

**“That’s just not me”: Stylistic Language and Authentic Dialectic Identity in Canadian  
Women MCs**

By

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### Abstract

This project investigates the utilization of linguistic practices by Canadian woman MCs for identity construction and performance, aiming to further understand their social realities, experiences, and the priorities of their self-representation. Qualitative analysis of the lyrics of six notable artists (Michie Mee, Eternia, Eekwol, Tasha the Amazon, Haviah Mighty, Backxwash) finds patterns in the data for personal claims to language, territory, and ethnicity, as well as for self-assertions, Forman's (2021) tropes of internal sensitivity and vulnerability, and positive reappropriations of derogatory terms such as *bitch*. By taking the comprehensive perspective of analyzing MCs' language over time through their careers, these findings challenge existing work which has described women's personas as reflexive of their representations by men in the genre, and which has found difficulty reconciling the authenticity of seemingly-contradictory indexical claims. Findings show that indexing duality and multi-faceted identity—including specified claims to their multicultural ethnicities—are consistent themes in the Hip-Hop of these women, and are in fact necessary for *keepin' it real*. This study challenges the concept of stylization as strategic inauthenticity (Coupland, 2001) and instead introduces the notion of dialectic identity as a priority for these MCs, where multiple aspects of identity are performed without challenging one another's authenticity. This view of women's language in Hip-Hop encourages a renewed look at these MCs as an agentive group with their own Hip-Hop language traditions, resistant to external simplification or generalization, and concerned with nuanced self-assertion.

*Keywords:* Canadian women in Hip-Hop, multiculturalism, sensitive MC, strategic authenticity, dialectic identity

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## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 ORIGINS OF HIP-HOP .....	9
2.1.1. <i>New York Beginnings: Authenticity</i> .....	9
2.1.2. <i>Components of Hip-Hop: Style</i> .....	10
2.2. EVOLUTION OF HIP-HOP.....	12
2.2.1. <i>Localization and the spread of Global Hip-Hop</i> .....	12
2.2.2. <i>Gender in Hip-Hop</i> .....	13
2.3. THE CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE .....	15
2.3.1. <i>Social contexts in Canada</i> .....	15
2.3.2. <i>Canadian Hip-Hop in evidence, from previous study</i> .....	16
2.4. CONCLUSION .....	19
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1. SELECTION CRITERIA .....	21
3.2. CODING.....	22
TABLE 1 .....	23
3.3. ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES .....	23
3.3.1. <i>Michie Mee</i> .....	24
3.3.2. <i>Eternia</i> .....	25
3.3.3. <i>Eekwol</i> .....	26
3.3.4. <i>Tasha the Amazon</i> .....	27
3.3.5. <i>Haviah Mighty</i> .....	28
3.3.5. <i>Backxwash</i> .....	29
<b>CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1. TERRITORY AND ETHNICITY: DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE.....	31
4.1.1. <i>“It’s not my hometown, but it’s my hometown, you feel me?”: Knowledge- and experience-based territory claims</i> .....	31
4.1.2. <i>“Born political”: Knowledge and experience ethnicity claims</i> .....	34
4.2. WOMEN’S HIP-HOP LANGUAGE: DUAL CLAIMS .....	38
4.2.1. <i>Derogatory reappropriation</i> .....	38
4.2.1.1. <i>Backxwash and reappropriation</i> .....	39
4.2.1.2. <i>The duality of bitch</i> .....	40
4.2.2. <i>Sexuality and agency: Assertion, not subversion</i> .....	42
4.2.3. <i>Vulnerability and the sensitive MC</i> .....	45
<b>CHAPTER 5: NON-CONTRADICTIONAL DUALITY AND DIALECTIC IDENTITY.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>DISCOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>55</b>

## Chapter 1. Introduction

Linguistic study of Hip-Hop<sup>1</sup> has led to understanding the Hip-Hop community and its music as a valuable source of solidarity, expression, and empowerment to marginalized members of society (Rose, 1994). Rap has been characterized by the fundamental tenets of authenticity (Rose, 1994), style (Edwards & Rap, 2009), and indexicality (Alim, 2006; Cutler, 2007) in lyrics and lifestyle. Artists strategically utilize the stylistic and linguistic traditions of Hip-Hop to index membership or alignment with groups and identities to which they can claim an authentic connection. With the spread of Hip-Hop globally, these strategies were taken up to express specific, local experiences (Alim et al., 2008; Mitchell, 1998; Pennycook, 2007) in what became known as ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1995), and a multitude of Global Hip-Hop studies have gained insight into diverse groups’ marginalized experience through their language use.

In Canada, artists in Montréal have been shown to index a complex, multifaceted cultural identity by selectively performing language, territory, and ethnicity (Sarkar & Allen, 2007), but the unique nature of Canadian multiculturalism (Marsh & Campbell, 2020; Winter, 2011, 2015) leaves much room for further investigation into the construction of a Canadian Hip-Hop identity. Hip-Hop identities are intersectional, and language is used to position oneself in alignment with certain groups as much as it is to showcase authenticity. For women in Hip-Hop, research has shown that identity performance is used to defy and reappropriate stereotypical narratives surrounding women in the genre (Eberhardt, 2016; Hobson & Bartlow, 2007; Keyes, 2000), though most prior research on this subject has been performed in the fields of media studies (Pough, 2015; Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012), gender studies (Attwood, 2007; Lane, 2011), racial studies (Balaji, 2010), or a combination thereof (Hill Collins, 2004). To date, there has been relatively little linguistic research on Canadian Hip-Hop or women in Hip-Hop, and even less that focuses on Canadian women in Hip-Hop specifically.

This project targets these research gaps by analyzing the lyrics of six notable Canadian women Hip-Hop artists of diverse backgrounds and experiences, to answer the following research question:

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use *Hip-Hop* for this project, though over time and throughout the literature others have used varying spelling, hyphenation, and capitalization conventions. When directly quoting another author, I have kept the spelling as they used it.

What are the linguistic practices and themes of Canadian women MCs' identity construction and performance, and what can those tell us about the priorities of these women's self-representation?

In so doing, this project will contribute to the existing body of work on both Canadians and women in Hip-Hop, and continue the ever-expanding tradition of Hip-Hop linguistics by adding to our understanding of Hip-Hop language.

This thesis is laid out in five chapters. After this introduction, Chapter 2 gives a thorough literature review, covering relevant aspects of the history of Hip-Hop linguistics from Hip-Hop's origins in New York, to its globalization, and finally to studies specific to the language of Canadian Hip-Hop and women's Hip-Hop. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, describing artist selection criteria, the qualitative coding and analysis process, as well as introducing the MCs through brief biographies. Chapter 4, the discussion section, interprets the results of the analysis process as they relate to previous conclusions by other researchers. It is divided into two major sections, the first centered on Canadian identity indexicality, and the second on the language behaviours observed which are specific to women. Chapter 5 offers the conclusions of this research and presents possible directions for further study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, an overview of some relevant previous studies will be given to provide context for the analysis to come. Section 2.1 includes a brief history of Hip-Hop's social origins in New York, and a general description of the types of creative language use and techniques employed by artists, centered around introducing the dominant Hip-Hop ideologies of authenticity and realness that define the genre. Section 2.2 details the spread of Hip-Hop globally, being taken up and localized to suit diverse groups through code-switching and navigation of local discourses. In section 2.3, these notions are brought home to the study of Hip-Hop linguistics in Canada, highlighting the central themes of complex identity navigation and construction that characterize the work of Canadian artists. To the best of my ability I have been as comprehensive as possible when reviewing these topics while retaining focus, including relevant linguistic studies and, when pertinent, work from other disciplines and reputable sources.

By laying out the context of previous study in the field of Hip-Hop linguistics, Global Hip-Hop, and specifically the study done in Canada, I want to lead to my subsequent focus on the Hip-Hop language of one particular group that is as yet little-studied: Canadian women. I want to analyze how Canadian women MCs utilize the established traditions and themes of Global Hip-Hop language to navigate and mediate their own experiences and identities, with an aim of understanding the social realities and lived experiences that they convey.

Hip-Hop linguistics as a field of study was pioneered through the work of Tricia Rose, whose 1994 book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* set a precedent for the understanding of membership in Hip-Hop culture as purposeful discursive practice. Her emphasis on presenting Hip-Hop as necessarily rooted in—and reflective of—the social, economic, and political realities of individuals fostered the development of an entire discipline of sociolinguistic work. Thanks to Rose's example, as Hip-Hop linguistics has grown there has remained a strong focus on contextually motivated, interconnected discourse. As will be shown, Hip-Hop is a culture with a legacy of reinvention and evolution as its core, and *Black Noise* underlines the importance of keeping the legacy and context in the discussion to fully represent artists' experiences.

## 2.1 Origins of Hip-Hop

### 2.1.1. *New York Beginnings: Authenticity*

Rose (1994) paints a picture of New York in the 1960s as a city in tension, and a city in flux. Deindustrialization left previously industrial Black and Hispanic neighbourhoods to navigate the transition to service-based economy with little support from the wealthy and powerful people who proliferated, and benefitted from, the change. With familiar employment prospects dwindling and little opportunity for entry into new sectors, the wealth gap between the upper and lower classes grew ever wider; community members no longer had any clear road to economic stability, nor much hope for change or success. Largely white, upper-class political powers used their sway to further their own advantages “against the interests of the poor” (Rose, 1994, p. 30). They pushed historically Black and Hispanic communities out of their neighbourhoods to the less-desirable South Bronx, leaving them “with few city resources, fragmented leadership, and limited political power” (Rose, 1994, p. 31), and shattering social networks and ways of communicating in the process.

This set of changes had a traumatic impact on community members, especially young people. Not only had they witnessed their families losing their economic prospects and their homes, but they also lost access to the local institutions and traditions that had previously bound their community together for support in times of strain. Young people found themselves at a “crossroads of lack and desire” (Rose, 1994, p. 35) with no blueprint to follow for avoiding their elders’ fate. With broader society showing a lack of regard or care for these communities, and the communities no longer able to support themselves from within as before, young Black and Hispanic people in the South Bronx were excluded from all forms of societal acceptance and group belonging—leaving them without connections to build an identity around. This process of marginalization did not, however, extinguish the voices of these communities, as those in power likely hoped it would do. Instead, what occurred was a celebration and continuation of centuries of Black oral tradition (Smitherman, 1997): young residents of the South Bronx, with no identity precedents to follow, forged new bonds and networks based on the specific shared experience of the sociocultural contexts that had led to life in this new neighbourhood. Alternative family and hyperlocal solidarity brought about the formation of crews: small, tight-knit groups that provided “insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment” (Rose, 1994, p. 34). Crews came together on the streets that society had cast them off to, which they had no historical

attachment to, and forged a way to reinvent and self-define themselves (Rose, 1994). They claimed ownership of their streets and they asserted their own voice—graffiti on the walls, local crew meetings, breakdancing in the streets and abandoned lots of their new environment. All of this became the foundation of Hip-Hop culture, and the testing ground for a new musical form to articulate “a sense of entitlement” and revel in “aggressive insubordination” (Rose, 1994, p. 60). Originally the Masters of Ceremony for group breakdancing meets, the trailblazers of this new music would become known as MCs.

The sociocultural context of New York in the 1960s produced a sharp tension between general society and a deeply marginalized other. A simultaneous sense of hopeless distance from, and rage against, the social mechanisms that contributed to their situation left South Bronx youth with little in their power but their own cultural and aesthetic resources. Based on the collective need to express complex shared emotions and experiences, Hip-Hop community members were those who understood each other, those who “got it” by living it. This shared experience is absolutely central: self-definition and subversion are integral to membership in Hip-Hop culture, and it is important to stay true to that background of experience and always “keep it real.” In the past some have tried to fabricate realness, appropriating language and experience they had never had—to deleterious effect on their careers once the truth was revealed (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015; Hess, 2005). The belonging that comes from having undergone the same kinds of trials by fire, and staying true to the people who went through it with you—that people an MC is representing, the people they relate to—that is authenticity, that is *keepin’ it real*, and it is vitally important. Without it, there is no Hip-Hop.

