Make Rappers Rap Again: Interrogating the Mumble Rap "Crisis"

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THEORIZING AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC SERIES
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

PROJECT SUMMARY

I'd been regularly listening to what is now called Mumble Rap long before many claim rapper Wiz Khalifa coined the phrase "mumble rapper"[1] in 2016 and before journalist Michael Hughes used the same phrase two years prior.[2] I couldn't exactly explain the shift that was happening in Hip Hop back then, but I knew Future had changed the game on April 16, 2011 when he released "Tony Montana," the lead single from his debut studio album *Pluto* (2012). That is the day I claim Mumble Rap was born. Within the next few years, folks started taking serious issue with Young Thug, Rich Homie Quan, Lil Uzi Vert, and other mumble rappers. The subgenre was being subjugated within "real" Hip Hop (or the most authentic Hip Hop) and sometimes even expelled altogether. Critics were frustrated with mumble rappers' perceived ignorance about Hip Hop history and disrespect toward "old heads" (or Hip Hop elders). Critics also claimed mumble rappers couldn't rap due to unintelligible and simplistic (that is, unintelligent) lyrics and that they relied too heavily on melody and production. It was also decided all mumble rappers sound the same and that they're too feminine or soft, for example, wearing nail polish or rapping about sadness.

Hip Hop was being declared dead, yet again!

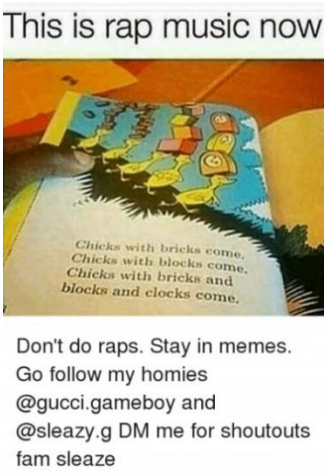

Figure 1

Several old heads and mumble rappers' peers were especially outraged by the rise of Mumble Rap and its predominance. For example, in a since-deleted Instagram post, Remy Ma wrote, "I love when my fave, Hov, drop new music cuz now y'all gotta act like y'all care about lyrics & bars for a little while. Somebody at Columbia call me, I need to drop my album before 'they' start singing and mumbling again."[3] She also included the hashtag #MakeRappersRapAgain.[4] Similarly, when he was asked to define Mumble Rap, Dave East responded, "The definition would be no thought process behind it. There's not really any care. That was something that got popular against lyricism."[5] Social media was also buzzing with commentary. One meme (Figure 1) castigates Mumble Rap because of its simplicity. It also compares the subgenre to children's books, featuring a page from Dr. Seuss' *Fox in Socks* that reads, "Chicks with bricks come. Chicks with blocks come. Chicks with bricks and blocks and clocks come."

In response, most mumble rappers avoided or rejected the conversation, which was sometimes interpreted as indifference about real Hip Hop norms. Some mumble rappers, like Uzi and Playboi Carti, embraced being labeled mumble rappers, which was sometimes understood as nonchalance. Others distanced themselves from the subgenre in an effort to be taken seriously, such as Trippie Redd.[i]

When scholars have entered the conversation, they've taken a similarly scant approach. Roy Christopher claims mumble rappers are unsophisticated with the exception of Playboi Carti.[6] Adam de Paor-Evans belittles mumble rappers because of their simplicity and lack of lyricism. He claims they "string occasional words together, like 'cat', 'sat' and if you're lucky, 'mat'" rather than "rapping clearly, eloquently, articulately and with prowess and esteem."[7] Shortly after, I decided to write this book and give Mumble Rap the scholarly attention it deserves. And while I struggle with referring to artists as mumble rappers when they haven't claimed the term for themselves or when they've been critical of or silent about its usage, I do so as an act of resignification.

