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The Role of Integrated Marketing and Media Technology in the Diplomatic Projection of U.S. State Power

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Abstract: This article argues that the *hip hop-basketball paradigm* operates as an integrated marketing complex and media technology through which the United States projects and reproduces its state power on the global stage. Drawing on a multi-year ethnographic study of the musical and theatrical aspects of professional basketball in Toronto (2018–2023) and on critical analysis of basketball-themed media—movies, music, music videos, sneaker advertisements, and live spectacle—this article reframes that empirical material through the lens of soft power and what the U.S. State Department itself calls «hip hop diplomacy.» Building on Razmig Keucheyan’s claim that nationalism underpins the logic of the world capitalist economy, this article shows how the hip hop-basketball paradigm operationalizes a nationalist-capitalist hegemony anchored in three interlocking ideological appeals: aspiration, the inviolability of private property, and innovation derived of competition. Through a case study of the 1996 family film *Space Jam*; a history of «songs to sell sneakers» from Run-D.M.C.’s 1986 «My Adidas» through Drake and Future’s 2015 «Jumpman»; and an extended analysis of the Toronto Raptors’s global brand ambassador, Drake, this article demonstrates that when the paradigm operates outside U.S. borders—in a Canadian, multicultural register that markets itself as distinct from the United States—it nonetheless reproduces U.S. sociocultural and political ideals. The hip hop-basketball paradigm, this article concludes, is one of the most effective, and least examined, technologies of U.S. cultural diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Nationalist-Capitalist Hegemony; Basketball; Hip Hop; Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power.

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El papel del marketing integrado y las tecnologías mediáticas en la proyección diplomática del poder estatal de Estados Unidos

Resumen: Este artículo sostiene que el paradigma hip hop–baloncesto funciona como un complejo integrado de marketing y una tecnología mediática mediante la cual Estados Unidos proyecta y reproduce su poder estatal en el escenario global. Basándose en un estudio etnográfico de varios años sobre los aspectos musicales y teatrales del baloncesto profesional en Toronto (2018–2023), así como en un análisis crítico de medios relacionados con el baloncesto —películas, música, videos musicales, anuncios de zapatillas deportivas y espectáculos en vivo—, el artículo reinterpreta este material empírico desde la perspectiva del poder blando (soft power) y de lo que el propio Departamento de Estado de Estados Unidos denomina «diplomacia del hip hop». Partiendo de la tesis de Razmig Keucheyan de que el nacionalismo sustenta la lógica de la economía capitalista mundial, el artículo muestra cómo el paradigma hip hop–baloncesto pone en práctica una hegemonía nacionalista-capitalista basada en tres apelaciones ideológicas interrelacionadas: la aspiración al éxito, la inviolabilidad de la propiedad privada y la innovación derivada de la competencia. A través de un estudio de caso de la película familiar *Space Jam* (1996), de una historia de las «canciones para vender zapatillas» que va desde Run-D.M.C. y su tema *My Adidas* (1986) hasta Drake y *Future with Jumpman* (2015), y mediante un análisis extenso del embajador global de la marca de los Toronto Raptors, Drake, el artículo demuestra que, cuando este paradigma opera fuera de las fronteras estadounidenses —en un contexto canadiense y multicultural que se presenta como distinto de Estados Unidos—, continúa reproduciendo ideales socioculturales y políticos estadounidenses. El artículo concluye que el paradigma hip hop–baloncesto constituye una de las tecnologías más eficaces y menos estudiadas de la diplomacia cultural estadounidense en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Hegemonía nacionalista-capitalista; Baloncesto; Hip Hop; Diplomacia cultural; Poder blando.

Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, marketing and advertising underwent a major shift. Traditional twentieth-century attitudes—*Mad Men*-era techniques—no longer resonated with the multicultural, polyethnic consumer base known as millennials. The autocratic strategy of mega-corporations dictating messages to consumers became ineffective for driving engagement and sales. Consequently, innovative marketing and advertising agencies began targeting individuals in more nuanced ways, inviting them into the brand. Music and marketing executive Steve Stoute, whose

agency Translation reworked the campaigns of brands like Reebok, McDonald's, and State Farm, observes that «consumers wanted to be allowed in, to have a point of view in the matter» (Stoute [2011] 2012, 148). The technology of address that emerged from this shift was hip hop. Or, more precisely: hip hop articulated to professional basketball, with both forms borne to a global audience by U.S.-based media conglomerates and the corporate sport infrastructure that surrounds the National Basketball Association (NBA).

This article calls that articulated complex the *hip hop-basketball paradigm* (Zalis 2025). It is at once a marketing logic, an aesthetic regime, an ensemble of media texts—films, music, music videos, video games, social-media performances, branded apparel, live arena spectacle—and, I argue here, a media technology of state power. The argument I want to advance is that the hip hop-basketball paradigm constitutes one of the most consequential and least theorized vectors through which the United States today conducts cultural diplomacy. It is a soft-power instrument as significant in the present moment as American film was for Joseph Nye when, in 1990, he first offered his thesis, defining *soft power* as «the ability to do things and control others, [and] to get others to do what they otherwise would not» through cultural seduction rather than coercion (Nye 1990, p. 154). What college sports and American film and television were for U.S. soft power in the post-Cold War period of which Nye was writing—avenues to affect the preferences of others—the hip hop-basketball paradigm is for the present: a global circulation of texts, sounds, images, and consumer commodities that carry U.S. national-cultural ideals, package them as universally aspirational, and seed them across the world's most rapidly urbanizing, youth-heavy markets.²

The argument is built on critical ethnographic research conducted in Toronto from 2018 to 2023 with key stakeholders in the city's professional basketball community: artists, fans, technicians, media personalities, executives, and creative directors.³ That work formed the basis of my doctoral thesis, *Net Effects: Nationalist-Capitalist Hegemony in the Hip Hop-Basketball Paradigm* (Zalis

2 On the relationship between hip hop, resistance, and hegemonic institutions, my approach is informed by Katz (2019) and by Marsh and Campbell's (2020) *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel*, which takes seriously hip hop's capacity to disrupt and reimagine national formations. On African American aesthetics in basketball, I draw on George (1999), Boyd ([2003] 2008), Abdul-Jabbar and Obstfeld (2007), and Caponi-Tabery (2008). My argument here is not that these counter-hegemonic articulations do not exist—they manifestly do—but that, *as the paradigm circulates commercially through the global mediascape*, the hegemonic reading dominates.

3 A methodological note: this article combines critical media analysis with insights drawn from ethnographic fieldwork. Where I cite interviews, the data come from semi-structured conversations conducted in Toronto between 2018 and 2023, with consent procedures approved by the Memorial University of Newfoundland's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research.

2025), and I draw on several of its empirical chapters here.⁴ But this article reframes that material in a deliberately different register. Whereas the thesis was concerned with how music and sound shape the meaning-constitution of basketball events in Toronto, this article asks a different question: *how does the hip hop-basketball paradigm work as a media technology for the diplomatic projection of U.S. state power?* Toronto, I argue, is in this sense not an outlier within an otherwise U.S.-centric story, rather Toronto is proof-of-concept. It is the league's only non-U.S. franchise; it is positioned in a country that, since 1971, has officially branded itself as a multicultural alternative to American nationalism; and it is host to the most globally consequential hip hop artist of the twenty-first century, Drake. If, despite all these differences, the paradigm's operations in Toronto continue to reproduce U.S. sociocultural and political ideals, then the case for the paradigm's role in U.S. cultural diplomacy is at its most rigorous: it works even where the conditions seem locally inhospitable.

