it cannot. Language itself is not neutral. Rather, it is up to each of us to determine where we “stand” in regard to our national anthem, based on an informed understanding of how our intersectional experiences place us within its history and cultural imaginary.

National anthems are what Stanley Waterman called (2019) “examples of unisonance,” “part of the paraphernalia of national packaging, alongside flags, currency, or postage stamps” all used to unify citizens. “National packaging” here lies in some tension with ideas of citizenship; citizens are not consumers and yet media culture often muddles the two (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2012; Scammell, 2003). Nonetheless, audiences and citizens may be united by the medium of a national anthem (particularly at sporting events). Like the aforementioned Eleanor Collins’ postage stamp, an anthem can also articulate Canadian history and help to brand a uniquely Canadian lifestyle, characterized by diversity. Yet, banal reifications of Canadian-ness can harmfully overgeneralize and prioritize the experience of some Canadians over others. Racially diverse musical artists on national playlists, on the other hand, can work together to help articulate multiple, yet equally Canadian identities.

Mya Scarlato’s article, “Playing Upon the Blue Guitar: Toward Re-imaginings of the U.S. National Anthems” (2022), explored the “idea of re-imagining the American National Anthem in ways that honor and represent a plurality of identities and lived American experiences.” She draws on the music of “three Black musicians—Jimi Hendrix, René Marie, and Jon Batiste” who performed “the U.S. national anthem” in unique ways. Their “re-imaginings...problematized conventional representations of patriotism by including, celebrating, and awakening us to voices of Black Americans, who are often excluded” (p. 92) from U.S. popular culture. Following Scarlato’s study, I

contend that three racially diverse Canadian R&B artists, Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez, have the potential to “re-imagine” Canada’s national community by including voices that have often been excluded from its cultural imaginary. In section 5.3 below, I will offer one particularly spectacular instance of this happening. Before discussing Reyez’s 2020 anthem performance, I will first address some of the complexities of branding nationalism.

## 5.2 Cultural Branding and The National-Popular

According to Jessie Reyez’s management/promotion team, “it’s no secret that [cultural marketing] is becoming increasingly important in a post-2020 world” (8 Til Faint, 2020). This subsection provides a brief analysis of what “cultural marketing” and “cultural branding” are. According to Dr. Douglas Holt, understanding cultural branding involves making sense of “why some symbols become powerful [how] they accomplish something for our identities for the meanings that we collectively need in society” (Innovation network - SDU, 2013). Dr. Douglas Holt argued that a “key question” driving cultural branding is: “why do we need particular meanings at particular historical junctures?” (Innovation network - SDU, 2013). Holt argues that “in traditional marketing history” and in many business models, this type of contextualization “doesn’t exist” (Innovation network - SDU, 2013). Holt states that “When you start thinking about cultural symbols...in media studies...you start to see that things become symbols [and] become valuable because they are bringing meaning to society, to address particular issues problems demands for identity” (Innovation network - SDU, 2013). In this Media Studies dissertation, I have been examining a similar concern: how digital stars Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, articulate “Canadian” national identities via R&B music.

Branding is closely tied to advertising. Andrew Wernick (1991) argues that “the mythic, psychological, or status related meaning that ads associate with the commodities they depict becomes transferred to them” so that products come to embody the values that they are advertised to promote. In this context, I have been arguing that digital stars Drake, Bieber, and Reyez perform diverse Canadian identities in popular culture through texts that are mythical and performative, functioning as emblems of “Canadian-ness,” with the potential power to (re)shape hegemonic views of Canadian-ness. Wernick (1991) further



stated that advertising “comes to serve as a major transmission belt for ideology. But ideology itself undergoes an important change to the same extent” (p. 267). In other words, it is important to address the on-going reimagination of ideas articulated through advertisements which both shape ideas in society and are also shaped by that society. As artists articulate Canadian-ness they (re)shape how Canadian-ness can be re-imagined in society, even as existing ideologies of Canadian-ness shape their digital stars. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez’s articulations of Canadian-ness, are also implicated in how the nation-state of Canada was attempting to brand itself through music, cultural policies, and government practices.

National governments have long attempted to shape their public image on the global stage through advertising. Naomi Klein examined how, in 2002, the Bush administration hired “Madison Avenue’s top brand managers” including “Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Charlotte Beers [who was assigned] not to improve relations with other countries but rather to perform an overhaul of the U.S.’s image abroad.” Naomi Klein (2002) refers to the significance that “Brand U.S.A” placed on shaping the opinions of national and international audiences “to sell the United States and its war on terrorism to an increasingly hostile world.”

Likewise, “in Canada, government and political advertising are inextricably linked” (Whitaker, 1977, p. 219). Reginald Whitaker (1977) dates this to “The First World War” which “gave a major impetus to the development of advertising and most particularly to the involvement of advertising agencies in the preparation of government propaganda appeals to citizens on such issues as voluntary enlistment and the sale of government bonds” (p. 221). Canadian and U.S. government bodies have long used marketing and brand management practices to engage citizens and build hegemonic beliefs about their respective nations.

For example, as in Canada, Australia’s policymakers created a multicultural policy “to help unite communities with diverse cultural backgrounds around a collective identity” (Rentschler, et al., 2023, p. 12). As discussed in Chapter 2, Canada also created a multicultural policy, but white music-media gatekeepers enacted it in ways that upheld

hegemonic views of Canada as an exclusively white population that played rock and folk music. Professor Marcia Langton argued that Australia's multicultural policy, like Canada's, has failed to include all national identities (AIATSIS, 2019). Our multicultural policy thus continued to serve the Canadian brand as "inclusive" while still privileging white Anglo-Saxon English-speaking citizens.

Sana Imran's (2017) study, "Strengthening the National Identity through Brands," argued:

Advertisements today, sell more than...products; they sell values, ways of life... Media is a powerful tool in building and bringing communities together. Advertising through media contributes towards nationalism and process of conceptualizing a nation. Brands are quite helpful in representing the nation's distinct and unique values amongst diverse international audience of investors, tourists, migrants...scholars, arts and sports franchises. (p. 80)

I put Imran's (2017) argument that companies use advertisements to sell national "ways of life" in dialogue with David Buxton's (1983/1990) theory that musical artists sell "a life-style model" (p. 396), as discussed in Chapter 4, to suggest that digital stars, like Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, are implicated in "nation branding" practices by selling a distinctly Canadian national brand.

The value of musical artists for nation-building practices was exemplified in 2016 during a state dinner at the White House, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described Canadian star Justin Bieber as "one of [Canada's] most popular exports to the United States" (Global News, 2016). Not only did Prime Minister Trudeau's classification of Bieber as a "popular export" address artists as a valuable commodity to be bought and sold, Trudeau further defined a Canadian identity as an excessively apologetic one when he referenced to Bieber's single "Sorry" and stated: "of course, leave it to a Canadian to reach international fame with a song called 'Sorry'" (Global News, 2016). Despite the light-hearted nature of this comment, Trudeau demonstrated how Canadian stars can articulate and contribute to hegemonic views of Canadians and help build a distinctly Canadian national brand.

Neither a state nor a marketer has all of the power in shaping the hegemonic understanding of a nation and must, therefore, to varying degrees incorporate audiences'

existing beliefs while trying to frame or re-frame the nation in desirable ways (Akutsu, 2008; Georgescu & Botescu, 2004; Rose, 2010). A major theme of this dissertation has involved understanding how Canadian R&B artists have long demanded space and recognition in Canada's national imaginary while battling with Canadian media gatekeepers, music industry executives, and government policies.

Global trade and international information sharing can lead to the loss of a distinctly unique national identity (Habermas, 1998). The concept of "nation branding," in which "the reputations of countries function like the brand images of companies" (Anholt, 2008, p. 22) means that countries turn to branding techniques in order to distinguish each nation's unique identity in terms of a commercial logic (Olins, 2000; Dinnie, 2008, p. 21). Magdalena Kania-Lundholm (2012) evaluated nation branding as "a double-edged phenomenon" (p. 221) because "it is both empowering and exploiting; it is about the national pride and recognition of collective subjectivity, but it also follows the exclusionary and exploitative logic of consumer capitalism" (p. 221). A branded national identity commodifies a way of life that likely overlooks individual citizens' diverse identities (N. Klein, 2002; Georgescu & Botescu, 2004). The ideology of a "Canadian national brand" might be used to create a sense of community but simultaneously it might be weaponized to exercise exclusion and/or manipulate citizens.

