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Changes in Hip-Hop: A Look at "Mumble Rap"

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Abstract

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Hip hop first originated in the 1970s in South Bronx, New York. The term “Hip-Hop” is not one that is easily defined among Hip Hop scholars and audience as a whole. However, when describing it in its beginnings, Hip-Hop was actually made up essentially of 5 different elements that together created this sphere of what we now call “Hip-Hop”. On the forefront was first disc-jockeying, also known as DJ-ing, where a person would take music disc and did what is known as scratching and mixing a song or multiple songs together. Following after Djs were also the dance including dance styles such as breakdancing or b-boying, the graffiti art known as tagging, the clothing style, and last but not least, rapping.

Rapping is best described as the rhythmic and poetic discourse of language often over a set beat. But rapping was not first “rapping” in its origins. There were first emcees (MC or masters of ceremony) who worked alongside of DJs. MCs entertained audiences through the force of their personalities. They performed these innovations in the context of Jamaican toasting... telling them stories about them and reciting improvised poetry or spoken words set to music (Bowser 2012). These individuals were also called wordsmiths before gaining the title of a “rapper”. The term “rapper” can first be seen being coined around the late 70s, such as in the song “Rapper’s Delight” by The Sugarhill Gang in 1979.

Hip-Hop/Rap first reached popularity with the releases of songs such as “Rapper’s Delight” and 1980 “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. With these two songs we saw a spectrum of themes and the beginning styles of the genre. From the fun storytelling narrative and clever rhyming wordplay to the messages about social issues the African American community were experiencing in their daily lives, rap became a platform where artists were able to convey their reality in the way they perceived it. This would include talking about their neighborhood,

life, environment, and even every and any problems they have had to encounter when one's skin is black to encouraging one to dance and have fun as it also created a sphere of a joy and celebratory life for the community through hard times. Brown (2010) states:

Lyrically, rap music profoundly influenced how race and economics are viewed. It created a response from the music industry, which couldn't deny the popularity of rap and its sense of raw display of African-American and Latino urban street culture. The roots of rap tap into how African-American males use of street knowledge, African heritage and syncopations, politics, and the complexities of language to create what is referred to today as rap music and Hip Hop culture.

And this is no different than what happened to rap as we moved into the 90s.

Shifting the mainstream narrative of rap came song releases such as "Boyz-n-the-Hood" by rapper Eazy-E in 1988. The song that tells about the day in the life of a young black man in the hood "who's always hard" as he goes about driving around in his "6-4" talking about theft, being violent towards both men and women, getting drunk, and interactions with police reached great popularity following along with the rise of rap group N.W.A (Niggaz With Attitude). The group consisted of many rappers such as Eazy-E himself, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre and more, who held no mercy in talking about their gangster vibes and life of the hood as well as police brutality. Following the 90s-decade, rap saw the rise of artist including Snoop Dogg, Tupac/2pac, Notorious B.I.G, and more. Most rappers alike held hard gangster personas talking about their lives in the streets, gangs, drugs & violence, as well as unjust police encounters in the mainstream music. But was it really a just persona that we saw from them?

In the 1980s African American communities in America were worsening due to many factors such as the rise to drug influx & usage and gang violence. Bowser (2012) states:

The gang environment in the South Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s was unlike any other in the United States. Great Depression- like levels of overall unemployment were recorded in the South Bronx, which was isolated economically and socially from the rest of society, as were other American ghettos... Amidst a citywide fiscal crisis, even the police department stopped patrolling the area; the South Bronx became too dangerous for any police presence but SWAT.

These sorts of conditions did not go away nor were they alone in one area of the country and time. Many low income African American communities dealt with similar and poor living conditions through the 1980s and 1990s. This also happen to coincide as well with the rise of police brutality in these environments too. Therefore, when one is surrounded in such dangerous and tough conditions, it is not just a persona for show, it's a mentality necessity to survive and get by. One can imagine how perhaps African Americans, especially males, believed that they had to be tough and ruthless to survive and doing anything for money, such as drug dealing or acts of violence and theft even moreso during this time. Even to modern day the mentality is no different. And this sort of conveyed reality spoke out too to many other African Americans coast to coast in the 90s era of rap music. But, in addition, it also began to attract the attention of the "majority" of the mainstream listeners. The attraction of the mainstream took the imagine that was introduced by some of the named rappers and set an image of what they had to be (and others) to sell the music for money and fame.

As gansta rap took the mainstream by storm, much of the social-political rap was pushed in the underground, though some were by choice of artist who did not want to be controlled by the

mainstream. Though other prominent politically charged voices were still able to popular in the mainstream such as Public Enemy and A Tribe Called Quest, what dominated music was thus the typical misogynist, sexual and violent rap music that many characterize all Hip-Hop to be—even though this was all a response to popular demand.

Hip-Hop/rap from the late 90s to the early/late 2000s ranged from gangster rap to procreational rap to even pop-rap. This era brought along hits that both celebrated blackness, provoked thought, and party/clubbing songs from more artist such as Jay-Z, Kanye West, Lil John, Nelly, Lil Wayne, Missy Elliott, Outkast and more. However, turning into the mid- 2010s, we begin to see a shift in the style of music.