### ***2.1.2. Components of Hip-Hop: Style***

When it comes to the practices of Hip-Hop music, it is important to provide some insight into the main components. The self-defining and self-deterministic purposes of Hip-Hop, to claim power as a marginalized group in society, have been discussed, but this section will more explicitly define the real tools of that purpose. To that end, Edwards & Kool G Rap’s (2009) *How to Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* has been an excellent resource. Edwards spoke to dozens of MCs and compiled their definitions and responses to the vital elements of constructing a Hip-Hop track. The book settles on four main components, three of which will be discussed here: Content, Flow, and Delivery. The specifics of the fourth category, Writing, are

not as relevant to the purposes of this project as they are more focused on the creative process, rather than the output of the final track and its performance.

Content is described as the “subject matter” (Edwards & Rap, 2009) of a track. Beyond the structure of the lyrics themselves, the content is within them, sometimes written between the lines, and may be serious or playful, based in truth, fiction, or both, and works to make the audience feel as the MC intends. The content may be delivered in braggadocious, storytelling, abstract, conceptual, or humorous form via the linguistic tools of imagery, simile, metaphor, slang, vocabulary, wordplay, and punchlines. By developing mastery of these linguistic tools to the advantage of producing the desired content, in the desired form, MCs may effectively manipulate language as they need, within the traditions already established in the genre.

The value or worth of the content itself, be it party music or music to spark change, will be judged based on the audience’s personal opinions, but the important thing is that there must *be* content (Edwards & Rap, 2009)—if a Hip-Hop track were to utilize the other four elements skillfully but not contain any coherent meaning, the song would be found fundamentally lacking.

Flow is the sought-after *sympatico* between the rhythms and rhymes of a given track (Edwards & Rap, 2009). That is, explicitly, any rhymes being composed need to fit with two kinds of rhythm: “the rhythm of the lyrics...” and “the basic rhythm of the music... referred to as the *beat*” (Edwards & Rap, 2009, p. 63). This awareness of a dual set of rhythms is what differentiates rap from spoken or written poetry: where poetry must fit only the rhythm of the words, Hip-Hop music introduces the beat alongside it, which needs to flow with that lyrical rhythm. Flow is created by manipulating syllables, stress, rests, or breaths, and matching them up across beats and bars—sometimes overlapping—to create the desired effect. Good flow is something that lives as a product of content and delivery. Just on paper, or to another artist, the same material wouldn’t flow without the MC’s specific verbal manipulations.

Aside from the crafting of the track itself, an MC needs to be able to utilize the traditions and mores of Hip-Hop to their advantage, in delivering a performance and crafting a persona. This may mean practicing breath control, specific enunciation patterns, and affecting a unique vocal pattern through accent, tone, pitch, or the like. A prerequisite for good delivery is the skillful utilization of both content and flow, consistently and cohesively. The right delivery works to give the MC a recognizable presence, a sense of swagger, that is integral to the genre and

performances within it. If an MC nails the content, flow, *and* delivery of the track, they have covered the essential parts of Hip-Hop and can gain respect and acceptance from other MCs.

Further integral linguistic features of Hip-Hop that an MC must master include discursive practices of Black oral tradition, what Perry calls “tropes” of Hip-Hop, products of the previous generations’ Hip-Hop reconfigured and combined in a kind of “conversation with the Black musical tradition” (2004, p. 33). These tropes include signifyin’, a direct verbal insult at a person (Smitherman, 1997); the dozens, indirect and circumlocutory insults such as “your mama” style jokes—either for fun, or to make a point or critique (Smitherman, 1997, p. 14); and call-and-response with listeners (Perry, 2004). Discursive elements such as these are ideally woven into clever rhyme schemes that flow, and further the message of a track.

Through the use of traditions, beats, lyrics, musical choices, and decisions in delivery, artists can incorporate their personal knowledge and experience, and index their belonging to various groups. Be they American, Puerto Rican, Black, Muslim, man, woman, Hip-Hopper, or any other group, as MC Cormega says: “if you got subject matter and flow, that makes you a well-rounded artist” (Edwards & Rap, 2009, p. 133). MCs understand their multiple roles in creating a track—that they are not only a poet, or only a music-maker, but a hybridization of both. Holding those multiple roles means that the artist must prove their respect for the skills and worth of each category, never advantaging one at the expense of another: prioritizing a cogent style throughout.

## **2.2. Evolution of Hip-Hop**

### ***2.2.1. Localization and the spread of Global Hip-Hop***

The decades following Hip-Hop’s inception were characterized by the social process of globalization, fostering its expansion to communities all over the world, who consequently took it up and adapted it to their own experiences (Alim et al., 2008; Morgan, 2016; Pennycook, 2007; Terkourafi, 2010). Through the messages of Hip-Hop, individuals around the world living in marginalized contexts and subjugated social positions could see that they were not alone in their conditions (Miller et al., 2014). Hip-Hop was a vehicle for voicing discontent against a larger normative society that didn’t want to include them but, importantly, it did so by celebrating the unique qualities and social norms that had been used to set them apart to begin with (Smitherman, 1997; Stapleton, 2016). The intensely complex feelings that come with occupying

such a social position, the realness and authenticity in the tracks, prompted diverse groups to use the tools and tenets of Hip-Hop for expressions of their own.

The adoption of Hip-Hop by new groups globally, what was originally a hyper-local showing of South Bronx solidarity, indexed new local experiences. This resultant complex mix of local adoptions of a global form has been termed ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1995), an “indigenisation of global phenomena” (Mitchell, 1998, p. 5). Depending on each unique situation, the application of the Hip-Hop ethos produced different results. This could mean the injection of local styles into the Hip-Hop form (Brandellero et al., 2014; Graves, 2012; Kidula, 2012) or the discussion of local sociopolitical topics (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2002; Tickner, 2008). Incorporation of these themes allow artists to index their personal connection to the locale, take charge of their own narrative and presentation, and show pride and celebration of those who share that aspect of their identity. A common aspect of glocalization is the strategic utilization of minority and indigenous languages—often in the form of code-switching—in global Hip-Hop acts. That practice is used to index resistance to cultural prejudices against certain varieties (Akande, 2013; Williams, 2010), promote self-assertion, solidarity, and self-preservation among non-standard or minority language users (Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2013; Mitchell, 2000), and telegraph the experience of marginalized communities to the majority, in an effort to initiate social change (Simeziane, 2010).

The through-line between all of these new Hip-Hops, where they could be viewed as disparate and unconnected offshoots of the ‘original,’ is the persistent emphasis on realness, authenticity, and self-definition (Pennycook, 2007). As was discussed in section 2.1, for an MC to be respected and accepted in Hip-Hop culture, they must prove their respect for the genre, their craft, and *especially* their commitment to an identity and style that is unique to them, one that reflects their lived experience. MCs, no matter where they’re from, must speak from their experience, must not take on aspects or aesthetics of the form which they do not believe in, and must speak to the power structures and suppressions to which they have been subjected (Forman & Neal, 2004)—that is what unites global Hip-Hop.

### **2.2.2. Gender in Hip-Hop**

Though we have established that the core of Hip-Hop is centered around the tenets of authenticity, it cannot be ignored that Hip-Hop also exists “alongside the seductiveness of the material and psychological conditions of capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy” (Love, 2016, p.

415). As such, part of participation in and indexicality to Hip-Hop requires conforming to “a set of conduct norms for each gender’s proper behaviour” (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009, p. 25), generally (historically) heteronormative and cisgender-conforming. Though hegemonic masculinity and similar gender dynamics surely exist outside of the US, the works discussed in this section are centered on US Hip-Hop, as the progenitor of later iterations, and as such focus on US gender norms.

For Hip-Hop artists who identify as men, this often means an expectation of participation in misogynistic values and behaviours (Claps, 2010). Weitzer & Kubrin (2009) found that misogyny was present in nearly a fifth of their data set, making it a significant topic, and that 94% of those misogynistic songs were produced by men MCs. Participation in the major misogynistic themes and activities of objectifying women (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009) provides men MCs with “self worth and limited access to... markers for heterosexual masculine power” (Rose, 1994, p. 15) used by MCs to assert and reaffirm their constructed status as a male authority in a patriarchal, sexist Hip-Hop culture (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 69). Alongside the process of learning the craft of Hip-Hop through experience, and improving oneself by taking after other respected artists, lifestyles and ways of being become adopted, too. This “hyperbolic masculinity” (Oware, 2011) reinforces a shared experience in Hip-Hop culture between men, and is emphasized through contrast to the ways that other genders are represented.

Though women have been present and active in all areas of Hip-Hop culture from its earliest beginnings (Rose, 1994), the way they have been portrayed in Hip-Hop since the beginning has shaped “the realities of women’s experiences in the industry as lyricists, producers, and performers” (Hobson & Bartlow, 2007, p. 3) to their detriment. As Rebollo-Gil & Moras (2012) put it: “rap has always been feminine. What it has not been is pro-woman” (p.125). Given the preponderance of men in Hip-Hop and women’s typical appearance as sex object, women MCs fight an uphill battle “both within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in the genre” (Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012, p. 126) that strip them of agency (Pough, 2015) and equal status (Hill Collins, 2004). In the face of this, women reappropriate Hip-Hop traditions in ways “that refute, deconstruct, and reconstruct alternative visions” (Keyes, 2004, p. 209) of that limiting identity. Through lyrical content, women can reclaim derogatory terms to work against oppressive taboos (Eberhardt, 2016; Forrest, 2002), and index membership to groups within and beyond traditional representations in Hip-Hop (Lane, 2011; Paradigm Smalls, 2010). That is, the

experience of girlhood (Payne, 2020), womanhood (Little, 2018; Richardson, 2006), motherhood (Chaney & Brown, 2016), and positive female authority.

Reappropriating their own sexual agency (Attwood, 2007; Balaji, 2010) allows women to work to “move beyond a discourse of [binary] opposition” (Tobias, 2014, p. 56) between men and women MCs. The aim of women in Hip-Hop today falls along the same lines as all other groups: self-definition and self-assertion. To represent their own intersectional experiences—including membership in the Hip-Hop culture, including membership to all of the same glocal elements that characterize the Hip-Hop Nation (HHN), while also incorporating the experience of women within all of those frames.

It should be said that to date, there has not been a wealth of linguistic research specifically targeting women’s language in Hip-Hop, but rather more sociological and cultural study. Existing work centers largely on the originating years or Hip-Hop’s second explosion of popularity in the 1990s (Callas, 2018), which provides a large part of the motivation of this study: to contribute to an understanding of Hip-Hop as it is today, and to learn in what ways women’s language may have evolved and changed along with society, adding to the canon of Hip-Hop linguistics.

### **2.3. The Canadian perspective**

Having established some background in Hip-Hop culture and language as it originated, and as it evolved globally, we will now turn to its adaptation by Canadian artists.

#### ***2.3.1. Social contexts in Canada***

Large and relatively sparsely-populated, in the past fifty years Canada has increasingly relied on the benefits of immigration to maintain its economic and sociopolitical status on the world stage (Statistics Canada, 2022). Kymlicka (2004) describes the Canadian resurgence in multicultural values, something which many other countries have turned away from in recent decades, as a product of lucky historical and geographical circumstances. Government response to the 1990s Quebec separatist movement, toward the recognition of a national plural identity, paved the way for all ethnic groups to be incorporated in the concept of a “pan-Canadian identity,” as scholars commonly refer to it today. The successful fostering of “immigrant multiculturalism” (Kymlicka, 2004) comes from what is described in Winter (2015) as a sort of “internal globalization” that is touted to allow all aspects of ethnic and cultural identity to be equally valued and represented in society. But this utopian ideal is not truly representative of the

reality of Canadian society and culture. Realistically, the Canadian model of multiculturalism and diversity has led to something more like “minority accommodation... in which ethnic and national minorities are treated separately and are each granted particular rights” (Winter, 2011, p. 31). Today, there is still a historically dominant cultural identity consisting of the “mainstream: (white, English-speaking) and an othered “multicultural we” (Winter, 2015, p. 641), made up of all communities and members who exist in some ways separate from the dominant culture. This means that, though diverse cultural and ethnic identities are socially and institutionally valued in Canada, they are still undeniably quietly categorized as some other type of Canadian.