Peter van Ham (2001) argued that "globalization and the media revolution have made each state more aware of itself, its image, its reputation, and its attitude—in short, its brand," whereby, a country can help define its "brand" through global trade and international relationships. The consumption of nationally-branded products can also help foster national pride (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Anholt, 2008). Michael Beverland et al. (2021) contend that businesses and companies may become carriers of "latent forms of national identity" (p. 598) by "attach[ing] themselves to everyday collective memory...through a range of practices including product placement, marketing communications, sponsorship, licensing, partnerships" (p. 595). In this context, digital stars like Jessie Reyez make their identities and lifestyle brands synonymous with that of Canadian-ness and "Canadian" lifestyles. According to Dr. Douglas Holt, cultural branding is highly contextual and takes into account how "this brand has this ideology

that is going to be meaningful for these people in this historical moment” (Innovation network - SDU, 2013). In what follows, I analyze one exemplary moment in which Jessie Reyez and her team exemplified the practices of national cultural branding in 2020.

### 5.3 “A Legacy” Moment in Canadian Cultural History”

On August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Jessie Reyez sang the Canadian and U.S. national anthems (Reyez, 2020b; Reyez, 2020x) for a Toronto Raptors game. But this was no ordinary performance: Reyez sang atop the CN Tower prior to an NBA playoff game broadcast around the world. Her performance is said to have garnered over 266,000,000 impressions worldwide (8 Til Faint, 2020). Reyez wore a branded La Tour CN Tower jacket and a black neck gaiter on her face that had the words “Breonna Taylor” written across it. She also took a knee during her singing of the U.S. anthem.



**Figure 12: Reyez wearing Breonna Taylor mask during performance of the U.S. national anthem for NBA (Reyez, 2020b)**

In promotional materials, Reyez’s team described the marketing objectives of this performance and stated that it would “produce a cultural moment that offers iconic permanence, positioned as a ‘legacy’ moment in Canadian cultural history,” designed to

“secure...impressions,” and to “inspire dialogue and impact that is socially impactful, fearlessly provocative and associated to Jessie Reyez’s values” (8 Til Faint, 2020).<sup>22</sup> That is to say, Reyez’s performance is simultaneously a commercially-motivated promotion and a political statement by an artist deeply committed to multiculturalism and social justice.

In this performance, we witness Jessie Reyez exemplifying Canadian national branding practices while participating in the U.S.-originated #SayHerName campaign. Reyez covers her mouth with a black gaiter that "says" murdered U.S. citizen Breonna Taylor’s name before beginning the performance of the U.S. national anthem. Whereas BLM movements often focused on the brutalities against Black men and not Black women, Melissa Brown and Rashawn Ray (2020) contended that “supporting the #SayHerName campaign [which advocates saying Breonna’s name in the movement to highlight her experiences] means remaining steadfast in the struggle to upend how systemic racism and sexism intersect to disproportionately affect Black women.” The death of 26-year-old Black U.S. woman Breonna Taylor in March of 2020 was the tragic result of false accusations of drug possession, police gunfire, and a lack of medical assistance provided by police officers. Inspired by this “Black woman’s fatal encounter with the police” (Brown & Ray, 2020), Taylor's death became “one of the main drivers of wide-scale demonstrations that erupted that year over policing and racial injustice” (Oppel Jr. et al., 2023), as protesters across Canada and the U.S. condemned police brutality. Brown and Ray (2020) point out that "the grand jury’s failure to implicate anyone in Breonna Taylor’s death" spurred "online activism in her name [that increased people’s awareness of] how the justice system disempowers Black women victims of police brutality” (Brown & Ray, 2020).

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<sup>22</sup> This quote comes from an “internal only” deck provided to me by 8 Til Faint’s team titled “Ideation to execution: an elevated Canadian cultural moment with a global mandate” which highlighted the “ideas” behind of the performance, its “goals and targets,” its “objectives,” its “execution” process, its “impressions” and results for “why [the performance] worked” through a brief precis of the preparations and intentions for Reyez’s performance.

Later that year, after Breonna Taylor's death in 2020, Reyez participated in BLM movements in Canada. These included the "Justice for Regis" protest in Toronto that occurred after no charges were laid against police for the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a 29-year-old, Black-Indigenous-Ukrainian-Canadian woman who died after falling off her balcony while speaking with the police in her apartment (M. Miller, 2020). Reyez marched the streets of Toronto and posted about her participation in the protest on her Instagram account (Reyez, 2020u). Reyez has proudly asserted her Black ancestry and her female identity by stating: "I am a visible Latina and I show love to the Black revolution openly" (Roiz, 2020). The black gaiter featured in Reyez's performance of the U.S.A.'s National Anthem on top of the CN Tower also speaks to the COVID-19 era (when masks were worn daily as a form of protection to prevent the spread of the virus), also doubles as a symbol of the silenced voices of Black women. The neck gaiter was black in colour and reinforced Reyez's positioning as an advocate for BLM movements. Although Breonna Taylor's name on the gaiter was only visible at the beginning of the performance, before Reyez pulled it down from over her face, Reyez wore the black gaiter around her neck during performances of both the U.S. and the Canadian national anthems.

When Reyez (2020v) posted her performance on the CN Tower on Instagram, she hashtagged Breonna Taylor's name in the caption: "Canadian AND U.S. National Anthems. Game 1. #BreonnaTaylor @raptors @nba Playoffs." Reyez thus underscored how BLM is relevant to both Canada and the U.S.A. by capitalizing the word "AND." In claiming the intersectional identity of "Black<sup>23</sup>," "Canadian," and "woman," Reyez asserts her authenticity as she engages in BLM conversations. Yet, in acknowledging this highly mediated performance, I also want to highlight the ambiguities and complexities of employing hashtags to support BLM movements. These hashtags run the risk of what has been called "virtue signalling" which is also a rising concern in online brand management strategies, as companies attempt to position themselves through brand

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<sup>23</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, Reyez stated "A lot of Latinx people have African blood; my grandfather was Black" and aligned herself with the Black Latina community (Roiz, 2020)

values associated with virtuousness, kindness, decency, etc. on social media (Bartholomew, 2015).

In 2020, Dr. Karen Stollznow explained that “virtue signalling is often an accusation of “jumping on the bandwagon” of a popular cause. At the height of the #BLM protests, companies including McDonalds, Starbucks, and Nike were accused of “corporate virtue signaling.” Jacob Browera, Saim Kashmiri, and Vijay Mahajan’s (2017) assert that “firms with a consistent commitment to CSP [Corporate Social Performance] over time can reap the rewards of their CSP” (p. 94) and argue that a demonstrated long-term engagement with a social cause increases the company’s perceived authenticity in committing to that cause—reminding us that authenticity is a quality on sale in these contexts. Neil Levy (2021) argues that virtue signaling is related to “the motivations” (p. 9557) and the perceived “truthfulness” (p. 9557) of the person that is signaling virtue; however, Levy also argues that “virtue signaling might...be hypocritical...Not only might the virtue signaller really be concerned with signalling their moral respectability, they might also (or instead) be signalling dishonestly” (p. 9555). For example, following the death of George Floyd, Australian Football League players took a knee before a match (game) which “sparked a divided online reaction” as some Twitter users claimed the players to be performing “virtue signaling” and “claimed it was done to win over US audiences” (K. Stevenson, 2020). A recent study suggests that if companies engage in environmental or sustainability causes in a way that consumers believe and respect, consumers’ judgments about that company’s reputation are affected in a positive way (S. Gray, et al., 2020). Therefore, it benefits both the cause and the company if the company’s engagement with a social cause is perceived as authentic.

Reyez does indeed use her platform to instigate conversations about Breonna Taylor and BLM movements, even if, as a popular culture performance with multiple promotional dimensions, there are limitations to Reyez’s seeking of engagement with these topics. Although a fuller discussion of the COVID-era reinvigoration of Black Lives Matter movements in 2020 falls outside the scope of this study, I want here to unpack some of the implications of such brand-driven activism.

In 2020, I interviewed Stacy Jones, CEO of Hollywood Branded, about the state of marketing and brand management during the COVID-19 pandemic and the reinvention of Black Lives Matter movements. Stacy Jones stated:

the world has been turned upside down in terms of Black Lives Matter movements...brands are going to be looking at influencers and celebrity talent in ways to have them help get their messaging across...specifically looking for influencers and celebrities who share a voice share a message...who are going to be able to not offend...but carry the voice of the brand in a safe way that is somewhat protected.