Mumble Rap

In 2016, Hip Hop rapper Wiz Khalifa was asked in an interview with radio host of Hot 97 of his thoughts on some of the emerging artist during that year. “We call it mumble rap,” Khalifa described. “It ain’t no disrespect to the lil homies, they don’t want to rap. It’s cool for now, it’s going to evolve. Those artists, if they want to stay around, they’ll figure out the next thing to do. But right now, that’s what’s poppin’.” This term, “mumble rap” has since been coined in describing the rapping style of rappers that have emerged onto the hip-hop scene in 2016. Mumble rap can be described as a rap style in which artists, instead of being articulate, seem to sound incomprehensible and mumbled in speech. What started with a few rappers, such as Lil Uzi Vert, Young Thug, Lil Yatchy and more, has then been an encapsulated term and a new style of hip-hop music amongst the use. The term “Soundcloud rappers” (referring to the artists songs distribution on media platform Soundcloud) have also been used to described these rappers in 2018, giving this new era of young rappers a new title than the diminutive term “mumble rappers”.

Mumble rap is best described as being a derivative of Trap music, a subgenre of Hip-Hop/Rap that is defined by its heavy bass, 808s, and hi-hats. Lyrically and explanatory of its name, “trap” refers to the location in which drug dealers and/or making occurs often talks such things. From here, “Mumble Rap” began branching into its own new style to appeal to the mass majority. Although the style became popular amongst the music chart, it still created much controversy among the Hip-Hop community and to Hip-Hop fans. While some still enjoy these energy-bringing trap beats, some could not help but notice that the lyricism is missing amongst these rappers. Both in articulation and in theme, this rap style causes hesitation in support of the music. In a Billboard article titled “‘Mumble Rap’: Did Lyricism take a Hit in 2016?”, writer Kathy Iandoli says:

Fans have been flashing decoder rings over rappers’ lyrics for decades and vacillating in their preferences. Jay-Z’s initial high-speed rhyming style.... Made him not only hard to understand but ready for filth during an archival dig around *Reasonable Doubt’s* era...Wu-Tang Clan’s Ol’ Dirty Bastard had ostensibly garbled lyrics...Bone Thugs-n-Harmony were a quintet of indescribability when it came to their lyrics... The predicament of simple comprehension in hip-hop is the same, yet reaction is now different.

It is this split in audience that draws me to want to analyze further “mumble rap” and draw to question what exactly inside of this style provokes such a split in a wider audience. My research and analysis will thus also focus on current decade songs from 2015 to those current in 2019.

Data

Method

The first question I drew myself to ask in this research is: are they really mumbling? And further, is this mumbling creating a further change different than typical African American

Vernacular? To demonstrate if there is such speech change inside of “mumble rap”, I have decided to transcribe two samples of notable mumble rap songs using the linguistic IPA system. Songs were chosen based on the popularity of the song and the artist that fits into the category of being a labeled a “mumble rapper”. Within the charts, I provide transcriptions of the song during specific time lapse with its IPA above and the actual song lyrics below for each line.

Data Charts

Artist: Lil Uzi Vert

Song: XO TOUR Llif3

Time Lapse: 0:49- 1:27

1 fæntʌm dæts ɔ ɪɛd, ɪnsaɪd ɔ: waɪt

Phantom that's all red, inside all white

2 laɪk sʌmðɪŋ ju raɪ ɔ slɛ daʊ(n), aɪ dʒu wɔ(n) də he:

Like somethin' you ride a sled down, I just want that head

3 maɪ brɪʔi ɔ mə

My brittany got mad,

4 (a)'m beɪ ɪ mɛn naʊ

I'm barely her man now

5 ɛɪbɒdi ɡɔrə seɪm swæ naʊ

Everybody got the same swag now

6 wɒdɔ waɪ də aɪ tɛɪ ɪ daʊ(n)

Watch the way that I tear it down

7 stækn maɪ bænds əl ðə weɪ tə ðə tɒp

Stackin' my bands all the way to the top

8 əl ðə weɪ tɪl maɪ bændz fəllɪn oʊvə

All the way 'til my bands fallin' over

9 evri taɪm ðæ tʃu liv juɪ spɒt

Every time that you leave your spot

10 jɛɪ ɡɛɪlfrend kɔl mi laɪk kʌm oʊn oʊvə

Your girlfriend call me like, "Come on over"

11 aɪ laɪk ðə weɪ ʃi tʃi:t mi

I like the way she treat me

12 ɡoʊnə liv ju, wɒn liv mi, aɪ kɔl ɪt ðæt kæsɪnoʊv

Gon leave you, wont leave me, I call it that Casanova

13 ʃi (s)ɛd ɔm ɪnsɪ: ə

She say I'm insane, yeah

14 ə maɪt blɒʊ maɪ breɪ: ɔɪ(t)

I might blow my brain out (Hey)

15 ksɛni hɛl ə peɪ ə

Xanny, help the pain, yeah

16 plɪsz ksɛni meɪk ɪt ɡoʊ weɪ

Please, Xanny, make it go away

17 ɔm kʌmɪtɪd nɒt ʌdɪktɪd bət ɪt kɪp kʌtroʊl ə mi

I'm committed, not addicted, but it keep control of me

18 ɔlə peɪn n(əʊ) aɪ kənt fiːl ɪt

All the pain, now I can't feel it

19 aɪ swɛɪ də ɪts sləʊwɪn mi jɛə

I swear that it's slowin' me, yeah

Artist Info:

Rapper Lil Uzi Vert (25) was born and raised in (North) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Beginning his rap career in 2010, Lil Uzi Vert had much of a breakthrough between the years of 2014-2016, including with his song "Xo Tour Life". The young rapper stated in many interviews that his rap style was influenced by other rappers such as Wiz Khalifa and Meek Mill. He also expresses his music interest in rock naming artist such as Paramore, Marilyn Manson, and My Chemical Romance as favorites of his as well as stating that he wanted to become a "trap rap rockstar".

