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RESEARCH ARTICLE



“Not You Too”: Drake, heartbreak, and the romantic communication of Black male vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a resurgence of academic interest in the lived experiences of Black males. One way that scholars have approached the field of Black male studies is by examining the susceptibility of Black men and boys in various contexts, commonly referred to as Black male vulnerability. In this essay, I utilize the song “Not You Too” by the Hip-Hop/R&B artist Drake as a case study to explore the ways Black men, through music, may communicate their vulnerability in the context of romantic relationships. Through a rhetorical analysis, I argue that Drake (re)articulates the notion of Black masculinity by communicating his vulnerability through recognition of his struggles of trust, willingness to forgive, and critical reflection of the power dynamics within his romantic relationship. I conclude by asserting that it is vital to study the communicative realities and sensibilities of Black men by engaging in both interpretative and empirical analysis to liberate Black males.

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Expanding scholarship in Black male studies

Black male studies has experienced a revival in scholarly interest. Following the germinal publication of Curry’s *The Man-Not* (2017), other scholars have followed suit. For instance, McDougal’s *Black Men’s Studies* (2020), Hopson and Petin’s *Reimagining Black Masculinities* (2020), and a plethora of articles demonstrate that studying the experiences of Black males is worthy of academic attention. These interventions work to combat pathological perceptions of Black males. This genre of scholarship challenges pop culture’s stereotypical images of Black masculinity as hypermasculine and hypersexual, rooted in what Jackson (2006) calls “scripts” or ascribed meanings for the Black body based on an interactant’s perception. Jackson explains that “Black males are economized [with] the one iteration that stands out most ... the stud, pimp, player, and mac daddy images” (p. 70). Not only do these scripts lead to adverse material consequences for Black men, but these consistent and damaging representations of Black males also stifle any systemic change that could occur on varying social, cultural, and political levels.

In a world where Black men are hypersexualized, pathologized, seen as societal threats, and often perceived as the racialized counterpart of white men, one area of interest for

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many Black male studies scholars is the exploration of the vulnerability of Black males. Curry (2017) defines Black male vulnerability as “the disadvantages that Black males endure [and] the erasure of Black males’ actual lived experience from theory, and the violence and death Black males suffer in society” (p. 29). Essentially, Black males are uniquely susceptible to racism, imposed early childhood sexual debut, sexual assault, rape, unemployment, over-policing, and other implicit forms of oppression due to their status as racialized males in a white patriarchal society (Curry, 2014, 2017, 2019; Johnson, 2018; Rudrow, 2019, 2020). This susceptibility is a product of historical and contemporary pathological perceptions of Black males that reduce their multilayered realities into a singular (often negative) script. Despite this susceptibility, Black males are often discouraged from expressing their emotions. Many of them are stripped of self-determination, making it nearly impossible to resist undesirable scripts (Ford et al., 2014). As a result, music has traditionally been one of the few spaces Black men can articulate their vulnerabilities and make sense of their lived experiences.

Curry’s (2017) conception of Black male vulnerability provides a valuable starting point through which we can gauge the various ways Black males are vulnerable in several contexts. One area in desperate need of scholarly attention is the communicative practices of Black males within the context of romance. This essay aims to explore the ways Hip-Hop/R&B artist Drake, as an exemplar, *communicates* his vulnerability in romantic relationships through music. Drake is perhaps one of the best contemporary archetypes for understanding Black male vulnerability, as his music primarily deals with the expression of emotions, which challenges normative perceptions of Black masculinity and manhood. Rudrow (2020) highlights the significance of Drake’s discourse in terms of understanding Black male vulnerability, contending that “Drake’s articulated Black male vulnerability helped carve disruptive space for representing emotionally expressive Black men and, by extension, more complex masculinities” (p. 6). Boutros (2020) adds, “Drake’s work largely bucks commercial demands on Black male artists to perform hyper-masculinity by focusing on emotion, relationship[,] and interior life” (p. 108). As a contemporary rhetorical figure, Drake offers a unique site to interrogate Black male vulnerability as expressed through music. This essay focuses primarily on heterosexual romantic relationships, although the analysis may yield insights into other types of relationships.