Stacy Jones was highlighting how companies wanted to participate, but in a “safe” and “protected” way that would “not offend” customers, in a complex social justice movement that advocated for the safety and protection of Black people who faced structural racism. Therefore, Jones’ statement illustrates a significant tension: companies engage with these topics but do so in a mediated, even insulated, fashion that limits risk, and thus also their commitment to actual social change. To highlight the different “risks” different organizations are willing to take, I draw on Sean Campbell (2022) who suggests that “there are, broadly speaking, two branches of activism. There are on-the-ground, grassroots organizers...who work locally, passionately, with little money, often risking their lives and livelihood through their protests,” i.e., taking risks that actually involve potential death or physical trauma. Sean Campbell (2022) states that the second branch is “the larger, more professionalized national groups with corporate donations and fund-raising power, whose high-profile leaders can garner lucrative speaking gigs and book deals” so that larger companies can reach wider audiences to increase the visibility of the movement, but the companies do so while commodifying the movement through “lucrative” and presumably low-risk business ventures. Hence, larger companies can commodify these movements in ways that benefit their businesses without taking the same “risks” as grassroots leaders.

J.C. Pan (2020) noted in his article “Will big philanthropy defang our radical moment?” that an “uneasy relationship [that has long] existed between large funders and social movements...No matter how willing foundations might seem to embrace radical rhetoric of the moment...partnerships with big philanthropy run the risk of defanging radical grassroots work.” Large companies who participate in the movement through their large-



scale advertising campaigns run the risk of detracting from the movement itself, perhaps overshadowing smaller-scale organizations that are doing more “on-the-ground, grassroots” work in risking their lives through protests and demonstrations. Additionally, “companies are getting applauded and pilloried for public comments about race” (Weisul, 2020) without actually doing the same work or taking the same risks as many smaller, grassroots organizations in making a change.

The American Association of Advertising Agencies published (2020) free downloadable “Black Lives Matter for Marketers” PDF which highlighted how companies face a “risk” in losing customers by demonstrating allyship for BLM and by potentially doing so in ways that are not received well by consumers: “Allyship of any kind requires risk. But, doing nothing is worse than getting it wrong. Every misstep is a learning opportunity. Own your mistakes and consumers will forgive you.” By suggesting that companies can make “mistakes,” take “missteps” and “ge[t] [messaging] wrong” the text suggests that audiences tend to accept or admire a company’s participation in BLM. Yet, when Bieber branded his *Justice* tour in live performances as an effort to provide “justice” for all lives (2020k, 2020l, 2020m) and incorporated Martin Luther King’s voice in his *Justice* album, Bieber’s efforts were described as a “misstep” (Spanos, 2021), and many critics were not forgiving towards Bieber’s efforts to participate in Black Lives Matter Movements (Capital XTRA, 2021). So, when is an attempt to engage in Black Lives Matter movements considered a “misstep” and who determines what is culturally acceptable for companies to do, in demonstrating their allyship to BLM?

The “Black Lives Matter for Marketers” PDF stated that “The right mix of BLM activities will be unique to each business, but the most important thing is that you must have processes and practices in place in order to participate effectively.” This implies that each company does not have the ability to participate in equal ways in BLM as each company has its own “unique,” “right mix” of articulations and “activities” to “effectively” “participate” in BLM. But, how is the “right mix” for each company to “participate effectively” measured?

The answers, as with any evaluation of authenticity, varies pertaining to each individual's interpretation of the company's activity, which is fundamentally shaped by that individual's own sense of identity and politics. Hegemonic struggles over what is socially and culturally acceptable are constantly changing and people in power continue to regulate what is celebrated as an acceptable form of participation. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) understanding of hegemony suggests that there continues to be a constant struggle between people in positions of power and those in subordinate positions who are fighting not only to direct conversations about BLM but also to define what will be perceived as a meaningful or authentic means of engagement in the movement. For example, Bonin Bough, Black U.S. Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of Group Black, a Black-owned media company, stated that the NFL should "say sorry to [Colin] Kaepernick" and when he further stated "It's great that you see the error of your ways, but an entire guy's life is ruined" (as quoted in Weisul, 2020), Bough highlighted the sheer power that companies hold in determining the public reputation and future career of individuals who might challenge hegemonic beliefs and/or help support Black Lives Matter Movements. An executive in the National Football League, Joe Lockhart (2020), claimed that companies must tread carefully when engaging in conversations about racial politics to avoid polarizing markets. Lockhart (2020) admitted that "no teams wanted to sign a player—even one as talented as Kaepernick—whom they saw as controversial, and, therefore, bad for business." As individuals challenge hegemonic beliefs, they must somehow do so in ways that remain acceptable to people in positions of power or risk losing job opportunities, future careers, and positive public relations.

The Raptors and the NBA likely selected Reyez and helped her stage her performance of the anthem because they believed she could engage with BLM in a presumably "safe way that is somewhat protected," in a large part due to her claimed intersectional identity and experience. In my interview with Adam Burchill, Senior Director of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Partnership (MLSE), Music, and Live Entertainment, he noted how Reyez's intersectional identity enables her to speak about BLM in ways that would not be socially or culturally appropriate for "white dudes" like himself:

we need to create room for more diverse voices and more diverse perspectives. I don't know the first thing of what it is to be like Jessie Reyez from her unique

experiences but I know that as a white dude I took a lot from it and I can certainly imagine what that could mean to people who faced similar challenges like she has...so those of us in the mainstream in sport and culture business have a duty to ensure that we are championing up and coming, new and diverse perspectives. And I think that the Toronto Raptors are better by having Jessie Reyez.

Reyez's intersectional identity authenticates her participation in discussions of BLM because her non-hegemonic, "marked" body (as discussed in Chapter 1) immediately positions her as Other, if not opposed to, white Canadian (or U.S.) national imaginaries in a perhaps unthreatening way. When Burchill says that Reyez's perspectives are "new" and "up and coming," he frames her "diverse" perspective as something novel in a contemporary society where diverse identities have yet to be fully embraced and normalized in mainstream media.

Although Reyez's "diverse," intersectional identity has long existed within the fabric of Canadian culture, Canadian media of Reyez's generation is only now beginning to (somewhat) fill these gaps in hegemonic articulations of Canadian-ness. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to challenge what may appear to be "new" as more of a re-articulation of an existing ideology. Although these "diverse," non-white Canadian "perspectives" were fighting for decades for audibility and visibility in Canadian society in ways that somewhat circumvented mainstream media (by producing their own R&B records in the first generation of Canadian R&B artists, as discussed in Chapter 2; or growing an online fanbase in the second generation of Canadian R&B artists, as discussed in Chapter 3), Reyez's generation of third wave Canadian R&B artists are gaining a more central position in Canadian media. This is attributed to the long struggles of a generation of artists before her (as discussed in Chapter 3); to accelerated digital media trends due to the COVID-19 pandemic (as discussed in Chapter 4); and to a political and cultural shift in recognizing more "diversity" beyond hegemonically white "preferred" identities in Canada (as discussed in Chapter 1 and 2). Nonetheless, Reyez's representation of diversity continues to be mediated by hegemonically white gatekeepers.

To return to Reyez's CN Tower anthem performance: One source claims her stance to take a knee originated not with Reyez but with a corporation. According to journalist Ted Fraser (2020), Reyez's manager Mauricio Ruiz said that "the Raptors asked Reyez to

kneel, and she was more than happy to oblige. The players in Orlando [where the actual game was about to be played] were also kneeling for both anthems.” Whatever its genesis, by taking a knee, Reyez aligned herself with Black Lives Matter movements. Some individuals criticized Reyez’s participation in BLM via her performance; online user Sean-Paul F [@wasabiGT] (2020) stated: “Please don't kneel. We should all be standing tall together. Kneeling is a step back from everyone being equal.” Another online user, Trippie LSTER [@trippielster9007] (2020) commented: “why’d she kneel tho. Unless if she’s kneeling for First Nations people, kneeling during the Canadian national anthem for BLM is just wrong.” These comments highlight the multiple cross-branded and cross-national complexities involved in this performance. The latter comment that Reyez taking a knee for “BLM” is just “wrong” is reminiscent of a quote discussed in Chapter 2, when U.S. hip-hop, radio announcer Alix Spiegel stated that Maestro Fresh Wes was “just wrong” for participating in U.S. hip-hop music because he is a Canadian who “delivers information about America to Americans. He interprets our culture for us” (Spiegel as quoted in Villamere, 2017, p. 132). Reyez’s and Maestro’s Canadian-ness make them, for some, inauthentic participants in cultural practices associated with the U.S.A. The contestation of who is to be included in cultural activities, and who is inauthentic, continues to be mediated by the perceived racial and national identity of the participant.