Artist: Migos

Song: Motorsport

Time Lapse: 0:49-1:44

1 ksen pɛ:rke tʃɛk[[jɪ]] bɪl bɛlʌtʃɛk

Xans, Perky, Check (yeah), Bill Belichick

2 teik tə ɛ aʊtɪ bɔ: dʒʌsʊ aɪ kɛn flɛks

Take the air out the ball (ooh), just so I can flex

3 teik tə ɛ aʊtɪ mɔ: wɔkɪn wɪθ də sɛks

Take the air out the mall, walk in with the sacks

4 teik tə ɛ aʊtʃə brɔ: naʊ ʃi kɛnt ɡoʊ bæk

Take the air out your broad (Hey), now she can't go back (E)

5 ksɛn pɛ:rke tʃɛk [jɛ] bɪl bɛlɪtʃɛk

Xans, Perky, check (Yeah), Bill Belichick

6 teiktə ɛ aʊtɪ bɔ: dʒʌsʊ aɪ kɛn flɛks

Take the air out the ball (Yeah), just so I can flex

7 teiktə ɛ aʊtɪ mɔ: wɔkɪn wɪθ də sɛks

Take the air out the mall (Hey), walk in with the sacks

8 teiktə ɛ aʊtʃə brɔ:

Take the air out your broad (Woo, woo, woo, E)

9 ɔfset

Offset

10 da ku: keɪm ɪmpɔ:rtəd

Uh, the coupe came imported (Hey)

11 ðɪʃɪsən ɔl waɪt klɑmɪn ʃnɔ:rtəd

This season's Off-White come in snorted (White)

12 grin læmouɡini ə tɔrtɪs

Green lamborghini a tortoise (lambo)

13 nou hjumɪn bɪm am ɪmɔrdəl

No human being, I'm immortal (No)

14 pɔtɛkneɪpɪ fuu(r)/(ɔ:) da wɔ(d)/(r)ə:

Patek and A.P full of water (Patek)

15 hunɪt keɪ aɪ spɪnɔʊn maɪ sɪnɔʊrə

Hundred K, I spend on my senora (Racks)

16 ma pɪki ɔʊ mɑrdʒɪn bʌtə

My pinky on margarine, butter (Margarine)

17 ɪn maɪ ɪ ɡɔ mɪkdənɔʊ nʌɡɪt

And my ears got McDonald's nuggets (ayy)

18 sɔn æz aɪ lænd ɔʊn ə lɪr

Soon, as I land on the lear (Whew)

19 [ɪ]ɡets ðeɪ wɛt ɪrɪs

Piguets, they wet, tears ('guets)

20 fɔʊr.eɪhtɪeɪt hɪt tə ɡɪrɪs

488, hit the gears (488)

21 sɪsɪdaɪdɔʊ brɪtnɪ spɪrɪs

Suicide doors, Britney Spears

22 əm bʊdʒi soʊ bɪtʃ doʊn ɡɪt nɪr

I'm boujee, so, bitch, don't get near

23 kɪs ɛndʒəl meɪ doʊ dɪsəpɪr

Criss Angel, make dope disappear (Voila)

24 hɪt tə ɡæs ɪt ɡɒt fleɪmz aʊtə rɪrʒ

Hit the gas, it got flames out the rears (Skrrt)

25 ɪsə reɪs tutə bæɡ ɡɪt tə mɪlʒ

It's a race to the bag, get the mills (Hey)

Artist Info:

Migos is a trio rap group consisting of the members Offset (27), Takeoff (24), and Quavo (27) whom grew up in Gwinnett County in Lawrenceville, Georgia. The group was founded in 2008 and gained popularity in 2013. The group is well known for their many adlibs and sound effect use in their tracks. Their music is classified under “hip-hop/trap”. Their song “Motorsport”, from their album *Culture II*, was released in 2017 and featured two female rap artist—Cardi B and Nicki Minaj.

Comparison

In order to further the comparison and analysis of mumble rap, I will provide a transcription of an example of an artist considered a “conscious rapper”. With perceptions against “mumble

rap”, many perceive that “conscious rappers” (those more socio-political) are my lyrical and articulate than the latter and the two get placed against one another for comparison often. The artist of choice, J. Cole, serves not only as an example of a conscious rapper, but stands as an example of rappers (i.e Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Nicki Minaj, ect.) and rap style before the current new style of prominent rap music.