Legally and constitutionally, every effort is taken to enshrine the value of immigrants, and socially Canadians generally feel positive towards immigration and immigrants (Enviroics Institute for Survey Research, 2016). However, the consistent othering of minority ethnicities and cultural practices introduces a tension within individuals who are torn between their identities as Canadian and minority-Canadian. The plural pan-Canadian identity means that a single individual can simultaneously belong to both the majority and the other: a second-generation Canadian from Jamaica, for example, conforms with the majority in terms of language and life experience in the country, but also belongs to the “multicultural we” as a visible minority and someone who may follow certain lifestyle mores from their Jamaican parents. In the Canadian context, often the minority experience is not quite the same as it is in other areas of the world (though of course, discrimination on racial and ethnic lines does occur, and is present in the family history of many Canadians). It is less an experience of explicitly harmful disenfranchisement and direct discrimination, but a subtler kind of sign marks that as different, complicating their personal identity and their relationship with what it entails. An identity as a Canadian is one not mutually exclusive to an identity as some other nationality or ethnicity, which can be difficult to disentangle; this is where the study of Hip-Hop Language provides a framework to understand these complexities of lived experience and identity.

### ***2.3.2. Canadian Hip-Hop in evidence, from previous study***

To date, there is not an overwhelming amount of linguistic work on Canadian Hip-Hop, but what has been done gives us interesting insight into the individual experience of individuals navigating different aspects of their identities. Heritage and identity in Canada can exist on, and be participated in, along numerous axes. Every individual deals with their own relation to the mainstream and the other—everyone has various indexical relations to both, depending on their

affiliation with their heritage. By analyzing Hip-Hop in the Canadian context, we can see how “Canada’s ten provinces and three territories provide deeply varied ways in which hip hop culture is made to speak to its locality and to urgent social issues” (Marsh & Campbell, 2020, p. 4). Authenticity and indexicality in Canadian MCs seems to hinge on strategic participation in and manipulation of three major aspects of identity: language, territory, and ethnicity (Sarkar & Allen, 2007), serving to create a Canada-specific, hybridized, translocal identity.

Personal connection to language in Canada can become quite complicated, and through Hip-Hop language we can begin to pick apart those relationships. There is the language of the majority, English, a second official language, French, which receives varying degrees of importance depending on location, and then the many languages of home, community, and heritage, which often have gaps in domains of use and fluency among individuals in multilingual environments. Blackledge & Pavlenko (2001) connect the linguistic practices of code-switching, code-mixing, and language choice with reflexive identity construction—a strategic show not of a binary “being” or “not being,” but rather of how strongly aligned one is with some identity, a flexible view which “allows us to investigate various identities as linked to particular contexts and practices” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 251). Language choice works to create “hybrid identities” referencing “multiple territories and ethnicities,” which serve as a “unifying forces” for individuals who cannot solely identify with the top of the language hierarchy (Sarkar & Allen, 2007). Expression through language choice and mixing in Hip-Hop is especially well-documented in the highly multicultural city of Montréal (Low et al., 2009; Sarkar, 2008; Sarkar et al., 2005; Sarkar & Allen, 2007; Sarkar & Winer, 2009), a city with the struggle for language and identity baked into its history, but elsewhere in Canada code-switching is just as relevant as a marker for bilingual and multicultural identity (Aina, 2020; Low, 2001; Sandher, 2019; Sobral, 2019). Strategic dialect choice can serve to index belonging to the insular and local, like rural Newfoundland Skeet culture (Clarke & Hiscock, 2009), or connect with global diasporic communities, by use of Jamaican Patois (Scobie, 2015, 2019). By showcasing a personal experience and understanding of the dynamic relations between various spoken languages in a locale, MCs index their authentic belonging as a member of that multilingual group.

For some communities, however, the possibility of strategic language choice is hardly available. Such is the case for many Indigenous people in Canada, after British imperial attempts at genocide historically severed links of cultural and linguistic transmission. In these cases, Hip-

Hop artists index their identity and authenticity by connecting to territory: conveying “specific place-based experience and knowledge” (Przybylski, 2018, p. 493) that outsiders could not display. For Indigenous people this can mean the “lack of access to services, poverty, and discrimination” (Przybylski, 2018, p. 494) or the racialized minority experience of an isolated Northern culture (Marsh, 2009a). For MCs with immigrant backgrounds, especially third- or fourth-generation immigrants and beyond, it is often equally impossible to connect to the language of their ancestors. Instead, these MCs create authentic identities through linguistically indexing “geographic connections to locales outside Canada” (Boutros, 2020, p. 103), and through citing relation to communities of multicultural practice that convey their Hip-Hop journey (Boutros, 2020; Persadie, 2019). Lyrically, this can include reference to local place names (Scobie, 2015) and colloquialisms (Boutros, 2020; Persadie, 2019; Scobie, 2015), showing an MC to be privy to the kind of “insider information” that “only someone from [there] would likely be acquainted with” (Scobie, 2015, p. 80). This geographical connection can also be shown visually, by including landmarks and mundane features of the local landscape within music videos or album artwork (Clarke & Hiscock, 2009; Persadie, 2019; Scobie, 2015). In contexts outside of a mainstream, well-known Hip-Hop identity, “emphasis on naming and claiming represents a signifier of authenticity” (Marsh, 2009a, p. 118). For Canadian MCs, the prerogative is to name not only their current living environment in Canadian locales, but also the facets of their heritage and identity that the MC has relationships with, and in so doing, claim all of it as their own.

Similar to the ways in which diverse groups of Canadians can lose contact with their heritage languages through life in a majority-English context, over time many individuals’ links to ethnicity can become strained and changed over time spent away from the homeland. Often, family traditions and practices are the longest-lasting link between an individual and their heritage (Blackmore, 2009; Brandellero et al., 2014; Takhar et al., 2021), and the incorporation of such traditions into an MC’s work become another viable tool for Canadians to authentically index their complex ethnicity. In Hip-Hop tracks, this means the incorporation of traditional music or instruments, as in B-Girl Annie and B-Girl Snap’s invention of “throat-boxing, a synthesis of the Inuit cultural practice of throat-singing and the hip hop cultural form of beat-boxing” (Marsh, 2009a, p. 120), Michie Mee’s utilization of Jamaican dancehall and reggae-style instrumentation (Scobie, 2015, 2019), and K’naan’s use of “ululating female voices” and

predominant percussion drums to create “a sense of ‘Africanness’” (Sobral, 2019, p. 217). Deft use of cultural aesthetics and practices allow for an MC to craft tracks that reflect their hybridized identity within the limits of their own experience of their ethnicity as an immigrant.

For Canadian Hip-Hop artists a complex, plural, hybridized identity is the norm, and what research has been done thus far has shown that indexicality occurs on multiple levels to authentically reflect this, relying on the varied cultural resources that an individual may have access to. Language, territory, and ethnicity emerge as three defining features and axes on which a Canadian Hip-Hop identity can be constructed. Canada’s relatively unique form of institutionalized multiculturalism and internal globalization results in identities characterized by juxtaposition and dialectics. By juxtaposing their multiple connections to language, territory, and ethnicity, MCs can showcase a multifaceted and dialectic identity: all parts can be shown as authentic, even when they may seem to contradict one another. A Hip-Hop artist can be Canadian, and Quebecois, and Manitoba-Canadian, all at the same time to varying degrees as they choose to index in their Hip-Hop through their linguistic practices. Previous study on this subject in Canadian Hip-Hop has contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the Canadian experience and identity across many communities, and it is the aim of this project to expand this understanding further, by incorporating discussion of yet more individuals and their expression of Canadian cultural identity.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

As shown in the above sections, identity in Hip-Hop culture is defined by an individual’s interaction with multivariate aspects of their personal experience. The rich, intersectional discursive nature of Hip-Hop language has opened a window of study not only into the complex linguistic behaviours of artists, but also into the lived experiences of marginalized community members in their own voices. Through Hip-Hop linguistics, we have seen that in an extension of Hip-Hop’s locally-focused traditions and mores, MCs “have constructed a globally congruent and locally responsive performance, utilizing at both the musical and rhetorical levels the global form of hip-hop” (Clarke & Hiscock, 2009, p. 258). The unique nature of Canadian multiculturalism has led to some illuminating research on identity and authenticity in this country. Similarly, gender has long been a dynamic factor in performance and participation in Hip-Hop communities. Prior work has shown the validity of studying the language of Canadian Hip-Hop, and of studying women’s language in the genre, but where these two intersect there

exists a gap in research. This gap is what I hope to target through the current project. My research question, then, is as follows: What are the linguistic resources being utilized by Canadian women MCSs, and what can their use tell us about the social realities and experiences of these women?

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1. Selection criteria

There are two points of focus for artist selection criteria: career, and recognition. The main purpose of these criteria is to try and achieve some normalization across all the artists I will be looking at, so that I can assume they all reside in somewhat similar spaces in the community. First, she must have a career spanning at least five years with at least three albums released in that time, and second, she must have some observable accomplishment in the Canadian Hip-Hop industry. In choosing a more established artist of five or more years rather than a newcomer, and someone with a larger catalog of music, their identity expression and personal style can be expected to come through their tracks more clearly. Additionally, the number of tracks needed for my analysis will generally not exist from an artist who has not been performing long enough to produce them, so this criteria is somewhat self-selecting. Newer artists just starting out may or may not continue in the industry in the future, so this selection criteria also hopefully ensures this project's future relevance by focusing on well-established artists.

The second focus is somewhat more vague, but just as useful a parameter, if only to disqualify the broad selection of artists that could happily make for a topic of study. All of the women chosen have received or been nominated for a major Canadian music award in their genre, in this case either a Juno Award in the Rap category, a Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Hip-Hop/Rap, or the Polaris Music Prize, a non-genre-specific annual award. I do not wish to imply that by choosing artists on this basis, all of the artists who were therefore excluded are in some way unskilled or unimportant, nor do I personally believe that award-wins are what validate ability and the value of art. However, in the music industry it is generally accepted that winning awards such as these signifies a presence in the community and a recognition of an auspicious career. In the context of the Canadian Hip-Hop scene specifically, this also greatly narrows the possible candidates, as the number of women who fit this criterion is extremely small. In the history of these awards, very few women in Hip-Hop have been nominated, and even fewer have won—and of that small number, even fewer again fit with the first criterion.

With these parameters in mind, I have selected six women MCs for this project: Michie Mee, Eternia, Eekwol, Haviah Mighty, Tasha the Amazon, and Backxwash. More detailed biographies and introductions are to follow in section 3.3. The selection of these artists, as well

as fitting the criteria outlined above, I believe will also facilitate a good perspective of the Canadian Hip-Hop community and the women in it. Michie Mee, Eternia, and Eekwol have been rapping since the '80s and '90s, while Haviah Mighty, Tasha the Amazon, and Backxwash have been present since the 2010s, representing a wide range of life experiences and backgrounds between them, and hopefully allowing for insight into Canada's Hip-Hop community over time, as well.

### **3.2. Coding**

The analyzed work of these MCs makes up a total of 205 songs—an average of 34 from each artist—with song selection driven mainly by availability. Tracks were sourced from Apple Music, YouTube, Bandcamp, or independent websites. Where lyrics were publicly available, they were taken and checked for accuracy, and where they were not, lyrics were transcribed—about 100 of the tracks. As this transcription was done by myself, and due to the nature of Hip-Hop Nation Language (HHNL) and the sound quality of some of the older tracks, there are necessarily a few unclear, low-confidence sections of transcription. While not generally a hindrance, in any cases where language was unclear, those sections of words were not included in the analysis process. Analysis was done using Delve Tool, a qualitative analysis software through which relevant elements could be tagged and sorted into categories. Coding and analysis practices were done based on the Grounded Theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), which says preconceived notions of what will be found should be avoided. There were several initial rounds of open coding, either focused on Canadian multicultural identity or on women's Hip-Hop language, during which any explicitly relevant language was tagged. Over subsequent passes through the dataset, tagged concepts with thematic or linguistic similarities were grouped into categories, which gradually emerged as subcategories of the broader themes of discussion. For instance, the tagged concepts of women's physical and emotional strength, women's skill as MCs, women's tenacity, men's weaknesses, men's faults, and men's inferior ability as MCs were grouped into the 'assertion of women's superiority' subcategory. With each subsequent round of coding, continual rearrangement and reconfiguring of data led to the refinement of categories and subcategories. See Table 1 for this categorical scheme on page 23.

