

“The crown is heavy”: A textual analysis of masculine ritual aggression in the Kendrick v. Drake

Hip Hop beef

Joel D. Allen

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Committee:
Timeka N. Tounsel
Carmen Gonzalez
Ralina L. Joseph

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Joel D. Allen

University of Washington

Abstract

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Joel D. Allen

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Timeka N. Tounsel

Department of Communication

Using a textual analysis to examine the Kendrick Lamar - Drake beef as a case study of ritualized aggression in Hip Hop, this essay analyzes how artists perform, negotiate, and challenge racialized and socially privileged masculine forms. This research analyzes diss tracks, media discourse, and audience interactions to make meaning of the racial and gender politics present in the Kendrick v. Drake rivalry. The study interprets Kendrick’s performance of Black masculinity as adhering to hegemonic expressions typical in Hip Hop, emphasizing cultural authority and lyrical dominance. Kendrick’s approach contrasts against Drake’s hybrid forms of masculinity that subvert established aesthetics, while strategically incorporating machismo displays. Ultimately, this essay advances that ritual aggression through Hip Hop beef – as seen in the case of Kendrick v. Drake – is a practice whereby audiences validate performances of contemporary Black masculinities, privileging select identifying portrayals over others.

Keywords:

Ritual Aggression, Hip Hop, Masculinity, Black Culture, Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Beef

Introduction

“At the end of the day, [there’s] nothing more powerful than rap music. I don’t care what it is. We are the culture.” Kendrick Lamar delivered these remarks at the 2025 Grammy Awards, while accepting Song of the Year for his mega-hit diss track, “Not Like Us” (Lamar, 2025). The song explicitly targets fellow rapper – known as an emcee (MC) ¹– and *Billboard*’s Artist of the Decade, Drake. The media widely recognizes Drake as a global cultural force, holding numerous streaming records, and embodying the heights of mainstream Hip Hop² (Guinness World Records, n.d.; Chery, 2020). Yet, Kendrick’s presence and technical ability challenges Drake’s claim as Hip Hop’s most dominant figure. Kendrick has symbolically positioned himself as a messianic authority for the genre, even donning a diamond-encrusted crown of thorns on the cover of his 2022 album *Mr. Morale and the Big Steppers*. Kendrick framed himself as a savior for authentic Hip Hop culture, redeeming it from Drake’s iniquitous market-driven persona, and decades-long reign as Hip Hop’s commercial avatar.

Dormant tensions between Kendrick and Drake publicly erupted in May 2024, developing into a lyrical confrontation that commanded global attention (McGee, 2024). Kendrick and Drake performed ritual aggression through lyrical competition, engaging in character assassinations, personal critiques, and hypermasculine posturing, in an unprecedented

¹ Master of Ceremonies

² Iglesias and Harris assert Hip Hop as a culture. Being a proper noun, Hip Hop must be capitalized, rejecting the previous academically-mandated, hyphenated spelling, “hip-hop” (2022).

series of successive diss track releases³. Ritual aggression refers to rule-based interactions that manage conflict, avoiding tangible harm through culturally symbolic performance (Jia & Yao, 2022; Hermann, 2017; Wong, 2021). While not physically hostile, these performances fundamentally establish dominance, renegotiating hierarchy and preserving social order (Dyrel, 2021; Kádár & House, 2022; Lang & Kundt, 2024; Oğuz & Işık-Güler 2024). In their feud, Kendrick labels Drake as culturally inauthentic. Additionally, he speculates that Drake is an absentee father with delinquent womanizing tendencies – casting him as morally defective. Drake in-turn, questions Kendrick’s authentic street credibility. He condemns Kendrick as a false prophet, and accuses him of domestic abuse. After the two exchanged eight inflammatory diss tracks, commentators speculated that Drake no longer desired to engage in confrontation. Drake concluded his participation in the feud with “The Heart Part 6”, delivering lines such as, “I don’t wanna diss you anymore” and “You can drop 100 more disses, I’ll see you later” (Drake, 2024). Drake’s symbolic retreat effectively ended the public rivalry. In the aftermath, Kendrick dominated the Hip Hop mediascape, breaking multiple streaming records and capturing five Grammy Awards for “Not Like Us”, and later headlining a historic Super Bowl Halftime Show (Davis, 2025).

The feud's cultural significance extends beyond the immediate rivalry between Kendrick and Drake. Their confrontation highlights Hip Hop as a locale where publics simultaneously construct, challenge, and openly negotiate gender expressions. Each artist displayed alternate presentations of contemporary Black masculinity through the symbolic practice of ritual aggression. Kendrick’s confrontational approach – typified through conventional Hip Hop expressions – contrasted Drake's fluid, cosmopolitan performances. Additionally, the role of the

³ See Appendix A.

audience – as seen in their shifting attitude towards top MC, J. Cole’s involvement in the beef – reveal how fans negotiate and redefine acceptable gender performances (Robinson, 2024; Tyree, 2024). Acts of ritual aggression thus shape, and are shaped by, audiences' expectations of gendered social norms. Audiences assess these presentations along the boundaries of perceived cultural authenticity in Hip Hop, and hegemonic masculine performances within the genre. Characteristics of “authentic” Black masculine forms in Hip Hop include, an aggressive and promiscuous heterosexuality, prideful self-assertion, and hypervisible displays of material wealth (Avery, Ward, Moss, & Üsküp, 2017; Ogbar, 2024; Rose, 2008). This study expands current scholarship by analyzing ritual aggression in Hip Hop culture as a productive arena to nuance and redefine contemporary Black masculinities – particularly through the Kendrick – Drake rivalry. The study asks how performances of ritual aggression in Hip Hop work to construct, reinforce, and contest hegemonic masculine forms. By addressing this question, the research highlights the public negotiation and policing of Black cultural identities, and reveals broader discourses around race, gender, and social power.

Literature Review

The Kendrick v. Drake feud represents a long-standing tradition in Hip Hop known as battle-rap. These lyrical confrontations adhere to stylized ritual aggression, highlighting a competitive skillfulness through complex metaphors and creative performance (Chery, 2020; Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024). Ritual aggressions are structured, symbolic, and culturally regulated interactions that perform conflict without inflicting lasting physical harm (Kádár & House 2022). Contrasting spontaneous violent aggression, ritual aggression is characterized by established rules, predictable behaviors, and emblematic gestures (Lang & Kundt, 2024). Such acts seek to

maintain social order by resolving disputes, negotiating hierarchies, and asserting dominance among social groups (Wong, 2021). Various forms of ritual aggression are evident throughout the natural and human worlds.