Artist: J. Cole

Song: KOD

Time Lapse 1:34-2:16

1 haʊ (aɪ) ɡru ounli fju'udəv ləvd

How I grew up, only few would've loved

2 məmɔ aɪ ɡət ma feɪst fju ə də blʌd

'Member I got my first view of the blood

3 aʊm heɪŋɪn aʊt ən ðeɪ ʃʊt əpðə klʌb

I'm hangin out and they shoot up the club

4 maɪ/ʊ hoʊmi ɡət fɑ:məsʊtəkəl plʌɡ

My homie got pharmaceutical plug

5 a sməʊkt də dʒɪlɔɡ ən ɪt rʌn θɪl maɪ veɪn

I smoke the dru and it run through my vein

6 aɪ θɪŋk ɪts weɪkɪn ɪts nʌmɪn də peɪn

I think it's workin', its numbin' the pain

7 doun giv ə fʌk ɛn (aɪ)m sɒmwʌt ɪnseɪn

Don't give a fuck and I'm somewhat insane

8 doun giv ə fʌk ɛn (aɪ)m sɒmwʌt ɪnseɪn

Don't give a fuck and I'm somewhat insane

9 jɛʌ, æt ðɪs ʃɪt deɪli, sɪ sʊʊ mʌtʃ ʌgɪvɪs

Yeah, at this shit daily, sipped so much Actavis

10 a kʊvɪs ækɪvɪs də deɪ ʃʊd peɪ mi

I convinced Actavis that they should pay me

11 (ɪ)f prækʃɪs meɪd pɛɪfɪkt, ɔm prækʃɪsɪs beɪbi

If practice made perfect, I'm practice's baby

12 ɪf prækʃɪs meɪd pɛɪfɪkt, ɔm prækʃɪsɪs beɪbi

If practice made perfect, I'm practice's baby

13 plætɪnəm rɪst raɪdɪn ɛn bæk laɪk mɪs deɪzɪ

Platinum wrist ridin' in back like Miss Daisy

14 plætɪnəm dɪs(k) ɛn aɪ ɒn mæstɪs bɪtʃ peɪ mi

Platinum disc and I own masters, bitch, pay me

15 jɔl nɪgəs træpɪn sʊʊ læktɪkʊʊ deɪsɪ

Y'all niggas trappin' so lack-sical-daisy

16 maɪ nɪgəs sɛl kɪæk laɪk ɪts bæk ɪn də eɪtɪ

My nigga sell crack like it's back in the 80s

17 nou ə jʌŋg nɪgə hi ʌkɪn soʊ kɹeɪzi

Know a young nigga, he actin's so crazy

18 hi seɪv ə fju pæk(s) ɛn hi æk ə məseɪdɪz

He serve a few packs and he jack a Mercedes

19 hi ʃʊt æt ðə puʊlɪs hi klæp æ ɒʊ(l) leɪdɪz

He shoot at the police. He clap at old ladies

20 hi daʊn gɪv ə flʌk (ɪf) ðɪm krækəz goʊn heɪŋ hɪm

He don't give a fuck if them crackers gon' hang him

21 bɪtʃs bi æskɪn wʌt hæv ju dʌn leɪtli

Bitches been askin, "What have you done lately?"

22 ɔ stækt æ fju ɛms laɪk mə læst (n)eɪm wʌz ʃeɪdi

I stacked a few M's like my last name was Shady

23 maɪ laɪf ɪz tu kɹeɪzi nou æktə kʌd pleɪ mi

My life is too crazy, no actor could play me

24 maɪ laɪf ɪz tu kɹeɪzi nou æktə kəd pleɪ mi

My life is too crazy, no actor could play me

Artist Info:

Rapper J.Cole (34) grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina. With dreams of rapping, the artist attended and graduated college in New York City, where he was first rejected by Jay-Z before

being signed to Roc Nation in 2009. He released his first mixtape in 2008 and has steadily gained a large popularity for his rap style and messages including those from his 2018 album *KOD* where the song “KOD” is featured. Cole states that he was influenced by 90s rappers such as 2pac, Andre 3000, Nas, Eminem, Jay-Z, and Notorious B.I.G.

Discussion

The best way to look at this new style of hip-hop music is to look at it as a language. In H. Samy Alim’s (2004) “Hip Hop Nation Language”, Alim discusses hip-hop in the light of a language of its own. Alim states, “Rapping, one aspect of hip-hop culture consists of the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats, and it is this element that has predominated in hip hop cultural activity in recent years. Thus, language is perhaps the most useful means with which to read the various cultural activities of the Hip Hop Nation (HHN)” (Alim, 388). Using both this ideology and the framework of characteristics of the Hip Hop Nation and the Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL) that Alim proposed, one can observe a breakdown of Mumble rap in the modern Hip Hop sphere.

Alim gives ten characteristics or “ten tenets” that he describes as describing Hip Hop Nation Language. Of those ten, I draw on seven to analyze in my paper:

(1) HHNL is rooted in African American Language (AAL) and communicative practices...

Thus HHNL both reflects and expands the African American Oral Tradition.

(2) HHNL is just one of the many language varieties used by African Americans.

(4) HHNL is a language with its own grammar, lexicon, and phonology as well as unique communicative style and discursive modes.

- (5) HHNL is simultaneously the spoken, poetic, lyrical, and musical expression of the HHN.
- (8) HHNL exhibits regional variation... Even within regions, HHNL exhibits individual variation based on life experiences
- (9) The Fundamental aspect of HHNL... is that it is central to the lifeworlds of the members of the HHN and suitable and functional for all of their communicative needs.
- (10) HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf HHN.
- (Alim, 393-394).

Linguistic Observations on Mumble Rap

Hip Hop Nation Language is a language with its own grammar, lexicon, and phonology as well as unique communicative style and discursive modes (Alim 394), however it is simultaneously rooted in African American Language (AAL) (Alim 393) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Much of its speech structures comes from the vernacular of the African American community as it also incorporates various amounts of structures that are involved inside of rap. Some of the most observable grammatical and phonetic features of AAVE displayed in rap are: 1) the habitual *be*; 2) zero copula; and 3) consonant word reduction (Brown 286-287).