In *Make Rappers Rap Again*, I argue Mumble Rap is, in fact, real Hip Hop. It has galvanized the genre for over a decade. Like many rappers who debuted before them, mumble rappers are certainly rebellious. However, even intracommunal rebellion is a Hip Hop mainstay. Several rap icons, such as Ice Cube, Jay-Z, and Lil' Kim have also inspired debates about what Hip Hop has been, is, and should be, debates those who denigrate Mumble Rap seem to have forgotten or maybe never knew. I problematize real Hip Hop norms for engaging with its origins and old heads by recovering those debates. I demonstrate the ways most mumble rappers practice citational and collaborative politics congruent with real Hip Hop. I argue Mumble Rap is conversant with other, oft-ignored, Hip Hop cornerstones, namely illegibility, melody, the DJ, production, and the subgenre. At the same time, I take a comprehensive approach to examining the Mumble Rap sound, paying special attention to flow and production. I examine habitus, further theorizing Mumble Rap backlash and the unique but not necessarily exceptional ways mumble rappers do Hip Hop.

Geographically, I situate Mumble Rap as southern, because most rappers, DJs, and producers associated with the subgenre are, in fact, from the South. They also create and collaborate in ways that are notably conversant with Southern Hip Hop. I also examine social media; the institutional, commercial, and transnational contours of Hip Hop; and Black politics. For example, for four years prior to Mumble Rap's debut, President Barack Obama was routinely celebrated for being "well-educated" and "articulate." Moreover, rapper Talib Kweli declared him the "Hip Hop President." It's no wonder, then, the perceived mumbling, simplicity, unintelligence, and overall strangeness of Mumble Rap has been frustrating for so many. I argue that mumbling should be understood as another example of mumble rappers doing real Hip Hop vis-à-vis resistance. Finally, I examine the

[i] See India, "Lil Uzi Vert and Playboi Carti," and Lamarre.

ways Mumble Rap challenges dominant narratives about Hip Hop masculinity, focusing especially on mumble rappers' attention to mental and emotional health.

I rely primarily on discourse analysis, and focus on the disciplinary contours of language, practices, and technologies that render some ways of knowing and making sense of the world unintelligible.[8] In that way, *Make Rappers Rap Again* is conversant with the work of Kembrew McLeod, H. Samy Alim, Ronald L. Jackson II, Elaine Richardson, Geneva Smitherman, and others. Few full-length manuscripts have conducted discursive analyses of Hip Hop. This is largely the result of Hip Hop Studies primarily contending with Hip Hop as a culture, which is congruent with the ways most artists, fans, journalists, and others understand it. However, this often results in a propensity for catastrophizing (Hip Hop is dead!), as well as a preoccupation with Hip Hop's vulnerabilities, whether the focus is on threats that are real (e.g., racism and commercialization) or imagined (e.g., hypersexualized female rappers or southern artists).

To be sure, Hip Hop is a culture. Although, as Stuart Hall points out,

> The marking of "difference" is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture. . . . Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories "pure". . . . What unsettles culture is "matter out of place.". . . What we do with "matter out of place" is to sweep it up, throw it out, restore the place to order, bring back the normal state of affairs. . .to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal.[9]

My book interrogates the Mumble Rap "crisis" and the ways mumble rappers have been treated as "matter out of place." I primarily situate Hip Hop as a discourse, because it is a site "where power is enacted [but also] negotiated."[10] Consequently, I'm able to examine the myriad ways mumble rappers are subjected to processes of exclusion and mechanisms of discipline. At the same time, power is not unidirectional or static, nor is it as always debilitating. Power is also a productive force that enables.[ii] Therefore, I also understand mumble rappers as an "effect of discourse," not only as subjugated subjects.[11] I take up what Hall refers to as Foucault's most radical proposition, and I examine the ways mumble rappers have been "produced *within* discourse."[12] Like power, discourse is not fixed. It is a site of continuous struggle, a site of constantly contested meanings and *negotiated* relationships. Hence, I contend with the ways Hip Hop *enabled* Mumble Rap, along with the other contours of habitus I identify, as well as the ways mumble rappers have also reshaped Hip Hop.