Tools of Hip-Hop Nation Language (flipping the script, the dozens, and narrativizing) were also noted during the coding process, but as these tools were not themselves the theme of discussion they are not included in this table. Rather, common tools used in expressing certain

themes are mentioned when applicable throughout the discussion. As much as possible, every effort was taken to tag only explicit, direct language on any given topics, avoiding interpretations and inferences which might be subjective. Therefore, uses of metaphor, though surely relevant and meaningful to discussions of HHNL, were omitted from this project, owing to the fact that interpretation of such language relies on personal and cultural knowledge. Without input from the speaker, my own personal recognitions and understandings cannot conclusively account for all ambiguous language.

**Table 1**

*Broad categories and narrower subcategories*

<b>Canadian Multicultural Identity</b>	
<b>Language</b>	Variety code-switch Language code-switch
<b>Territory</b>	Personal territory Heritage territory
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Cultural practices & lifeways Social issues
<b>Women's Hip-Hop Language</b>	
<b>Derogatory</b>	Backxwash-specific terms
<b>Reappropriation</b>	<i>Bitch</i>
<b>Assertions</b>	Assertion of sexual agency Assertion of independence Assertion of women's superiority
<b>The sensitive MC</b>	Vulnerability Self-doubt Sensitivity

### 3.3. Artist biographies

This section will now provide brief biographies of each of the six MCs chosen for this project, as well as a general overview of their common themes and influences. These are summarized in Table 2, on page 30.

### 3.3.1. Michie Mee



Figure 1. Michie Mee in 2019. Adapted from *Michie Mee, Canada's OG female MC*, (n.d.), Sounds Like Toronto. <https://soundsliketoronto.ca/en/stories/artists/michie-mee>. Photo by Steve Carty.

Michelle McCulloch (shown in Figure 1) was born in 1970 in Kingston, Jamaica, before moving to Canada with her family. By the age of 15 Michie Mee was already well-established in Toronto's young rap scene. With a father working in the entertainment industry, travel to New York was quite frequent and allowed her further exposure to the growing Hip-Hop culture there. Freestyling on both sides of the border motivated her to embrace her Jamaican identity in her performance, utilizing her Jamaican accent alongside reggae and dancehall musical flows (Cowie, 2015). The first Canadian MC ever to be signed to an American record label (Nazareth & D'amico, 2012), in 1991 she released *Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style* with L.A. Luv, and in 2000 the album *The First Cut is the Deepest*, both of which were nominated for Rap Recording of the year at their respective Juno Awards, along with *Jamaican Funk's* title track earning its own nomination in 1991 for Best R&B/Soul Recording (Juno Awards, n.d.; Taylor, n.d.). After a hiatus to raise her family, in 2008 she released the single *Say About Us? (feat. Jenna)* and returned with the album *Bahdgyal's Revenge* in 2020. These three albums and one single are what make up the content for this artist. Most known for her reggae and dancehall-infused tracks, and her impact on Canadian Hip-Hop as a whole, Michie Mee raps about her experiences as a woman breaking into the industry and themes of having to earn respect from MCs as both a Canadian and a Jamaican. Her fusion of the heritage and contemporary influences in her life, reflective also of the area of Toronto in which she lives, is what stood out about her sound, and led to her status as she is known today: a national Hip-Hop pioneer.

### 3.3.2. *Eternia*



Figure 2. Eternia from her Bandcamp profile. From <https://eternia.bandcamp.com/>.

Born in 1980 to an English, Scottish, and Assyrian family, Silk-Anne Semiramis Dawn Craig Kaya has been performing as Eternia since the 1990s (McGregor, 2002). A veteran of the Canadian Hip-Hop industry, Eternia raps explicitly about the reality of the industry and her lived experiences as a woman. Professing herself a literalist, she stated in an interview, “I don’t make up stories... It’s all from my eyes, from my perspective” (Bell, 2008). Her career quickly took her to many places around the world, and she has spent time in New York and Australia before coming home to Toronto, where she has lived since the early 2010s (Orcutt, 2016). She’s been proclaimed as “Canada’s dopest female MC” (Macdougall, 2011) since before her first full-length album was released, and over her 30-year career has received notable recognition in the industry. Earning Juno nominations for Rap Recording of the Year for both her 2005 album *It’s Called Life* and 2010’s *At Last*, she became the second woman rapper ever nominated in the history of the award, after Michie Mee. *At Last* was also longlisted for the 2011 Polaris Music Prize (Polaris Music Prize, 2011). These two albums and her subsequent 2021 release, *Free*, make up the content for analysis for this artist. Known for her lyricism and delivery, Eternia’s tracks often focus on the complexities of relationship dynamics, and feature themes of personal reflection and growth.

### 3.3.3. *Eekwol*



*Figure 3.* Eekwol in 2020. From “Rapper and PhD student becomes first Indigenous storyteller-in-residence at U of S,” by N. Pierce, 2020, *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*. <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/rapper-and-phd-student-becomes-first-indigenous-storyteller-in-residence-at-u-of-s>. Photo by Sweetmoon Photography.

A Cree woman from Saskatchewan, a member of the Muskoday First Nation, Lindsay Knight has been rapping since her teenage years, first as Lowkee in an eight-member Hip-Hop collective, before going solo as Eekwol in 2004 (Marsh, 2009b). The struggle and realities of life for Indigenous peoples in Canada is a major theme throughout her releases. She has said that in her mind, “we’re all multicultural” (Sealy, 2007), and connects her experiences with those of minority and marginalized peoples the world over. Her 2004 album *Apprentice to the Mystery* won Best Hip Hop/Rap Album at the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards in 2005, and her release catalogue since that time has been prolific. *Apprentice to the Mystery* and two of her other more recent releases, *Good Kill* (2015) and *F.W.B.W.* (2019) (short for “For Women By Women”), comprise the data for this artist, chosen due to their availability. A veteran in the community, Eekwol speaks often on the reality of being a woman in Hip-Hop and is passionate about the power of Hip-Hop for positive social change, starting with young people.

### 3.3.4. Tasha the Amazon



Figure 4. Tasha the Amazon in 2020. From “Tasha the Amazon is unstoppable: Interview,” by C. Wang, 2020, DJBooth. <https://djbooth.net/features/2020-03-03-tasha-the-amazon-interview-vocal-cord-surgery-black-moon>. Photo by James Ellis.

From “sleepy” Kitchener, Ontario originally, Tasha Schumann was born to a Jamaican and German (Hicks, 2017) in 1993 (Wang, 2020). Having dabbled in a variety of musical styles throughout her childhood and teen years, in 2013 she began her Hip-Hop career as Tasha the Amazon. Her 2016 debut album *Die Every Day* was nominated for Best Rap Recording of the Year and the Junos (Juno Awards, n.d.), and she has since released *Black Moon* in 2019. Prior to the release of *Die Every Day* she had released the EP *FiDiYootDem*, which is unfortunately no longer available, leaving the other two albums mentioned as the analyzable content for this artist. Known for her introspective lyrics and sometimes dark themes, she takes influence from the multiculturalism of Toronto and the diversity of the music scene there to create a unique sound (Shinfuku, 2016).

### 3.3.5. *Haviah Mighty*



*Figure 5.* Haviah Mighty in 2020. From “Interview: Haviah Mighty talks new music, maintaining a platform with purpose, shifting societal standards + more,” 2020, *Soundzine*. <http://www.soundzine.ca/2020/12/interview-haviah-mighty-talks-new-music.html>. Photo by Yung Yemi.

1992-born Haviah Mighty has been rapping since the age of 15, after her family relocated to Brampton, in the Greater Toronto Area. Daughter of a British-Bajan (Barbadian) mother and Jamaican-born father (Fanfair, 2019), the diversity of her new surroundings helped her embrace all aspects of herself and pour that into her music. She has worked on many projects over her career, most notably her 2019 album *13<sup>th</sup> Floor*—winner of that year’s Polaris Music Prize and the first Hip-Hop album ever to do so (Polaris Music Prize, 2019)—and her 2022 Juno Award-winning album *Stock Exchange*, which made her the first woman to win Rap Album/Ep of the Year (Juno Awards, 2022). She has worked on and released a substantial body of work, but her most widely-available works were analyzed for this project: *Bass Loud* (2015), *Flower City* (2017), *13<sup>th</sup> Floor* (2019), and *Stock Exchange* (2021), as well as her two 2023-released tracks “Room Service” and “Honey Bun.” Known for her socially conscious lyrics and a wide range of styles, she makes music to represent all parts of herself and her identity—be that cultural, political, social, musical, or otherwise (Yeung, 2020).

### 3.3.5. *Backxwash*



*Figure 6.* Backxwash in 2020. From “Backxwash’s brilliant, explosive new record is a harrowing journey inward,” by M. Mertens, 2020, Bandcamp. <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/backxwash-god-has-nothing-to-do-with-this-interview>. Photo by Bianca Lecompte.

Born in Lusaka, Zambia in 1991, Ashanti Mutinta came to British Columbia at age 17 for university before settling in Montréal, where she entered the Hip-Hop scene in 2011 under the name Backxwash. Her family had discouraged her childhood passion for music, and in Montréal she took the opportunity to regain that confidence, producing a unique fusion of Hip-Hop and Metal (Mohenu, 2020). Her debut as Backxwash coincided with her coming out openly as a transgender woman, another aspect of her identity which informs the music she puts out. An artist with a prolific release schedule so far, the lyrics of five of her albums were analyzed for this project: *Black Sailor Moon* (2018), *Deviancy* (2019), *God Has Nothing to Do with This* (2020), *I Lie Here Buried With My Rings and My Dresses* (2021), and *His Happiness Shall Come First Even Though We Are Suffering* (2022), chosen due to their availability. Of these, her 2020 release won the Polaris Music Prize of that year (Polaris Music Prize, 2020), and her album from 2022 was longlisted for the same award (Polaris Music Prize, 2022). Her experience as a transfemme person in a patriarchal society make up some of the major themes in her music (Locke, 2020), alongside themes of conflict between Christianity and precolonial spirituality (Jaunet, n.d.; MacDonald, 2022).