Non-human animal behaviors display various ritual aggressions – such as primates exhibiting territorial dominance, a pride of lions asserting mating privileges, and a wolf pack competing to establish an alpha (Hermann, 2017). These animalist behaviors communicate strength and establish hierarchy, typically ending in submission or retreat (Lang & Kundt, 2024). The human social order uses ritual aggressions across diverse cultural contexts (Dyrel, 2021). Debates, talk shows, and commentary programs, where participants engage in attacks, interruptions, and verbal confrontations – within acceptable bounds – demonstrate ritualized aggression (Wong, 2020). Similarly, online spaces host digital forms where acts such as "ratioing"⁴ or call-outs perform symbolic aggression and signal social allegiances (Dyrel, 2021). Institutional practices of ritual aggression, including initiation rites within teams, fraternities, or military organizations, establish rank and group identity (Lang & Kundt, 2024). These acts emphasize adhering to rules and boundaries, reinforcing hierarchy through structured conflict.

Within Black American culture, "playing the dozens" displays ritual aggression as a verbal sparring match, involving clever insults and humorous banter exchanged among companions – in a playful yet competitive back-and-forth (Oware, 2023; Randolph & Lewis, 2023). "The dozens" allows community members to display verbal skill, resilience, and humor, while reinforcing community bonds (Randolph & Lewis, 2023). Similarly in Hip Hop beef, acts of ritual aggression display lyricism, intellect, wit, and finesse, at times neutralizing verbal attacks prior to their occurrence (Bradely, DuBois, Gates, Common & Chuck D, 2010). Ritual

⁴A social media post receives significantly more negative impressions than positive engagement.

aggression – particularly in Hip Hop – is mediated and amplified by audience participation, highlighting a communicative and symbolic nature that elevates lyrical exchanges into enthralling spectacles (Jia & Yao, 2022). Audiences play critical roles as interpreters and participants, judging artists by their complex rhyme schemes and nuanced delivery (Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024; Oware, 2023). As a result, audience reaction becomes pivotal, as spectators decide victories (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016).

In battle-rap, artists openly challenge their opponents to demonstrate their lyrical superiority as the dominant wordsmith (Bradley, et al., 2010; Tyree, 2024; Tyree & Williams, 2021). Ritual aggression remains a defining practice within Hip Hop, reflecting Black cultural traditions of verbal contests, characterized by lyrical challenges that display oratory creativity – rebutting verbal attacks, turning phrases, and flipping insults (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Oware, 2023). However, in Hip Hop beef, engaging in ritual aggression has consequences. The winner stands to gain a heightened profile and increased validation within the culture, while defeat can diminish cultural relevance, and harm future prospects for the loser (Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024; Perry, 2004). Ritual aggression through Hip Hop effectively functions to negotiate status within an established cultural hierarchy (Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024).

The distinction between Hip Hop’s battle-rap culture and commercially-oriented radio-rap – as Coddington terms “Hit-Pop” – displays a commodified reshaping of ritualized aggression (2023). Traditionally, artists perform battle-rap in a head-to-head lyrical acapella competition that goes three rounds – differing from the hook-verse-chorus structure standard in radio records (Bradley, et al., 2010; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). Conversely, “Hit-Pop” tracks are designed to cross-over, that is, appeal to the sensibilities of white audiences, who make up over 70% of Hip Hop music’s commercial consumer base (Coddington, 2023; Ostrove, 2014;

Vito, 2019). Commercially successful artists have brought battle-rap – once a niche element of Hip Hop – into the mainstream through rap beefs (Mercer, Henderson & Drake, 2020). Artists create studio-produced diss records that adapt the direct-delivery nature of rap-battling, thus extending a cultural and commercial reach (Oware, 2023). This continued commercial commodification of Hip Hop culture transforms ritual aggression through rap beefs into mass consumed public spectacles (Johnson, Henderson & Drake, 2020; Lee, 2024; Mello-Klein, 2024; Schröder, 2019).

Rap beef as ritual aggression illustrates gender politics within Hip Hop, openly contesting masculine displays of dominance through assertive narratives of control over space and culture (Jeffries, 2011; Tyree, 2024). While hegemonic masculine types – controlling, intimidating, and emotively stoic – remain influential, contemporary Hip Hop artists increasingly integrate vulnerability, emotional introspection, and complex romantic narratives into their music (Alim, et al., 2018; Avery, et al., 2017; Johnson, et al., 2020; Oware, 2023; Perry 2004). Gender expressions vary over space, and throughout time, resisting being fixed to dominating constructions, while remaining bound to social acceptance and approval of various forms (Messerschmidt, 2019). Hegemonic masculine performance changes along racial, economic and geographic bounds, which invite divergent representations of masculinity to infiltrate and challenge dominating Black male identities within Hip Hop (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). Symbolic masculine practices for the white, academic and business class male – wearing sports jackets, driving Germanic cars, marriage and familial expectations – differ drastically from conventionally privileged Black male presentations (Messerschmidt, 2019). Forms of Black masculinity remain fluid, although hegemonic notions exalt certain configurations over others (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). Characteristics of privileged Black masculine expressions

within Hip Hop culture include active street credibility and gangsterism, aggressive and fierce heterosexuality, and a competitive, prideful self-reliance (Ogbar, 2024; Oware, 2023; Vito, 2020). Hip Hop artists seeking to maintain relevance must explicitly address, challenge as inauthentic, and subordinate through dominant assertion, masculine expressions within the genre that deviate from normative forms (Messerschmidt, 2019).