Our limited understanding of the vulnerabilities of Black males, particularly in romantic relationships, is problematic for several reasons. First, the perception of Black males as invulnerable in romantic relationships ignores their emotional vulnerability and can also limit their intimacy with their romantic partner (and perhaps other vital non-intimate relationships). This ideology confines the imagination of the myriad of possible Black masculinities. By not attending to the vulnerabilities of Black males, we not only situate their experiences as extraneous to the dismantling of white supremacy and racism, but we also participate in their social death. Such a position also renews the stereotypical script of Black masculinity as hypermasculine and hypersexual, devoid of emotions and victimhood. Second, this ideology intensifies the impact of Black men, especially boys, accepting hegemonic notions of masculinities and enhances the emotional and psychological trauma that can lead to depression, anger, and, ultimately, premature death. Finally, when Black men are perceived as emotionless, or their emotional vulnerability is not considered seriously, it poses a significant threat to their

ontological and material existence. This communicates to Black males that their only value to society is either through their phallus, material resources, or death as a symbolic source for others to capitalize. Such a disposition leads Black males to feel alienated from critical relationships that may enhance their lived experiences.

Thus, it is vital to study the communication of Black males, particularly their vulnerabilities in romantic relationships. Studies have shown that, for many Black men, early childhood observations of chaotic romantic relationships, particularly adult relationships, shape their attitudes and behaviors regarding future relationships (Bae & Kogan, 2020; Kogan et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2014). One way to study this issue is to look at contemporary Hip-Hop/R&B, which often complicates the current perception of Black masculinity as invulnerable. Musicians performing in this genre have had tremendous influence over pop culture and are generally observed as a communicative/rhetorical force on society's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Henry et al., 2010; Sciuillo, 2018; Watkins, 2005). Music can be an agent of socialization and an expression of lived experiences that are not always captured by dominant discourses but are vital to its listeners, particularly those who are oppressed and who utilize music as an escape.

Modern conceptions of the communication of Black male vulnerability

Previous research has explored how Black men *communicate* their vulnerability through music, underscoring what Rudrow (2020) calls “disruptive Black masculinities” or representations of Black masculinities that push against normative conceptions. Hunter and Davis (1994) explain that “Black men are expected to conform to dominant gender role expectations [for example, be] ... successful, competitive, aggressive” (p. 24). Such demand explains why mainstream Hip-Hop artists tend to accept hyper-masculine and hypersexual scripts and embed this rhetoric into their performances (Belle, 2014). Lemelle (2009) explains, “[in] the entertainment industry ... masculinity [endorses an] image of [the] machismo spectacle [in which] expectations for Black males are to [re]produce [this] particular brand of masculinity” (p. 52). For Black male Hip-Hop artists to maintain marketability, they must express idealistic masculine characteristics such as “dominance, independence, self-confidence, assertiveness, strength, virility and ambition” (Arthur, 2006, p. 106). Attention to the discursive ways some Hip-Hop artists navigate market constraints is vital to understanding the communication of Black male vulnerability.

Academics from various disciplines have taken up scholarship on Black male vulnerability in terms of its “communicative” properties through music. Oware (2011) assists our conception of Black men's communicative practices in terms of vulnerability through music in his analysis of homosociality in gangsta rap. According to Oware, homosociality is a strong non-sexual relationship one may have with another person of the same sex. Through an exploration of how gangsta rappers, primarily Black men, communicate their love for their “homies” or friends, Oware illuminates that Black male musicians often express their vulnerability by observing their friends as family, lamenting the importance of vital connections, being willing to share material resources, and expressing sorrow for lost friendship due to incarceration or death. Oware's study is essential because it underscores that (a) Black men are indeed capable of expressing their vulnerability (in this case, regarding non-intimate relationships); and (b) Black men may