The habitual *be* is the use of the verb “to be” without any change or conjugation to its form. The zero copula describes when there is an absence of a copula or auxiliary of “is” or “be”. Though the copula is not stated, the use of it is still existing or implied during speech. Though there are also other verbal changes such as tense absence or particle change that itself is common in AAVE,

what is most interesting to note and seemingly most stand out about “mumble rap” is its increased word or rather final consonant reduction.

In common AAVE there is consonant reduction, especially with *t*, *g* or *d* in final position of words. This pattern is observed in both words that end in single or cluster consonant endings. Though not uncommon, there is an increased amount of use of consonant reduction inside of “mumble rap” songs. Inside of Lil Uzi Vert’s “XO TOUR Llif3”, lyrics state:

Phantom that’s all red

Inside all white

Like something you ride a sled down

I just want that head

Which, as phonetically transcribed from the song, gets produced by the rapper as:

1 fæntʌm dəts ə ɹɛd

fentum dats əw red

2 ɪnsaɪd ə: waɪt

enside əw white

3 laɪk sʌmðɪŋ ju raɪ ə sle daʊ(n)

like somdɪŋ ju raɪ ə sle dɔw

4 aɪ ʒu wɔ(n) də heɪ:

I ju waw(n) du heh

Notably, the rapper can be seen dropping of several final consonant such as the *d* in “sled” and “ride” and the double *l* cluster in “all”. Even though this may be documented as another noted characteristic in AAVE use, this can also be seen as the artist means, unconsciously or consciously, of creating a path of similar sound sets to transition from one word to the other to create a faster pace inside the of song’s rhythm.

Observing the first line given prior, we see that double *l* in “all” was dropped. This then leaves the *a* on its own to create a shortened “aw” sound (phonetically represented as ɔ). The sound is a mid-low back vowel and the initial sound in “red” is a voiced alveolar central approximant. These two sounds, in relation to tongue placement, are closer in transition of sound creation than if the artist were to announce the *l* sound (an alveolar lateral approximant) and switch to an *r*. Smitheran (1997) notes that given that the rapper has to meet the artistic demand for rhyme, use of this systematic AAL pronunciation rule can generate a unique rhythmic line (11).

Another example of this we can observe is looking at “Motorsport”. The lyrics are:

The coupe came imported

This season’s Off-White come in snorted

Green lamborghini a tortoise

No human being, I’m immortal

And we can these lyrics phonetically transcribed from the rapper as:

10 da ku: keɪm ɪmpɔːrtəd

Da ku came importd

11 ðɪfɪsʌn əl waɪt kʌmɪn ʃnoʊrtəd

This hisun awl white comin shnortd

12 grɪn læmoʊɡɪni ə tɔrtɪs

Green lamogini yi tortis

13 noʊ hjuːmɪn bɪn am ɪmɔrdəl

No humin bein awm imordal

Similarly, we can see that there is some deletion of sounds in their final consonant position. For example, in line 10 the rapper drops the final *p* in “coupe”. Another note, perhaps more stylistically, is alteration or change in phoneme choice, such as “*sh*” from “*s*” in “snorted”. I also note how there were times where there appeared to be a merge in words, causing them to seem as a single word. For example, in line 11 we see this with both the “This season” and “come in”, that I note as I transcribe came off as “thishisun” and “comin”. This again can be seen as a, unconscious or conscious, result of keeping up with a set rhythm in the song while finding a right way to balance out one’s lyrics.

The question that can stand next, however, is there a difference in this same production with a rapper on the other spectrum of rap genres? Will they be more “articulate” than a “mumble” rapper? To challenge this notion, I scrutinized the song “KOD” by rapper J.Cole for comparison.

The standard lyrics of the song are:

Yeah, at this shit daily, sipped so much Actavis

I convinced Actavis that they should pay me

If practice made perfect, I’m practice’s baby

If practice made perfect, I'm practice's baby

Platinum wrist ridin' in back like Miss Daisy

Platinum disc and I own masters, bitch, pay me

From this, the transcription from the artist are:

9 jɛl, æt ðɪs ʃɪt deɪli, sɪ soʊ mʌtʃ əgɪvɪs

Yeah, at this shit daily, si so much agivis

10 a kɒvɪs ækɪvɪs də deɪ ʃʊd peɪ mi

Ah covis akivis da dey shoud pay me

11 (ɪ)f prækʰtɪs meɪd pɛr.fɪkt, əm prækʰtɪsɪs beɪbi

(i)f practice made perfect, ahm practice's baby

12 ɪf prækʰtɪs meɪd pɛr.fɪkt, əm prækʰtɪsɪs beɪbi

if practice made perfect, ahm practice's baby

13 plætɪnɪm rɪst raɪdɪn ɛn bæʃ lɑɪk mɪs deɪzɪ

Platnim wrist raidin en back like mis daizy

14 plætɪnəm dɪs(k) ɛn aɪ ɒn məs(t)ɪs bɪtʃ peɪ mi

Platnum dis(k) en I on mas(t)is bitch pay me

We can note that even “conscious” rappers are subject to the same speech changes when trying to stay along a rhythm that they set for themselves. There are instances where there are drops in final consonant position such as in line 9 where the *p* in “sip” is missing. There is also shortening (result of consonant deletion in words) of words such as with “convise” in line 10 that

seems to be pronounced as “covis” by the rapper as this transcribed portion of the song sped up in rhythm. Even the word “Activis” seemed to take two different pronunciations by the rapper during the verse due to the rhythm.