It is necessary to recognize the racially oppressive legacy that continues to market limited forms of Black masculine expressions (Bogle, 2016; Ogbar, 2024). Examining Black masculinity in contemporary media requires consideration of historical presentations that are rooted in exploitative misrepresentations and performance (Lott, 2013; Pilgrim, 2017). Observers can trace contemporary tropes of Black masculinity back to the 19th-century, where minstrelsy emphasized performative caricatures, depicting Black men as hypersexual, brute-like, and deviant from an idealized white masculine imaginary (Bogle, 2016; Negut & Sarbescu, 2014; Pilgrim 2017). Scholars explicitly link contemporary portrayals in Hip Hop to historical stereotypes, asserting that commercial success often depends on conforming to denigrating representations that resonate with a mainstream, predominantly white audience (Lamotte, 2014; Ogbar, 2024; Taylor & Austen, 2012).

The durability of racism is facilitated by its unique ability to adapt and change alongside shifting social and cultural occurrences (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick & Esses, 2010). The commercially dominant gangsta rap subgenre, for example, comes from Hip Hop's rebellious tradition and critique of systemic power inequities (Jeffries, 2011; Ogbar, 2024). However, corporate practices prioritized depoliticizing narratives, curating portrayals of Black masculinity that appeal to broader consuming audiences through "Hit Pop" (Coddington, 2023; Lee, 2024; Ogbar, 2024). Images of Black masculinity that market-driven forces deemed profitable largely

emphasize narratives of criminality and street violence (Rose, 2008; Vito, 2019). This shift aligns with what Yousman terms "Blackophilia," where white consumers engage with commodified Blackness – fascinated by mythologies, curious of cultural differences and drawn in by forbidden narratives (Jeffries, 2011; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Yousman, 2003). Consuming audiences often selectively embrace anti-Black racial tropes in Hop Hop, while neglecting underlying structural inequities and nuanced racial identities (Coddington, 2023; Hunt, et al, 2018; Lamotte, 2014; Negut & Sarbescu, 2014) .

Traditionally, marketable representations of masculinity in Hip Hop promote aggressive, conflict-oriented performances, valorizing instances of confrontation – Ice Cube v. N.W.A.; Tupac v. Biggie; Jay-Z v. Nas (Avery, et al., 2017; McGee, 2024). Black masculine performance occupies a cultural space structured by white-dominated perceptions that dictate which forms of Black masculinity the majority-white audience celebrates and which forms of Black masculinity they marginalize (Alim, et al., 2018; Coddington, 2023; Ogbar, 2024). Despite market-driven challenges to authentic Black cultural expression, some scholars argue that Hip Hop provides interpretive tools for listeners to make sense of their social worlds (Jeffries, 2011; Perry, 2004; Vito, 2019). Other scholars note contentions with this frame, as audiences constantly negotiate understanding and confront listeners with competing portrayals, co-constructing meaning through discourse (Payne, 2024; Schröder, 2019).

The interpretive framework for this textual analysis builds from three theoretical lenses (Larsen, 2012; Moody-Ramirez & Scott, 2015; Phillipov, 2013; Tyree & Williams, 2021). The first being ritual aggression as performance, considering diss tracks as ritualized acts, that participants characterize through symbolic conflict, and performative competition (Johnson, et al., 2020; Kádár & House, 2022; Lang & Kundt, 2024; Mercer, et al., 2020; Oğuz & Işık-Güler,

2024). This perspective highlights technical elements used in Kendrick and Drake's feud, such as rebuttal, metaphor, and creative lyricism, serving in their confrontation as markers for masculine identity (Bradley, et al., 2010; Jia & Yao, 2022). The next lens is the role of gender politics and hegemonic masculinity (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). This perspective explores how masculinity in Hip Hop is socially constructed in adherence to gendered expectations (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Ogbar, 2024). Subversive interpretations of hegemonic masculine performance, that Kendrick and Drake employ, receive particular attention (Messerschmidt, 2019). The final lens considers ritually aggressive displays, and audience reactions to performative gender identities (Hunt et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2013; Oware, 2023). This analytical frame reviews how audiences interpret, engage with, and police the symbolic representations of masculinity between Hip Hop artists in lyrical confrontation (Messerschmidt, 2019; Ogbar, 2024; Robinson, 2024). This lens explores how audiences shape meaning-making, and transform Hip Hop beef into a participatory arena for identity co-construction (Robinson, 2024; Tyree, 2024).

The analytical process involved closely reading diss tracks to analyze their techniques, thematic patterns, and performances that indicate participation in ritualized aggression (Kádár & House, 2022; Tyree & Willimas, 2021). Artists' metaphoric choices, cultural references, and character attacks receive attention in connection with stylistic vocal delivery and production elements. The analysis explores masculine aesthetics and archetypes that align with or deviate from commercially dominant Hip Hop performances (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025; Jia & Yao, 2022). This study builds upon existing insights of gender identity to examine masculine performance within Kendrick and Drake's feud (Avery, et al., 2017; Messerschmidt, 2019). Kendrick's politically informed, culturally commemorative lyricism is contrasted against Drake's emotionally nuanced, commercially strategic performance of masculine dominance. This study

extends discussions of Hip Hop as a hypervisible arena for Black masculine expressions that intersect with gendered social expectations and select artistic portrayals (Avery, et al., 2017; Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025; Oware, 2023).

Contextualizing the Kendrick - Drake Beef

This study examines how Hip Hop artistry reflects and reshapes socially privileged conceptions of gender, race, and power (Avery, et al., 2017; Alim, et al., 2018; Hunt, et al., 2018; Messerschmidt, 2019). Hip Hop culture emerges from Black American and Afro-diasporic traditions, amplifying historically marginalized voices on mainstream platforms (Lee, 2024; Oware, 2023; Vito, 2019). Artists negotiate dominating racial and gender politics in complex ways, at times rejecting norms as a form of resistance and autonomy, while other times accepting these norms in hopes of gaining broader social appeal (Coddington, 2023; Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025; Johnson, et al., 2020). Despite commercial co-optation, Hip Hop remains a critical site for Black cultural expression, portraying identity and narrative power through lyricism and performance (Ogbar, 2024; Payne, 2024; Perry, 2004; Rose, 2008). This analysis treats Hip Hop as a cultural text, exploring how masculinity is performed, particularly through ritualized conflict (Avery, et al., 2017; Lang & Kundt, 2024). Specifically, it examines the 2024 feud between “Kendrick Lamar” Duckworth and Aubrey “Drake” Graham, a rivalry that escalated into one of Hip Hop's most culturally significant confrontations (McGee, 2024).

