Listening to Mumble Rap: Blackness and Autofiction

My earliest exposure to mumble rap was through the music of Chief Keef when I was a freshman in high school in an affluent Connecticut suburb of New York City. Chief Keef and I were both Black teenagers with dreadlocks, but otherwise, we shared little physical resemblance. Despite this, my peers in this predominantly White high school would call me “Chief Keef” or “Gay Chief Keef”. They threw up gang signs in my face and screamed his lyrics in my ears. I resented the teasing and so I unfairly began to resent Chief Keef and everything that came with his presence in my life. I attempted to culturally distance myself from my Blackness under the false hope that this distance would somehow protect me. If I listened to indie rock, shaved my head, and wore expensive clothes, I thought that people might stop bullying me and I might free myself of targeted violence, name-calling, pushing and hair-pulling.

Despite this posturing, at home, I began to explore Chief Keef’s music. While I was initially hostile, there was something within it that resonated deeply with me over time. I spent countless late nights alone on YouTube diving into his life: his house arrest, his friendship, his rise to fame, his music. I wasn’t immediately enamored with his mixtapes, but I loved his breakout singles, namely “Love Sosa,” “I Don’t Like,” and his later collaborations with Chicago native Kanye West. These songs felt to me then and still do now, like complex explorations of the multiplicitous nature of Black life. Before I knew Sosa, rap songs had to be happy or sad, they needed to contain clear messaging, an

internal rhyme scheme, and good morals. Chief Keef's music fundamentally shuts down any analysis predicated on rules like this. Through imprecision and abstraction, through the poetics of mumble rap, Chief Keef captures the surrealism of Black Life in neoliberal America. He reflects on the joy and sense of community that comes from a collective sense of horror and suffering. He uses hyperbole and metaphor interchangeably with autobiographical material to craft hyperreal stories about the black experience. He slurs and accents his words to create character and drama, using inarticulacy as both a melodic flourish and world-building poetic device. These techniques are all present in today's most zeitgeist-shifting mumble rappers: artists like Playboi Carti, Young Thug, and Lil Uzi Vert.

Think of mumble rappers as a development following the tradition of jazz. There are rich connections between the two: virtuosic control of their instruments, a prioritizing of the instrumental over the lyrical, intoxication as an essential part of performance, and an implicit connection to an abstract Black cultural continuum, a shared imagination that they conjure images from. This last point has always been the logical explanation for the lyrical character of mumble rap; mumble rappers are bricoleurs. Rather than speaking in the flowing, immaculately workshopped verses of rapper/poets like Talib Kweli, Tribe Called Quest, or Digable Planets, they improvise and summon fractured vignettes from a fractured world; mixing fantasy and magical realism with the African-American vernacular storytelling of Zora Neal Hurston. Artists like Young Thug and Playboi Carti are fundamentally non-linear, experimental affective storytellers. They walk into the

booth without as much as a lyric written down on a piece of paper and leave with poetic works filled with ethnographic detail, fabulous metaphors, slant rhymes, unreliable narration. Whether intentionally or not, their work brings autofiction to my mind, as it is through experiments with a tension between fact and fiction that these authors explore the world and their place within it. Blackness is often a site that can only be explored by blurring these lines as coming to terms with race and racism requires one to live inside fiction and political reality simultaneously. I hope to illustrate through this essay that mumble rap is autofiction at its most alluring, deeply personal and imaginative, challenging and rewarding.

What is Mumble Rap?

Mumble rap lacks a fixed geographical origin. It emerges slowly, rearing itself in waves across time and space of countless decentralized forces: the most prominent of these being neoliberalism and the internet. Neoliberalism as a guiding economic unfolding in tandem with the prison industrial complex created new geographically dispersed forms of Black-American life. This economic force became an engine for ensuring the continuity or afterlife of slavery, by creating punitive social worlds for Black folks across America. The massive proliferation of prisons in the United States was a form of "policing the crisis" of neoliberalism, which represented a significant departure from the Keynesian macroeconomic policy and labor politics of the early-20th century. Under Keynesians, racism and segregation were rampant, but Black labor was an essential feature of the wartime production of the United States. Black families moved to large,

industrialized cities for decent-paying factory, government, and shipyard jobs which briefly marked the emergence of something like a Black middle class. This all changed following World War 2 due to a confluence of factors, including the end of the wartime production, the return of White veterans to the United States, and the meeting of a group of intellectuals called the Mont Pelerin Society. These notable intellectuals, including Frederich Hayek, Karl Popper, and Milton Friedman, advocated against the Keynesian model of central planning and proposed instead a highly unregulated form of capitalism, where the role of the government would instead be to remove all barriers to maximizing private profits. It took a few decades, but when this doctrine of personal responsibility finally became a governing economic policy in the 1970s, the results were disastrous for Black Americans. Where there was once hope for prosperity and sites of brief refuge there were now heavily militarized police forces, government-sanctioned paradigms of resource extraction, and abandoned neighborhoods. Policing was a key feature of this targeted disruption, and from the ’80s until today, incarceration rates have skyrocketed. Without pre-accumulated capital or opportunities to further themselves legitimately through education or business, Black Americans were left with two options: subsistence living through petty wage labor or participation in illegitimate economies. Despite these segregated and unjust conditions, Black life carried on, through various forms of intoxication, through love and the bonds of community.