To prove this point, the article proceeds in a series of substantive sections. The section that immediately follows develops the theoretical framework, drawing on Razmig Keucheyan's (2014) work on the inseparability of nationalism and capitalism, Antonio Gramsci's ([1971] 2012) theory of cultural hegemony, and Joseph Nye's (1990, 2008, 2012) literature on soft power. It also engages directly with the U.S. State Department's own admission—articulated in groundbreaking work by Mark Katz (2019) and in a 2022 podcast hosted by Council on Foreign Relations producer Gabrielle Sierra (which featured Mark Katz and Toni Blackman, the first Hip Hop Diplomat for the U.S. State Department)—that hip hop has become a strategic instrument of U.S. public diplomacy. The paper then turns to basketball movies, with an extended case study of the 1996 live-action/animated family film *Space Jam* and the way its soundtrack and narrative structure operationalize three interlocking appeals: aspiration (in R. Kelly's «I Believe I Can Fly»), the Lockean defence of private property (in Michael Jordan's resistance to the antagonist alien overlord, Mr. Swackhammer), and the *agon-arete* pairing of innovation through competition (in the film's climactic act). Throughout, I show how the Protestant ethic, identified by Max Weber and developed by Anthony Giddens (2005) and Jeremy Rifkin (2015), undergirds the film's moral grammar. Inquiring of the prevalence of hip hop and R&B in the *Space Jam* soundtrack, the article then

4 The full empirical study on which this article draws is Zalis (2025), *Net Effects: Nationalist-Capitalist Hegemony in the Hip Hop-Basketball Paradigm*, which deploys an experimental methodology I call *just listening*—an ethically grounded, intensely focused listening practice developed across the multi-year fieldwork in Toronto. The methodological apparatus is fully developed there.

turns to the historical entanglement of hip hop, basketball, and marketing and branding, analysing the place of the hip hop-basketball paradigm in the sneaker industry—from Run-D.M.C.’s «My Adidas» (1986) through Drake and Future’s «Jumpman» (2015)—showing how a sounding commodity (the «squeak, squeak» of basketball footwear, both soundmark and keynote of the basketball soundscape) becomes the vehicle for what Stoute calls *aspiration*: the desire for things to be other than they are (Stoute [2011] 2012). Building on this notion, the article then advances its most ambitious claim: that Drake, taken by many of his fans as a synecdoche of multicultural Toronto and of Canada’s branded distinctness from the United States, in fact performs a tightly choreographed set of texts informed by U.S. sociocultural and political ideals.⁵

Nationalist-Capitalist Hegemony, Soft Power, and Hip Hop Diplomacy

Critical sociologist Razmig Keucheyan opens an avenue for thinking about the entanglement of nationalism and capitalism in the hip hop-basketball paradigm when he observes that «Nationalism is neither accidental nor provisional. It is part and parcel of the very logic of the world capitalist economy» (Keucheyan 2014, p. 117). Against a long-standing tendency in some quarters of Marxist theory to treat nationalism as either a transient bourgeois ideology or an irrational deviation from class consciousness, Keucheyan insists on the structural inseparability of the two formations. Capitalism, in his account, is not a system that happens to occur within nation-states; it is a system that requires nation-states, and the cultural-affective bonds they cultivate to reproduce itself globally. From this perspective, the world capitalist economy produces nationalist ideologies as part of its infrastructure.

I take this thesis to be analytically generative for thinking about cultural products that, on their face, appear to be mere entertainment: a family-friendly basketball movie, a series of songs about sneakers, and a celebrity endorsement for a basketball team. The point is that these texts are not propaganda in the crude sense of carrying explicit political messages. But rather, as Joseph Nye argues, they are effective propaganda because they are not understood as propaganda: «the best propaganda is *not* propaganda» (Nye 2012, original

5 A note on scope: the article is intentionally synoptic rather than encyclopedic. There exists a vast literature on hip hop, on basketball, and on the political economy of mediated sport; I have drawn on it selectively. My ambition is not to settle the question of how hip hop and basketball each separately extend influence in global popular culture, but to mark out a specific *articulated* form—the hip hop-basketball paradigm—and to argue that this form has acquired a distinctive role in U.S. cultural diplomacy that should be the subject of sustained future study. There is no other study, to my knowledge, that frames the question in quite this way; my hope is that this piece will be a foundation on which other researchers, working in other languages and in other regions of the global mediascape, can build.

emphasis). It is as metaphorical «undercover cars» that these media texts are indeed vectors through which the cultural-ideological substrate of nationalist capitalism is rendered attractive, normal, and pleasurable. They are what I have elsewhere called the texts of a *nationalist-capitalist hegemony*: a cultural formation in which the values of U.S. national identity (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) and the values of capitalist accumulation (private property, competition, the right to benefit from one's own labour) are presented as a single, coherent, desirable package. As Keucheyan (2014) writes elsewhere in *The Left Hemisphere*, hegemonic projects must «found and protect a world order which [is] universal in conception . . . [and] an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests» (102). The hip hop-basketball paradigm is one of the most effective such projects of our present.

The animating concept here is Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, developed in the *Prison Notebooks* and adapted by generations of cultural critics. It distinguishes hegemony from coercion: where coercion compels obedience through force, hegemony secures consent through the dissemination of a worldview that the dominated come to internalize as their own (Gramsci [1971] 2012, p. 333). Movies, popular music, branded apparel, and other forms of mediated culture work hegemonically when they make the values of the dominant class appear to be the values of common sense.

«Just Do It,» writes global sportswear giant Nike on its trademarked property.

This is precisely the move that professional basketball's mass-media texts perform. Through narratives, character archetypes, and symbolism, basketball-themed films, songs, and spectacles tend to reinforce existing power structures and social norms. Rarely do they communicate counter-hegemonic narratives, although films and documentaries from or about subaltern groups can serve as forms of resistance against dominant cultural messaging. I think here of distinctively non-hip hop-basketball films like Scott Kalvert's 1995 *The Basketball Diaries*, with its representations of the failure of the American Dream, and David Zucker's satirical take on spectacle sport in his 1998 slacker-comedy, *BASEketball*.

Most importantly for my argument here, however, is Spike Lee's 1998 *He Got Game*. The film presents striking visions of Black masculinity, the prison-industrial complex, the exploitation of young Black athletes in high school and collegiate basketball, and the entanglement of all of these with the Protestant ethic (Weber [1930] 2005)—providing much grist for the critical mill. Its parallel soundtracks—one released on Def Jam Records featuring Public Enemy's hardcore, political hip hop, and the other on Sony Classical featuring

Aaron Copland's classical Americana—at once celebrate and critique basketball's place in the American national imagination.

This article is also inspired by bell hooks's ([1995] 2021) incisive critique of Steve James's incredibly popular 1994 high school basketball documentary, *Hoop Dreams*, in which hooks argues that the film projects a vision of the American Dream that sees White adults exploiting young Black men and ultimately benefiting from their successes, reinforcing, among other troubling ideologies, an «'auction block' mentality that has to call to the mind of any aware viewer the history of slavery and the plantation economy, which was also built on the exploitation of young, strong, black male bodies» (hooks [1995] 2021, np).

It follows, then, that representation in basketball media matters significantly. Who gets to be the hero, how different genders, races, and classes are portrayed, and which stories are deemed worth telling all contribute to the reproduction of the dominant sociocultural, political, and economic order. Thus, «when the viewer takes the connoted meaning . . . full and straight» (the *dominant-hegemonic position* in Hall [1980] 2006, p. 171), basketball's mass-media texts celebrate aspiration, individual effort, the value of competition, and the rewards of hard work.

Indeed, nationalist-capitalist hegemony is a seductive force, leveraging sociocultural, political, and economic appeals to gain consent of the masses and maintain the dominance of one group over others. However, its attraction is most often a multifaceted illusion, promising prosperity and stability without delivering these outcomes. While aspiration, effort, competition, and hard work are generally considered worthwhile achievement-oriented behaviours, nationalist-capitalist hegemony is complex and fraught with sociocultural, political, and economic injustices. Consequently, its hegemony frequently leads to the erosion of local traditions and identities (de-indigenization; cultural flattening), the uneven distribution of wealth and benefits (exacerbating social and economic inequalities), and a loss of political and cultural autonomy, resulting in voluntary subjugation—acquiescence and resignation (Keucheyan 2014).