A multitude of diverging biographical elements between Kendrick and Drake amplify the cultural stakes of their feud, and further dramatize tensions between their masculine performances. Their rivalry is contextualized by divergent career paths, with each artist representing differing poles within Hip Hop culture. Kendrick began his career with the

independent label Top Dawg Entertainment, and subsequently established PgLing, demonstrating his commitment to creative autonomy and independent production (Jackson, 2022; Vito, 2019). In contrast, Drake's career under "The Big Three" major-labels – Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, and Sony Music – firmly position him within Hip Hop's mainstream commercial enterprises, as the "Big Three" control over 85% of the music market, exchanging distribution and promotion deals for 75% to 90% of an artist's profits (Coddington, 2023; Markman, 2012; Ostrove, 2014).

Stylistically, Kendrick and Drake represent opposite ends of Hip Hop's aesthetic spectrum. Kendrick is renowned for a conscious lyricism that embeds social critique and political commentary, in the tradition of a Black consciousness that deconstructs white supremacy (Lamotte, 2014; Ogbar, 2024). His aesthetic reflects the street reporter, chronicling lived environments and offering discourse that humanizes economically deprived communities disregarded by the mass media (Avery, et al., 2017; Lee, 2024). Kendrick's Pulitzer-winning album *DAMN*. epitomizes this approach with verses like:

Barricaded blocks and borders, look what you taught us / It's murder on my street, your street, backstreets, Wall Street / Corporate offices, banks, employees, and bosses with / Homicidal thoughts, Donald Trump's in office / We lost Barack and promised to never doubt him again / But is America honest or do we bask in sin? (Lamar, 2017)

Drake, conversely, achieves commercial dominance through genre-blending tracks ranging from emotive heart-break R&B, to gangsta-rap themes, and party/pop-centric vibes. His lyrical content often centers on quasi-romantic heterosexual exploits, extravagant material excess, and a grand transnational appeal – even adopting pseudo-foreign accents at times

(Coddington, 2023). Drake's commercial primacy is evident as the highest streaming act in the history of Spotify (Guinness, n.d.). He directly contrasts his artistic approach to Kendrick's conscious lyricism, exemplified in his track "GIMMIE A HUG":

And what the f*** [is Kendrick] gon' do with it? Have the girls up at 29⁵ on stage
twerkin' with a dictionary? / [Kendrick offers] Guilt trips, not Turks [and Caicos] trips
when it's cold out here in February / 'Cause right now, shorty parachuting molly⁶ like she
flying for the military / This girl face so pretty, I can only think of f**kin' missionary /
F*** that, make the beat switch, turn the hoes up, give a million to 'em (Drake, 2025)

A culturally significant factor of divergence between the two artists is their approach to MCing. Drake has navigated credible accusations of ghostwriting, a cardinal sin within Hip Hop culture, while Kendrick has not faced such allegations (O'Farrill, 2022). Additional elements contrasting these personalities is their upbringing, which helps magnify the cultural separations between the two. Kendrick grew up shy by many accounts, positioning his artistic identity as a product of Compton's marginalized Black community. Drake, with mixed Black-Jewish heritage and a suburban Canadian upbringing, entered the music industry accustomed to mainstream entertainment, acting in *Degrassi: The Next Generation (2001)*. These contours help broadly define both artists, whose nuanced artistic offerings at times extend beyond Hip Hop's confines. Nevertheless, their overall divergent lyrical performances reflect distinct masculinities – with Kendrick's appeal to a social-consciousness placed in comparison to Drake's global celebrity-driven masculinity (Tyree, 2024).

⁵ Area 29 is a Houston strip club where Drake reportedly spent over \$1 million in one night at this club (Friend, 2024).

⁶ Molly is slang for the drug ecstasy.

Their feud represents a clash of separate visions regarding Hip Hop's cultural meaning and subsequent influence. Kendrick and Drake's public spectacle set all-time commercial benchmarks, and impacted industry norms. In the wake of their beef, both artists launched international tours; however, Drake's *Anita Max Win (AMW)* tour was ultimately postponed, while Kendrick's *Grand National Tour* broke records, becoming the highest-grossing live show (co)headlined by a Black male artist (Lawrence, 2025; Saponara, 2025). Drake – one of the decade's most successful artists – filed defamation lawsuits against music industry labels stemming from the widespread acclaim of “Not Like Us” (Coscarelli, 2025). Such an unprecedented legal move in Hip Hop culture raises concerns about freedom of speech, and artistic expression. Ultimately, Kendrick and Drake's artistic achievements set the stage for open ritual aggression, as both artists asserted dominance within Hip Hop's competitive tradition. Their varied performances of masculine expressions during confrontation offered an opportunity to examine diverging negotiations of identity (Alim, et al., 2018; Avery, et al., 2017; Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025).

Contesting masculine performances of ritual aggression

The Kendrick – Drake feud exemplifies ritual aggression as a stylized performance of competition, using diss tracks to communicate symbolic aggression. A critical perspective underlying this conflict is the strategic performances of masculinity by both artists. Each of them leverage their established personas and artistic productions to contest, promote, and reify hegemonic expectations of Black masculinity in Hip Hop (Avery, et al., 2017; Johnson, et al, 2020; Ogbar, 2024). In various moments throughout the beef, these artists negotiate conventional gendered performances, at times intentionally subverting expectations, only to strategically reinforce their presence as an emphasized display of dominance. This interplay connects to

socially privileged forms of masculine expressions, revealing how both Kendrick and Drake utilize gendered expectations to gain broader appeal through selective engagement.

The feud's origins date back over a decade prior to the public confrontation. In 2013, Kendrick invited his MC peers to a lyrical competition, goading many by name on his guest verse for Big Sean's track "Control":

I got love for you all but I'm tryna murder you n****s / Tryna make sure your core fans never heard of you n****s / They don't wanna hear not one more noun or verb from you n****s / What is competition? I'm tryna raise the bar high / Who tryna jump and get it? You're better off tryna skydive (Big Sean, 2013).