express vulnerability through art, which permits them to process and understand their emotions, publicly and without fear of confrontation. This idea is not to assume that there will not be any backlash from said articulations but to suggest that art (e.g. music) is a requisite conduit Black men utilize to get their message into the public sphere. This implication also sets a compelling precedent for young Black boys to re-imagine their masculinity with vulnerability as a constitutive component of their ontology. Black boys may not utilize music specifically but may use other art forms to express their emotions. The key takeaway is that having a channel to express emotions is vital to understanding Black male vulnerability.

Oware's (2011) study accentuates Black male vulnerability in non-sexual relationships, Chaney and Mincey (2014) conducted a content analysis of the discourse of Hip-Hop/R&B music from 1956 to 2013 to understand how Black men communicated their sensitivity, primarily through tears or crying (i.e. vulnerability), particularly towards women. Their analysis illuminated four varying ways Black men express their sensitivity; that is, they may express their vulnerability in private, in partnered situations, through perceptive awareness, or in public. Chaney and Mincey (2014) break down these findings in the following manner:

Private Sensitivity occurred when the Black male was alone; felt lonely; disguised or hid his tears from his romantic partner or others; and expressed a determination to not cry and/or continue crying. *Partnered Sensitivity* occurred when the Black male encouraged and/or connected with his romantic partner, other men, and/or members of the Black community through crying. *Perceptive Sensitivity* was demonstrated when Black men acknowledged the tears shed by others and shed tears themselves while being conscious of society's expectation that men suppress emotion and/or refrain from crying. *Public Sensitivity* was exemplified when the Black male cried publicly and verbally expressed that he does not care what others think of him. (p. 131)

Chaney and Mincey's study clarifies the lyrical realities of Black male vulnerability in romantic relationships, underscoring the contextual factors in which Black male artists may communicate their vulnerability through music. Again, music is a valuable channel for Black men to communicate their vulnerabilities.

In communication studies, while not explicitly probing Curry's (2017) concept of Black male vulnerability, scholars such as Hopson, Jackson, and Orbe have all contributed to our understanding of Black masculinity, mainly through their respective examinations of the (mis)representation of Black men in the media (see Hopson & Orbe, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Hopson, 2011; Orbe, 1998). However, in a more recent study, Rudrow (2020) explicitly addresses the vulnerability of Black men in music. Using J. Cole's song, "Wet Dreamz" (released in 2014), Rudrow makes the case that Black men are vulnerable during their sexual debut. He contends that, with storytelling, Cole offers an alternative view of Black masculinity by revealing his insecurities about losing his virginity. Rudrow maintains that Cole "positions himself vulnerabl[e] by presenting himself as sexually insecure, making him susceptible to criticism around his masculinity and ... mainstream marketability loss in a genre [that] ... construct[s] Black men as sexually confident" (p. 3). Rudrow assists our knowledge of how Black men may communicate their vulnerability through music, in this case, related to their sexual debut.

To add to this literature, I explore the communicative practices of Drake, a Black male musician, who can model and signal to Black males (i.e. major consumers of his music)

about other possibilities of manhood, particularly regarding the communication of one's vulnerability in romantic relationships—an area that has not been addressed adequately in the literature. To address this gap, I use Drake's (2020) song "Not You Too" (featuring Chris Brown), from his mixtape *Dark Lane Demo Tapes*, as a case study. The thematic emphasis on the expressions of Black male vulnerability and its potentially disruptive nature into current perceptions about Black masculinity make the song an exceptional exemplar for intellectual engagement into the multiple realities of Black masculinity and manhood. Through a rhetorical analysis of the lyrics, employing Black male vulnerability as a framework, I explore how Drake's "Not You Too" illuminates alternative ways Black men can communicate their vulnerability in romantic relationships.