In observation, the muttering effect listeners seems to arise predominantly with the up in speed and rhythm the verse that the rappers set for themselves. Though this is not always the case for most artist, we can count it in as one of many possible factors that may influence articulation differences in songs from these “mumble” rappers.

In addition to noting the effect of rhythm on the speech of these rappers, I also would like to draw towards the idea that these speech differences and styles can be the cause of many things such as who they are embodying or drawing from, like an animator. For instance, rapper Lil Uzi Vert, along with naming rappers such as Wiz Khalifa and Meek Mills as being influential for him, states that he also draws from and enjoys rock artist such as Paramore and Marilyn Manson. Given the rock artist inspiration, this can be used to note and explain some of his more drawled, singing rap style. In observation, in “XO Tour Life” he moreso sings in lines 13-16:

13 ʃi (s)ɛd ɔm insɛɪ: ɔ

She (s)aid awm insay aw

She say I’m insane, yeah

14 ɔ maɪt blɔʊ maɪ breɪ: ɔɪ(t)

Aw might bow my bray ou(t)

I might blow my brain out (Hey)

15 ksɛni hɛl ə peɪ ɔ(t)

Xanny hel a pay aw(t)

Xanny, help the pain, yeah

16 plisz kseni meik it gou wei

Pleaz Xanny make it go way

Please, Xanny, make it go away

This moment in the song also displays moments of consonant reduction, but seems to be due to the effect of him singing the lines rather than a definitive rap as the end of the verse leads to the chorus. Whereas with J.Cole, who draws a lot from rappers of the 90s, seems to embody and resemble their rapping speech style that has more enunciation just as the 90s rapper influencers of the 70s and 80s had more of in the beginning of rap following more of a spoken word rhythm.

Another factor to consider is also location and region of some rappers which also can result in different AAVE use than other regions. As Alim states, HHNL exhibits regional variation... Even within regions, HHNL exhibits individual variation based on life experiences (394). With artist such as Migos, a lot of trap and “mumble rap” artist come from the south and east coast state regions. We see their differences such as the “sh” rather than pronunciation of “snorted”, which also can be seen in Lil Uzi vert’s song where (in line11) he also seems to say “shpot” rather than “spot” with intended articulation of the sound.

However, I feel that although we can note and theorize origins of these uses and changes, we also must leave room to assume that all of these changes phonetically were done on purpose and by stylistic choice of these rappers to play with words.

Music Observations: Message and Lyrical Execution

Hip Hop, like many things, cannot be summed up into one whole. It is a combination of multiple aspects that helps create an ever-changing whole. Even those aspects are made up of smaller parts like a taxonomy or leaves along a branch to a whole tree. Likewise, we can view this in both the lyrical approaches to rapping as well as the message in the music. Johnson (2012) identifies many of the different types of rap such as Acid Rap, Comedy Rap, Gangster Rap, Horror Rap, Love Rap, Party Rap, Pimp Rap, Porn (Sex) Rap, Political Rap, Metaphysical Rap, Science-Fiction Rap, Storytelling Rap, and Suicide Rap (34-35).

Just as we see that there are various subgenres of rap music, we can see that there is also various approaches in lyrical delivery by rap artist. Johnson (2012) describes an interesting way one can use to analyze these variants looking at their approach, personality and method approach. Within each there is a spectrum. Looking at the approach, we can measure it from the end of being basic/simplistic or if it is analytical/complex. Personalities can measure for being Extrovert, Conversational, or Introvert/Introspective. Finally, method approach can be single-subject, multi-subject, Non-sensical, or Storytelling. While looking at this, the other side to analyze is the poetic verse which includes examples such as simple single rhyme line verse, double line verse (where the following ending of the line rhymes with the previous or following), internal double liner (where the rhyme happens within the two lines), the wrap-around (where rhymes happen at the beginning and end of the sentence/lines, dense-rhyming (which displayed the artist ability to use clever word-play of concepts), retrograde (rhyming at the beginning of the sentence) and even non-rhyming. As Johnson discusses, it is a combination of these things in different places and aspects that shapes a rapper's style.

I believe that both lyrical approaches, though diverse, blends in towards the music style and message that the rap artist specializes in making. Looking at “mumble rap”, it is seen as a segment of Trap rap which itself can be looked at as a segment of Gangster rap. Often, it seems that “Mumble rappers”, using Johnson’s model, are much more simplistic (regarding their straightforwardness in subjects), and extroverted. However, poetic verse and method approaches, I believe, can be seen in varying depending on the song being created. In these examples, the subscript numbers indicate where rhymes of lines coincide with one another. For example, in Young Thug’s 2015 “Best Friend”:

Take them boy’s to school, swagonometry¹

Bitch I’m bleedin’ bad, like a bumble bee¹

Hold up! Hold it. hold it, nigga proceed¹

I’ma eat that booty just like groceries¹

Or even in Lil Pump’s verse in the 2018 song “I love It” with Kanye West:

Your boyfriend is a dork, McLovin¹

I just pulled up in a Ghost²

Fucked that bitch out in London¹

Then I fucked up on her cousin¹

Or her sister, I don’t know nothin’¹

Here we see use of both a one-liner and a double liner style amongst the lyrics of deemed mumble rappers.