The infrastructure that carries this hegemonic content beyond the United States is what Joseph Nye, in 1990, named soft power. Distinguishing it from the «hard» forms of military and economic compulsion, Nye defined soft power as the capacity to «shape others' preferences» through attraction and seduction rather than coercion (Nye 1990, p. 168). Nye himself wrote nothing of integrated marketing media technologies that fuse music, sport, and lifestyle, but his framework predicts the rise of something very much like the hip hop-basketball paradigm. In a global system where the U.S. no longer enjoys

uncontested hard-power supremacy—where China, Russia, and a more multipolar landscape have significantly raised the cost of coercive diplomacy—soft-power instruments take on disproportionate importance. The most effective of those instruments are the ones that circulate independently of state direction, that travel not as official emissaries but as commodities, fashions, and pleasures, and that reach precisely the demographic the state most wants to reach: the young, the urban, the polyethnic middle class of the global South and East.⁶

Hip Hop Diplomacy

The U.S. State Department has, in fact, recognized this. In a May 2022 episode of the Council on Foreign Relations podcast *Why It Matters*, host Gabrielle Sierra, in a conversation with Mark Katz and Toni Backman, reported on what is now openly termed «hip-hop diplomacy»—a U.S. State Department program that sends hip hop artists abroad to, in the program’s own words, «connect with young minds,» leveraging hip hop’s «unique ability to inspire goodwill towards the United States» and providing what state planners describe as a unique and strategic cultural advantage over adversaries such as China and Russia (Sierra 2022). Hip hop diplomacy frames hip hop simultaneously as an art form that can bridge cultural divides and as a surreptitious tool for winning hearts and minds (Katz 2019). In doing so, it masks the repressive nature of state power, presenting it as aligned with the underclasses—a velvet sheath on an iron hammer. This perceived alignment is largely a façade; in reality, the hip hop-basketball paradigm serves the nationalist-capitalist hegemony described above, reinforcing rather than challenging systemic structures of authority and inequity.

This recognition is the analytical hinge for my argument. If the State Department itself acknowledges hip hop’s value as an instrument of U.S. public diplomacy, then the question is no longer whether hip hop carries U.S. ideology abroad but how it does so. My contention is that hip hop’s diplomatic effectiveness is significantly amplified by its longstanding entanglement with professional basketball: a sport whose marketing infrastructure is global, whose media texts are translated into virtually every major language, and whose star athletes and apparel commodities operate as ambient carriers of

6 Steve Stoute uses the term «polyethnic» to describe a twenty-first century phenomenon. He uses the adjective to refer to «individuals that form the new diverse culture in which we live» (Stoute [2011] 2012, 71). He continues: «Because America’s ever-increasing numbers of interracial marriages and an unprecedented leap in ostensibly polyethnic births, we are giving rise to children whose ethnicity is often vastly different from who they are culturally» (71). This contemporary, polycultural, and liberal-aligned perspective is fundamental to understanding the construction of the contemporary multicultural synecdoche that is ambassador Drake.

U.S. cultural ideology in markets where the State Department itself has no direct presence. Hip hop diplomacy, in other words, is most powerful not in the form of officially sponsored cultural exchanges (which reach a comparatively narrow audience) but in the form of the unofficial, integrated marketing media technologies, circulating U.S. national-capitalist values through the hip hop-basketball paradigm.

The next three sections of this article examine that thesis in detail. I begin with basketball movies, because for many of the participants in my Toronto fieldwork, basketball films were the first sustained encounter with the paradigm. I then move to the music industry's articulation of the paradigm through sneaker culture. Finally, I turn to the case of Drake and the Toronto Raptors, where the question of U.S. ideology's reach into nominally non-U.S. territory is sharpest.

Basketball Movies and Cultural Hegemony:

***Space Jam* and the Allegory of U.S. Capitalist Ideals**

I begin with basketball movies for a rhetorical reason. Mass-media texts precede and structure the way audiences experience basketball, both in person and on television. To understand the most modern iteration of the hip hop-basketball paradigm, it is necessary first to understand its emergence in 1990s popular culture and its rise to prominence shortly thereafter. (See Zalis 2025, pp. 47–51 and pp. 78–81, for an overview of basketball movie soundtracks and their pivot to hip hop around Ron Shelton's 1992 film *White Men Can't Jump*.) Rather than survey the breadth of hip hop-basketball cinema, this section focuses on a single film: Joe Pytka's 1996 live-action/animated sports comedy *Space Jam*. The choice is not arbitrary. The basketball team in question for much of the empirical work in this study, the Toronto Raptors, was founded in 1995, contemporaneous with the global distribution of the blockbuster film and the rise of the spin-off marketing era. *Space Jam* accrued over U.S.\$250 million at the worldwide box office and was the highest-grossing basketball film of all time until 2022, when it was supplanted by Takehiko Inoue's *The First Slam Dunk* (Nash Information Services 2024a, b); one attempted tally of its global economic impact estimates U.S.\$6 billion across all related markets (Gallagher 2019). And as 1990s culture is back on trend—*Space Jam*-themed merchandise now decorating barbershops, basketball courts, and fast fashion marketplaces across North America and beyond—the film is taking on a second life in global popular culture, its soundtrack blends characteristics of its era, foregrounding commercial hip hop, rap, and R&B.

On its surface, *Space Jam* is a promotional vehicle for Michael Jordan via Warner Bros. Family Entertainment, capitalizing on Jordan's global appeal and his then-recent return from a one-year hiatus from professional basketball. Searching for new ways of marketing his superstar client, it was Jordan's agent David Falk who brought the idea of *Space Jam* to Warner Bros., rather than the other way around (Sandler 2001, p. 136). Beneath that promotional surface, however, the film is a dense allegorical text whose soundtrack and narrative structure operationalize three interlocking ideological appeals: aspiration, the inviolability of private property, and innovation derived of competition. Each of these appeals is undergirded by a specifically Protestant ethic of disciplined, intentional work. Together they form the moral grammar of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony.

A critical engagement with *Space Jam* matters precisely because the film disarms critical attention. Its family-friendly slapstick comedy and cartoony, zany antics tend to elide critical examination, and that disarming quality is what makes it a particularly effective ideological vehicle. Adopting a Bakhtinian methodology that favours «small chunks, scenes, and patterns» rather than a «traditional 'close reading' of a text» (Emerson 1991, p. 347), the following three subsections show how music and sound help communicate these themes in three of the movie's pivotal scenes. The argument is not that *Space Jam* effects any particular ideological outcome in any particular viewer; rather, that the film is a representative, and globally circulated, instance of how the hip hop-basketball paradigm encodes the values of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony in narrative form.

«I Believe I Can Fly» and the Protestant Ethic

The opening scene of *Space Jam* introduces a fictionalized young Michael Jordan practicing basketball alone in his backyard in the middle of the night. The non-diegetic soundtrack is R. Kelly's R&B single «I Believe I Can Fly,» which the producers feature in a short excerpt focused on the chorus's images of flight. The song was the second single from the soundtrack album, which has been certified six-times platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA 2024).

I suggest that flight in this context is a metaphor for the aspirational goal of upward mobility—the ultimate vision of freedom within the nationalist-capitalist imagination. American advertising and record executive Steve Stoute defines aspiration as «the mix of desire, hope, imagination, creativity, fearlessness, and a few other ingredients, among which last but not least is belief—specifically, a belief that whatever it is that's the focus of the aspiration

is obtainable» (Stoute [2011] 2012, p. 7). This definition provides an effective lens to understand the song and its operation as the metaphor of flight. It also highlights the connection between aspiration and the ideological underpinnings of the film and professional basketball more broadly:

I believe I can fly
I believe I can touch the sky
I think about it every night and day
Spread my wings and fly away
I believe I can soar
I see me running through that open door
I believe I can fly

In the context of R. Kelly's intentional poetry, to believe one can fly is to believe in one's bold and creative capacity to realize visions of freedom that are often relegated to dreams—phenomena not immediately present in the here-and-now experience of the senses. Flight, in these terms, is a matter of projection rather than perception of material reality. Kelly does not sing about actually flying or about actually touching the sky. Rather, he sings about manifesting the opportunity in his mind's eye: the line «I see me running through that open door» suggests that when opportunity rears its head, he imagines (and thus believes) he will be on to something elsewhere and elsewhere.