Hip-Hop is often criticized for glorifying street life, misogyny, and hypermaterialism (Oliver, 2006, 1998; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). However, utilizing Hip-Hop as a proxy to better understand the communicative practices of Black males (arguably its top listeners in terms of cultural connection) provides insights into their daily struggles within a repressive system. Research maintains that Hip-Hop has played a significant role in the lives of the Black community (Cummings & Roy, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Rose, 1994; Stapleton, 1998). As Miller et al. (2014) suggest, it is "through Hip Hop, one [is] able to discover the shared experiences and crises taking place in various urban cities and realize that he or she was not alone or singled out" (p. 6). Music has a constitutive function with its audience that can help its listeners cope and make sense of their experiences, hence many seek music as a therapeutic endeavor. Through music, we can gather a broader understanding of Black males' identity in terms of vulnerability.

I contend that Drake (re)articulates the notion of Black masculinity by expressing his vulnerability within a romantic relationship. I also maintain that Drake offers Black males (and other listeners) an alternative perspective of Black masculinity by demonstrating potentially more powerful ways to communicate their vulnerability in the context of romantic relationships through expressions of his struggles with trust, forgiveness, and recognition of the limitations of his power in his romance. Recognizing how Drake traverses the rhetorical constraints placed on many musicians is vital to the theoretical advancement of Black male studies. Scholars have already noted that Black male musicians are often obliged to respond to market demands that advise them to subscribe to criminal, hypermaterialist, hypermasculine, and hypersexual scripts (Graham, 2016; McCann, 2017; Watkins, 2001). Rudrow (2020) suggests that "while hip-hop artists can position themselves vulnerably to disrupt ideas about Black masculinity, this positioning must be managed and constrained" (p. 2). Hence, highlighting discourses with more progressive ideals about Black masculinity is imperative for a more robust understanding of Black males. To start, I map out my argument by providing a descriptive analysis of the song "Not You Too."

"Not You Too": trust, forgiveness, and the probing of relational power

Resembling much of Drake's previous musical work and persona since he entered the national Hip-Hop/R&B scene in 2006, the song "Not You Too" focuses on his unsteady encounter with an intimate partner where trust issues persist. The song begins with Drake's recognition that this experience is the first time in a while that he has presumably

been disillusioned or heartbroken by his romantic partner. Drake opens the first verse by questioning his difficulty in “trusting” others: “Trust / Trust who? / Watchin’ my back even when I’m in the booth / Ah, trust who?” (Drake, 2020). This repeated mentioning of “trust” underscores an important aspect of Black male vulnerability, mainly the social and relational value of trusting others with one’s emotions. When one can establish trust with another individual, one is more willing to express one’s vulnerabilities. From this point, Drake acknowledges his wrongdoing in the relationship but questions his partner’s possible infidelity and inability to disclose her misconduct. He says, “down to come clean not like you / I wanna make you feel the weight’s off your shoulders too / I’ll take it” (Drake, 2020). Despite her potential unfaithfulness, Drake explains, “I want you, I know you’re not an angel / not you,” underscoring his recognition of her promiscuity. This choice and context of a potentially unfaithful female partner put Drake, the Black man, in a unique position as both a potential victim of infidelity and a bigger person for forgiving her. This occurrence, however, positions Drake as susceptible to disparaging commentary that questions his masculinity as “soft” and non-conforming to patriarchal norms. For Hip-Hop artists, particularly Black males, exposing their romantic vulnerability lyrically jeopardizes their opportunity to be read as authentic and legible to mainstream audiences, which mandates that they adhere to heterosexual and hypermasculine scripts (Graham, 2016). Therefore, Drake rapping about his vulnerability in his romance underscores the disruptive quality of his articulated masculinity; that is, he is risking his marketability by even discussing such a topic. To end the first verse, Drake, lyrically, appears to be conflicted about accepting his partner back into his life. He articulates that despite her indirect apology, he is still resistant to taking her back as a romantic partner because he is skeptical that her remorse about her transgression is genuine.