These provocative lyrics are consistent with the battle-rap tradition, where artists perform competitive verbal exchanges characterized by aggressive metaphor, to establish a sense of lyrical dominance over rivals (Bradley, et al., 2010; Oware, 2023; Tyree & Williams, 2021). In this earliest instance Kendrick reveals his favor towards a confrontational, masculinized approach to Hip Hop competition.

Throughout his commercially dominant career, Drake's artistic persona has challenged conventional masculine performance in Hip Hop. His appeal through affective labor, and emotionally vulnerable lyrics, articulate nuanced perspectives of heteronormative relationships. His early thematic lyrics of romance earned him a global fan base spanning across demographics, noticeably consisting of a sizable female audience. Drake's artistic production and aesthetic persona have shifted expressions of masculinity in Hip Hop towards more fluid, and effeminately-hybridized forms (Coddington, 2023). However, while engaged in ritualized aggression in his beef with Kendrick, Drake selectively identifies how to subvert norms of

masculine presentations (Alim, et al., 2018; Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025). He adeptly displays an understanding of the cultural value for aggressive masculinity in rap beef, offering his signature genre-bending, R&B melodies in only 16 lines of one diss track throughout the entire exchange of the beef.

Nevertheless, Drake displays his willingness to subvert hegemonic masculine presentations as part of his artistic persona, leveraging aesthetics conventionally associated with effeminate representations, in publicized images – wearing hair barettes, painted nails & eyeliner, and posing with “duck lips”. Drake uses these aesthetic choices as a subversive tactic of coded masculine performance. In his track “Push Ups” Drake raps, “I just got ‘em done, boy, don’t make me have to chip a nail”. Referring to his manicured hands as symbolic extravagance and wealth-associated leisure, Drake simultaneously subverted and adhered to privileged masculine performance in beef. Although initially Drake's metaphor counters conventional expressions of heteromascularity – using a preoccupation with cosmetic-oriented practice via manicure – he signifies a readiness to symbolically engage in typified masculine physical confrontation, highlighting a willingness to risk his heavily groomed aesthetic by *chipping a [done] nail*. Drake reinterprets masculinity as a modern cosmopolitan form that privileges fluid expression. He presents a contemporary, hybrid Black masculinity that is adaptable and commercially profitable. Drake breaks from rigidly hypermasculine presentations of dominance, expanding interpretations of Black male successes to include leisurely pursuits typically associated with effeminate identities.

Kendrick’s “Euphoria” also exemplifies the complexity of masculine performance in ritual aggression, subverting expectations sonically. He achieves this subversion through production samples and a vocal delivery unconventional to diss records. In this performance,

Kendrick opens the track with a gentle R&B instrumental, sampling Teddy Pendergrass', "You're My Latest, My Greatest Inspiration" – a song that compares the artists' love interest with the beauty of the Mona Lisa (Pendergrass, 1981). Rather than the aggressive basslines and high-tempo rhythms often associated with diss records, Kendrick initially employs soft vocal tones that imply a sense of intimacy. This approach is intended to disarm listeners, and draw them into the lyrics which, although Kendrick delivered in a calming tone, antagonize his subject thoroughly, keeping with the tradition of ritual aggression. Kendrick's sonic approach in this record complicates expressions of masculine aggression between male artists. Audiences expect displays of a dominance in Hip Hop beef, symbolized through hostile vocal intonations and cutting lyricism (Avery, et al., 2017; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Mello-Klein, 2024).

However, Kendrick – aware of these expectations – subverts them for only a time, before gradually adhering to them with an increasingly loud, impassioned vocal performance. His aggressive lyrical delivery builds throughout the track, epitomizing hypermasculine vocalites typical in Hip Hop beefs. Kendrick effectively ambushes listeners by blurring genre lines, prior to progressively increasing hegemonically privileged masculine vocal inflections. The track also shifts into a combative production, traditional to diss tracks. The music production changes multiple times during the track, incorporating death bell tolls, and deep reverberating basslines, while increasing decibel levels and rates of beats-per-minute. With this strategy, Kendrick tacitly acknowledges the politics of masculine performance in Hip Hop. He signals a challenge to these norms with soft melodic elements upfront – atypical to conventional Hip Hop tracks – only to wield these as tools of dominance through juxtaposition, reinforcing traditional aggressive elements of Hip Hop disses (Alim, et al., 2018; Coddington, 2023; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016).

Naming, positioning masculinities, and response

Contextual tracks that precede the formal confrontation between Kendrick and Drake signify initial subversion of ritually aggressive masculine performances within the feud. Notable examples are present in Drake's "First Person Shooter" (FPS) featuring J. Cole, and Future & Metro Boomin's "Like That" featuring Kendrick. Both tracks reveal themes that the competing artists return to throughout the duration of their beef.

While not issued as a formal diss towards Kendrick, Drake's "FPS", initiated a direct response – thus igniting their feud – due to the politics of naming within Hip Hop culture. In Hip Hop, naming practices are read with significant weight, as name-dropping an artist – referencing their government name, stage-name or associated monikers – without explicit praise, signals disrespect and functions as an invitation for ritual aggression to commence (Kádár & House, 2022; Oware, 2023; Tyree & Williams, 2021). In "FPS", Cole rhymes, "People love to argue who's the hardest MC / is it K. Dot⁷, is Aubrey⁸ or me / we the Big Three like we started a league". Hip Hop commentators considered Drake, Kendrick, and Cole the best contemporary MC's in Hip Hop, naming them "The Big Three" (Chery, 2020; Tyree, 2024). Although rankings varied, many viewed Drake as the de facto number one – due to charting dominance and career longevity, Kendrick as number two – with classic albums, significant Grammy wins, and a Pulitzer Prize, and Cole as number three – with a skillful lyrical technique.

Cole's verbal affirmation of a Big Three status between these artists subverts conventional masculine performances in Hip Hop, which reward independence and prideful self-assertive claims of unequivocal dominance (Chery, 2020; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016;

⁷ An associated moniker of Kendrick Lamar.

⁸ Drake's legal first name.