The scene's diegetic content is a quiet conversation between the young Michael Jordan and his father, in which Michael, dribbling a ball under a single porch light, asks innocently: «Do you think if I get good enough, I can go to college?» The implication is twofold: first, that young Michael knows that «good» is something one can «get,» and that there is a difference between «good» and «good enough»—that being «good» is often *not* «good enough,» and second, that his pathway to higher education lies in basketball excellence. This thought pattern reflects the young boy's understanding that upward mobility is afforded through sport, and that practice and dedication are what are required of him to realize his dreams. This philosophical and ideological championing of disciplined, intentional work is the Protestant ethic. As Jeremy Rifkin (2015, p. 71) summarizes Max Weber's foundational argument, the Protestant ethic purports that accepting one's calling «and performing one's role fully and without lapse might be a sign that one has been elected to salvation.» Young Michael (the real-life Michael Jordan was raised in the Protestant tradition) embodies the idea that adherents «continuously work at improving their lot in life» as they are «duty-bound to improve [their] calling» (p. 71).

Thus «bettering one's economic lot [is] a reflection of one's proper relationships with God and the natural order» (p. 72).

In his introduction to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Anthony Giddens (2005, p. xii–xiii) describes the Protestant ethic in the development of rational capitalism as the combination of «the impulse to accumulation with a positively frugal life-style.» Young Michael, working on his game in the dead of night, enacts his belief that through dedication and effort—through *getting good enough*—he can realize his dreams of touching the sky. This belief aligns with the idea that personal achievement and success are the results of good, hard work. Young Michael personifies aspiration, striving for upward mobility as an autonomous individual, defining his journey by eventually amassing fame and fortune in the professional marketplace.

Michael Jordan represents the archetypical, heroic vision of flight.

The point worth emphasizing here is that the Protestant ethic, in this filmic operationalization, is not presented as a parochially American or Christian value. It is presented as a universal grammar of striving, available to any aspiring child, anywhere. That universalization is precisely what makes the Protestant ethic an effective vector of U.S. cultural diplomacy: it announces itself as common sense.

«Property In His Own Person»:

John Locke, Michael Jordan, and the Resistance to Swackhammer's Tyranny

The narrative crisis of *Space Jam* is set in motion when an alien tyrant, Mr. Swackhammer, attempts to enslave the Looney Tunes—the cartoon characters of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and so on—and force them to perform as attractions in his intergalactic theme park, Moron Mountain. The Tunes challenge Swackhammer to a basketball game; if they win, they go free, and if they lose, they are bound to perform for him in perpetuity. Recognizing that they will need help to win, the Tunes recruit Michael Jordan from planet Earth.

The political-philosophical content of this premise is unmistakable. The Tunes are workers; Swackhammer is a tyrant who claims the right to expropriate their labour without their consent and without remuneration. Jordan, the movie's hero, is recruited to defend their right to the products of their own labour. His final dunk—an impossibly long leap from half-court that wins the game in the final second—secures the Tunes's freedom and ejects Swackhammer from the global mediascape.

The philosophical genealogy of this scene runs through John Locke. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke ([1690] 1821, p. 209, original emphasis) argues that every man has «a property in his own *person*: [that] no body [*sic*]

has any right to but himself,» and that «the *labour* of his body, and the *work* of his hands, we may say, are properly his.» Locke, the renowned English Enlightenment philosopher, passionately defended private property during the emergence of the new market economy in the late seventeenth century. Responding to a Christian cosmology where one's «place on the rungs of the Great Chain of Being . . . defined one's life journey in the feudal era» (Rifkin 2015, p. 72), Locke argued that the pursuit of private property more accurately reflected the dignity of the human person under God.

Lockean property theory was foundational for the American republican tradition; it is paraphrased almost directly in Thomas Jefferson's «life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.» When *Space Jam* presents Jordan's victory over Swackhammer as a moral triumph, it is, in effect, dramatizing Lockean property rights as universal human entitlements. Workers have the right to benefit from their labour. Slaveholders (even animated, alien ones) are unjust, tyrannical. The free market is the political order in which this justice is realized. Jordan bet on himself—so be it.

This is a profoundly American argument. It is also, of course, an argument with a much darker history than the film acknowledges. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lockean property rights coexisted with, and indeed underwrote, the chattel slavery of African-descended people in the United States, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples across the Americas. The film's anti-slavery moral is sincere but historically amnesiac. Children watching *Space Jam* in São Paulo, Lagos, Manila, or Tokyo are not invited to think about that history. They are invited to identify with Michael Jordan as the hero who delivers freedom through basketball excellence. The Lockean infrastructure of the moral lesson is, as the Protestant ethic was in the previous scene, presented as a universal grammar.

Agon and Arete: Innovation Derived of Competition as a Free Market Exercise

The film's climactic moment is Jordan's impossibly long leap. Down by one point with five seconds left in the basketball game, Jordan dribbles, advances the ball, reaches the half-court line, avoids the Monstars's attempted body check (illegal in fair basketball play), and uses the opponents as a step to leap from. Jordan grits his teeth, and his determined «Ugh» becomes the substrate for a minimalist soundscape, connoting a packed arena collectively holding its breath in anticipation. He takes off from half-court, intending to dunk the basketball: an impossible feat in the real world, as the half-court line is roughly forty-seven feet from the basket. By extension, Jordan is both literally and figuratively reaching for the goal and striving for victory. Time seems to stand

still as multiple Monstars go full-contact, trying to tackle the basketball superstar. Two Monstars secure their hold around Jordan's waist, altering his trajectory and causing worry to cross his face. The Monstars are literally and figuratively pulling him back down to earth.

At this point, Jordan's arm takes on elastic qualities, stretching forward while his body stays in place. The viewer hears sounds reminiscent of rubber or leather stretching—crackling—thus conveying pain, and Jordan's agonized expression reinforces this. With one final reach, Jordan lets out a roar: «Arrrrg!» A wide shot shows he has stretched his arm all the way to the basket, undeterred by the massive alien bodies trying to hold him back from his liberational project.

Swish.

Final buzzer.

Tunes win.

Here, I draw on the philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006), whose philosophical treatise on athletic beauty distinguishes between two interrelated qualities of competitive sport: *agon*, that is «competition,» and *arete*, that is «striving for excellence with the consequence [rather than the goal] of taking some type of performance to its individual or collective limits» (Gumbrecht 2006, p. 70). In Jordan's climactic dunk, both qualities are visible. According to Gumbrecht, competition involves «the domestication of potentially violent fights and tensions through institutional frames and stable rules» (p. 70). And indeed, planet earth did not send an intergalactic military force to Moron Mountain to liberate the Looney Tunes and secure Jordan's freedom. Basketball was the battleground. The game was definitively violent, but a generally peaceful form of competition set the stage for Jordan's allegorical agony. With respect to *arete*, Jordan did not set out to transcend human limits; rather, competitive striving pushed him to exceed his expectations, being the consequence rather than the goal of his efforts. In the heat of competition, Jordan showed faith in his abilities—taking the lead rather than deferring to his teammates—drawing upon his inner strength to achieve the impossible. By doing so, he liberated his friends, restored power to the other NBA players (thus securing the future of competition in the real world), and secured his right to benefit from the labour of his own body.

Full and straight, competition makes manifest innovation in a free marketplace.

This last formulation is my central claim about the film. The fictionalized superhuman dunk is not only the film's narrative resolution but a parable about the productive virtue of competitive markets. Competition, the hall-

mark of free-market capitalism, leads (in this allegorical world) to innovation, success, and glory. Jordan's visible agony and intense pain embody *agon* and *arete* as ancient Greek virtues, but the political content they carry is contemporary and specifically liberalist-capitalist: competition is the engine of progress, and the right to compete freely is the highest political good.