In the second verse, Drake recalls his personal history with this romantic partner, highlighting his love for her. He describes, “You the real MVP, my love / Ride dirty like Pimp C / You a real ten-speed freak, shawty / You was everything a nigga need / You was everything to me, my love” (Drake, 2020). Here, Drake acknowledges not only her sexual attributes but also her ability to fulfill his relational needs robustly. He follows this sentiment by asking about her transgression—“Why’d you keep those things from me, my love?” (Drake, 2020)—bringing back to the fore her infidelity, about which it appears he has now found out the truth. Symbolically, her transgression signals a dialectical tension many Black males face when dealing with a romantic partner; that is, forgiving one’s romantic partner for infidelity violates patriarchal constructions of masculinity and manhood. Here, Drake offers an alternative. The song concludes with Drake recognizing his disappointment and vulnerability in the relationship, maintaining that despite his belief that he found “the one,” he was ultimately disenchanted. Given the characteristics and description of Drake’s lyrical expression of his vulnerability in this song, understanding his romantic, communicative practices warrants further analysis.

The struggles of “trust”

Drake’s lyrics signify resistance to historical and contemporary perceptions of Black masculinity by articulating his struggles with trust in his romantic partner. Because Black male vulnerability is performed and negotiated at the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism, their imposed racialized and gendered socialization is presumed

to be more dominant, aggressive, and less vulnerable in romantic relationships. As such, Black men are often expected not to exhibit emotions towards a woman during a breakup, especially in instances where she is the one who commits infidelity. Drake challenges this perception in a multitude of ways. First, his employment of the word “trust,” which appears ten times throughout the song, illuminates the importance of safety, acceptance, emotional dependence, and commitment to mutually beneficial relationships or, as Wheelless and Grotz (1977) would say, “expected outcomes” (p. 251) in a romantic relationship. Second, lyrics such as “Trust who? / Watchin’ my back even when I’m in the booth” or “Doin’ my thing, but I’m down to come clean, not like you” (Drake, 2020) further demonstrate Drake’s desire for a deeper connection with his romantic partner through achieving a certain level of trust, rendering himself as vulnerable. In both instances, Drake’s lyrical recognition of his difficulty with trust highlights the communication of his vulnerability and yearning for transparency with his romantic partner. Here, Drake positions himself as vulnerable because of his desire to restore trust in his romantic partner instead of seeming as though he is emotionally unaffected by her transgression.

Trust, in an interpersonal communication sense, is the “reliance upon the communication behavior of another person in order to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation” (Giffin, 1967, p. 224). This uncertainty is a significant factor in how trust (and arguably vulnerability) is communicated in a romantic relationship. Individuals use acceptance, active, passive, or interactive communication strategies to reduce relationships’ uncertainty (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Berger, 1979; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Rather than participate in the hypermasculine script, Drake expresses his vulnerability by employing an interactive communicative strategy, directly engaging his romantic partner by pleading for her to reduce his uncertainty through positive relational behaviors that will ultimately rehabilitate his trust in her. Here, Drake lyrically confronts hegemonic constructions of Black men and their vulnerability by positioning himself as emotionally dependent on his romantic partner.

Although several studies suggest that the discourses of Hip-Hop/R&B, particularly from Black male musicians, position men as the least vulnerable and hold significant power within romantic or intimate relationships (Avery et al., 2017; Gordon, 2020; Rose, 2008; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009), many of these studies overlook other kinds of discourses within the genre that illuminate alternative notions of Black masculinity and manhood. This is not to say that some of the studies indicated above are iniquitous or incorrect for drawing attention to the misogyny and oppressive language used to characterize women by Black male musicians. Rather, it is to extend the conversation with a more nuanced retort that suggests serious academic attention to Hip-Hop/R&B discourses that offer alternative masculinities would be more fruitful, both theoretically and practically. By overemphasizing Hip-Hop/R&B discourses that highlight misogyny and oppressive language towards women, we are engaging in what McDougal (2020) calls “problem orientation” research that ultimately pathologizes Black male artists (and, perhaps more importantly, Black men in general) as societal problems who need “fixing.” Such a disposition limits the imagination of Black males on the possibilities of manhood and potentially reduces them to a singular script.