Tyree, 2024). However – and likely due to subverting traditional masculine performance – this track triggers an invitation for a ritually aggressive response by Kendrick. Cole continues, “the spider-man meme is me looking at Drake”. Cole references a “Spider-Man meme” – featuring three identical figures – while explicitly mentioning only himself and Drake, excluding Kendrick. This selective omission – especially after name-dropping Kendrick and referencing a popular image depicting three figures – symbolizes a repositioning of Hip Hop’s hierarchy. These lyrics precede Drake’s own invitation for a retaliatory response – based on the rites of ritual aggression. Drake rhymes, “Who the G.O.A.T.⁹? / Who you b****es really rootin' for?... N****, it's just you and Cole”. Drake and Cole’s lyrics strategically erase Kendrick, and situate him as a lesser figure within the debate over Hip Hop’s greatest MC. Particularly after prior acknowledgment of who constitutes the “Big Three,” this omission symbolizes an act of diminishment – challenging Kendrick to reaffirm his position within Hip Hop’s competitive cultural hierarchy. Explicitly naming another artist in unfavorable terms invites competition, while strategic omission signals disrespect, which provokes retaliation and cyclically reinforces the genre’s demand for top artists to assert dominance (Lang & Kundt, 2022; Ogbar, 2024; Tyree & Williams, 2021).

Additional subtext of Drake and Cole’s collaboration is how their artistic partnership works to subvert Hip Hop’s conventional masculine practices of ritual aggression, replacing competitive hostility with playful sparring and mutual endorsement of contemporaries. Rather than direct confrontation, their verbal tag-team claiming lyrical dominance represents a masculine form counter to Hip Hop battle-rap tradition – as both artists tentatively recognize a sense of rivalry but avoid explicitly antagonizing each other (Oware, 2023). The intentional

⁹ An acronym for the Greatest of All-Time.

omission of Kendrick in their back-and-forth, after explicit mention, is inherently provocative within Hip Hop's normative masculine codes (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Kádár & House, 2022; Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024). Their strategic move represents a subversive attempt to maintain masculine forms of dominance through passive aggressive confrontation. This approach runs counter to the direct nature of traditional masculine performances in Hip Hop beef, which values direct confrontation and proclamation of will. These actions license a response, and an appeal to restoration of conventional masculinized practices in ritual aggression, which Kendrick meets in his "Like That" verse (Avery, et al., 2017; Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024).

On Metro Boomin and Future's "Like That", Kendrick explicitly deconstructs the Big Three hierarchy that Drake and Cole advanced. Kendrick's declaration, "Motherf**k the Big 3, n****, it's just Big Me", represents more than competitive posturing, but signifies his assertion of singular dominance. Kendrick's proclamation reflects Hip Hop's all-or-nothing masculinity, where greatness must be individually claimed rather than collectively shared (Jia & Yao, 2022; Tyree, 2024). Kendrick raps, "Yea, get up with me / first person shooter, f*** sneak dissin'", rejecting subliminal disses and demanding open confrontation. Here, he reaffirms Hip Hop codes of explicit verbal combat, directly challenging his contemporaries to lyrically duel to identify a champion (Bradley, et. al., 2010; Chery, 2020; Oware, 2023). Kendrick's verbal antagonism represents a reset of ritual practice, seeking to restore traditions of overt competition central to Hip Hop's hierarchical norms (Alim, et al., 2018). While Drake and Cole's collaboration suggests a pluralistic masculinity, Kendrick continuously insists on competition and solitary dominance. His intervention serves as genre correction, reasserting that authentic dominance in Hip Hop is combative in nature, and must be performed solely, not collaboratively (Tyree, 2024).

Contesting collaboration as masculine fault line

Hip Hop commentators further Kendrick's ideological stance of individualism with reports that he declined an invite to collaborate with Drake and Cole on "FPS" (Mahadevan, 2024). In "Euphoria", Kendrick alludes to this possibility when addressing Drake saying, "Surprised you sent that feature request, you know we got some s*** to address". While Drake's invitation to collaborate indicates a willingness to compromise traditional forms of masculine representation in Hip Hop, Kendrick's rejection capitulates to the status quo. These actions highlight diverging approaches to Hip Hop culture, with Drake's attempt at collaboration contrasting against Kendrick's confrontational independence. Rejecting advances for cooperation, Kendrick instead reinforces a hegemonic masculine framework of hierarchy, typical in Hip Hop, through lyrical warfare rather than partnership. Additionally, lyrics from Drake and Cole's collaboration read counter to privileged gender performances of hierarchical masculinity within the genre. Both artists declined to definitively assert themselves above the other in "FPS" – while omitting Kendrick from the debate. Thus Cole and Drake signal satisfaction with an ambiguous draw and perpetual interchangeability for pole positioning within Hip Hop's hierarchy. Kendrick's retaliatory aggression represents more than prideful self-assertion, but symbolizes restoration that reaffirms his cultural authority. Kendrick, adhering to masculine codes within Hip Hop, asserts his narrative claim to being an MC without lyrical peers (Avery, et al., 2017; Chery, 2020; Ogbar, 2024).

In "Euphoria", Kendrick explicitly critiques Drake and Cole's collaboration, contrasting their connection against his own singular status. While addressing his rivals' choice to collaborate, Kendrick highlighted their previous public displays of intimacy, describing their interactions as overly affectionate. He rhymes, "There's three GOATs left and I see two of 'em kissing and hugging on stage / I love them to death, and in eight bars I'll explain that phrase".

Referring to the Big Three artists as GOATs, Kendrick evokes a process of elimination, insinuating a requisite status change due to a violation of traditional cultural codes that promote assertive independence. Using satire, he weaponizes homosocial intimacy as a breach of Hip Hop's traditionally rigid heteronormative masculinity. He recalls occasions on Drake's, *It Was All A Blur* tour, where J. Cole would join Drake on stage, to embrace and openly commemorate one another (Blanchet, 2021). His lyrical framing positions such tenderness as incompatible with the competitive masculine performance that Hip Hop traditionally demands. Kendrick challenges his peers' claims to GOAT status as illegitimate, due to their open expressions of affection as "rival" MC's. Kendrick, in a typified display of masculinized dominance, continues exploiting Drake and Cole's public expressions of homosocial connection, saying *I love them to death, and in eight bars I'll explain that phrase*. In his heteromasculine performance, Kendrick remains aware of the homoerotic imagery accompanying his idiom. Drawing contrast between himself and his rivals, Kendrick maintains a privileged performance of masculinity with lyrics that connote violence, as opposed to the romantic love he accuses his competition of having for one another. He emphasizes the upcoming punchline through delayed gratification, and clarifies his profession of *loving [his rivals] to death*, in forthcoming bars.