Net Effects: Movies as Diplomatic Vectors

Space Jam communicates, in a family-friendly, globally exportable, commercially profitable form, the moral grammar of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony. Aspiration through Protestant-ethical labour leads to upward mobility. Private property is the natural and just reward of one's own work. Competition produces innovation, which produces freedom. These appeals «found and protect a world order which [is] universal in conception . . . [and] an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests» (Keucheyan 2014, p. 102). Media representations of basketball, in this register, communicate American exceptionalism and the American Dream: that against all odds, one can succeed.

The point for understanding the diplomatic projection of U.S. state power is that the film does not need to say any of this explicitly to do the work of saying it (a «show, don't tell» kind of thing). The hegemonic logic is encoded at the level of allegory, sound design, narrative structure, and casting. The film is, to use Stuart Hall's ([1980] 2006) terms, encoded with a *dominant-hegemonic position*. Most viewers, most of the time, decode the film «full and straight» (p. 171). They cheer for Jordan; they boo Swackhammer; they emerge from the movie theatre or close the streaming app feeling that, somehow, cosmic justice has been served. What has actually been served, however, is a particular vision of justice—a vision built on Lockean property, Protestant labour, and Greek-derived ideals of competitive excellence, all packaged as universal common sense and disseminated, by Warner Bros. and its successor distributors, to a global audience. This is what cultural diplomacy looks like when it is most effective, when Warner Bros. ships a family-friendly animated feature film.

Songs to Sell Sneakers: Hip Hop-Basketball Cross-Marketing

If basketball movies are one vector through which the hip hop-basketball paradigm projects U.S. ideology, the basketball sneaker is another—and in some respects, a more pervasive one. A film is a discrete event; a pair of shoes is worn every day, and the sounds the shoes make become part of the acoustic environment of mundane social life. The basketball sneaker is, I want to

argue, a *sounding commodity*: an object that not only carries cultural meaning visually and tactilely but also acoustically.

The sound of sneakers squeaking—«squeak, squeak»—is one of the rare sounds that functions as both a *soundmark*, a term in sound studies derived from «landmark» to refer to a community sound that is unique or specifically noticed by people in that community, and a *keynote sound*, used to describe a sound heard by a community frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived (Truax [1978] 1999). For many of the research participants in my Toronto fieldwork, basketball sounds like «sneakers squeaking.» However, one particularly insightful research participant described a psychological condition they called «Basketball Ear»: for those with basketball ear, they said, «the sound of sneakers—you can't hear it anymore—but it makes you so physically comfortable [while watching the game]» (interview with the author, March 29, 2020).

Whether foregrounded or backgrounded in one's experience of the game, the sound of sneakers extends well beyond the basketball court, animating classrooms, boardrooms, shopping centres, and even the top floor of the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. (Kay 2018). The sound of sneakers squeaking is thus the linchpin holding together basketball's cultural and commercial connection to hip hop, or, rather, African American music more broadly. Whether indexing a physical change in direction—connoting on-the-spot creative decision-making and risk-taking (individual style, improvisation, and subverting expectations)—or reflecting the ubiquity of commodities derived of exploitative labour practices and the flow of globalized capital (see Anner 2013 for an example of anti-sweatshop union activism at Nike in Honduras), basketball footwear has become standard apparel in everyday life in America today, and increasingly, around the world.

Basketball's influence on everyday life, particularly through the widespread adoption of basketball sneakers in popular style, cannot be overstated: «Basketball sneakers dominate the sneaker industry, which has come to dominate all footwear» (Hollander 2023, 119). The best-selling sneaker of all time, the Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars, has long been associated with youth culture in addition to various music subcultures, from the English punks of the 1970s to West Coast rappers of the 2000s (Irving 2017). The Chuck Taylor appears on the cover of John Lee Hooker's 1973 album *Born in Mississippi, Raised Up in Tennessee*, in the official video of «God Save the Queen» by the Sex Pistols (where Sid Vicious sports a battered pair), on the feet of band members on the cover of Blondie's 1978 album *Parallel Lines*, and in the opening scene of Nirvana's «Smells Like Teen Spirit» music video. From classrooms to board

rooms to the Oval Office—the 2024 U.S. Democratic Presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris campaigned in Chuck Taylor All-Stars and solicited a basketball-themed endorsement from NBA superstar Steph Curry at the 2024 Democratic National Convention—basketball footwear has become synonymous with American popular culture.

For the purposes of the diplomatic argument advanced in this article, the relevant point is that the sneaker is a U.S. national-cultural product whose worldwide distribution does not require state direction. The sneaker industry is itself one of the most effective vehicles of U.S. soft power. And the acoustic signature of the sneaker—«squeak, squeak»—is the sounding component of that soft-power vehicle.

«My Adidas» and the Birth of Hip Hop Cross-Marketing

The history of integrated and intentional cross-marketing between hip hop and the sports apparel (sneaker) industry begins, by the testimony of music and marketing executive Steve Stoute, on a hot summer night in New York City: Friday, July 19, 1986. Twenty thousand fans, mainly Black and Latin teens and young adults, packed Madison Square Garden for a sold-out concert featuring Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, and Whodini. The concert's significance was not just the lineup but a particular sneaker, the Adidas Superstar, part of Run-D.M.C.'s signature style, immortalized in their song «My Adidas» (Stoute [2011] 2012, pp. xv–xxi).

According to Stoute, this endorsement deal emerged from a «creative curiosity» between the German sportswear brand and the then-burgeoning cultural movement of hip hop from the United States (Stoute [2011] 2012, p. 24). This partnership merged art and sport in such a way that, according to Adidas's self-published history, it «[signified] the birth of non-athletic promotions in the sporting goods industry» (Adidas Group 2024).

Released as the B-side for a medley of rap nursery rhymes called «Peter Piper,» «My Adidas» initially did not garner much attention from fans or critics. This changed when the song «began to appeal and sell to consumers from zip codes where rap wasn't even on the radio, much less being stocked in the record stores. Suburban, white zip codes» (Stoute [2011] 2012, p. xviii). Stoute describes this phenomenon as a «reverse crossover,» a term that plays on the traditional notion of «crossover» in the music industry. In the standard model, «crossover» refers to a recording or artist who moves from one chart to another, typically from a genre-specific chart, such as jazz or R&B, to the more general pop chart (Stilwell 2001). Stoute theorizes, however, that rather than

conforming to established, mainstream tastes, hip hop, exemplified by «My Adidas,» invited new audiences to embrace the «cool» it represented.

The «My Adidas» event matters here for two reasons. First, it was the founding moment of a now-vast corporate apparatus that systematically converts hip hop expressive culture into commercial product, with apparel and athletic footwear as the integrated commodities. Second, it set the template for a particular kind of cultural-economic operation: a U.S.-grown subculture (hip hop) is articulated through a global commodity (athletic footwear), and the product of that articulation is sold worldwide. The values that travel with the product—aspiration, individualism, the dignity of striving, the ostentatious display of one's own success—are carried into every market the shoes reach. While the marketing partnership with Adidas undoubtedly provided economic opportunities for Run-D.M.C. and helped bring hip hop culture into the mainstream, it also reveals some of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand, it facilitated the spread of hip hop to new audiences in America and abroad, contributing to its cultural influence. On the other hand, it accelerated and scaled up the transformation of hip hop into a commercial force that often aligned with the very capitalist structures that the culture initially resisted and that marginalized its practitioners to begin with. This commodification process reflects what critics of capital would argue is a classic example of capital's tendency to absorb and neutralize dissenting cultural forms, turning potential sites of resistance into engines of profit.

The Question of Aspiration

«But where does the aspiration come from?» Martha Diaz, the community organizer, associate curator, and archivist of the Hip Hop Museum, asked me this profound and revelatory question after I presented a conference paper on the cultural and commercial connection between hip hop and basketball at the Northside Hip-Hop Archive's 2019 Event Series at the University of Toronto. While aspiration—the desire for things to be other than they are—is an ancient, transcultural trait, in the specific contexts examined in this article it is rooted in marketing strategies that yoke culture to commerce within the framework of contemporary capitalism. Integrated cross-marketing is neither liberating nor progressive, and shoes are not a pathway to spiritual enlightenment. Both are fantasies designed to sell products.