Finally, this project reconsiders Hip Hop's commitment to situated analyses. Hip Hop has long-claimed one should be substantially engaged with it, if its claims are to be taken seriously.[iii] To some, my being a fan of Mumble Rap would mean I am not appropriately objective, even though I published my first contribution to Hip Hop Studies over a decade

[ii] See Barker and Galasínski, and Hall, "Foucault."
[iii] See Kitwana, Powell, and West.

ago. In Hip Hop, however, that means my claims would at least be taken seriously, even if they are resisted or rejected. Still, I understand "situated" as a site of struggle. Perhaps we might revisit the ways we understand and operationalize situatedness in relation to the field. From my view, Hip Hop will *never* die. Therefore, it will become increasingly difficult for scholars to engage all of its complexities routinely and substantially, which could result in further simplification or even inattention. We may become even more likely to "stigmatize or expel" any "matter out of place" due to our heightened focus on what we have already experienced, currently experience, or already know.[13] Hence, we now have the opportunity to attend more precisely to the ways we understand and name ourselves in relation to the field. As was the case with Hip Hop Feminism, Postmodern Hip Hop Studies, and Southern Hip Hop Studies, perhaps the field should be more deliberately comprised of Old School scholars, Golden Age scholars, Nas scholars, Tupac scholars, Gangsta Rap scholars, Shiny Suit Era scholars, scholars of the elements, scholars of particular elements, Midwest Hip Hop scholars, or Southwest Hip Hop scholars. In addition to calling for us to think more carefully about what real Hip Hop is, *Make Rappers Rap Again* encourages us to ask more critical questions about who *we* are, a particularly opportune conversation as 2023 is the 30th anniversary of Hip Hop Studies and the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop.[iv]

Chapter Summaries

"Let's not call it Hip Hop—let's say that's rap!": An Introduction
Introduces the Mumble Rap debate; situates Hip Hop as a discourse and details discourse analysis; and situates real Hip Hop as a historically constituted claim rather than an essence or a uniformly defined and agreed upon set of ontologies and politics.

Chapter One, "Know who laid down the groundwork!": The Old Heads
Interrogates the claim mumble rappers are ignorant about the origins of Hip Hop and disrespectful toward old heads by examining ossified real Hip Hop politics regarding continuity and authentication; interrogates romantic reverence for the Old School, Golden Age, and Modern Era; and situates mumble rappers' citational and collaborative politics as congruent with real Hip Hop norms.[v]

Chapter Two, "Not every song is that fuckin' simple!": The Mumble Rap Sound
Interrogates the castigation of mumbling, as well as the claims mumble rappers can't rap and sound the same, by situating illegibility as a Hip Hop cornerstone, problematizing teleological and traditional approaches to lyricism that are inattentive to critical Hip Hop

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[iv] I situate *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (1993) by Houston A. Baker, Jr. as the beginning of Hip Hop Studies. Also, DJ Kool Herc often credited with instigating Hip Hop at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in The Bronx, NY on August 11, 1973.

[v] William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic* (New York: New York UP, 2007), 47.
Cobb defines the Old School as the period from when Hip Hop was created in 1973 to the early 1980s, the Golden Age as approximately 1984 to 1992, the Modern Era as 1992 to 1997, and the Industrial Era as 1998 to 2005.

cornerstones, such as melody, the DJ, and production, and situating the Hip Hop subgenre as a commitment to collectivity; and interrogates all three claims by more carefully analyzing The Mumble Rap sound.

Chapter Three, "They don't match the world that we live in!": The South
Situates Mumble Rap as southern, paying special attention to artists' discursive claims to the South, especially vis-à-vis collaborative and citational politics.

Chapter Four, "Can't explain what these lame kids are talkin' about!": Everything Else
Focuses on social media; the institutional, commercial, and transnational contours of Hip Hop; Black politics, especially Barack Obama's presidency; and other Hip Hop artists, such as Kid Cudi, Pharrell, and Kanye West.

