

Observations on Drake's Billboard



One chilly morning in Toronto last November, the early sunlight revealed a rebus on a lone billboard consisting of the number 6, a pair of praying hands, and three words. Combined it read, "The 6 God is watching."

Within hours, Torontonians were posting photos of the billboard on social media. All gave credit to Toronto's most famous resident, megastar rapper Drake, who had coined the sobriquet "The 6" for his hometown, in reference to the city's area codes of 416 and 647. That evening, Drake mysteriously posted and then promptly deleted a shaky photo of the billboard with the caption "Be home soon" on Instagram. The next day, major media outlets, from Time to CBC, were speculating on the meaning of the message. An enigmatic proclamation alluding

to a celebrity author, the billboard exemplified a deliberate formula for viral appeal.

Located along the Gardiner Expressway near Downtown Toronto, Drake's billboard marked a threshold to the city. Like a Roman triumphal arch, the billboard was commissioned by one of the city's most successful and powerful citizens. But instead of receiving parades of soldiers on horseback, the billboard drew carloads of millennials aiming their smartphones for a drive-by photo. And unlike conquests carved in static stone, the billboard's message was immortalized on the Internet while the physical version had vanished by Christmas.

In April, Drake released his fourth studio album, Views. The album's cover art depicts the rapper surveying Toronto

Billboard along Gardiner Expressway, Toronto, on display November through December 2015. Photo: Em Cheng.

from atop its tallest structure, the CN Tower, as if to declare that it is Drake himself who is watching The 6. Views is both a record of and a tribute to the city under his supervision. The billboard was thus a site-specific status update, a cryptic herald that also created a space of intimacy between Drake and his fellow citizens.

That Drake, a social-media juggernaut with over 50 million Instagram and Twitter followers, chose to invest in a single oversized sign in a city with a population of less than three million reflects a millennia-old human desire to announce one's presence in built form — if only so it can be photographed, uploaded, and disseminated online. — Em Cheng