In addition, there are a few other linguistic devices we can observe in this new wave of rap style. One is the use and insertion of onomatopoeia inside of songs. Often this use is in relation towards an object or action that is just mentioned or being implied. Another is the insertions of adlibs during lyrics. Finally, we can also see the use of repetition and/ or emphasis on the last word or words in a line to amplify the line's meaning. Notoriously, the rap group Migos has a wide range of these devices. Such can be seen in their 2018 song "Motorsport":

Take the air out the mall¹ (Hey), walk in with the sacks

Take the air out your broad¹ (Woo, woo, woo, E)

Offset

Uh, the coupe came imported² (Hey)

This season's Off-White come in snorted² (White)

Green Lamborghini a tortoise² (lambo)

No human being, I'm immortal³ (No)

The use of onomatopoeia and word repetition are used to emphasize certain relation of sound or effects to the words being spoken. In addition, the use of these as layovers adds more layers to the sound of the song itself. Amongst audiences, this also enables listeners to partake in the song along with the artist as they are able to recreate those last words or sounds provided by this technique. To prove that this is a style inherent to this new style wave, we can compare it to other artists' songs around the same years both of a same and different rap genre. For example, Remy Ma's verse in her 2017 song "All the Way Up" with Fat Joe:

Just left the big house to a bigger house¹

Aint have a girlfriend, but the bitch is out¹

Chanel croc bah, shit ain't even out¹

With the gold chains², Himalayan, Birkin cocaine²

Lit it up³, Pac shit, I hit em up³

Also, in Cardi B's 2018 song "Money":

Bitch, I will pop on your pops¹ (Your pops) /Bitch I will pop on whoever² (Brrr)/

You know who pop the most shit?³ (Who?) /The people whose shit not together²

(okay)/ You'da bet Cardi a freak⁴ (Freak)/ All my pajamas is leather² (uh) /

Bitch, I will black on your ass⁵ (Yeah) / Wakanda forever² /Sweet like a like a

honey bun⁶, spit like a Tommy (brrr) gun⁶ / Rollie on a one of one⁶, come get your

mommy some⁶ /Cardi at the tip-top, bitch⁷ / Kiss the ring and kick rocks, sis⁷

(Mwah)

Interestingly, we can see an influence of this style on certain artists. For example, rapper Drake often seems to switch between styles depending on the type of rap audience he's tailoring to. Upon his 2018 album *Scorpion*, we can compare between the songs "I'm Upset" (as the tempo changes to that of more trap music later in the song):

I go out on tour and I say I'm drinkin less¹

End up getting loose and getting pictures from my ex² (ex, ex, ex, ex)

SMS¹, triple X²

That's the only time I ever shoot below the neck³ (skrr)

Why do you keep on shootin' if you know that nigga dead?³ (skrr)

To the more Pop-Rap hit "In My Feelings":

Look, the new me¹ is really still the real me¹

I swear you gotta feel me¹ before they try and kill me¹

They gotta make some choices, they runnin' out of options²

'Cause I've been goin' off and they don't know when it's stoppin'²

To that of the more reflective song "Emotionless" on the same album:

Missin' out on my days¹

Scrollin' through life and fishin' for praise¹

Opinions from total strangers take me out my ways¹

I'm tryna see who's there on the other end of the shade¹

Most times it's just somebody that's underaged¹

That's probably alone and afraid¹

We can see that the use of these new linguistic, such as the onomatopoeia and end work/phrase repetition, and musical devices, such as the increased background adlibs, upon this new age rap genre seems to be mostly used as a sort of hype method. It functions to draw listeners in and encourage the energy of the song to its listener. It draws more attention to the verse and keeps listeners as involved through the song than just in the chorus if needed.

Similar to “Emotionless”, in comparison, I note that there is often a complex rap style and word execution with rappers that are trying to elude to more figurative imagery for the audiences on a topic as one may see amongst socio-political rappers. Their personalities also tend to be introverted/introspective. In Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 song “How Much A Dollar Cost” from his album *To Pimp A Butterfly*:

A homeless man¹ with a semi-tan¹ complexion²

Asked me for ten rand³, stressin², about dry land³

Deep water, powder blue skies that crack open⁴

A piece of crack that he wanted⁴, I knew he was smokin⁴

He begged and pleaded⁵

Asked me to feed him twice, I didn’t believe it⁵

Another example can be seen in CyHi The Prynce’s 2017 song “Closer”:

My partner robbed¹ Peter ‘cause he owe Paul²

.38 snub³, the revolver got a nose job¹

I used to talk to the plug³ long distance⁴

Heard echoes cause they was listening⁴, damn that was a close call¹

Though that mumble rap music seems to display a more simplistic and extroverted style of rap to that of the more usual introspective complex style conscious rap genre, the artists of either are not limited to one or the other. Where conscious rappers can at time be extroverted and controversial at times, mumble rappers also can be introspective and reflecting in their music.

Reflecting the African American Community

Though “Mumble” rap seems to have its alterations and differences as a subgenre, I feel that that is not the only issue some people have with it. Therefore, I speculate that the factor of representation also contributes to the discouragement of the rap style to some others.

Since this style of music is very integrated and rooted inside of a community, it serves as a reflection of the speech community to the outside viewers. Those who may not be knowledgeable of the terminology and style of the speech community can find some sort of understanding as they listen to rap music. However, this leaves room for error in perception of the speech community to the inner and outer public as well.