Reyez posted about the performance (2020w) on a key site used for the promotion of her digital stardom, her Instagram account. Using hashtags on her Instagram may have made Reyez vulnerable to charges that her performance was merely “digital slacktivism.” Slacktivism is defined as the act of supporting “a cause by performing simple measures” by those who “are not truly engaged or devoted to making a change” (United Nations, 2010). The term is often applied dismissively to online participatory practices in social movements. Drake, for example, alluded to some of the complexity at issue here when he posted in 2016 about video footage that had surfaced involving “two Baton Rouge officers wrestling 37-year-old Alton Sterling to the ground, then sticking a gun in his chest, and shooting him dead” (Phippen, 2016). When Drake wrote, “No one begins their life as a hashtag. Yet the trend of being reduced to one continues” (Drake, 2016a; Drake as quoted in FYI Music News), Drake highlighted how Black lives lost to police brutality

are often “reduced” to hashtags in popular culture, thereby reifying their identities in ways that may be problematic.

Drake's online post echoes concerns raised briefly in Chapter 2 regarding Canada Post's (2022) recognition of Canadian blues artist Eleanor Collins's historical contributions to Canadian culture with a stamp. Reducing her life's work to something literally the size of a postage stamp risks oversimplifying and reifying her contributions to Canadian society. Slacktivism, which assesses the degree of one's support for a cause, applies equally to offline activities, including “wearing a ribbon on your shirt to bring awareness [to a cause]” (Muslic, 2017). The degree of one's participation in a cause can be challenged online and offline. Even as Reyez participates in the social-justice-driven act of taking a knee, she is also deeply implicated in processes of commercial promotion and commodification.

Moreover, Reyez's performance of the anthems was filmed in profile, certainly in order to reinforce the fact that she was taking a knee, but also having the effect of highlighting the “La Tour CN Tower” logo on the shoulder of her jacket, directly facing the camera.



**Figure 13: Reyez performing U.S. national anthem while taking a knee with “La Tour CN Tower” brand integration (Reyez, 2020b)**

Had there been an explicit disclosure for the “La Tour CN Tower” brand integration in Reyez’s social media posts of the recorded event, Reyez may have been questioned for her degree of commitment to social justice aims in taking a knee in this highly branded and explicitly promotional context. Additionally, as a digital star, her participation in Black Lives Matter movements, and her representation of “diversity” in this performance, continue to be mediated by many gatekeepers and commercial interests. As discussed in Chapter 4, the digital star is created by the performer, their team, their brand partners, and audiences, all of whom shape the musicking experience and the value—both cultural and economic—of the star. Nevertheless, her performance made Jessie Reyez “the first artist to perform the national anthem atop the CN Tower” (CBC Music, 2020a; Curran, 2020). Working together, the Toronto Raptors professional basketball team, Reyez’s embodiment of her Canadian lifestyle brand, and La Tour CN Tower all prominently asserted “Canadian” brand values highlighting a multicultural nation in an international context.

Carlos Torelli (2013) argues that “cultural equity can be assessed by observing the frequency with which a brand is used in public discourse for illustrating cultural themes and ideas” (p. 51), so that “culturally symbolic brands serve as public representations of the abstract characteristics that define a culture” (p. 51). For example, when Reyez’s promotion team stated “that the cultural symbolism of the Toronto Raptors was incredibly high in cultural equity” (8 Til Faint, 2020), they were arguing that the Toronto Raptors are strong signifiers of a Canadian-ness that is potentially quite valuable to Reyez. By aligning Reyez’s branded Canadian identity with that of the Toronto Raptors, and then placing both on the CN Tower, her performance also exemplifies the practice of nation branding.

Ironically, as a symbol of Canadian-ness mostly made up of Black U.S. citizens, the Toronto Raptors remind us once more of the outsized influence that U.S. culture has on Canadian society. Canada’s Raptors represent *de facto* immigrants and still qualify as a “national team” that the country is proud of, in part, because they “sport” national-branded shirts, stand and/or take a knee for the Canadian national anthem in games, and, like Reyez, their identities become (sub)merged with that of a Canadian-ness celebrated

through cultural marketing and branding. In sports, as in music, national identity can be performed. With the help of many Black U.S. Raptors players, Reyez reinforces shifts in ideas of Canadian identities (as a second-generation Canadian and as an R&B artist). These (re)articulate Canadian-ness through differently racialized identities, using national branding and marketing methods. Here it is worth noting that, by 2022, Reyez “often splits her time Los Angeles and New York [but is] adamant that home will always be Toronto” (Lloyd, 2022) which may also complicate her Canadian-ness as it intersects increasingly with U.S. culture.

Adam Burchill discussed with me (2020) the importance of this performance to changing ideologies of Canadian-ness when he said:

[Reyez, OVO, and the Raptors] are changing a very outdated idea of what it means to be Canadian...[The] Canadian the white hockey player [does not represent] Canada anymore...white guitar-playing rock bands used to be the bread and butter of Canada but that’s changing.

Asserting her Columbian identity and her R&B-ness while highlighting the politics of Blackness within Canadian mainstream and social media, Reyez challenges hegemonic notions of what it means to be a Canadian. Representations of Canadian music began to shift from an “outdated” idea of an exclusively white rock and folk nation to include more racially diverse Canadian artists once it gained the support of Black U.S. R&B artists and gatekeepers. We see similar parallels in how Canada has expanded its understanding of its racial national identity through interactions with U.S.-influenced cultural forms. For example, Canadian Jessie Reyez’s collaboration with The Toronto Raptors is an example of how the U.S. has influenced racial national identity in Canada because the Raptors are predominately made up of Black U.S. athletes. Together they enable Canada’s multiculturalism to achieve even greater media visibility.

As in my discussions of Canada’s twinned inferiority complex in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, it would seem Canadians still sadly require support from U.S. cultural leaders to elicit Canadian pride. Yet, many online viewers demonstrated how Reyez successfully invigorated Canadian pride with comments about her anthem performances on her YouTube post (Reyez, 2020x), including “Oh be still my proud Canadian heart...Jessie this was so beautiful...” (@diannaw3034, 2020); “I’ve never been so proud of the

Canadian anthem until now” (@flatbush8950, 2020); “So beautiful Jessie I absolutely love this. You always touch my heart with your voice ❤️ man I’m so proud to be a Canadian right now!” (@manic1xie139, 2020); and “Proud to be Canadian 🇨🇦❤️” (@chloiepoblete4578). Therefore, Reyez engages online audiences who then publicly assert their Canadian pride and engage with other online users in discussions of their proud Canadian-ness through watching this groundbreaking performance.

In designing her CN Tower performance of the anthems, Reyez’s team stated that the Raptors “wanted to use their first game as NBA champions to touch on the belongingness and allegiance to the culture of Toronto that the Raptors embody” (8 Til Faint, 2020). In other words, capitalizing on the belongingness and allegiance that a local or national brand can create could be used to “touch” consumers emotionally, but also presumably financially. Following Benedict Anderson’s (1991) examination of an imagined community and Tim Edensor’s (2002) argument that media can help foster nationhood (which I discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), Reyez’s performance of the Canadian national anthem acts as a powerful, branded, national-popular text. Arguably, it not only enhanced a Canadian national brand but helped position Reyez as an even more authentic Canadian icon and hence a more profitable commodity.

By May of 2021, an article suggested that “a year after George Floyd’s killing, white allyship fades...from fatigue and frustration at the relatively slow pace of change [which] has led to a decline in white support for the Black Lives Matter movement” (J. Williams, 2021). Therefore, in evaluating a company or an artist’s authenticity in participating in these movements, longevity of impact becomes an important factor. Sherri Gordon (2020) claims that participation can be as simple as “read[ing] a book” and that “[n]o matter what your personal situation is or your limitations, there are always for you to engage, get involved.” Gordon (2020) recommends becoming “educated about issues facing people of color” and gaining more empathy and a broader knowledge and awareness in thinking about other people’s experiences and discussing these topics. Musical artists, like Reyez, can help audiences learn more about these struggles by representing different ways of life through entertainment media in live performances, social media posts, music videos, songs, and interviews. Artists have a unique capability



to inspire change and build empathy and allyship amongst audiences. Musicking (Small, 1998), as an experience, is expansive, emotive, and continually unfolding, making it a powerful tool for social change, with popular artists powerful cultural influences in contemporary society.

## 6 Conclusion

In a country that long failed to accept and institutionalize R&B music as part of Canadian culture, this qualitative study explored the development of “Canadian R&B” from the twentieth into the twenty-first centuries. I examined the historical construction of beliefs that “Canadian” musical identities are exclusively “white” and “folk,” and that “R&B” is an experience created exclusively by people who have “Black” and “American” identities. I analyzed a variety of media (trade magazines, websites, social media posts, academic journals) as well as conducting my own interviews with music industry executives and marketing professionals. I charted some of the challenges “Canadian R&B” music has posed historically to Canadian musical institutions (such as the makers of popularity charts) and considered the ways in which national/regional/R&B cultures define, assign and make places for particular kinds of performers and musical style, or not. I concluded that many racially diverse Canadian R&B artists have yet to receive proper recognition for their contributions to the sounds and styles we celebrate in Canadian culture today. This dissertation sought to fill gaps in the literature by exploring several Canadian artists’ contributions to “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness,” with an analysis of how musical artists Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez in particular have successfully broken-down barriers and built successful careers as racially diverse Canadian R&B artists.