**Table 2***Overview of Artists*

<b>Artist name</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Years active</b>	<b>Works analyzed</b>	<b>Award recognition</b>
<b>Michie Mee (Michelle McCulloch)</b>	Jamaican-Canadian	1985-present	<i>Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style</i> (1991) <i>The First Cut is the Deepest</i> (2000) <i>Say About Us? (feat. Jenna)</i> (2008) <i>Bahdgyal's Revenge</i> (2020)	1991 Juno Award for Best R&B/Soul Recording (nominated) 1992 Juno Award for Rap Recording of the Year (nominated) 2000 Juno Award for Best Rap Recording (nominated)
<b>Eternia (Silk-Anne Semiramis Dawn Craig Kaya)</b>	English, Scottish, Assyrian, Canadian	Approx. 1990-present	<i>It's Called Life</i> (2005) <i>At Last</i> (2010) <i>Free</i> (2021)	2006 Juno Award for Rap Recording of the Year (nominated) 2011 Juno Award for Rap Recording of the Year (nominated) 2011 Polaris Music Prize (longlisted)
<b>Eekwol (Lindsay Knight)</b>	Cree	2004-2019	<i>Apprentice to the Mystery</i> (2004) <i>Good Kill</i> (2015) <i>F.W.B.W.</i> (2019)	2005 Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Hip Hop/Rap Album
<b>Tasha the Amazon (Tasha Schumann)</b>	Jamaican, German, Canadian	2013-present	<i>Die Every Day</i> (2016) <i>Black Moon</i> (2019)	2017 Juno Award for Rap Recording of the Year (nominated)
<b>Haviah Mighty</b>	British-Barbadian, Jamaican, Canadian	2007-present	<i>Bass Loud</i> (2015) <i>Flower City</i> (2017) <i>13<sup>th</sup> Floor</i> (2019) <i>Stock Exchange</i> (2021) <i>Room Service – Single</i> (2023)	2019 Polaris Music Prize (won) 2022 Juno Award for Rap Album/EP of the Year (won)
<b>Backxwash (Ashanti Mutinta)</b>	Zambian	2018-present	<i>Black Sailor Moon</i> (2018) <i>Deviancy</i> (2019) <i>God Has Nothing to Do with This Leave Him Out Of It</i> (2020) <i>I Lie Here Buried With My Rings and My Dresses</i> (2021) <i>His Happiness Shall Come First Even Though We Are Suffering</i> (2022)	2020 Polaris Music Prize (won) 2022 Polaris Music Prize (longlisted)

## Chapter 4: Discussion

Focusing on the question of Canadian women MCs' identity construction and performance, the upcoming sections will now turn to discussing what patterns and behaviours were observed in the analysis of these MCs' lyrics. The two broad categories of discussion are first: the ways in which these MCs index authenticity as Canadians, and second: the ways in which they index authenticity as women.

### 4.1. Territory and ethnicity: Dimensions of knowledge and experience

As evidenced in prior study of Canadian MCs, and mentioned in the literature review above, connections to territory and ethnicity are important aspects of authentic identity performance in Canadian Hip-Hop; indexing "specific place-based experience and knowledge" (Przybylski, 2018, p. 493) is imperative to accomplishing this goal. "Naming and claiming" a territory (Marsh, 2009a) is an especially relevant signifier of an MC's alignment to a group, and Sarkar & Allen (2007) coined the term "name proclaiming" to describe indexical language which goes beyond just claiming by name, instead actually "publicly performing particular responses to certain social discourses" (p. 21). In the lyrics of these six artists, territory and ethnicity were often claimed using these methods, to varying degrees. A perspective of place-based knowledge versus place-based experience, or a gradient progression from knowledge to experience, has been taken to discuss the indexical linguistic behaviours found in the lyrics of these MCs. Knowledge here refers to a more abstract understanding of some group or place, broadly salient to both members and outsiders, whereas experience relies on a deeper understanding from personal involvement, and is less salient to outsiders. Artists make use of what claims they can authentically make along the dimensions of knowledge and experience. Ethnic identities often have some territorial roots, but especially in the case of Canada's diasporic and immigrant communities, identifying with some ethnicity means authentically showcasing the lifeways, practices, and specific social dynamics that come with it in whatever place they live.

#### 4.1.1. *"It's not my hometown, but it's my hometown, you feel me?"<sup>2</sup>: Knowledge- and experience-based territory claims*

To explain what is meant by a gradient from knowledge to experience, take the example of territory name claiming. The more knowledge-based, or abstracted, a person's relationship

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<sup>2</sup> From Haviah Mighty, 2017, "Flower City"

with a place is, the more directly they name it, and the more broadly. Given more personal experience with the territory, they name it more implicitly and minutely. As shown in examples (1) through (5) with place names in bold, MCs will mention their country of origin, their heritage territory, by referring to the entire nation, even the whole continent, if the connection they are indexing is based mainly on knowledge of it.

- (1) I'm the **Jamaican**, takin' charge, and livin' large [Michie Mee, 1991, "Jamaican Funk"]
- (2) I'm **Bajan, Jamaican**, and also **British** [Haviah Mighty, 2015, "My Love"]
- (3) I'm that yellow-skin **Jamaican** [Tasha the Amazon, 2019, "Helluva Rude"]
- (4) I'm **African**, I try to do all I can [Backxwash, 2019, "Deviancy (feat. SurgeryHead)"]
- (5) That's **Assyrian**, for all y'all simpletons questionin' my origin [Eternia, 2005, "Bang"]

If an MC has spent time somewhere, lived somewhere for a while, the more insider-specific the name claims can become, such as the mentions of cities by name or well-known abbreviations in the following excerpt:

On the trains in the cities that I habitat, **TO, LO, NY**, that's where I draw the border / never forget my [unclear] heads up in **VanCity, O-Town**, lockin' it down, that's where I started spittin' / what a pity, haven't seen faces in a while, smiles from this face, to yours, pick up the phone and dial / **CT, NJ, CA**, I gots people there, been a minute since I been in it, you know I'll see ya there.<sup>3</sup> (Eternia, 2005, "Inspiration")

And overall claims which are less knowledge-based are smaller in scale and more specific. In "Blame" Haviah Mighty talks about "repping Queen St. and Kennedy," her neighbourhood of residence in Brampton, Ontario; Backxwash mentions by name Ottawa and North Rhodesia (former name of Zambia, her native country); and Michie Mee indexes her Ontario experience by specifying the cities and neighbourhoods she is familiar with:

Well as you know, "Good Things Grow in Ontario,"<sup>4</sup> like in **Mississauga, Thornhill, Brampton, Markham, and Scarborough** / and bad man, to find 'em is a cinch, Jungle region, [unclear] and **Jane & Finch** / these are posses, but trouble they don't seek, I know, I live there. (Michie Mee & L.A. Luv, 1991, "Canada Large")

<sup>3</sup> The abbreviations in this excerpt, in order, are: the cities of Toronto, London, New York, Vancouver, and Ottawa; and the states of Connecticut, New Jersey, and California

<sup>4</sup> "Good Things Grow in Ontario" is a long-running promotional campaign by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

These terms require—and therefore index—some amount of personal experience in that place to easily use the terms, but are not so obscure as to lose salience to outsiders.

When an MC has a long, lived experience in a place, their claims can be done using even more insider-only language: improper titles and abbreviations, colloquialisms and slang terms, and slogans (as seen in “Canada Large” above) are used. These women describe their territory in such a way as is cogent only to others ‘in the know,’ from “the province of the Great Lakes”—Ontario—“in the North,” as Canada is colloquially known, where they live in their “G20 City,” “the 6”—Toronto. They travel from “Jungle Region,” a.k.a. the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood, “a highway away” along “the four-oh-one”—Canada’s busiest motorway (Hocking, 2023)—to “the Westside” of the Greater Toronto Area. In the Regional Municipality of Peel, referred to simply as “Peel,” is “Flower City”—a nickname for Brampton. Beyond those, cultural references are invoked to index place-based experience: mentioning Canadian celebrities or public figures such as Celine Dion or “Trudeau” (Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau), Canadian music awards, Greyhound buses, moccasins, and tallgrass [prairies]. These insider terms—the kind that “only someone from [there] would recognize” (Scobie, 2015, p. 80)—rely on a deeper level of personal experience to use fluently, making their use by MCs indexical of that kind of lived-in membership. For a visual example of this gradient for claims to territory, see Table 3 below.

**Table 3**

*Claims to Toronto/Greater Toronto Area membership, from knowledge-based (left) to experience-based (right)*

Knowledge	←————→	Experience
<i>Canada</i>		<i>Jungle Region</i> <i>“the 6”</i>
	<i>Ontario</i> <i>TO</i> <i>Brampton</i>	<i>Flower City</i> <i>Highway 401</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger territories</li> <li>• Broadly salient terms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller territories</li> <li>• Abbreviations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Localized areas</li> <li>• Insider/slang terms</li> </ul>

This strategic claiming, along the gradient of abstract knowledge to personal experience, allows MCs to claim membership to all territories that are important to them and make up their identity, without glossing over the specific kinds of connection they have to each.

#### 4.1.2. “Born political”<sup>5</sup>: Knowledge and experience ethnicity claims

But territory is just one example. The lens of a gradient of knowledge and experience can also be useful in understanding MCs’ linguistic behaviour on multiple topics of ethnic identity—which may, or may not, have their own territorial roots. Knowledge-based connections have MCs talking about their heritage language or cultural practices (6, 7) and about the historical narratives of that group (8, 9, 10) form a somewhat more objective, removed position.

- (6) But I’m standin’ like my last name and Turkish tongue, blastin’ and laughin’, Eternia represents, everlastin’ [Eternia, 2005, “Bang]
- (7) We need to maintain that knowledge and wisdom from the elders before it’s all gone [Eekwol, 2004, “Apprentro”]
- (8) From the other side, you could try to relate, just got some generations of genocide and genetic fate [Eekwol, 2004, “Power of Silence”]
- (9) ‘Cause slavery showed Black youth, for mad years, that whiteness is right / Your ma getting fucked, your dad getting whipped, but white is the light [Haviah Mighty, 2019, “Thirteen”]
- (10) Almost like our ancients were posted up in the slave ships [Backwash, 2021, “I Lie Here Buried With My Rings and My Dresses”]

Given more experience, however, MCs become the subjects of, and participants in, these topics. Rather than discussion of a linguistic variety, they code-switch into using that variety, “producing appropriate alignments and stances or positionings” (Omoniyi, 2008, p. 30) with the group that speaks it. The prominence of code-switching, too, correlates with their personal experience with the linguistic variety. Michie Mee—who spent much of her early life in predominantly Jamaican neighbourhoods—has entire tracks in Jamaican and switches for full lines, or often fluidly back and forth<sup>6</sup> (Jamaican noted in italics):

*Natural born warrior, heir to the throne, you out to roam but you always come home / love is all you bring, king-king to the ting, no hiding when you’re riding, stand right beside him // talk up how when we drive by, we walk up, I won’t stop till the money bag cock up / Empress [unclear], wah mi be the cleaner, Toronto star, catch me and I gleam, ah / no borders between us, get accustomed to seein’ us, in arenas, Mars, and Venus*  
[Michie Mee, 2020, “Stand Right Beside Him (feat. JD Era)”]

<sup>5</sup> From Eekwol, 2015, “Shift”

<sup>6</sup> Code-switches to Jamaican Patois were coded based on phonological differences

Whereas the other two Jamaican artists—who grew up in more diverse areas, and have more mixed cultural backgrounds—sometimes switch for up to a whole verse, but most commonly their variety switches are a smaller minority of each track, often for a single word (11, 12, 13), or short phrase, such as the hook, intro, or outro (14, 15).

- (11) That's *Obeah* in this bitch, a seance for my day ones, yeah you know I'm like a witch, like slew dat, slew dat, I put *gold* upon your fist, and *cold* upon your wrist, yeah I *told* ya I'd make you rich [Tasha the Amazon, 2019, "That Ain't You"]
- (12) *Free* me on my pager if the green is loud [Haviah Mighty, YEAR, "For Free"]
- (13) Virgin *gyal* to the West Coast [Haviah Mighty, YEAR, "Blame"]
- (14) *Mi step out everywhere cu' mi money new dem, every city fuckin' love mi, dat gully yoot friend* / when I touch the globe, turn my money to yen, when I touch home, enemies act like friends. [Tasha the Amazon, 2019, "Helluva Ride"]
- (15) *Yeah mi spend it pon the weekend, all a me is a unique blend*, Got my money please send, *Bwoi me want me revenge*, all about my defense [Haviah Mighty, 2019, "You Don't Love Me"]

They discuss history and its present-day effects with themselves in the first person, as it really affects them, often in combination with a code-switch or linguistic variety-switch to underline that personal experience on multiple levels. As in this excerpt from Haviah Mighty's 2021 song "Protest," rapper in Jamaican:

*I got the over the shoulder look pat-down / A me dat de boi wan track down / Whole squad pulled up so they ram down / Locked door so the door get rammed down / When me see dem, me heart just sank down / It seems dat de boi wan crack down / Holy fuck bro man down!* [Haviah Mighty, 2021, "Protest"]

Her first-person perspective shows her experience-based alignment with Black people facing institutional racialized violence, and her code-switching emphasizes her authentic claim to this kind of experience in her own life, specifically. This is the kind of experience-based claim that serves to connect MCs not only to groups which have a certain territorial affiliation, but beyond them as well, such as the broader experience of the African Diaspora and racially marginalized groups the world over.