In this case study, Drake lyrically establishes an alternative view of Black masculinity by underscoring the significance of “trust” in the communicative practices of Black male

vulnerability in romantic relationships. It is in this moment that Drake lyrically understands himself and his romantic partner as what Labennett (2018) calls “collaborators and co-conspirators who employ love ... kinship and fidelity” (p. 156). Rather than align himself with white patriarchal norms that treat women as easily replaceable objects, Drake observes his romantic relationship as a collaborative endeavor in which the notion of “trust” is significant and more about reciprocity and mutual interest. Ultimately, this lyrical move underscores the relational value that Drake’s romantic partner holds within his life. This occurrence is perhaps Drake’s rationale for discussing his trust issues in the first place (e.g. the desire to articulate his vulnerability).

A key form of love: forgiveness

Another aspect of Drake’s vulnerability expressed throughout “Not You Too” is his willingness to forgive. Rather than overlook his partner’s infidelity or place contingencies on his forgiveness, Drake positions himself as vulnerable by communicating his forgiveness through what Kelley (1998) calls “direct forgiveness.” Drake’s straightforward approach underscores his relational motivation to be loved and emotionally secured by his romantic partner, ignoring normative patriarchal constraints that often associate forgiveness with weakness and inferiority. In the song, he says, “Just tell me it can’t be that crazy / And even if it is that crazy, baby, I’ll take it” (Drake, 2020). Here, Drake professes his willingness to accept the relational transgression committed by his romantic partner, disrupting the hegemonic constraints that perceive Black men as emotionally invulnerable. From a communication perspective, forgiveness is “an interpersonal process of constructive, communicative acts that, over time, allow individuals to respond positively to hurtful situations” (Carr & Wang, 2012, p. 41). In this case, despite being hurt by his romantic partner’s infidelity, Drake is still willing to forgive her by engaging her in a complicated dialogue where he could effortlessly be observed as effeminate. As mentioned, rapping about one’s vulnerability in the context of a romantic relationship threatens Drake’s ability to be understood as a legitimate and authentic model for masculinity in Hip-Hop culture. Rudrow (2020) explains that “in hip-hop, ... violence [is] manifest [ed] through disparaging comments or marketability loss, acting as a policing mechanism against artists breaking hip-hop’s lyrical norms” (p. 3). Here, Drake’s willingness to forgive his romantic partner for her transgression violates Hip-Hop’s lyrical norms and potentially exposes him to symbolic violence about his masculinity.

Some studies have demonstrated that “forgiveness,” as a significant theme within Hip-Hop/R&B discourses, is derived from the Black feminist tradition as a strategic liberation tool (Miles, 2017; Vanzant, 1996) and, like many other media representations of infidelity, men are often overrepresented as the perpetrators (Alexopoulos & Taylor, 2020; Hust et al., 2008). However, in this case, not only is Drake the victim of infidelity but it could indeed be argued that Drake is discursively engaging the Black feminist tradition of “forgiveness” that is worthy of being recognized as an alternative reality of Black masculinity and manhood; this occurrence must not be overlooked. As Morgan (1995) eloquently suggests:

hip hop is ... the dominion of the young, black, and male. ... [and we must] recognize hip hop’s ability to articulate the pain our *community* is in and then use that knowledge to create

a redemptive, healing space. ... Hip hop [is] instrumental in exposing black men's pain.
(p. 155)