Following Black and white segregation practices, music charts were segregated: music created by Black identities was classified under “race records,” which was later renamed “R&B.” Despite the growing popularity of R&B music in the 1950s, Canadian broadcast media excluded racialized identities and Canadian government and media policies failed to support R&B music. An influx of immigrants in Canada, during the 1960s and 1970s, worked together at the periphery of Canadian society to create genre-blurring R&B, hip-hop, and soca music. Canadian R&B artists failed to gain support in Canada and were sometimes forced to move to the U.S. to establish their careers. Lacking access to radio airwaves and infrastructural support for their music, Canadian R&B long remained underfunded, undervalued, and underdeveloped. In the 1990s, Canada began embracing some Canadian R&B artists who first found success in the U.S.A. By the early 2000s,

Canadian R&B acts were accessible on national and international media as they mixed “R&B” with “pop” music. In the late 2000s and 2010s, a racially diverse cohort of Canadian R&B artists, established careers as Canadian R&B artists by benefitting from new online technologies (such as streaming platforms) and traditional networking practices (developing relationships established by their predecessors, with Canadian and U.S. artists and music industry executives).

I assessed how Bieber, Drake, and Reyez represent new generations of Canadian R&B artists, able to break into the music industry by building on the work of their predecessors while using innovative brand management strategies, genre-blurring practices, and cultural marketing. I interrogated the racist, xenophobic, and sexist reasons why Canada has long failed to give racially diverse Canadian R&B artists the place they deserve in Canadian music, media, and academia. I tracked various understandings, and applications of the classificatory tools “Canadian” and “R&B” and examine the intergenerational impact of structural racism on the development of R&B in Canada. Bieber, Drake, and Reyez continue to be challenged by some music industry executives for their participation in “R&B” as racially diverse Canadians; this demonstrates an ongoing problem with classifying music through exclusionary racial- and national-based music genre categories. However, Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s successes articulate a shift towards more diversity in Canadian music and Canadian media. Although music genres continue to be powerful tools to exercise exclusion, Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have a growing influential power to shape more inclusive ideas of race, nationality, and music genres. I argue that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez represent multiple, yet equally Canadian identities through their Canadian R&B artist lifestyle brands across multiple media (including, but not limited to, music lyrics, music videos, brand partnerships, interviews, and social media posts). The historical development of “Canadian R&B,” through the contemporary work of Bieber, Drake, and Reyez, reveals how multi-generational struggles and relationships, international networks, digital media, and cultural marketing helped build a Canadian national brand that is shifting away from an outdated idea of Canada as exclusively white rock and folk nation, to now honestly reflect (and inspire) Canada’s diverse population. I conclude that Canadian R&B can enhance unity despite the traditional organization of music genre categories through exclusionary racial and

national divides. Canadian R&B's history and its continued development demonstrate a striving towards a more inclusive Canada and a more inclusive and innovative R&B genre style.

To assess how the careers of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez have reinforced, complicated, and challenged hegemonic understandings of both “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness,” I began Chapter 1 by addressing how hegemonic views of Canadian-ness and hegemonic understandings of R&B-ness often denied racially diverse Canadians space in the genre of R&B music. I tracked treatments, understandings, and varying applications of the classificatory tool “Canadian” and “R&B” across a variety of media through trade magazines, websites, social media posts, academic journals, and by conducting my own interviews with music industry executives and marketing professionals. I argued that there are new generations of contemporary Canadian R&B artists creating “musicking” (Small, 1998) experiences. These include Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez. I provided my working definition of contemporary Canadian R&B while demonstrating the pitfalls and complexities of classifying music into genre categories. I highlight the importance of recording Canadian R&B history as a key contributor to Canadian culture and to address the impact that Canadians have had on R&B music despite being long ignored, unsupported, and underrepresented in Canadian media and scholarship. I argue that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez contribute to the growing recognition of Canadian R&B music through various marketing and brand management strategies and I provided context to demonstrate why Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were chosen for this study based on their prominent and unique articulations of Canadian-ness and their representation of new generations of contemporary Canadian R&B. I argue that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez are exemplary case studies to engage in discussions of race, nationality, and genre in the classifications of “Canadian-ness” and “R&B-ness” based on their multiple, yet equally Canadian R&B lifestyle brands.

In Chapter 2, I surveyed the literature on historical definitions of the R&B genre and Canadian identities in popular media. I explored how ideologies of racialized and nationalized identities shaped music genre classifications. I traced the history and development of R&B in Canada and the U.S.A. through minstrelsy, Billboard charts,

border radio stations, interactions between Canadian and U.S. hip-hop music genre worlds, and collaborations between U.S. and Canadian artists and music industry gatekeepers. I explored how R&B music has developed in Canada in ways that intersected with and diverged from the U.S.A. I argued that Canadian broadcast media and Canadian music industry gatekeepers have long failed to support Canadian R&B artists. I explored how multicultural Canadian hip-hop, R&B, and reggae artists worked together in the U.S. and at the periphery of Canadian mainstream media to develop a distinctly Canadian R&B music genre world. I argued that many first-and second-generation immigrants contributed to Canadian R&B music by mixing their cultural influences into the sounds and styles of their musical performances. I assessed how these artists were required to move to the U.S.A. to get record deals where they continued to represent their distinctly Canadian identities, despite lacking support from Canadian media and music industries. I examined how government regulations and media policies developed ideologies of Canada as an exclusively white community which excluded racialized identities and R&B music. I concluded that the history and development of Canadian R&B music still requires much academic exploration and analysis.

In Chapter 3, I traced how diverse Canadians Bieber, Drake, and Reyez broke into the music industry as new generations of Canadian R&B artists. I argued that Bieber, Drake, and Reyez were able to build on the networks created by generations of Canadian artists before them to help them break into the music industry. I also argue that their mixture of pop music with R&B and their use of online communications also helped them to break into the music industry in ways that were not available to the previous generations of Canadian R&B artists. I assessed Bieber and Drake as the second-generation of contemporary Canadian R&B artists who were able to use the internet to help build their visibility and brand their public personalities as distinctly “Canadian” and “R&B.” I classified Reyez in the third generation of contemporary Canadian R&B artists and examined how she used local Canadian music industry infrastructures to help catapult her career. I examined Bieber’s, Drake’s, and Reyez’s unique struggles to break into the music industry as “Canadian R&B artists” based on their racialized, nationalized, and gendered identities. I explored how online communications and mobile devices shifted these musical artists’ brand management and marketing strategies. I concluded that

contemporary musical artists expand upon marketing strategies exercised in broadcast media in shifting to online platforms (like audience engagement, brand consistency, and brand integration strategies) and employ new digital campaign management strategies enabled by networking platforms like Blogspot, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. I examined how they helped push Canadian R&B into popular culture as digital stars by using online communication strategies alongside traditional industry practices (such as brand partnerships and networking with music industry gatekeepers).

In Chapter 4, I explored how Drake's, Bieber's, and Reyez's brand partnerships with companies and social media strategies, between 2019 and 2022, rendered their lifestyle brands as distinctly Canadian and part of the R&B genre. I examined how all three artists created content to brand themselves as distinctly Canadian through references to Canadian cities, Canadian companies, and Canadian lifestyles in R&B performances, social media texts, interviews, and brand partnerships. I examined how all three artists used particular marketing methods to increase their brand awareness and brand relevancy in popular culture. I touched on marketing methods including, but not limited to, colour consistency, SEO optimization, and user generated content. I also explored how their use of social media enabled these artists to brand their star personas by sharing lived experiences and building their authenticity as contemporary Canadian R&B artists. I examined how they created Canadian R&B content inclusive of music, music videos, livestreams, brand partnerships, and social media posts to popularize Canadian identities and contemporary Canadian R&B music as popstars.

I concluded this study by critically examining the ideology of a national brand and analyzed a singular moment in 2020, when Jessie Reyez performed the Canadian and U.S. national anthems. Singing on top of the CN Tower before a Toronto Raptors playoff game while taking a knee and wearing a black mask that stated Breonna Taylor's name, Reyez's performance helped highlight some of the key insights of my study. I addressed the growing influence of contemporary Canadian R&B artists as digital stars, and examined their potential to raise awareness and ignite social change while inspiring national pride and shedding light on important political movements.