Using the mores of ritual aggression, Kendrick returns to the politics of naming, bridging his striking independence as a competitive MC with his continued rejection of Drake and Cole's collaborative agenda. He rhymes, "yea, Cole and Aubrey know, I'm a selfish n****, the crown is heavy / I pray they're my real friends, if not, I'm YNW Melly." Kendrick reasserts his singular dominance, symbolically referencing the price to be champion comes at the expense of true friendship. His further threat - "If not, I'm YNW Melly" – metaphorically invokes violence to underscore distrust in collaboration between "frenemies", reinforcing a competitive survivalism

embedded in Hip Hop's Black masculine performance (Avery, et al., 2017). Kendrick settles on this position by naming rapper YNW Melly, infamous for allegedly committing a double homicide against two of his close associates. Through his lyrical ruthlessness, Kendrick effectively repositions himself within an aggressively individualist masculinity, explicitly rejecting divergent emotional vulnerability and relational peer connectivity. Kendrick's presentation aligns with how socially praised Black male performance is historically framed through competitive spectacle, reinforcing dominant ideals of rugged individualism (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025; Messerschmidt, 2019). His critiques of Drake and Cole's open emotionality, coupled with his metaphorical violence, uphold a traditional masculinity, underscoring Hip Hop as a space to express conditional forms of Black masculine norms (Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016; Ogbar, 2024; Oware, 2023).

Policing and expanding the bounds of ritual

As a rule-governed performance, ritual aggression through Hip Hop beefs emphasizes countering insults in-kind (Jia & Yao, 2022; Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024). Failing to appropriately respond to attacks signals vulnerability and weakness, indicating retreat, which can lead to a lack of cultural credibility (Lang & Kundt, 2024; Kádár & House, 2022). Audience reactions to J. Cole's tentative solo engagement in the feud exemplifies the consequences of improperly responding while in a Hip Hop beef (Robinson, 2024; Tyree, 2024). After releasing his own diss track targeting Kendrick – on the appropriately titled EP, *Might Delete Later* – Cole deleted his diss track “7 Minute Drill”. In doing so, Cole subverted the norms of ritual aggression by displaying an introspective masculinity. He subsequently recanted his attack, removed the diss from music platforms, and issued a public apology to Kendrick – less than a week after dissing him. Cole's unexpected withdrawal from the conflict disrupted expectations of ritual aggression,

with many spectators initially interpreting this act as weakness or cowardice (Robinson, 2024). However, commentary changed once fans witnessed the increasing intensity of Kendrick and Drake's feud (Kádár & House, 2022; Tyree, 2024). After the beef concluded, – limiting mistaken intentions that may lead to retaliatory confrontational verses – Cole reflexively shared his perspective on Kendrick and Drake's performances of ritualized aggression. He also contemplated how audiences reacted to his own withdrawal, on the song "Port Antonio". He writes, "Now some will discredit me, try to wipe away my pedigree" (Cole, 2024). In reflection, Cole shares an awareness that Hip Hop observers are likely to contest his status as a top MC. He recognizes his failure to meet audience expectations of masculine performance in ritual aggression, and the compromising impact this is likely to have on his public perception (Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024; Robinson, 2024; Williams & Thompson, 2024). Masculinist ritualized aggression in Hip Hop beef demands endurance through conflict until an audience-determined resolution is brought forth (Kádár & House, 2022). Cole's apology and retreat violated norms of ritual aggression, thus disqualifying his symbolic and cultural legitimacy as a top MC (Robinson, 2024; Lang & Kundt, 2022).

Conversely Kendrick and Drake tacitly acknowledged and accepted the terms of engagement (Kádár, & House, 2022). As the feud escalated, both artists implicitly consented to continuing the battle, maintaining the bounds of ritual aggression (Lang & House, 2024). They both understood that non-engagement signified defeat, and would damage cultural authority (Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024). Their provocations intensified with each diss, embodying dramatic enactments of masculine dominance through mutual combat and retaliatory escalation (Kádár & House, 2022). The feud became increasingly personal, as seen in "Family Matters" when Drake raps, "we could have left the kids out of this don't blame me" (Drake, 2024). Drake symbolically

refers to bounds within mutual combat that limit the scope of attack to the opposing party. He also signified the breach of these norms, rejecting responsibility while retaliating in-kind. Drake effectively expanded the boundaries of ritual aggression by maintaining confrontational engagement, and advancing masculine performance of dominance by escalating conflict (Kádár & House, 2022).

Kendrick also articulates the unwritten rules of ritual aggression, upholding and policing its boundaries. In “Euphoria,” he raps, “this supposed to be a friendly fade¹⁰, you should keep it that way,” invoking mutual combat common in accepted street codes of masculinity and anticipated in Hip Hop beefs (Jeffries, 2011; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). He also signifies a mutual willingness to escalate, thus remaining engaged in ritual aggression and conventional performances of masculinity, stating, “If you take it there, I’m taking it further, that’s something you don’t want to do”. Kendrick framed his retaliatory escalation as conditional upon Drake’s acceptance or transgression of boundaries. He revisits the expectations of their ritualized aggressive acts in “Meet the Grahams,” reminding his opponent, “this was supposed to be a good exhibition within the game, but you f***ed up the moment you mentioned my family’s name”. Kendrick reinforces a decidedly masculine posture, stating that personal violations justify intensified escalation (Kádár & House, 2022).

In the framework of ritual aggression, Kendrick and Drake’s escalatory responses throughout their feud are reactions to symbolic disrespect, invoking masculine codes of honor and retaliation (Kádár & House, 2022; Lang & Kundt, 2024). In a moment of reflection of how ritual aggression in their feud was anticipated to proceed – while maintaining a posture of masculine dominance – Kendrick chides Drake’s lyrical performance. In “Meet the Grahams”, he

¹⁰ Sparring match

directly addresses Drake, saying, “Guess integrity is lost when the metaphors doesn’t reach you” (Lamar, 2024). Kendrick accused Drake of failing to properly engage within the demarcated bounds of their verbal ritualized competition, thus prompting the norms of masculine performance and retaliation to extend these bounds. This framing justifies Kendrick’s subsequent lyrical escalation as necessary and a corrective measure against what he perceived as violations to an established code (Oware, 2023).