Morgan's recognition of Hip-Hop/R&B as a critical venue for Black men to discuss and articulate their pain underscores the importance of engaging in a more nuanced analysis of Black masculinity and manhood, with particular attention to the vulnerabilities articulated within Hip-Hop/R&B discourses. Morgan's commentary also concurs with what many Black male studies scholars and advocates have been pleading for, an invitation to the "healing space" that so many other marginalized communities (women, queer, disabled, etc.) are invited to. By inviting Black males into "healing spaces," we can move towards Morgan's call for a functional approach to liberate them and the relationships they engage in. Therefore, research must engage in a nuanced discussion of Black male vulnerability at the intersections of race, gender, and Hip-Hop/R&B. Such an endeavor is vital for the liberation of Black males.

In "Not You Too," Drake (2020) lyrically invites us into a healing space where we can sympathize and listen to his pain regarding infidelity, an essential aspect of Black male vulnerability. Because many Black males are often socialized to *not* express their emotions, especially regarding romance (Chaney & Mincey, 2014; Wallace, 2007), Drake offers his listeners an alternative form of masculinity, one that embraces the expression of one's feelings concerning love. Such a phenomenon may encourage Black males to express their emotions as a necessary healing component. Consequently, Drake's vocalization of his vulnerability in this romantic relationship through a direct forgiveness approach (instead of other forms of forgiveness, such as indirect or conditional) underscores his motivation for love and emotional security. Again, this type of articulation of alternative masculinities, grounded in vulnerability, pushes us beyond the "problem orientation" research agenda that continues to understand Black males as inherently problematic and devoid of victimhood. Drake not only expresses his vulnerability through direct forgiveness but also engages in reflective thinking about the power dynamics of his relationship.

A weapon of love: power

Drake further conveys his vulnerability by questioning his partner's transgression, underscoring her power in the relationship. Because of the association between vulnerability and power, those who yield the least amount of power tend to be more vulnerable and more likely to question the power dynamics between self and others (Curry, 2018). Drake's series of questions directed at his partner underscores his vulnerability and his perceived lack of power in the relationship: "You was everything to me, my love / Why you keep that little shit from me? / ... Why you do that little shit to me, shawty? / When you know that we was meant to be" (Drake, 2020). Here, Drake expresses his vulnerability by questioning the power dynamics between himself and his partner, signaling resistance to the patriarchal communicative practice that positions men as the dominant gender over women. Men are generally regarded as the bearers of power in romantic relationships and thus are less likely to engage in the sort of questioning performed by Drake. In many ways, Drake's articulation of his masculinity and powerlessness in this relationship is akin to Rudrow's (2020) reading of J. Cole's vulnerability regarding his sexual debut in Cole's

song “Wet Dreamz.” In both cases, Drake and J. Cole resist stereotypical logics that read Black masculinity and Black men as emotionally invulnerable. Together, Drake and J. Cole are powerless and illuminate their insecurities in their relationships with women. This revelation underscores Black men’s vulnerability in relationships (intimate or casual) by drawing attention to the recognition of the power dynamics between Black men and women, offering an alternative perspective of Black masculinity.

Some studies have concluded that Black male musicians hold much of the power in romantic relationships through their articulations in various Hip-Hop/R&B discourses, implying that they exercise this power over women in ways similar to their white male counterparts (Gordon, 2020; Hunter, 2011; Miller-Young, 2008). However, more recent studies that have explored Black male vulnerability and Hip-Hop/R&B discourses, collectively emphasizing the non-patriarchal and more egalitarian views regarding romantic and non-intimate relationships that Black male musicians express in their music (Chaney & Mincey, 2014; Greene, 2009; Oware, 2011; Rudrow, 2019, 2020; Winters, 2013). These studies suggest that Black male artists can express their vulnerability, offering alternative realities of Black masculinity and manhood. Nevertheless, analyses of Hip-Hop/R&B songs that deal with the vulnerabilities and emotions of Black men are often absent or limited in the dominant discourses regarding the intersections of Black males and Hip-Hop/R&B, ignoring a more holistic, multidimensional, and complex representation of Black masculinity and manhood in music. In sum, Drake’s questioning of his romantic partner’s transgression signifies his vulnerability. Rather than participate in the pathological script that reads Black masculinity as synonymous with hegemonic masculinity (often ascribed to white men), Drake presents an alternative conception of Black masculinity, one that acknowledges the limitations of his power in his romantic relationship and embraces a more egalitarian perspective.