With experience-based claims, instead of expressing an objective view on cultural spiritual or celebratory practices, their language has them celebrating and participating in these practices and lifeways. Haviah Mighty cares for her hair through the passed-down tradition of

wearing “silk scarves late at night” and doesn’t “really fuck with sunscreen,” because she’s “a Black, Black, Black shorty” (2019, “Good On My Own Tonight [feat. TOBi]) and, as Michie Mee says: “*Skin out yuh bhatty cyan tehk di sun long*” (Michie Mee, 1991, “Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style”)—as Black women, they can enjoy the sun as much as they like without fear of sunburn. They show participation in celebratory practices as well, especially dance styles which are rooted in their culture’s music, as in (16) and (17).

(16) *Dem deh gyal a she a dem have di winery*<sup>7</sup> [Michie Mee, 1991, “Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style”]

(17) *Wine, wine, wine up yuh waist* [Haviah Mighty, 2023, “Room Service”]

One of Backxwash’s focal points throughout her discography is her participation in spiritual practices indigenous to pre-colonial Zambia, something she not only describes from a knowledge-based perspective, but claims as part of her ethnic identity through descriptions of her own participation (18, 19, 20).

(18) *I fuck with black magic, yuh, I love the bad magic* [Backxwash, 2020, “Black Magic”]

(19) *I’m into voodoo and shit* [Backxwash, 2018, “Voodoo”]

(20) *Middle finger to my elders, I don’t pray anymore* [Backxwash, 2019, “Burn Me at the Stake”]

These practices by Backxwash are echoed by Eekwol’s indexical claims to aspects of land and culture which predate colonial classification. Identity expressions such as these are examples of the “resistance vernaculars” described by Mitchell (2000): “act[s] of cultural resistance and preservation of ethnic autonomy” (p.53) which perform a response to relevant social discourses (Sarkar & Allen, 2007). Their claiming and performance of an identity which has been subjugated defies that subjugation. These artists show allegiance to their ethnicity and territory as it was before colonialism, in pointed defiance of the traumatic recent history and the pain that comes with it.

Another noteworthy behaviour in the language of these artists is their ability to shift their indexicality over time, to reflect changing relationships with different aspects of their identity, or to accomplish different goals in their lyrics. Eekwol, for example, makes knowledge-based

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<sup>7</sup> “A form of dancing normally done by women... mostly performed to West Indian music such as reggae, soca or calypso.” (jamaicanpatwah.com)

claims to her Indigenous ethnicity, language, and territory early in her career, but as time progresses and she pursues cultural experience in her life, her language begins to reflect that experience (see Table 4 for visual representation). She begins to code-switch in 2015 as her experience speaking Cree grows: earlier mentions of the ‘Creator’ become **ᐆᐃᓂᓂ** (*kisemanito*)<sup>8</sup>, and she shows herself as a participant in cultural practices:

As I crouch and my *oskapios* kneel, senses separate the fake from the real / and I know that my time has come, fixed to mend what's come undone // and as I reach up in my prayer stance, my offering wet from the sweat in my hand, and I know that my time has come. To give thanks for another day in the sun. [Eternia, 2015, “I Will Not Be Conquered”]

**Table 4**

*Some of Eekwol’s claims to ethnic identity, along a gradient of knowledge and experience.*

Knowledge	←————→	Experience
<p>“We need to maintain that knowledge and wisdom from the elders before it’s all gone” -Eekwol, 2004, “Apprentro”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentions by name</li> <li>• Objective perspective</li> </ul>	<p>“See how much my people mean to me, Creator kept comfort for these aches and pains” -Eekwol, 2004, “Lonely Lost Planet”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less objective, more personal connection</li> </ul>	<p><b>ᐆᐃᓂᓂ</b> (‘Creator’) “I reach up in my prayer stance” -Eekwol, 2015, “I Will Not Be Conquered”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Code-switching</li> <li>• First-person perspective</li> </ul>

MCs also shift along this gradient in response to their audience, as in the career of Michie Mee. Her second album was targeted largely to an American audience, and in it her previous experience-based majority of Canadian and Jamaican identity claims become the minority. Her variety-switches to Jamaican are noticeably fewer (variety-switches coded in only 6 out of 12 analyzed tracks from her 2000 album, compared to 10 out of 12 tracks from 1991, and 8 out of 11 tracks from 2020), and she aligns herself more strongly with elements of her identity which are not defined by borders or nationality, such as the Hip-Hop Nation, African Diaspora, or womanhood.

These gradient dimensions of knowledge and experience, reflective of MCs’ lives, show us that not only is claiming each part of their identity an important goal for Canadian MCs, but

<sup>8</sup> “The Creator, God, the Great Spirit” (creedictionary.com)

equally important is representing those aspects of identity in the right manner. To claim an experience level that one does not have is inauthentic, but to omit an important part of their connection to territory or ethnicity is inauthentic, too. An important takeaway from this discussion—and something which is perhaps a stronger priority for Canadian MCs living in a multicultural context—is that this gradient of knowledge and experience does not serve to prove or disprove some aspect of identity. The gradient does not correlate with “outsider and insider”, or “non-member and member.” Indeed, in some cases artists can make both knowledge-based and experience-based claims to the same aspect of their identity, as will serve their desired performance. Any territory and ethnicity claims made in the lyrics of these artists are authentically claiming membership; the gradient of terms simply serves to further specify that claim, reinforcing the authenticity of their identity presentation.

#### **4.2. Women’s Hip-Hop Language: Dual claims**

This section will now turn to the language of these MCs as it specifically relates to their identities as women. The patterns found throughout the lyrics will be presented alongside the conclusions of prior corresponding work (Forman, 2021; Koponen, 2021; Lane, 2011; Pough, 2015; Smitherman, 1997; Vinter, 2017), with the aim of investigating commonalities and differences therein. In so doing, these language behaviours which have been researched discretely may be understood in a new light when taken together.

##### ***4.2.1. Derogatory reappropriation***

Much research to date has focused on some certain behaviour by women rappers and formed conclusions which are then implicitly applied to reflect the ideologies of the whole group of “women in Hip-Hop.” For example, take discussions of reappropriation of derogatory language. In the study of Global Hip-Hop, and in linguistics generally, stigmatized group members’ ‘flipping the script’ of derogatory terms for self-referential use are understood to purposefully challenge negative associations while increasing perceived power for their group (Galinsky et al., 2013). Black peoples’ reappropriation of the n-word is a well-known instance of this (Smitherman, 1997), as is the taking up of multiple terms specific to the 2SLGBTQI+ community such as *queer* or *dyke* (Cheves, 2017), or the locally-relevant reclamations of pejorated terms (Scarparo & Stevenson, 2018), language varieties (Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2013; Terkourafi, 2010), or cultural aesthetics (Przybylski, 2018) done throughout the Glocal Hip-Hop

Nation. These reappropriations are analyzed as reflective of the speaker’s ideology, as resistant to the other, older behaviours which are in accordance with stigma and pejoration.

#### 4.2.1.1. *Backwash and reappropriation*

Throughout the tracks analyzed for this project, Backwash participates often in derogatory self-labelling for power reclamation and self-assertion. Her reappropriations in (21), (22), and (23) reflect the life experience of someone well-acquainted with the hateful attitudes that some hold toward herself and other members of the trans community<sup>9</sup> (reappropriated terms in bold).

- (21) Even the **faggots** need lethal advantage [Backwash, 2022, “NYAMA”]
- (22) Y’all done let the trans in this bitch, with the **fags** with the **hags** in demand in this shit / with the drags with the panic attacks in the zip, and we randy as fuck understand it’s the clique [Backwash, 2019, “Bad Juju”]
- (23) They gotta know that I’m really that bitch, all my pronouns are fifty black, gimme my shit! / The **trans fag skank** with a nickel or six, I’m a target in the market for a clitorisin’ [Backwash, 2018, “Jane Dro”]

Her language takes control of the slurs and pejorative terms which she has had fired at her throughout her life, taking away that power against her through proud self-labelling. In the contexts of toasting—when projecting herself “as a powerful, all-knowing, omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds” (Smitherman, 1997, p. 13)—Backwash is “the Baphomet of this faggot shit” (Backwash, 2019, “Don’t Come to the Woods”), an occult deity worshipped by the Satanic Temple (Bauer, 2023). She flips the script on her perceived ‘evil’ and ‘godlessness’ to frame it as a source of pride and power: if people who participate in “this faggot shit” (ostensibly, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community) are pejorated and somehow “wrong,” then she is their god. She is a force to be reckoned with, “a dangerous **shemale** with that ace for details” (Backwash, 2018, “Aesthetic”). She defies the claims of bigots: “fuck all my enemies as hard as I can, fuck all these papers who **call me a man**” (Backwash, 2018, “BURN TO ASHES [feat. Michael Go]”). These reappropriations reasonably represent her own ideological stance regarding homophobia and anti-queer rhetorics: any uses of derogatory frames and pejorative terms such as these is unacceptable, and those ideas are in her power to reconfigure and reclaim. She uses these slurs in self-referential context only—never does she use them in a derogatory manner against

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<sup>9</sup> Slurs here are represented fully when directly quoting lyrics, for clarity of representing the MC’s own words.

others. Backxwash's reappropriative behaviour as shown above is in keeping with previous descriptions, but her other common reappropriations, and those commonly done by the other five women, were not as closely in line with prior research.

#### 4.2.1.2. *The duality of bitch*

The most common derogatory term in the language of these six women was *bitch*. *Bitch* has garnered some attention in the field of women's Hip-Hop language (Koponen, 2021; Vinter, 2017) due to its relatively-newly-acquired positive associations. A term with a long history in the English language as an insult against women, "early applications were to a promiscuous or sensual woman, a metaphorical extension of the behaviour of a bitch in heat" (Hughes, 2015, p. 24), but more recently Koponen (2021) found women on Twitter positively reappropriating "*bitch* to indicate stances of affection, communality, confrontationality, admiration, empowerment, and humour" (p.59). And indeed, three of Vinter's (2017) four reappropriated categories of *bitch* were used self-referentially in the lyrics of these six women: slang, independence, and monsterization.

Vinter (2017) describes slang reappropriations of *bitch* as those which correspond with use of slang terms, such as *bad* when connoting "admiration, positive nonconformity and street credibility" (p. 21). For example, on her 2015 track "My Love," Haviah Mighty asserts herself as "a bad bitch in your corner," and Backxwash calls it "a given" that she's "still the baddest fuckin' bitch in this shit" (Backxwash, 2018, "Aesthetic")—both "reinforcing positive adjective[s]" (Vinter, 2017, p. 22) flipping *bitch*'s derogatory script.

Reappropriations with connotations of independence are also part of these MCs' linguistic repertoire: indexing the kinds of traits which are lionized in men but societally undesirable in women, such as being bossy, unapologetic, selfish, or tough (Vinter, 2017). In their lyrics, these women quite regularly self-label as *bitch* to positively assert such traits, especially when emphasizing their independence from men. In "Love It or Leave It Alone" (2000), Michie Mee says "leave me alone, [I'm] not the girl of your dreams, 'cause you fuck with my head, talk to me in your bed, and this bitch ain't gon' cry no more." To show she is not susceptible to the rules and expectations of her father, Backxwash asserts that "this bitch is always fine, equipped with all your lies" (Backxwash, 2020, "Black Sheep"). And in Haviah Mighty's words, "any nigga tryna challenge my authority" will be cut from her life like a cavity in a root canal; she is not dependent on a relationship unless it is mutually beneficial: "your

absence is my number one wish, unless you treat me like your number one bitch” (Haviah Mighty, 2015, “Root Canal”). All of these reappropriations and self-identifications of *bitch* oppose an identity of subservience, meekness, and dependency to positively assert a persona of independence.