By seeking to answer the question, “how have the careers of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez reinforced, complicated, and challenged hegemonic understandings of both Canadian-ness and R&B-ness,” this study has sought to provide insights into the following:

- (1) Infrastructural racism has long impacted the construction and development of Canada’s R&B music genre world.
- (2) Music genres are powerful tools to exercise inclusion, exclusion, and the contestation of racial and national identities as ideological groupings.
- (3) Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez contribute to the growing international recognition for a Canadian R&B genre world by using various marketing and brand management methods, including mixing traditionally separated genre styles of pop, hip-hop, and R&B, and by further developing the networks created by their predecessors.
- (4) Traditional and online marketing methods are available (and are often necessary methods) for artists seeking to break into the music industry and build digital stars.
- (5) Digital stars have a strong potential cultural influence in shaping ideas of race, nationality, and genres as they articulate intersectional identities within a national-popular culture.
- (6) The COVID-19 pandemic shaped relationships between artists and audiences by accelerating digital trends and online communications that were already changing the roles of musical artists in popular culture.
- (7) The potential power and problematic structure of a national brand in contemporary society demonstrates how it can help build communities while also being exploitative.
- (8) Bieber, Drake, and Reyez have each embodied different Canadian lifestyles in R&B music, brand partnerships, social media posts, and marketing campaigns.
- (9) Canadian R&B still demands scholarly attention and infrastructural support.

(10) And, ultimately, racially diverse Canadian R&B artists are authentic contributors to Canada's national identity and to R&B as a cultural practice.

## 6.1 Future research

By tracing the ways in which the institutions of Canadian music have grappled with questions of genre definition (in relation to rhythm and blues and hip-hop), this dissertation maps a very important terrain for future research. This study lays further groundwork for new ways of analyzing Canadian popular music. Future research is needed to further broaden theoretical understandings of Canadian R&B and focus on how other media distribution channels and other musical artists have articulated R&B-ness and Canadian-ness in popular culture. It is simply not possible to document every notable event in the Canadian R&B space while examining the careers of Justin Bieber, Drake, and Jessie Reyez in a single study. A similar study with a different scope could focus on Bieber's, Drake's, and Reyez's, or indeed other Canadian performers', articulations of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness in other brand partnerships, time periods, marketing campaigns, and social media platforms.

Since I started conducting this research, The Weeknd has arguably become one of the most popular R&B Canadian stars to date. In the future, I would like to build on my findings and examine The Weeknd's entry into the music industry and analyze the expansion of his digital star. Particularly given Carl Wilson's (2015b) comments about The Weeknd's "music hold[ing] up ID cards stamped with question marks," I would like to further explore how his version of contemporary Canadian R&B is heard and interpreted, both within and outside of Canada.

In that vein, other future research might build on the findings in this study by examining how articulations of Canadian-ness and R&B-ness may differ within different communities in Canada, particularly Indigenous or French speaking communities. I only speculate that there are differences between musical artists' performances between Canadian provinces and cities and communities and how these differences may look, sound, and feel. Additional studies could explore the relationships between R&B-ness



and other regional/ethnic/national identities through the performances of other musical artists and public personalities.

By conducting this research project using Michel Foucault's (1969/ 2014) theoretical framework of discourse analysis, this study proposed to explore national identity, intersectionality, digital celebrity, branding, and marketing related to contemporary Canadian R&B music. Other studies could benefit from using a different theoretical framework and methodological approach to examine the complex relations between Canadian-ness and R&B-ness. Other studies might also examine how these patterns of articulation intersect with different intersectional identities from the ones discussed in this dissertation.

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- Emancipation Month*

- August 2020*

- “WHEREAS Emancipation Month recognizes the struggle for human rights made by freedom-seeking Canadians of African descent. The month is an opportunity to acknowledge the legacy and history of slavery in Canada while celebrating the rich contributions that people of African descent have made to our city and country.*


- By recognizing Emancipation Day on August 1 and Emancipation Month during August, we acknowledge an unforgiving period within our history and the importance of our ongoing commitment to eliminate discrimination in all its forms. The month of August marks many significant milestones in the struggles and successes faced by people of African descent on a journey that led to the abolition of slavery.*

- For over 400 years, more than 15 million men, women, and children of African descent were the victims of the transatlantic slave trade – one of history's darkest*

*chapters. The enslavement of African people occurred on these lands until 1834. We also recognize that there are legacies of slavery that continue to impact the lives of people of African descent around the world and in our own City (Toronto), that we need to collectively address.*

•*The campaign to abolish the slave trade began when Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe legally restricted the cross-border trading of slaves in Upper Canada, achieved through the passage for the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada, on July 9, 1793. All slavery was formally abolished within British colonies under the Slavery Abolition Act on August 28, 1833.”*

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## List of Appendices

### 6.3 Appendix 2: Ethics Board Approval Notice



# Western Research

**Date:** 29 July 2020

**To:** Keir Keightley

**Project ID:** 115540

**Study Title:** Building Brand Equity Online: Popular Music Artists as Social Media Influencers

**Short Title:** Popular music artists as social media influencers

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 07/Aug/2020

**Date Approval Issued:** 29/Jul/2020 21:24

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 29/Jul/2021

Dear Keir Keightley

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Interview Guide - Amara Pope - 06 16 20	Interview Guide	16/Jun/2020	1
Script Recruitment Email - Amara Pope - 061620	Recruitment Materials	16/Jun/2020	1
Script Snowball Recruitment - Amara Pope - 06 16 20	Verbal Consent/Assent	16/Jun/2020	1
Letter of Information and Consent - Amara Pope - 06 18 20	Written Consent/Assent	18/Jun/2020	1
Participant Observation guide - Amara Pope - 06 18 20	Participant Observation Guide	18/Jun/2020	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Katelyn Harris, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*



## 6.4 Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Please note that this guide only represents the main themes to be discussed with the participants and as such does not include the various **prompts** that may also be used (examples given for each question). Non-leading and general **prompts** will also be used, such as “Can you please tell me a little bit more about that?” and “What does that look like for you?”

### 1. Current role in the Marketing/ Entertainment Industry

Can you tell me more about your current role and what you do [in name of company/ name of industry]? How long have you been working as a [name of position] and have you seen any changes to your role since you started? Have there been any changes in your role since COVID2019 restrictions were implemented?

### 2. Social media platforms and applications

What platforms and applications do you use in your role? What tasks do you use these technologies for? How often do you use these tools? Would your role change without these technologies?

### 3. Online presence

What words, images, or platforms are most effective in conveying your brand [and that of your company]? For example, I use LinkedIn to connect with potential employers and manage my work experience online for other universities and companies to see. Does your employer have a brand guideline you must follow? What types of regulations are included?

### 4. Collaborations/ partnerships/ endorsements

Can you give me an example of some collaborations/ partnerships/ endorsements you arranged on behalf of your employer, or for your own professional endeavors? For example, do you work with other content creators/ influencers/ subsidiaries in social media campaigns or collaborate with other companies in live events? What do these relationships look like? Do these relationships function across different media and if so, how do function differently according to each medium? How do you balance both yours and your partner's brand values in joint ventures?

### 5. How the internet mediates relationships with consumers

Is social media important in connecting to your desired audience? Do you use metrics to monitor audience engagement? What metrics do you [or your company] use and are the details different across platforms? How is digital marketing used to augment traditional broadcast marketing in order for [you/ your company] to connect with consumers?

### **6. Changes to the Entertainment Industry**

In your opinion, has the relationships within the [marketing and/ or music industry] shifted since you began your career in the public relations [or influencer] space? Do you separate celebrities/musicians from influencers? Why [or why not]?

### **7. Conclusion**

Was there ever a moment in your career that you found challenging? What is the most rewarding part about your career?

## 6.5 Appendix 3: Information Letter and Consent Form

**Project Title:** Building Brand Equity Online: Popular Music Artists as Social Media Influencers

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Keir Keightley, PhD, Associate Professor, Western University, [REDACTED]@uwo.ca

**Student Researcher:** Amara Pope, PhD candidate, Western University [REDACTED]-[REDACTED]-[REDACTED], [REDACTED]@uwo.ca

### 1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study that will examine how musical artists are uniquely positioned “social media influencers” across broadcast and digital media, through the digitization of music and music videos.

As a working professional within public relations [or the music industry], I would like to learn more about your professional experiences to help me understand how artists fit within the digital landscape and wider entertainment industry.

### 2. What is the purpose of this study?

Over the last decade, the emergence of social media platforms transformed the entertainment industries and led to an exponential growth of online, influencer marketing. As a result, individuals and companies increasingly use new marketing strategies through digital media to engage consumers, build authenticity, and maintain visibility in the public space.