Black male vulnerability and their romantic, communicative practices

In this essay, I explored how Drake *communicates* his vulnerability in the context of a romantic relationship. Centering Drake’s song “Not You Too” as a case study to interrogate this phenomenon and demonstrate alternative ways Black masculinity is articulated and ultimately performed, I offer three implications. First, Drake communicates his vulnerability through his desire to (re)establish “trust” with his romantic partner against racialized, gendered, and sexualized norms and expectations. He conveys his longing for “trust” with his romantic partner through uncertainty-reducing strategies that can be classified as *repetition*, *cynicism*, and *reciprocity*. In terms of repetition, the constant evoking of the term “trust” in the song implies that specific words or phrases may be reiterated to clarify and accentuate the need for trust to advance intimacy. Cynicism, in this case, refers to Drake’s struggle with emotionally trusting others, particularly women with whom he is in an intimate relationship. A cynical communicative approach may serve as a defense or coping mechanism for Drake, given his challenges with systemic racism, discrimination, and misandry. Reciprocity speaks to Drake’s call for a mutually beneficial relationship wherein trust is prioritized due to the vulnerability in romantic relationships. Given this case study, these three strategies (repetition, cynicism, and reciprocity) extend contemporary understandings of “trust” as an interpersonal communication phenomenon by accounting for race and gender.

Second, Drake communicates his vulnerability through direct forgiveness. Merolla and Zhang (2011) found that direct forgiveness strongly predicted relational satisfaction. Conceivably, Black men who express their vulnerability to their romantic partner may use direct forgiveness as a communication strategy to develop a closer bond with their partner, particularly when their partner acknowledges their transgression (as Drake inquires of his partner within the song). Merolla and Zhang (2011) maintained that “when offenders accept responsibility for their wrongdoing, offended partners are inclined to communicatively reciprocate such directness” (p. 91). In short, rather than place contingencies on his romantic partner for misconduct, Drake expresses his vulnerability through direct forgiveness.

Finally, Drake communicates his vulnerability by acknowledging his limited power in his romantic relationship. This inference illuminates the progressive change in the power dynamics of contemporary romantic relationships. Gender roles are increasingly changing from their Westernized traditional roots, where women were seen as more of a help-mate for their male partner. Drake’s recognition of his limited power in romantic relationships represents Black male vulnerability and its progressive nature to resist hegemonic scripts that advise many Black males to display dominance over others, particularly their romantic partner. Mutua (2006) theorizes this phenomenon—wherein Black men practice and commit to the liberation of others—as “progressive Black masculinities.” Rather than attempt to dominate his romantic partner through various communicative strategies, Drake appears to seek a more egalitarian relationship in which power is equally distributed between partners.

With the pathologizing and misandrist rhetoric towards Black males, especially in the media and pop culture, “Not You Too” complicates the current perception of Black masculinity as invulnerable. Instead of participating in the hegemonic script, Drake offers an alternative by positioning himself as vulnerable in a romantic relationship. It is imperative to study the communicative realities and sensibilities of Black men to enhance their life chances. Jackson (2006) maintains that it is essential that we all participate in the deconstruction process before healing can occur (from both a racial and gendered perspective). This deconstruction process can be conceptual or practical for scholars and the broader community. Thus, to heal the Black man, we must understand him by engaging in interpretative and empirical research to comprehend *his* reality. Doing so will heal him and his family, community, and the society in which he exists.

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