The third of Vinter’s (2017) positive reappropriations which appear in the lyrics of this project is the use of *bitch* in monsterization contexts. As is the case in reappropriations which index independence, monsterization self-labels index traits which are typically looked down on in women; however these uses of *bitch* “carried a strong sense of malice, indicating that the *bitch* has some intention of being the opposite of charitable rather than of being independent” (Vinter, 2017, p. 28)—in some way monstrous. These include threats of violence: “I use my fist if you lookin’ sideways and shit, I’ll be a bitch if you pushin’ my patience” (Haviah Mighty, 2015, “Bass Loud”), and declarations of intention to act monstrously, as in (24) and (25).

(24) I think it’s about time I start feeling **bitchy** [Michie Mee, 2000, “Ripped Mee Off”]

(25) Ding dong the **bitch** is here, I been summoned from a hundred and fifty years [Backxwash, 2019, “Don’t Come to the Woods”]

As shown above, there is evidence that positive reclamations of *bitch* are not unusual, and that older, more derogatory connotations of the term face resistance from these MCs. However, this behaviour cannot be analyzed as reflecting an MC’s entire ideology around *bitch*, as was done in discussing Backxwash’s specific set of reappropriated slurs. This is because at the same time—literally within a single song, in some cases—as power-asserting reappropriations are done, these MCs retain and use the derogatory meanings. They use it in reference to men and to women, associating the addressee with a subordinate role (Kiesling, 2011): they refer to the *bitch* as someone weak, easily beaten (26, 27, 28), or immature, in some way not-grown-up or aspirational (29).

(26) I don’t need no man around, I’m fine without a bitch (Haviah Mighty, 2015, “Root Canal”)

(27) Comin forward, you sure would love to test Michie Mee, but I just laugh, ‘cause you’re just a bitch to me [Michie Mee, 1991, “A Portion From Up North”]

(28) I put this bitch-ass li’l boy in a box [Haviah Mighty, 2015, “My Love”]

(29) Your bitch ain't as nice as me, 'cause I ain't a bitch / I'm that grown woman that bitches aspire to be [Eternia, 2011, "It's Funny"]

And they use *bitch* to refer negatively to those who act in stereotypically "bitchy" ways, as someone who should have a better attitude, and should not be so difficult to deal with lest they end up alone (30). In a track where Michie Mee is "feeling bitchy" herself (Michie Mee, 2000, "ripped Mee Off"), she includes "callin' yourself bitch, new attitude, and tattoos" in the behaviours of members of the Hip-Hop community which she is criticizing, as actions that will not help them in the long run.

(30) You chose to be tricky, spoiled, bitchy, which made him the ditcher, and you the ditchee [Eekwol, 2004, "Road Blues"]

Based on the presence of these varied uses of *bitch*, most of these women are not categorically opposed to its earlier meanings. It cannot be concluded that, as a whole, women MCs are working to further the single ideological stance of reappropriating *bitch*—indeed, this cannot even be said of the six MCs looked at for this project. The stances indexed by any uses of *bitch* are individualized to each woman: Eternia and Eekwol both, for example, never positively reappropriate, though the other four MCs do. And it seems not to be a change over time in the genre, as Michie Mee uses *bitch* positively both before and after Eternia and Eekwol's releases. When positive reappropriations do occur, they can certainly be analyzed as indexing alignment against derogatory associations, but must not the cases of "straightforward" use then index alignment with misogynist themes? The implications of this duality of use for the identities that these women are presenting is what I hope to interrogate further.

#### **4.2.2. Sexuality and agency: Assertion, not subversion**

Women in the Hip-Hop industry are commonly characterized as having narrow margins in which they are permitted to reside by men. According to Pough (2015), "Hip Hop gendered feminine has no agency. She is something men rappers love, something they do. She does not act, she is acted upon" (p. 94). This corroborates Williams Crenshaw's (1993) summary of women in the Hip-Hop of men: "we hear about cunts being fucked until backbones are cracked, asses being busted, dicks rammed down throats, and semen splattered across faces. Black women are cunts, bitches, and all purpose hoes" (p.122). These presentations by men lead to women's own personas being viewed primarily through the lens of their sexuality—objectification, subjectification, self-objectification, agency, and sexual participation are prominent subjects in

the literature, often framed as reflexive responses to those margins which men have placed around them.

Women MCs have tended to be categorized into two camps when it comes to sexuality, as paraphrased by Lane (2011) from Keyes (2000) and Morgan (2000): “the current state of popular discourse surrounding Black women who rap places a very narrow strict divide between those women who are viewed as having a very sexualized image or not (see Keyes, 2000; Morgan, 2000)” (p.789). Theses and papers have been written on the sexual self-representations by Missy Elliott (Lane, 2011) and Nicki Minaj (White, 2013), Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion (Puoskari, 2020), and many entertainment media pieces (McDuffie, 2019; Perkins, 2021) have focused on women MCs’ “hypersexuality” as a point of fascination and controversy.

This fixation on classifying women as “hypersexual” or not, according to Lane (2011), “may be another way to call Black women hoes, and... may serve more as a distraction than an analytical tool” (p.789) when talking about their language and their authentic identities. Instead of a focus on “which” sexuality a woman chooses to present, the lyrics of these six MCs will be discussed based on what the women say, on their own terms—“not simply responses to male desires or forms of self-policing” (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 14) but rather as deft expressions of and claims to agency and experience. Though women’s experiences being stereotyped, objectified, and mistreated by men cannot be ignored, “this does not mean that we need to call into question [women’s] power for sexual choice, autonomy, or freedom” (Miller-Young, 2007, p. 278). There are varied and nuanced expressions of sexual identity by all six of these women. Over their discographies, they index enthusiastic sexual or romantic participation (31, 32, 34), and assert the power and strength that they have as a result (33, 34, 35).

- (31) If that ass is fat, I'm tryna fuck it up, Hop up in the bunk, and we could buddy up  
[Haviah Mighty, 2022, “Honey Bun”]
- (32) Oooh and then we fuck until the bed is breaking, oooh and then we fuck until the  
legs is shaking / oooh I know you love me, you don’t need to say it, oooh and in the  
morn I’m gone up in my spaceship [Tasha the Amazon, 2019, “Helluva Ride”]
- (33) Nigga try to contest me, I'ma put a hex so his ass can't sleep, I'ma make him wet  
so his ass can't leave [Backxwash, 2018, “Jane Dro”]
- (34) If I lay wit you then I’ll behave wit you the way I please [Eternia, 2005,  
“Control”]

- (35) When I rap, brothers collapse, I'm at the ceiling / I gave him a wink, 'cause he was a hunk, more than sex appeal is Jamaican funk [Michie Mee, 1991, "Jamaican Funk—Canadian Style"]

And they also index their desire to be viewed as more than simply a sexual object or lesser-than because of their gender (36, 37, 38).

- (36) Boys get taught to get good at somethin', girls get taught to find a good husband / I got both in my back of tricks, changing the way the world thinks about chicks [Eekwol, 2015, "Born a Guy"]
- (37) Relationships are a power struggle. whoever has more, has control. but I refuse to be subordinate [Eternia, 2005, "Control"]
- (38) Don't wanna be your slave, and I'm not gonna, take it how you wanna [Michie Mee, 1999, "Don't Wanna Be Your Slave"]

But most important to note on this subject is that not one of these women chooses one "side"—leaning into "hypersexual" attitudes or away from them in favour of another persona is never their entire identity. Each album contains a breadth of attitudes surrounding sex, family, the Hip-Hop community, and everything else that is important to them. To view the personas that these women have crafted as only responses to sexual representations by men is to ignore the complex, intersectional experience that they are really indexing. Every one of these MCs resists the simplifying categorizations of "very sexualized or not." Instead, as in examples (39) through (44), in constructing their identities, the focus is on telegraphing what their unique experience is as women: asserting who they internally are, and who they are not (with each assertion in bold).

- (39) **I am not** a ballerina, mamma mia, **I am** your leader [Haviah Mighty, 2019, "Fugazi"]
- (40) **I am not** a monster, **I am not** afraid, **I will be** disaster, like a hurricane / **I am not** predator, **I am** prey, but you can't kill my word, **I'm** the voice of today [Eekwol, 2015, "I Will Not Be Conquered"]
- (41) **I'm** a lover but **I am** a killer, **I'm** a finisher [Tasha the Amazon, 2016, "Picasso Leaning"]
- (42) **I'm** reading this with a dress on, **I'm** kind of like Jesus, **I'm** Teflon... **I'm** strong, **I'm** powerful, Black fuckin' Sailor Moon, yeah [Backxwash, 2018, "I GOT A PENTAGRAM TATTOO"]

(43) **I'm** still here y'all, **I ain't** goin' nowhere... yup, **I'm** like that, loud and obnoxious [Eternia, 2005, "Evidence"]

(44) **I ain't** frightened, **I [am]** just enlightened... **I'm never** hiding... **I'm** defending my ends [Michie Mee, 1999, "Ripped Mee Off"]

There are a few instances where women do directly respond to some external perspective, such as (45) and (46).

(45) So be gone, people try and tell the girls to be strong, stick wit it / fuck it if I did that, I'd be wrong [Eternia, 2005, "Control"]

(46) Not tryna be somebody's trophy or wifey, media keeps telling me: be who you wanna be, and at the same time bombarding me with patriarchal imagery [Eekwol, 2019, "For Women By Women"]

But for the most part, the focus of these women is performing themselves—they are the subjects, they are what is and is not. In their lives there are men, yes, certainly, but those men do not govern who these women are or how they present themselves. And as women, as human beings, they resist such simplifying categorizations. Sexuality and their relationship to others' views of them are not what motivate the identities that they construct. Instead, there is a bent toward expression of whole-personhood, of a multifaceted individual, and those facets include differing attitudes toward sex and men, based on each MC's priorities at their time of writing. What they show in topics of sexuality—like with their varied uses of *bitch*—is not wholly about subverting, reversing, or rejecting someone else's perspective, but about asserting their own.

#### 4.2.3. *Vulnerability and the sensitive MC*

Forman (2021) has introduced the idea of men rappers constructing an "alternate sensibility... that is considerably more isolated and individualized, emphasizing inner emotional and reflective states of mind" (p. 458). Termed the "sensitive MC," this persona is presented as a new emergence in the HHN over the past few decades. Part of a shift in the culture away from purely "hardcore," traditional masculinity, Forman characterizes the sensitive MC by "lyrical tropes of vulnerability, sensitivity, and self-doubt" (p. 458)—tendencies which are noted as "not entirely without precedent" (p. 462), citing some examples of men who are said to have sparked this shift in lyricism. Notably, Forman (2021) focuses only on this novel shift in men's Hip-Hop, and does not discuss women rappers. Based on the language of the women of this project,

however, I would posit that the language of the sensitive MC is not new, nor is it gradually emerging, but instead went unstudied by scholars until its recent adoption by men MCs.

The analyzed work of these women MCs spans more than thirty years, with Michie Mee, Eternia, and Eekwol releasing over much of that time, and from the very earliest of their albums, there is a strong presence of the sensitive MC—alongside the traditional tropes of HHNL, and the assertive and reappropriative behaviours described here. In fact, the “more open confessional mode that explores issues of mental health and other forms of mental/emotional malaise *and* well-being” (Forman, 2021, p. 470), including vulnerability, sensitivity, and self-doubt, is the most consistent pattern in the lyrics of these women.