Here, however, a critical qualification is needed. The cultural and commercial connection between hip hop and basketball is rooted in protocols of expressive culture steeped in improvisation, individual style, and creative freedom: all key components of African American aesthetics. A wealth of critical

scholarship celebrates these connections as counter-hegemonic, providing opportunities to challenge prevailing stereotypes and to help marginalized populations symbolically resist systemic racism. The critical theorist and popular culture scholar Todd Boyd notes that «basketball and hip hop [occupy] two unique spaces in American society, where the issues are based on a Black norm as opposed to a White standard, as is usually the case» (Boyd [2003] 2008, p. 14). The argument I am making in this article is not that hip hop and basketball are unilaterally instruments of U.S. imperial power. It is that, as commercial products circulating in the global mediascape, they tend to work in service of nationalist-capitalist hegemony—even when the cultural forms from which they emerge contain genuinely counter-hegemonic resources.

Indeed, this is a central paradox of U.S. soft power. The cultural materials it leverages are often the very materials produced by the populations the U.S. state has historically harmed: Black and Latin American innovators of hip hop; African American athletes whose dominance defines the global aesthetic of basketball excellence; immigrant and minority communities whose creative labour underwrites the entire enterprise. As the late ethnomusicologist Ken McLeod (2009) argued, the global distribution of mediated representations of African American men through sport and music reinforces America's image as a place where aggressive male dominance affords America's power and control over smaller national and commercial entities who might oppose them. The seductive force of U.S. soft power lies precisely in its capacity to absorb critique into commodity, to turn even the cultural products of dissent into instruments of the order they once resisted.

«Jumpman»: Integrated Cross-Marketing in the Streaming Era

The Run-D.M.C./Adidas template has, in the four decades since «My Adidas,» been refined into something far more sophisticated. Today's hip hop-basketball integrated cross-marketing campaigns are not single endorsement deals; they represent networked, multi-platform, multi-stage release strategies that use the rapper's musical persona, social-media presence, and live performance to drive sales of branded apparel. The exemplar case is the 2015 collaboration between American rapper Future and Canadian rapper Drake on the track «Jumpman.»

Released in 2015 as part of Drake and Future's collaborative mixtape *What a Time to Be Alive*, «Jumpman» initially appeared to be a standalone hip hop track. However, it effectively served as a part of Drake's then-emerging (and now well-established) multi-year collaboration with Jordan Brand, Nike's signature offshoot label, which, in 2023, reported U.S.\$6.6 billion in annual

wholesale revenue (Birnbaum 2023). This creative, integrated cross-marketing venture not only placed the hip hop star in cultural proximity to Michael Jordan's success in both business and basketball but also underscored elements of hip hop culture embedded in Nike's self-proclaimed anti-establishment ethos, even as the brand now occupies a dominant position within the global athletic apparel industry.

Drake's collaboration with Jordan Brand began a year before the release of «Jumpman.» In 2014, Air Jordan designed an exclusive sneaker for Drake, and a series of further exclusives followed: the Air Jordan 3 «Drake vs Lil Wayne,» which the rappers wore on their co-headlining tour, and the Air Jordan 3 «Gold,» which debuted at the 2014 OVO Fest, Drake's Toronto-centric music festival held during Caribana Sunday. (OVO stands for «October's Very Own,» Drake's record label.) In April 2015, the partnership between OVO and Jordan Brand became a public phenomenon at a Los Angeles OVO pop-up event, showcasing the exclusive Air Jordan 10 «White OVO» and «Black OVO» sneakers. The «super limited quickstrike release» drew significant attention within the sneaker community, with access restricted to those «in-the-know» via a lottery system (GOAT 2024). The «White OVO» sneakers were re-released on September 12, 2015, in another limited purchasing opportunity through select Air Jordan and OVO retailers.

Eight days after that re-release, Drake premiered «Jumpman» via his OVO Sound radio show on SiriusXM. On the track, Drake raps:

Jumpman, Jumpman, Jumpman, them boys up to somethin'
They just spent like two or three weeks out the country
(Drake quoted in Drake and Future 2015)

The release of the new track, followed by a tweet from the official Air Jordan account at 11:23 a.m. on a Sunday morning that read «Jumpman Jumpman Jumpman» (Jordan Brand 2015), subtly hinted at the covert collaboration between Drake and the athletic apparel giant («Jumpman» refers to the iconic silhouette logo of the Jordan brand). The strategic timing and cryptic nature of the tweet played into the air of secrecy surrounding the partnership, further fueling intrigue around the collaboration. While initial interpretations of Drake's lyrics referencing time abroad and being «up to something» suggested a clandestine or illicit scheme that aligned with the counter-cultural, rebellious image often portrayed in commercial hip hop, with the benefit of hindsight what Drake was «up to» in this integrated cross-marketing context was far more calculated: collaborating with Future to produce a track that in-

directly referenced the super-limited retail re-release of his signature sneaker, adding another layer to the carefully orchestrated marketing strategy.

This sophisticated marketing operation exemplifies the kind of strategy Stoute discusses in *The Tanning of America*:

Why not, for instance, start with a hip-hop/pop superstar, produce a hit single for said artist, and invite millions of consumers to pay for it, to sing the words, and to dance to its beat in clubs and dance halls? With the stage thus set, why not then reveal in a similarly contagious upbeat commercial that it's a jingle—and blow everyone's mind. (Stoute [2011] 2012, p. xxiv).

Re-released as a single on November 10, 2015, «Jumpman» charted successfully, peaking at number twelve on the *Billboard* Hot 100. On the surface, the rapper was celebrating, admiring, and even likening himself to Michael Jordan—a crucial aspect of cross-marketing strategies that thrive on cultural proximity *cum* maintaining an aura of authenticity in meticulously crafted, branded performances.

The Sneaker as Diplomatic Object

The «Jumpman» case study reveals several features of contemporary hip hop-basketball integrated cross-marketing that make it a particularly effective vehicle of U.S. soft power. First, the campaign is transnational by design. A Canadian rapper, partnered with a U.S. athletic-apparel subsidiary of an Oregon-based multinational, releases a collaborative track with an American rapper through a record label headquartered in Toronto, with retail releases coordinated across Los Angeles and Toronto and a global online resale marketplace. The networks of distribution are not contained within U.S. national borders; they operate across them, and that boundary-crossing capacity is exactly what makes the campaign useful to U.S. soft-power projection. The values that travel along these networks—the celebration of striving, of individual style, of aspirational consumption—are U.S. national-cultural values, but the sneaker that carries them does not look or feel «American» to consumers in Toronto or Paris or Seoul. It looks and feels global; it looks and feels «cool.»

Second, the campaign is aspirational without being explicitly nationalist. Drake never raps that the sneaker is American, or that buying it is a vote for the American Dream. He raps about being «up to somethin',» about having spent «two or three weeks out the country,» about the mystique of belonging to the inner circle of those who can secure the limited-release shoe. The aspirational content is implicit. It is encoded in the desire to have what others can-

not have, to be ahead of the curve, to be «in-the-know,» to hop across borders. That desire, as Stoute argues, is the desire that hip hop culture has trained millions of consumers to feel. And it is precisely the desire that U.S. capitalism, as both a domestic economic system and an international soft-power project, depends upon.

Third, and most importantly, the campaign is unfalsifiable as state propaganda. Nothing about the «Jumpman» release or the OVO/Jordan Brand partnership requires, or even acknowledges, any involvement of the U.S. government. There is, to my knowledge, no U.S. State Department official or Canadian Foreign Policy agent whispering in Drake's ear; there is, at least publicly, no diplomacy budget line for the campaign. The campaign is entirely commercial. And yet the net effect of such campaigns, conducted continuously across decades, is to render U.S. national-cultural values (competitive striving, accumulation, self-fashioning through consumption, the mystique of insider access) the universal common sense of global youth culture.

Ambassador Drake:

A Synecdoche of Multicultural Toronto, A Performer of U.S.

National-Cultural Texts

If the hip hop-basketball paradigm is a vector for the diplomatic projection of U.S. state power, what happens when the paradigm is operationalized outside the United States, by a non-U.S. team, in a country whose official self-image is built precisely on its distinction from the United States?