This study is being undertaken as part of my (Amara Pope) PhD dissertation. I plan to combine my research about the performance of popular music artists Drake, Jessie Reyez, and Justin Bieber with insights from music industry executives and marketing professionals about the changing landscape of the entertainment industry.

### 3. How long will you be in this study?

Participation in the study will consist of attending one phone interview with me, Amara Pope. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on how much information you would like to share.

### 4. What are the study procedures and how will participants’ information be kept confidential?

If you decide to participate, please contact me, Amara Pope, [■■■■-■■■■-■■■■] or [■■■■@uwo.ca] with (1) a list of times and days that work best for you and (2) your phone number. I will then send you an email to confirm the time and date of our scheduled interview.

Prior to our interview, we will go over this Letter of Information and I can answer any questions you may have.

I will then confirm how you wish to be identified in my PhD dissertation and any other presentations, and publications (whether you'd like your name; your company and/or title to be included; or if you would like full anonymity). If you wish to remain anonymous, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

I will audio-record the interview on a password-protected, mobile device during the interview to ensure you are not misquoted. All your responses will be kept confidential and my thesis supervisor, Dr. Keir Keightley, and I will be the only people with access to them.

Following the interview, I will transcribe the audio-recording on Microsoft Word and store them securely on Western's Institutional storage platform. These notes and recording will be protected using BitLocker Drive Encryption. The audio data will then be deleted on the mobile device.

All correspondence and notes will be deleted 7 years after the study is completed.

#### **5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. If a question or the discussion makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer.

#### **6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study; however, your participation in this study will contribute to the public discussions about the potential power artists have in reaching audiences across the entertainment industries, through digital and broadcast media.

#### **7. Can participants choose to leave the study?**

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by phone, by email or in writing) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to

have your information removed please let me, Amara Pope, know and your information will be destroyed from my records. Once the study has been published, I will not be able to withdraw your information.

### **8. Are participants compensated to be in this study?**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

### **9. What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

### **10. Who should I contact if I have questions regarding my participation in the study?**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact:

Dr. Keir Keightley, PhD, Associate Professor, Western University, █████@uwo.ca

**and/or**

Amara Pope, PhD candidate, Western University, █████-████-████, █████@uwo.ca

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, 1-844-720-9816, email: [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca). This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

### **11. Consent**

At the beginning of our telephone interview, I will ask you if you have read this document (Letter of Information) and confirm with you if you would like to go over it together. I will ask you if you have any questions.

Then I will confirm how you would like to be identified in the study in any quotations or references. I will ask for your permission to include your name, position, company name, or if you would like to request for full anonymity.

Lastly, I will confirm if you agree to participate in the study. If you agree, I, Amara Pope, will make note of our agreement in the notes I take during our interview.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**Verbal Consent questions:**

Have you read the Letter of Information?

**Yes No**

Do you have any questions about the study?

**Yes No** (will answer questions if there are any)

Do you consent to the use of personal, identifiable quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

**Yes No**

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

**Yes No**

Do you agree to have your name used in the dissemination of this research?

**Yes No**

Do you agree to have your professional title used in the dissemination of this research?

**Yes No**

Do you agree to have your organization's name used in the dissemination of this research?

**Yes No**

## 6.6 Sample Interview #1

What is your current position?

*I have been working as the Head of Brand Experience and Reputation at UBC. I help secure partnerships between UBC and other companies. I manage operations and manage all social content used to promote partnerships. I also organize the largest music festival in Western Canada that is hosted by an Alma Mater Society at UBC.*

*Essentially my role is broken down into two main components. One is ensuring new and vibrant experiences for the community and the second big role is opening up the UBC space to experiential marketing. Over the last 12 years, music festivals have become a staple for the community, and it is a defining moment for many people. So, I focus on building that experience in my role.*

Can you tell me more about organizing the music festivals? How did that begin?

*I attended UBC and was working for the events department at the Alma Mater Society. Basically, I worked hard and climbed up the organization. I networked and made connections along the way, and uh haha, I just kept getting more responsibilities and then I eventually got this role. You can uh visit my website to get a full story – and I can send that to you after call – just remind me. But essentially, it just took a lot of hard work moving up the chain.*

Thank you! I'll be sure to remind you. You grinded to get there!

*Yah. It took a lot of work but when I started off, I didn't know I'd make it all the way to this role. I just enjoyed what I was doing and just kept trying to do more and take on more responsibilities.*

That's great to hear – so what kind of artists did you work with over the years at UBC – in this role and your previous roles?

*I worked with artists like Tyga, ASAP Ferg, Saint Jhn, Loud Luxury, Slander, Oh Wonder, TroyBoi.*

That's an impressive list!

*Yah – I’ve lucked out and worked with some great people. I get to interact with the artists a lot – as the producer of the show I do outreach with the artists*

What are your other roles?

*Well, I secure the artist’s availability, handle the budget, handle the management, operation and marketing for the show.*

How do you identify who you will reach out to?

*I look at who is trending and examine the performers’ online KPIs, like their number of Instagram followers and engagement rates on posts. This will tell me who will bring more students to the concert and who can bring more visibility to UBC. I also look at how relevant they have been in terms of new music, albums and what other festivals they are performing at. Their online KPIs will also help me figure out what we could offer the artist in their contract in terms of compensation – money wise and whatever perks they might request that seem reasonable within our budget.*

Has COVID-19 affected your role?

*100% - festivals basically stopped so I didn’t have work – I hosted a few virtual festivals and pretty much it became a waiting game. It was definitely a tough time for the festival industry. Younger generation haven’t been given exposure to music and experiences they can have with in person concerts. This affects how they experience music and how they interact with each other. The virtual festivals are good for now but not the same.*

What platforms and applications do you use in your role?

*Instagram and Facebook – most where the artists are popular too. UBC has a good Instagram following that we use to stay in touch with students. Excel as like a budget tracker. I also use Asana a lot as a task directory and project management tool. Airtable works really well as a content Calendar. There’s a lot of social media scheduling platforms out there but I use Hootsuite which I also use to gather analytics on the performance of posts and campaigns. I also look at Google Trends to determine an artist popularity and look at their search traffic.*



Wow – that’s a lot. Thanks. How often do you use all of these tools?

*Daily*

Would your role change without these technologies?

*100% - would become a guessing game*

Do you use social media for outreach to artists for the show?

*No – we work with independent talent buyer who have good relationships with agencies.*

Okay, do you follow certain rules when reaching out to artists?

*Yes – we try to avoid artists with gang affiliations or assault accusations/charges. Since we’re trying to create a safe environment for the community so yah, we want to be mindful of who we work with.*

What types of regulations are included in your outreach and partnership with artists?

*Socially responsible companies. Ideally those who have the same values as UBC/AMS.*

Ah, I see. Do you need to follow the artist’s brand guidelines when featuring them on UBC media or just follow UBC’s brand guidelines?

*We follow festival guidelines since it’s the Alma Mater’s show we go according to how they want it. It is, well it, usually goes by the festival team’s direction.*

Do you use metrics to monitor audience engagement?

*We follow social listening to see how people engage with comments. Basically, we look at how...well how positive or negative it is. Shares are also a big metric for us because it shows people are eager to spread the word – of course in the end the goal is ticket sales.*

Do you use any traditional media to advertise these events?

*Yes of course. I look at media partners like Daily Hive, Radio acts, our student newspaper, field marketing cuz UBC has like 60,000 people on campus and not all follow*

*us on socials. So we have to have physical posters and stuff. We have also have a big ambassador team catering to a majority of niche groups and we work with them to promote the event*

In your opinion, has the relationships within the music industry shifted since you began your career?

*It's the same - the agencies control it all.*

Do you separate celebrities/musicians from influencers?

*No - they are all influencers - in short if you have a big audience following and can convince them - then you are an influencer*

You mentioned that COVID-19 did affect your role. How has COVID-19 affected you overall career?

*Well festivals were paused for 2 years - I ended up moving from Vancouver to Toronto and started my journey in Tech. So I shifted up my role.*

Those are some big changes!

*Haha, yeah.*

Was there ever a moment in your career that you found challenging?

*My first music festival. It was a lot of pressure and I had literally zero support in managing a 500K budget. And I had a lot of expectations.*

Wow! Well, you pulled through!

*Yeah it was a success and I learned a lot.*

That's awesome to hear and on a more positive note - what is the most rewarding part about your career?

*When the festival made a profit for the first time - it showed there was a lot of potential and growth and now we just keep growing!*

That is amazing to hear! Thank you so much again for your time today.

*No problem – happy to help.*

Just to confirm, you are okay with me publishing some of my findings from today's interview in my dissertation?

*Yes!*

Great, can you send me an email with your preferred name and title? And your website URL?

*Yes – and thanks for reminding me haha.*

No problem! Thank you again, Asad. And I will look out for your email.