Chapter Five, "Hip Hop has changed in a big way!": Hip Hop Masculinity
Interrogates the claim mumble rappers don't rap about substantive content by examining the ways they challenge traditional definitions of resistance, as well as dominant narratives about Hip Hop masculinity, especially their unique but not exceptional approaches to gender, sexuality, mental health, and emotional well-being.

Chapter Six, "You just gotta embrace the youth!": A Conversation with DJ Drama
Transcribes and contextualizes my May 2021 conversation with DJ Drama, the "Southern mixtape hero"[14] who signed Lil Uzi Vert to his Generation Now record label.

Real Hip Hop Studies: A New Directions Conclusion
Calls for reconsideration of the ways scholars understand and situate themselves within Hip Hop Studies.

Proposed Timeline

Completed drafts of the introduction, the remaining four chapters, and the conclusion will be submitted by January 1, 2024.

Auxiliary Materials

I will likely include 8–16 figures (mostly memes); my conversation with DJ Drama can be published online; and I plan to create playlists featuring songs and music videos referenced throughout the manuscript that may also be published online.

Author Biography

Dr. Heidi R. Lewis is Associate Professor of Feminist & Gender Studies and inaugural Coordinator of Early Career Faculty Development Programs at Colorado College. Her areas of specialization are Feminist Discourse (particularly Black Feminism), Hip Hop Discourse (with an emphasis on Rap), and Critical Media Studies (especially Black Popular Culture). She has published in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, the *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, and *Unteilbar Bündnisse gegen Rassismus*. She is also the author of forthcoming essays examining FX's *The Shield*, VH1's

Love & Hip Hop, Bravo's *Married to Medicine*, and "expertise" in Women's and Gender Studies. She has contributed to Mark Anthony Neal's *NewBlackMan*, *NPR*, and *Bitch Media*, and has given talks at Vanderbilt, the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, Cornell, the U.S. Olympic Committee, Portland State, and other organizations and institutions, especially in the U.S. and Germany. Most recently, she published *In Audre's Footsteps: Transnational Kitchen Table Talk in Berlin*, with Dana Maria Asbury and Jazlyn Tate Andrews, in Ingeborg Bachmann Prize winner Sharon Dodua Otoo's Witnessed, an English-language book series featuring Black authors who have lived in Germany.

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[1] "Awkward as Sh*t : Rosenberg and Wiz Make Up?," Hot 97, June 23, 2016, video, 22:09, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99GejUclZH4.

[2] "Loaded Lux Addresses the Emergence of Mainstream 'Mumble Rap,'" Vlad TV, December 11, 2014, video, 7:05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E_qHB1PwXc.

[3] Erika Marie, "Remy Ma Calls Out 'Singing & Mumbling' Rappers, Calls Jay Z Her Favorite," *HotNewHipHop*, April 30, 2019, https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/227000-remy-ma-calls-out-singing-and-mumbling-rappers-calls-jay-z-her-favorite-news.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Michael Saponara, "Dave East Talks Mumble Rap, Wanting a Son & Watching 'Surviving R. Kelly' in New 'Bumbu Room' Episode," *Billboard* online, March 20, 2019, https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/dave-east-bambu-room-episode-8503192.

[6] Roy Christopher, *Dead Precedents: How Hip-Hop Defines the Future* (London: Repeater Books, 2018), 139.

[7] Adam de Paor-Evans, "Mumble Rap: Cultural Laziness or a True Reflection of Contemporary Times?," *The Conversation*, September 7, 2017, https://theconversation.com/mumble-rap-cultural-laziness-or-a-true-reflection-of-contemporary-times-85550.

[8] Terry Threadgold, "Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis," in *Culture & Text: Discourse and Methodology in Social Research and Cultural Studies*, eds. Alison Lee and Cate Poynton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 50.

[9] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation*, eds. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 226.

[10] Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 84.

[11] Barker and Galasínski, 13.

[12] Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 79 (emphasis added).

[13] Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 226.

[14] Mickey Hess, *Is Hip Hop Dead?: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 59.