For example, in 1991’s “Insecure Lava” Michie Mee details a romantic relationship which she pursued at first, but throughout its duration their love cannot sustain what becomes an untenable dynamic:

“Learn to trust me, try your best not to cuss me / I know I have a busy life but still you’re not neglected, you know I have a career, so why can’t you respect it? ... So if you still think I got men all over the world, then fine, you’re not my man and I’m no longer your girl.” [Michie Mee, 1991, “Insecure Lava”]

The difficult realities of her life in the music industry, her sensitivity and vulnerability to the jealousy of a partner, and the eventual strength of decision to end the relationship are all explicitly laid out in her lyrics, in her first album, and these themes do not materially change in representation from then to today. Nearly thirty years later, in 2020’s “Made It” Michie describes the struggles and rewards of single motherhood, and “Love Everybody (feat. Tanya P & Xentury)” has strengths and vulnerabilities described together, almost interchangeable:

Don't know where this is coming from, stop talking when they game on, all you gotta do is stay strong, you exactly where you belong / movin' on is a given, it's your life you're living, it's been a long time, we shouldn't'a kept you, and everybody showed love when you stepped through, it's hard to get in, but they let you, never give up, and respect you / real love, real family all around you, and you don't want no bad vibes around dem, **it's hard to get up many days, life beats you up, but you love it anyways.** [Michie Mee, 2020, “Love Everybody (feat. Tanya P & Xentury)”]

This kind of centering of real experiences—struggles, difficulties, triumphs, and failures—is not unique to Michie Mee among the data for this project, and is the most prominent recurring theme of any kind that I observed during my analysis. These indications of effort and struggle, cost and reward, the internal sensitivity to understand oneself and one’s life, are almost always presented

over the course of a full track through narrativization. (47) through (51) provide just one case from each artist to exemplify the sensitive MC and these women's focus on *keepin' it real*, by authentically representing not just their external lives, but their inner lives as well.

(47) I'm a survivor, I get back on my feet, I am my worst critic and I'll be my own defeat [Eekwol, 2004, "Power of Silence"]

(48) Here's a scenario, present day, carved my fate, returned to the one form my younger days, made my bed that we share now I lie awake / I think about the past and paths to take // and I know that my mind's caught between two worlds, that I'm selfish and confused [Eternia, 2005, "Balance"]

(49) I even wrote a song about you, and even though I'm on without you... Every day I wake up, I think, 'How'd you get over me so soon?'... I don't blame you, I don't hate you, I'm just cut up inside [Haviah Mighty, 2017, "You"]

(50) For them I'd have died man... But that's when you learn, who will show up when it's time for their turn, people will not have your back in return, so let me just burn... we may not have tomorrow, lost generation these minutes are borrowed [Tasha the Amazon, 2016, "Die Every Day"]

(51) If He made me in His image, it's amazing how I hate seeing any of my face up in the mirror / So clear, I can't take how every waking day I'm here... with you I'm so beautiful so, you so true to your soul, have no use for my flaws, I'm so truly at calm [Backxwash, 2019, "YOU LIKE MY BODY THE WAY IT IS"]

Based on the lyrics of these six women, if such behaviour in men's Hip-Hop signifies a recent shift toward authentic masculinity being "about wisely defining strength and accepting vulnerability" (Dyson, 1996, as quoted by Forman, 2021), then I propose that authentic womanhood in Hip-Hop has always been about these things. If the older, "hardcore" persona of men in Hip-Hop has now become "truncated and... inauthentic" (Dyson, 1996, as quoted by Forman, 2021), then I propose that for women their priority has long been to avoid inauthentic truncation.

### Chapter 5: Non-contradictory duality and dialectic identity

The goal of this project was to investigate the Hip-Hop language of six Canadian women MCs—Michie Mee, Eternia, Eekwol, Tasha the Amazon, Haviah Mighty, and Backxwash—to identify their priorities in crafting a self-representative Hip-Hop identity. Discussion was in two major sections: first, constructions of a Canadian multicultural identity, and second, construction of the identity of a woman in Hip-Hop. Overall, the linguistic patterns of these two sections have in common a firm resistance to generalization.

According to some interpretations, the lyrics of a woman indexing the duality of both feminist and misogynist *bitch*, enthusiastic sexual participation and resistance to sexualization, both weakness and strength, place her identity in a state of unsustainable tension. As Rebollo-Gil & Moras (2012) put it, “their artistic persona—the way in which they choose to present and market themselves—is fraught with contradictions” (p. 127). While I do not mean to refute Rebollo-Gil & Moras’ work on the whole, I do take issue with the idea of “fraughtness” here, the ascribing of an undesirability to these “contradictory” personas (Oware, 2007). In the lyrics of these women, the varied aspects of the identities that they construct are not mutually exclusive, and any given aspect never seems to threaten or hinder some other aspect. Indeed, to expand upon the sensitive MC definition, in the language of these women, it is not only that defining one’s strengths and accepting one’s vulnerabilities are separately important, but there seems to be an emphasis on explicitly indexing both. In areas beyond just derogatory reappropriation and sexuality, these women consistently prioritize indexing their personal dualities—the so-called “contradictions” in their identity.

These women talk in detail about self-doubt: their regrets, guilts, and anxieties. They voice the conflict that comes from choosing to leave home, to pursue Hip-Hop, to diverge from the “traditional” path which was expected of them, to prioritize their own needs. But these doubts and guilts do not negate the pride they also show, in themselves, their craft, their confidence, their personal growth and that of their community. These six women give narratives of fear, such as in contexts of dangerous romantic relationships, threats to their safety from other people or their environment. They touch on struggle and strife, difficulties with substance abuse, mental illness. All of these MCs are clearly keenly aware of their vulnerabilities and the dangers they encounter as women. But they speak also about what they love—their happinesses, the

safety and security they have experienced in their lives as women: through their own independence, their music, relationships with family and friends, through motherhood, through romantic love. These experiences, these aspects, are part of their lives—part of what make up their identity.

Themes like pride and guilt, fear and love, the good and the bad, are present in nearly every narrative these women tell. And in most cases, that narrative does not consist solely of just one theme; not only that, but over their discographies these women portray “conflicting” views on the same themes. At some points they may decry romance, when they later praise its presence in their lives, for instance. Or a father’s actions may be condemned, when at other points he is commended.

This duality is highly consistent in the narratives of these six women’s Hip-Hop tracks. In many cases their choruses, hooks, and bridges are “classic” Hip-Hop Nation Language, consisting of the more typical and well-catalogued dozens insults, battling language, and superiority-asserting one-liners that are less introspective or personally specific. But when it comes to content, the preponderance of the “sensitive MC”—vulnerable *and* strong—is so clear, and is so throughout the entire dataset, as to lead to the conclusion that these newly-developed features of men’s Hip-Hop have always been a central tenet for women MCs.

They narrativize in their music on all of these topics, not as things which are isolable from one another, but instead as intertwined, overlapping parts of their identity and experience. Over the discographies of these six women, each aspect of their identities is given the same attention and importance in presentation as the others. There is never any effort made to prove their validity, never any concern on the MCs’ part for some perceived contradiction. Their personas are not “fraught” with mutually exclusive aspects, because all parts of the identities they are constructing—“publicly proclaiming anger, aggression, love, regret, fear, anxiety, vulnerability, and sensitivity” (Forman, 2021, p. 462), and more—are authentic and true. Just as they do when indexing their connections to ethnicity, these women can and will index everything at once, if that is what they are authentically experiencing, and if that is who they are. This linguistic duality, evident in reappropriation behaviours, attitudes indexed toward sexuality, and the internal identities which are being outwardly portrayed by these women, serves to construct what I am terming “dialectic identity.” Dialectics, to put it simply, is the idea of multiple contradictory notions being true at the same time (Maybee, 2020). I choose *dialectic*

identity rather than a *duality* of identity to further avoid minimizing the frame of discussion—not only two things may be shown in each persona. Instead of letting the parsing out of apparent contradictions dictate the discussion of these women’s personas, with fraught implications for the essentialness of authenticity in Hip-Hop, it may be more fruitful to approach analysis from this perspective: as an aim to understand as many parts of an identity as they feel are important to index, to see as many parts of the whole person as possible. This perspective would be in keeping with not only other areas of Hip-Hop linguistics but also with sociolinguistic study in general, in centering intersectionality. To see the linguistic behaviour of these women as presenting a dialectic identity, in a way reflective of an internal intersectionality, we can fully analyze the nuanced, detailed experiences and priorities of these women.

This dialectic view of identity performance can also recontextualize some of Coupland’s (2001) notion of “strategic inauthenticity,” which was itself a response to indexical contradictions in stylized performative language. Several points of the strategic inauthenticity concept are apt to describe what these six women are accomplishing in their lyrics when they “frame shift and emphasize dissonant social meanings” (Coupland, 2001, p. 350). By presenting themselves as women of many equally important facets, MCs prompt listeners to reevaluate their ideas of a metaphorical, stereotypical woman who is more one-note; by “introducing new and dissonant identities and values” (p.350), MCs interrupt listeners’ assumptions of the MC’s identity which excluded either of those aspects; and by executing “emphatic and hyperbolic realizations of targeted styles” (p.350) such as a code-switch, MCs call attention to that change, and the alignment it indexes. Though these behaviours and goals of strategic stylized language do resonate in the language of this project’s six MCs, and the descriptions are well-suited to what these women are doing in their performances, I do not see any reason to believe that these personas are inauthentic. If some aspect must be deemed inauthentic, there are no linguistic clues to denote which parts of these personas should not be believed, and *keepin’ it real* is such a fundamental creed in the Hip-Hop Nation that to question indexical claims there ought to be a firm cause. These women spend none of their words defending the validity of their claims, so one truth need not be advantaged over another in analysis of their language. I propose that this performative, stylized language makes use of strategic authenticity, rather than inauthenticity, as they emphasize and frame-shift to whatever parts of themselves they wish, with purpose and intentionality, but not to anything which is inauthentic.

It is valid to consider whether these contradictions in ideological stance reflect a change over time in the individual, rather than the inclusive explanation that I am proposing for these identities. That is, should earlier ideological stances be considered simultaneously with current ones, or might the newest claims be understood as somehow overriding previous ones? In the context of the music industry and the career-spanning personas of Hip-Hop artists, once again the focus should remain on their language. MCs always prioritize *keepin' it real*, and that means that if they no longer stand by or feel represented by some of their work, they will say so. They might mark a purposeful shift with a name change, like when rapper K-Dot started going by Kendrick Lamar to develop himself (Josephs & McKinney, 2020), or when Kanye West changed his name to Ye, in conjunction with major ideological changes (BBC News, 2021). Or they might cut connections to their own prior work directly, like when Eminem rapped “them last two albums didn’t count” (Eminem, 2010, “Talkin’ 2 Myself”). Unless they tell us otherwise, MCs can be understood as building their persona upon the foundation of their previous work, rather than creating a new version of that persona with every release. These six women’s personal shifts over time do not come with calls to separate themselves from their prior work, and as such do not seem to mark a purposeful change like those mentioned.

Over the course of this project, these six discographies show that these women are motivated to assert their own identities, rather than let that identity be ascribed by someone else. They very precisely index their personal stances, experiences, and histories from their own perspectives, to the degree which is authentic to them, and are careful to craft a multi-dimensional persona to every extent that they can. Their linguistic resources are their languages, including HHNL, their insider knowledge, and their knowledge of their own minds and hearts; from their use of these resources, we can understand the Canadian woman MC as one concerned with individuality, accurate self-representation, and above all, authenticity. They remain true to the mantra of authenticity in Hip-Hop by ensuring that they speak for themselves, and that they speak all parts of themselves to convey who they are on their own terms. To do otherwise, to simplify themselves or leave out a vital part of who they are? As Eekwol says: “that’s just not me.”<sup>10</sup>

Directions for future research into this area should bring in more diverse subjects, larger data sets for analysis, and continue to expand upon the specifics of Canadian multicultural

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<sup>10</sup> From Eekwol, 2004, “Listen Girl”

identity and self-representations of womanhood. The opportunity for more focus on each MC, with more background information and referencing to interviews and personal comments from the artist, could also add confidence to any conclusions regarding their language and motivations. Collaboration with artists would also allow for study of their inferential or subjective language, including use of metaphors, which could add further dimension to any discussions. Hip-Hop linguistics, while not precisely new, is still an emerging field, and care must be taken to ensure that all accounts are based on what the artists have produced, rather than letting influence from external factors affect conclusions. Especially as Hip-Hop evolves with new generations of artists entering the community, it is important to continuously update and expand our view of authenticity and *keepin' it real*, to ensure accurate and comprehensive representation of artists in our work.

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