*No problem, Amara. And good luck.*

Thanks. Have a great day.

*Bye.*

## 6.7 Sample Interview 2

Can you tell me more about your role?

*I am the head of content and SEO for a software company called Time Doctor. I lead a small team of writers and outreach specialists, and their job, well, is to increase organic traffic to our website*

How long have you been working at Time Doctor?

*About 6 months to a year in this role as the head of content and SEO. Before this Time Doctor was just a start up and most of us on the team didn't really have a defined role. We...sort of grew into our roles organically over the last few months.*

Have there been any changes in your role since COVID2019 restrictions were implemented?

*Not really. We were a 100% remote team prior to COVID-19. So the pandemic didn't really impact our workflow.*

So, business as usual?

*Yah you could pretty much say that. We didn't really change much of our day to day processes because of COVID-19. A lot of companies were affected but we kind of just have always functioned this way, remotely.*

Great and what types of apps do you use in your role to complete your day to day tasks?

*Ahrefs definitely helped us to identify keywords and blog topics to write about. BuzzStream is our outreach tool of choice. It's how we perform and track our email marketing efforts. We also use ConvertKit and Mailchimp and we use these platforms to email people on our list when we would publish a new blog post. WordPress is our content management system. Basecamp is our project management software. We used it as our defacto content calendar.*

Would your role change without these technologies?

*Yes. It would make it exponentially harder to do our job without these technologies. For instance, if an SEO tool like Ahrefs didn't exist, we wouldn't know which topics we would need to write about that would get search traffic. Or if a tool like BuzzStream didn't exist, we would have to manually send out all of our emails. So, these tools save us time like in the case of a BuzzStream or helps us complete our daily tasks like facilitate SEO, in the case of Ahrefs.*

Does your follow any brand guidelines in creating content?

*Not really. We wanted our articles to be helpful. But we don't have a brand voice or anything like that.*

Due to the start up status?

*Yes. I'm sure that we will build that eventually but we're still a fairly small team – but growing.*

What types of regulations are followed to try and keep content consistent?

*Well on our website, the designers ensured that everything would be coherent in terms of colour and font styles. My team and I just input the content using templates.*

Can you give me an example of some collaborations/ partnerships/ endorsements that you?

*Yes. I can give you a few examples of the partnerships that we did. In terms of webinars, we co-produce webinars with other companies where we allow a company to give a webinar to our user base. So they can reach our audience. This would be in exchange for allowing us to give a webinar to their users. So we would reach their audience and they can reach ours. We also have integration partners. At Time Doctor we integrate with a lot of other tools. Whenever we do an integration we mutually announce the integration to our audiences.*

How do you promote these webinars and integrations?

*Mostly through emails. We would email our email list and the company or integration partner would email their mailing list. We also put the integration onto the website. And often times we do a guest post on each other's sites to talk about our company relationship.*

How is digital marketing used to augment traditional broadcast marketing in ways that help you to connect with consumers?

*This is hard for me to answer because we don't use traditional broadcast marketing. But in terms of digital marketing – that is what we rely on 100% of the time.*

In your opinion, has relationships within marketing shifted since you began your career?

*Yes! In the B2B space, getting your audience's attention is so much harder to do. When I first started my career, I would be able to write 1 guest post on a popular blog and get 200 - 400 leads. This would be people signing up for an email newsletter or a free trial of a software. Now, if I get 2 or 3 leads from a guest post on that same blog, it's a lot. Same thing with SEO. 15 years ago, it was sort of this black box that people knew about, but no one actually executed on properly. Now, every company has an SEO team. You're competing with people who are really good at their job. This level of saturation has made it so that people are going to ignore 99% of the things they see. In order to compete now, your content has to be the best of the best. People build relationships with people/companies who are creating the best content. Whether that's the most helpful or most entertaining. There are no more shortcuts.*

Personal opinion – do you separate celebrities/musicians from influencers? Why or why not?

*I don't really know what an influencer is. What designates someone as an influencer? Is it the amount of followers? Not really sure how to answer that.*

No problem. Haha. That's part of my study to uncover what a hashtag influencer is.

*Yes. It is different based on who you ask. I'm not necessarily the best person to ask on it because I'm not a pop culture fanatic.*

Was there ever a moment in your career that you found challenging?

*I was running a marketing agency from 2008 till about 2014 or so. I got to a point where I was so burnt out, that I could no longer keep the company going. When I had to shut that company down, that was probably the lowest point in my career.*

What is the most rewarding part about your career?

*When I hire someone who is so freakin good at what they do, give them the freedom to do it, and watch them flourish in that role. It's the best feeling ever.*

Great, that's all the questions I had for you. Thank you so much for your help and for your time today.

*No problem, Amara.*

Have a great day.

*You as well.*

Bye.

## 6.8 Appendix 4: List of Respondents

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Occupation at time of the interview</b>	<b>Name</b>
1	Director of Black Culture at YouTube	Tuma Basa
2	Warner Music Canada Representative	Donald Robins
3	Musical artist	Jhyve
4	General Manager at Concord	Jeff Van Driel
5	Director of Remix Project and former Brand Partnerships Organizer at Universal Music's Urban division	Daniella Etienne
6	Agent at United Talent Agency	Ra Kumar
7	Emerging Artist	Robbie Ahmed
8	Jessie Reyez's manager	Mauricio Ruiz

9	Assistant Director	Raha Euphoria
10	Head of Brand Experience and Reputation	Asad Ali
11	Graphic designer of Swan Media	Jeremy Horn
12	Independent artist	Anonymous
13	Corporate Branding Specialist	Rocky Singh
14	Senior Software Engineer at Spotify	Andrew Martin
15	Creative Technologist and founder of Red Label Studios	Axel Villamil
16	Producer	Michael Simkin
17	Producer	Laura Coconato
18	Vice President of Media Strategy and Planning at CNBC	Tom Russell
19	Former Miss Canada Contestant and Social Media Marketer	Natasha Ahuja
20	Senior Director of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Partnership (MLSE), Music, and Live Entertainment	Adam Burchill
21	CEO of Hollywood Branded	Stacy Jones
22	Blogger and Instagram content creator	Natasha Suntewari



23	Creative Content Director of Damaged Moments	Colby Jackson
24	Vlogger [beerforbreakfast]	Micha Boon
25	Content creator [Thebarbarianbody]	Tanner Wideman
26	Content creator	Steph Earl
27	Digital Marketing Coach and Brand Strategist	Marsha Lynn Hudson
28	Sticky Branding CEO	Jeremy Miller
29	Head of Content / SEO for Time Doctor	Greg Digneo
30	Founder of Marketing In Asia	Azleen Abdul Rahim
31	Managing Director	Anonymous
32	Brand Manager at Sendinblue	Maja Schneider
33	Senior Business Development Management	Anonymous
34	Marketing Executive	Anonymous
35	Artist	Ini Nyong

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Amara Kama Dolores Pope

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:**

University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2011-2015 B.A. Joint Honours  
English Rhetoric and Professional Writing and Fine Arts

University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2013 Global TESOL Certification

University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2014 Global Experience Certificate

University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2015 Digital Media Specialization

University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2015 Teaching Preparation Specialization

Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2015-2016 M.A. Communication Studies

Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2016 University Foundations Teaching Certificate

Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
2016 University Teaching Certificate

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2016-2023 Ph.D. Media Studies

**Honours and Awards:** University of Waterloo Merit Scholarship  
2012

	University of Waterloo Excellence Award 2013
	Laurier Graduate Scholarship 2015-2016
<b>Relevant Work Experience</b>	Administrative Assistant University of Waterloo 2014-2015
	Teaching Assistant Wilfrid Laurier University 2015-2016
	Research Assistant Wilfrid Laurier University 2015-2016
	Teaching Assistant The University of Western Ontario 2016-2017
	Guest Lecturer The University of Western Ontario January 31, 2017
	Guest Lecturer Wilfrid Laurier University November 20, 2019
	Guest Lecturer University of Waterloo September 15, 2021
	Lecturer Conestoga College 2021-2021

**Publications:**

Pope, A. (2016). Musical artists capitalizing on hybrid identities: A case study of Drake the 'authentic' 'Black' 'Canadian' 'rapper.' *Stream: culture/politics/technology*, 9(1), 3-22

**Other Work  
Experience**

Blog Manager/ Editor  
Staff.com  
2017

Strategic Account Manager  
Investing News Network  
2017-2018

Communications Coordinator  
Connor Clark & Lunn Private Capital  
2018-2020

Brand Coordinator  
Sendinblue  
2021

Marketing Executive  
AnywhereWorks  
2021-2022

Marketing Manager  
Trackunit  
2022-2023