The escalating intensity and personal attacks within the Kendrick – Drake feud eventually reshaped audience perceptions of performance and acceptable masculine expression within Hip Hop (Kádár & House, 2022; Robinson, 2024). Audiences initially condemned Cole’s withdrawal from the feud, but later reinterpreted this move as an acceptable, conditional masculine form (Tyree, 2024). This signals a limit to the audience’s tolerance for ritual aggression when conflicts become too personal, and indicates the fluid nature of social practices (Robinson, 2024). Such reflexive recalibration highlights the contingent nature of Hip Hop masculine expressions, revealing the role of audiences beyond that of spectators and artistic judges, but including their active role as cultural arbiters that police bounds of Black cultural expression (Alim, et al., 2018; Johnson, et al., 2020; Payne, 2024; Schröder, 2019).

Conclusion

The analysis of the Kendrick Lamar – Drake feud highlights ritual aggression as a contested, and highly dynamic performance of masculinity, constantly reshaped by historical legacies, audience engagement, and cultural norms (Kádár & House, 2022; Lang & Kundt, 2024; Oğuz & Işık-Güler, 2024). Kendrick’s confrontational performance of ritual aggression displays a rigid, traditional masculinity that emphasizes dominance, and targeted lyrical warfare (Oware,

2023; Tyree, 2024). Drake's fluid performance challenges and expands the boundaries of acceptable masculine expression within Hip Hop. J. Cole's varied positionality – from collaborator, to competitor and then informed observer - demonstrates negotiations of masculine acceptance within ritual aggression. Ultimately, these intersecting relations show how ritual aggression remains foundational to Hip Hop beef, yet conditionally evolves, shaped by artistic choices and audience reception to such decisions. Ritual aggression in Hip Hop remains a spectacle of masculine contest, an accepted arena for privileged Black masculine expression, and a critical site for negotiating contemporary Black masculine identities. Hip Hop feuds thus illustrate the genre's enduring cultural relevance with connections to wider social expectations, audience participation, and nuanced discourse around race, gender, and power

This study has examined the Kendrick Lamar – Drake feud as a layered and evolving performance of ritualized aggression, illustrating how Hip Hop conflict operates at the intersection of cultural expression, gender performance, and audience reactions. This analysis affirms Hip Hop beef as ritual aggression through stylized, strategic, and socially mediated lyrical competition. The beef highlights how ritual aggression in Hip Hop platforms competing models of Black masculinity. Kendrick and Drake's contrasting masculine performances represent not only aesthetic choices but also cultural orientations, contesting what it means to be an authentic, culturally expressive contemporary Black male.

As the Kendrick - Drake conflict intensified, audiences revealed their complex role as co-contributors and policing agents within ritual aggression. Shifting audience reactions throughout the beef indicate that masculinity in Hip Hop is continually renegotiated rather than rigidly defined, and subject to reinterpretations based on context and performance. This shift highlights how ritual aggression, while grounded in hypermasculine codes of retaliation and

dominance, remains contingent – negotiated by artists, shaped by fan discourse, and not entirely fixed by either. The conflict reflects broader social dynamics influencing Black masculine cultural production, which is shaped by community norms and systemic constraints. Ritual aggression in Hip Hop publicly dramatizes the ways Black men negotiate identity, and emotional expression while experiencing a racialized surveillance through artistic consumption. The Kendrick and Drake conflict highlights the particular arenas where performative expectations conditionally celebrate while rigidly constraining Black masculine performance. While Hip Hop’s ritual aggression remains a constructive space for artistry and meaning-making, it also highlights tensions of racialized masculinity, gender, and identity formation.

Ultimately, the Kendrick–Drake feud reveals ritual aggression as an enthralling performance of masculinity, mediated by visibility, interpretive understandings, and shifting audience expectations. Each act dramatized the conditional negotiations of Black masculine identity in contemporary Hip Hop, working as a site of identity formation through social interaction. The ritualized aggressive performances of Kendrick and Drake extend to greater implications of hypervisible racial, and gendered presentations. Ritual aggression is thus revealed, not as a fully predictable form of confrontation, but as an evolving dialogue among artists, audiences, and the greater social public. The Kendrick – Drake conflict highlights performances of masculinity under public scrutiny – a tension that shapes individual artistic legacies as well as broader cultural understandings of what it means to be Black, male, visible and culturally viable within contemporary society.

Appendix A:

Timeline of Notable Events in the Feud

Date	Occurrence	Artist
August 14th, 2013	“Control”	Big Sean ft. Kendrick
2013 – 2023	10 years of mutually exchanged subliminal disses	Drake & Kendrick
October 24th, 2023	“First Person Shooter”	Drake ft. J. Cole
March 26th, 2024	“Like That”	Metro Boomin’ & Future ft. Kendrick
April 5th, 2024	“7 Minute Drill”	J. Cole
April 8th, 2024	Apologizes to Kendrick at Dreamville Festival	J. Cole
April 12th, 2024	Removes “7 Minute Drill” from streaming platforms	J. Cole
April 13th, 2024	“Push Ups”	Drake
April 19th, 2024	“TaylorMade Freestyle”	Drake
April 30th, 2024	“Euphoria”	Kendrick
May 3rd, 2024	“Meet the Grahams”	Kendrick
May 3rd, 2024	“6:16 in LA”	Kendrick
May 3rd, 2024	“Family Matters”	Drake
May 4th, 2024	“Not Like Us”	Kendrick
May 5th, 2024	“The Heart Part 6”	Drake
June 19th, 2024	“The Pop Out” concert	Kendrick
July 4th, 2024	“Not Like Us” music video	Kendrick
October 9th, 2024	“Port Antonio”	J. Cole
November 22nd, 2024	<i>GNX</i> album release	Kendrick
February 4th, 2025	<i>AMW</i> tour starts	Drake
February 9th, 2025	Super Bowl LIX Halftime	Kendrick
February 25th, 2025	<i>AMW</i> tour postponed	Drake
April 19th, 2025	<i>Grand National Tour</i> starts	Kendrick

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