Just as music and media have given other ethnic groups insight into the African American community as well as the community’s speech style; in more recent time, rap music has served over the past few decades for being the media model to the African American youth and well as set up an archetype of African Americans to those outside the group. As rap music had transpired and bloomed much in the 90s so did the perception and speech style of the audience that it effected. This means, then, that Hip Hop is a powerful force in shaping the lives of the youth for Hip Hop not only reflects reality, it helps create it (Love, 222). And in the modern day with rap’s popularity, this shaping even goes past African American youth, but all youth audiences internationally as well.

Though the “gangster” rap era showed the tough lifestyles as predominantly African American men to the mainstream listeners, its reception seems to have failed its origin. It was about conveying one’s reality to the world for others to understand as well as relate to. It was also

about playing around with music and creating things that were almost comical and funny. It, as well however, was about being “hard”. And the latter is what stuck to most people.

Taking this all into consideration, I reflect then on what is being reflected in mumble rap. Alim’s tenets draw the points that HHNL is simultaneously the spoken, poetic, lyrical, and musical expression of the HHN. At the same time, Alim believes that the fundamental aspect of HHNL is that it is central to the lifeworld’s of the members of the HHN and suitable and functional for all of their communicative needs. Which also ties into his last tenet statement: HHNL is inextricably linked with the sociopolitical circumstances that engulf HHN (Alim 2004). So, what does that mean for mumble rap?

It is easy to categorize and check off these characteristics amongst the many artist people view as being “conscious rappers”, but not so much has with mumble rappers. While conscious rappers focus on what is going on around and to the community as well as to oneself internally towards a turn for a better future, perhaps mumble rap is a scene of age that we are missing in understanding. Migos often say that they are “doing it for the culture”, but what does that mean if most of their songs are trap? These artists appeal widely to age groups of young teens to young adults (up around their mid-twenties), because it reflects what they want and feel. They want fun and freedom. They want escape. They are delving more with the close internal realities and emotions of the new youth mentality. Therefore, we can look as this music as a reflection of what’s going on within a smaller scale with people in the social media run world, the casual drug use world, the very sexual world, the don’t-care-what-a-bitch-says world that is very much now prominent for many in the world. If we see a problem with mumble rap and its messages and themes, it should turn us to trying to understand the audience that they are tailoring to. Sadly, not everyone wants to be “woke” and focus on the social issues around them. A lot of them just want

to be “young, wild, and free”; and that is also part of the hip-hop culture as well. Hip-Hop functions were once served as spaces where the youth can come together and have fun and enjoy themselves outside of the sphere of all that was bad around them. Therefore, mumble rap should not be shunned completely for its themes and messages. It instead, serves as a reflection of the modern times even as we see a split and where people want to be at in the world through this music popularity.

However, representation goes beyond music here as well. It also is reflected in one’s fashion, public messages and appearances that also factors into this. Some are now choosing to ditch acting “ignorant” for the public and wearing high-priced name brands while others choose to still flaunt their wealth, attire, and “hood” personalities. This to say as well, is often the results of trying to make an image that listeners buy it to. However, this as well extensively is also the new reality of who are youth are and where they are coming from just as rappers before have displayed doing. Both sides of a coin are shown amongst these styles and rappers that also should equally be viewed to reflect the community at hand and not denoted away on either side of being “old” nor being “young and naïve”.

Conclusion

Bowser (2012) quotes from DJ Kool Herc, “everything is not hip hop. And in fact, some things generally associated with hip hop— for example, sneakers, weapons, gangster rap, and bling-bling— in truth have nothing to do with it”. Rather than nothing, it still is something. It does not define it completely but is still a part of it and helps shaped what we make of it. Hip-hop has grown more as a phenomenon, and rap as a genre, not only in America, but internationally. Hip-hop/rap lives as a genre for its ability to connect a story with a listener to relate to. As I drew from

Alim, part of the fundamental aspect of the HHNL is its ability to be able to connect and communicate with the members of the HHN. Even though “Mumble rap” does not violate any of the other described tenets that Alim discusses, it still faults a bit in its inability to not focus on creating a completely understandable communication alongside of corporate themes and message to all of its audience. Therefore, while innovation as style is great, the loss of lyricism is a sacrifice not worth it amongst some members of the HHN. I do not wish to denote freedom of style for any rapper as innovation is always key; however, Hip-hop is more than just a complete focus on muttered words and hyped adlibs. These aspects and new styles are all parts of the ever-growing new shape of Hip-Hop/rap, but should not be the only sole focus and mass-produced representative just for a mass audience.

However, I also feel inclined to want to encourage this change and expression if it is also what in part connects rap to the new age of listeners. Kendrick Lamar states in a Forbes interview in 2017:

The responsibility.... Is to never forget the root where I come from, as far as hip-hop, and knowing my forefather sand the people that laid the groundwork for me.... Never take it for advantage, and misuse it. But also, at the same time I want to evolve. You know? I want hip-hop to continue to evolve.

I want hip-hop to continue to evolve for the sake of hip-hop. Though we may want the message to be said and heard, we also want to celebrate and build community unity through fun. But not at the expense of creating a style that only focuses on one end. Hip-hop is a multitude that creates a beautiful whole and I think that though “Mumble” rap brings an evolution of one spectrum of Hip-Hop, there is a rise and evolution of all the other ends that we as listeners should also support as

well to push into the mainstream light. This change should not be pushed away completely, but embraced and given a chance as well.

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