The Toronto Raptors Basketball Club is the National Basketball Association's only Canadian franchise and the league's only team headquartered outside the United States. Canada's official national branding, particularly since the 1971 declaration of multiculturalism as state policy under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, positions the country as a multicultural, non-imperial alternative to American nationalism. And Aubrey Graham—the man behind the global hip hop persona known mononymously as Drake, who in 2013 was named the Toronto Raptors's global brand ambassador—is widely understood, both within Toronto and abroad, as a synecdoche of multicultural Toronto: a Black, Jewish, biracial Canadian whose music, public image, and brand celebrate the diversity of his home city as a contrast to the racial politics of the United States.⁷

⁷ I retain the spelling «Raptors's» rather than «Raptors'» in accordance with section 5.15 of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (17th ed.), treating «Raptors» as a collective noun denoting «the Toronto Raptors Basketball Club» and taking a singular verb. The possessive of a singular noun ending in *s* takes the apostrophe-*s* form.

If the diplomatic argument advanced in this article is correct, however, the celebration of Drake as a uniquely Toronto figure standing apart from U.S. national-capitalist hegemony should turn out, on close inspection, to be illusory. What this section demonstrates is exactly that: even as a synecdoche of multicultural Toronto, Drake performs a tightly choreographed set of texts informed by U.S. sociocultural and political ideals. The music industry through which Drake's career is built is a U.S. industry; the music cultures he engages with are of American history; the basketball league of which he is brand ambassador is a U.S. league; the values his songs celebrate—aspiration, individual achievement, the conversion of cultural cachet into wealth—are the values of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony. Toronto, in the figure of Drake, is therefore one of the most effective sites at which U.S. ideology is reproduced, precisely because its multicultural branding makes that reproduction look like its opposite.

In 2013, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE)—the conglomerate that owns the Toronto Raptors, the Toronto Maple Leafs, Toronto FC, and several other major sports properties—announced that Drake would serve as the Raptors's global brand ambassador. At the September 30, 2013, press conference introducing the partnership, then-CEO Tim Leiweke remarked that Drake must be smarter than Jay-Z, the Brooklyn Nets's part-owner who had recently sold his stake to enter the business of sports management: Drake, Leiweke noted, did not have to write a cheque to gain direct influence over the franchise's present and future direction (Toronto Raptors 2013).⁸

The partnership rapidly produced new branded properties. By 2018, the Raptors had launched their OVO/Welcome Toronto initiative, a multi-year program of co-branded games, court designs, and merchandise that paired the Raptors's identity with Drake's OVO label. The annual OVO/Welcome Toronto games—staged as a series of six regular-season events to invoke the shorthand «6ix» by which Drake refers to Toronto—featured co-branded courts, jerseys, and giveaways, with the production seeking to deliver an immersive brand experience focused on art, community and ball. On March 14, 2019, OVO secured the naming rights to the Raptors's training facility, now officially the OVO Athletic Centre. The OVO/Raptors partnership also extended to a CAD \$6 million pledge toward the revitalization of basketball courts in underserved Toronto

8 The Drake/Jay-Z parallel in Tim Leiweke's introductory remarks at the September 30, 2013, press conference (Toronto Raptors 2013) is worth noting for the diplomatic argument. Both artists were brought into ownership/ambassadorial positions with NBA franchises. Both used those positions to extend their personal brands into apparel and entertainment cross-marketing. The Brooklyn Nets-Jay-Z and Toronto Raptors-Drake parallels are structural rather than incidental: they reflect the maturation of the hip hop-basketball cross-marketing complex into a normal feature of NBA franchise operation.

neighbourhoods—a commitment confirmed by Kendra Kerr, Manager of Partnerships and Projects at MLSE Foundation, in a January 18, 2021, interview.

The campaign that did the most ideological work, however, was the Raptors's broader «WE THE NORTH» branding, launched in 2014 by the advertising agency Sid Lee.⁹ The campaign positioned the Raptors and their fans as outsiders, underdogs, «the North»—a figure of regional and national distinction within and against the otherwise U.S.-dominated NBA. By the time the Raptors won their first NBA championship on June 13, 2019, «WE THE NORTH» had become a neo-romantic, national rallying cry, with Toronto Mayor John Tory subsequently declaring «WE THE NORTH Day» as a city-wide holiday on June 17, 2019.

For many of the fans, artists, executives, and activists I spoke with during my Toronto fieldwork, the Drake-Raptors partnership represents something genuinely good: a celebration of the city's polyethnic, polycultural reality, and an opportunity for inclusive multicultural belonging. As one interlocutor put it, the «WE» in «WE THE NORTH» signaled an inclusive multiculturalism that contrasted favourably with U.S. racial politics. I take that perception seriously. It is partly correct. The collective performance of the «WE THE NORTH» chant on the night of June 13, 2019—as fans poured out of homes, apartments, condominiums, and bars across Old Toronto in spontaneous celebration—was a powerful, if fleeting, enactment of multicultural belonging. It was not nothing.

But it is also, I argue, only a partial reading. The deeper structural reality, which the celebratory surface conceals, is that the entire apparatus through which Drake operates and through which the Raptors are branded reproduces the values of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony. To see this clearly, one must look at how Drake himself constructs his musical persona—and what he does, and does not, say in his most influential songs.

Drake as Musical Persona: The Curation of an Aspirational Figure

The performance studies scholar Philip Auslander (2006), drawing on Erving Goffman's ([1959] 1976) dramaturgical sociology and David Graver's typology of the actor's identities, distinguishes three concurrent aspects of identity available to a performer: the real-world person, the public version of self that the

9 For an account of the «WE THE NORTH» campaign's relationship to Canadian settler colonialism—which complements but is distinct from the diplomatic argument advanced here—see Aladejebi et al. (2022). Daniel W. Dylan (2019) discusses the campaign's vulnerability to ethno-nationalist appropriation. The relationship between settler-colonial dispossession and «WE THE NORTH» multicultural belonging is treated at length in Zalis (2025).

performer presents in the discursive domain of celebrity, and the character the performer plays. Applying this typology to Drake, we can distinguish Aubrey Graham (the real person), Drake (the personage), and Ambassador Drake (the Raptors-branded character that Aubrey Graham, performing as Drake, plays in the discursive domain of basketball and Canadian multiculturalism).

Indeed, many of my research participants were explicit that «Drake» is a character distinct from Aubrey Graham. One interviewee went so far as to refer to «Drake» as «Toronto’s Mickey Mouse,» suggesting a commercial and cultural connection to the city akin to Walt Disney’s proprietary mascot. In a 2007 interview with Notable Interviews, conducted at the very start of his rap career and recorded from a couch in his mother’s basement, the emerging Toronto rapper himself articulated the principle clearly: «You got to understand that this is about marketing—like, this whole thing is about marketing. It’s about your image. It’s about your story. You got to be appealing to people» (Drake quoted in Notable Interviews [2007] 2010). In the same interview, he expressed the desire to work in feature films, viewing his early-career experience as an actor on the Canadian television series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* as a stepping stone toward broader celebrity status.

In a January 5, 2021, interview, Toronto-based creative director Shane Stirling—who worked closely with Drake early in their careers—made clear the importance for aspiring rappers of communicating a musical persona directly to the audience. Using a rhetorical approach, Stirling explained to me how he encouraged Drake to tell his story in a way that reveals aspects of himself, whether real or imagined, to audiences. He engaged me in a similar dialogue:

SHANE STIRLING: Do you know who Jay-Z is?

JORDAN ZALIS: Yes, yes, I do.

STIRLING: Great. And where is Jay-Z from?

ZALIS: The Marcy Projects.

STIRLING: . . . Hold on, hold on, hold on. Let me wheel back. No, he’s from the United States of America.

ZALIS: Okay . . .

STIRLING: He’s from the state of New York.

ZALIS: Yup . . .

STIRLING: He’s from the city of New York City. He is from the borough of Brooklyn. He’s from the Projects of Marcy.

ZALIS: Yup . . .

STIRLING: And when he got his first apartment that he sold coke out of, it was on State Street. How the fuck do we know these seven levels?

He told us . . .

So, when I told Drake, I said, «Drake, you're an actor. What do you get first when you are on set?» He's like, «I get sides.» [In film jargon, «sides» refer to printed copies of script pages used as reference for cast and crew, outlining scenes being filmed that day.] I'm like «What do the sides say? Sides give you time, place—they kind of set the whole scene a bit. So, when you rap, speak with that level of specificity.»

So now you have [Drake songs like] «Weston Road Flows,» [and references to] Kennedy Road [in Drake's recording «Keep The Family Close»]—he's speaking with specificity; now you have people referencing areas of our city like they know it, the same way that [people] would be talking about Manhattan or Brooklyn or Bronx or all these different places, right? He's literally talking about streets and intersections. (Interview with the author, January 5, 2021)

The interesting thing about Stirling's account is what its narrative technique reproduces. Drake's specificity—his references to Weston Road, Kennedy Road, the «6ix,» the boroughs of Toronto—is built on the template of Jay-Z's Brooklyn-Marcy Projects-State Street specificity. The Toronto material is not derived from a distinctly Canadian cultural form; it is derived from the U.S. hip hop technique of biographical street-naming as authentication. Drake's Toronto, in other words, is constructed in the grammar of American hip hop.

That this is not unique to Drake but constitutive of the contemporary hip hop-basketball paradigm is the central point. The paradigm provides the templates—of self-fashioning, of aspirational narrative, of authenticity-through-specificity—that performers in non-U.S. locations adopt and adapt. The local content varies; the structural grammar does not.

«Started From The Bottom»: Civic Identity as Front for Individual Aspiration

The clearest demonstration of how Drake's persona reproduces U.S. nationalist-capitalist values is «Started From The Bottom,» released February 1, 2013. The song peaked at number six on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The accompanying music video, released February 13, 2013, has, as of this writing, amassed over 500 million views on YouTube. The song became the unofficial anthem for the Toronto Raptors's 2018–2019 championship season and has been a key part of the team's gameday celebrations since the partnership with Drake began.

It is also canonized as the final track on the *Smithsonian Anthology of Hip Hop and Rap*, the nine-disc box set released in 2020 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and the National Museum of African American History & Culture (Sheehy and Bunch III 2020). At a Raptors game, one will almost certainly hear «Started From The Bottom» through the arena's sound system.

The song's hook consists entirely of Drake repeating the phrase: «Started from the bottom, now we're here / Started from the bottom, now my whole team fuckin' here» (Drake 2013). On its surface, the hook offers a community-driven, pseudo-socialist narrative that shifts focus from individual achievement («I») to collective realization («We»). Many of my Toronto research participants read the song this way, hearing in it an inclusive, multi-cultural story of collective uplift. Something Toronto, something Canadian, rather than something of the United States.

I want to argue, however, that this reading is exactly the inverted ideological effect the song is designed to produce. Beyond projecting a simple notion of collectivity, the hook encapsulates two major themes. First, it reflects the principles of *trickle-down economics*—the neoliberal theory suggesting that benefits accruing to the wealthy will eventually benefit the broader economy through increased investment, job creation, and consumer spending. By extension, Drake's aspiration, personal advancement, and upward mobility are presented as contagious, extending to those in his inner circle, his «whole team,» and, through their retrospective association with the Raptors organization, even Raptors fans. Critics, however, have long argued that trickle-down economics disproportionately benefits the wealthy, exacerbates income inequality, and most often fails to deliver on its promises, as wealth tends to accumulate at the top without substantially «trickling-down» to marginalized communities. As Will Rogers (1932, p. 11) once put it, money «trickles up.»

Second, while Drake preaches communal benefit in the song's hook, the bulk of the songtext embraces an individualistic modality, distancing the rapper from interpretations centred on public good. In «Started From The Bottom,» he raps «I'ma worry 'bout me, give a fuck about you n—» and claims he was «tryna get it on [his] own» (Drake 2013). These representations of individualism and success—«now I'm on the road, half a million for a show»—contrast starkly with what might be considered indicators of broader community uplift, such as high literacy rates, housing-first policies, widespread well-being, and clean water for all.

Considering the role of civic community in Drake's musical persona, «whole team,» when viewed in retrospect, is a strategically ambiguous catch-all term. It could be read narrowly to represent the team of professionals and

close friends who support his career, or more broadly as the imagined community of Toronto residents, Raptors fans, and supporters of the team's WE THE NORTH campaign—those with a strong affinity for Canadian nationalism. The broad inclusive term positions this group-of-groups as «underdogs,» and the underdog narrative is itself one of the most quintessentially American narrative forms, the very narrative that *Space Jam*, above, dramatized in the figure of Michael Jordan leading the Looney Tunes against Mr. Swackhammer.

In short: a song that fans hear as a celebration of collective Toronto identity is, at the level of textual content and ideological structure, a celebration of individual aspiration that uses civic identity as a front for the same aspiration the *Space Jam* opening sequence dramatized through R. Kelly's «I Believe I Can Fly.» Drake, the nominally Canadian, nominally multicultural (polyethnic) superstar, is in this respect a perfect performer of U.S. nationalist-capitalist mythology. The mythology travels more effectively in his voice than in the voice of an American artist precisely because Canadian multiculturalism gives the mythology a non-American disguise.

Drake is taken by his fans, by Toronto's civic boosters, by Canadian commentators, and by international observers as a synecdoche of multicultural Toronto. He stands in, in popular imagination, for the city's polyethnic vibrancy and for Canada's branded distinctness from the United States.

The synecdoche, however, is misleading. What Drake actually embodies and performs is a set of texts whose ideological grammar is American: the aspirational narrative of striving from «the bottom» to wealth; the conversion of cultural cachet into branded property (OVO sneakers, OVO athletic centres, OVO court designs); the trickle-down logic of individual success benefiting «the whole team»—none of these is uniquely American in origin, but taken as a whole, they have been operationalized at industrial scale by U.S. capital, and all of them travel through the global mediascape under the auspices of U.S.-based corporations (Apple Music, the NBA, Nike, YouTube, Instagram).

This is why the Toronto case is, despite appearances, the strongest confirmation of the argument. Even where the local conditions seem inhospitable to U.S. ideology—a non-U.S. franchise, in an officially multicultural country, with a globally celebrated non-American star at the centre of the brand—the structural grammar of U.S. nationalist-capitalist hegemony reproduces itself. The hip hop-basketball paradigm is so effective as a vector of U.S. soft power precisely because it does not need to announce itself as such. It can travel under any local flag, in any local accent, and still do its very American work.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the hip hop-basketball paradigm serves as an integrated marketing complex and media technology for the diplomatic projection of U.S. state power. It has built that argument through three case studies: the 1996 family film *Space Jam*; the history of hip hop-basketball cross-marketing from «My Adidas» through «Jumpman»; and the contemporary case of Drake as global brand ambassador for the Toronto Raptors Basketball Club. In each case, the analysis has shown how U.S. nationalist-capitalist values— aspiration, the inviolability of private property, innovation derived of competition, all undergirded by the Protestant ethic—are encoded in the paradigm's texts and circulate, through the global mediascape, with the *net effects* of a sustained but unannounced cultural-diplomatic campaign.

The empirical contribution of this article has been to demonstrate that the paradigm reproduces U.S. ideology even in cases where local conditions—a non-U.S. franchise, an officially multicultural country, a globally celebrated non-American star—seem inhospitable. The curious case of the Toronto Raptors shows that the paradigm's grammar travels under any local accent. Drake, taken by his fans as a synecdoche of multicultural Toronto, performs a tightly choreographed set of texts which represent and thus reproduce U.S. sociocultural and political ideals.

The theoretical contribution has been to articulate a layered model of contemporary U.S. soft power: official state-directed hip hop diplomacy as a small visible layer; commercial hip hop-basketball cross-marketing as the much larger, much more consequential commercial layer; and the structural asymmetry of the global mediascape as the underlying condition that converts both layers into instruments of cultural domination.

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