Mumble rap is connected to what Fred Moten identifies in Duke Ellington, the pursuit and even possible achievement through the aesthetic invocation of a life “beyond

category.” [Moten 25] A life beyond subjection, a radical rupture of the now, a break with our pained present condition. Moten continues “black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus.” The surplus identified here is a negation of a racialized subjection that mumble rappers experience as residents of Black bodies, albeit wealthy and culturally powerful. This surplus might be to borrow another Motenism, borrowed from Glissant, “the consent not to be a single being.” Our neoliberal world seeks to reduce Black life into legible, fungible identities: the prisoner, the baby mama, the angry black lady, the rap star, the basketball star, the Obama, the Sambo, the Watermelon eater, the Uncle Tom. What does it mean in the face of this systematic quantification of Black life, to proclaim that one is not just incapable of reducing to a stereotype, not just too much to be quantified, but “never too much” to be quantified or reduced to a coherent, intact whole? This declaration is a powerful situation of Black life as a decadent, charged force, that while made up of excess, and made in excess can never truly be excessive.

Surplus and excess have complicated relationships with blackness. Our lives are put at risk through the use of excessive force. Black enjoyment and happiness were thought to be excess in times of slavery, sharecropping, and even late capitalism. Blackness has been a site of surplus value extraction from the first moments of European contact, where Blackness was made. Yet, it is in moments where subjection in its many forms is subverted, undermined, or cast off that Blackness is at its most joyful. When we exclaim

that we are “never too much,” we’re staging an aesthetic intervention, an incantation with political, liberatory drive, that pushes against the punitive neoliberal order.

Mumble rap is glitzy and high-def. It is dark, gloomy, nocturnal, and nihilistic, but it is colorful, freeing, post-structural. It is primal futurism, rap’s worst nightmare, and its savior. With its skittering high hats, rumbling 808s, and angular synths, it is electric, high-intensity music about experience. Emcees like Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert tell painted stories of drug-fueled, hallucinogenic late nights over dizzying instrumentals. Their music is often discredited for lacking substance, but this critique is unfounded and born out of white supremacist modes of thinking. Some critics can't comprehend that the work of a 16-year-old mumbling rapper might go over their heads, and so they’d rather deride the work than interrogate their lack of appreciation or understanding. This refuses to dig deeper, to give the time to this music feels inherently racialized, with the idea being that some works are inherently unsophisticated and unworthy of further examination.

Mumble rap is poststructural, it is a critique of articulacy and normative speech, a vestige of Black liberal respectability politics. Mumble rap is an assault on the racism of good intentions, the generations-old liberal Black politics of the NAACP and Alain Locke, among numerous others who have fallen into the belief in uplift suasion and “good behavior” theory of civil rights. Uplift suasion is pervasive in the Black middle and upper classes, even today. Its proponents argue that we should highlight the

accomplishments of Great African-Americans to illustrate the equality of Black and White minds, thus dismantling racism. This thinking forces Black greatness in all of its forms to conform to White American standards. This theory might produce Great Black Shakespearean actors, classical music composers, oil painters, or political commentators, but if Black Greatness must be confined to only forms historically recognized by predominantly White institutions, then there could never be truly Black forms.

Mumble rappers reject the idea that black art must move through dominant frameworks to be artful, emotional, or worthy of intellectual recognition. Today, rappers and scholars of rap appeal to racist musical structures by pointing at the technical virtuosity of rappers like Eminem and Busta Rhymes or the harmonic/rhythmic complexity of producers like Madlib and J Dilla. These comparisons are fair and could be used to combat a certain form of racism, but this critique contains within it a high culture/low culture divide that considers mumble rap a lesser form of art, and that maps class onto race. The sophistication of mumble rap lies not in its usage of a sophisticated harmonic language borrowed from jazz or the lyrical worldbuilding of its emcees but in its articulation of Black life. Mumble rap is affect music. It is a transcendental performance that dismantles the purist vision of a rap culture fixated on lyricism. Mumble rappers treat speech as something malleable. Grammatical conventions and pronunciations are unfixed; the rules of speech were meant to be adapted and broken. Mumble rap is liberatory, a site of aesthetic exploration where experience comes before all else. The

process of creation is an improvised performance, where ad-libbed grunts, melodies, refrains, and shrieks fall off the performer's tongue - they are in a state of flow. They draw on experience to form these worlds, but they're also in a state of heightened experience. They allow themselves to be guided by intoxication: their chemical intoxication, musical intoxication, the intoxication of their worlds. The flow state is an essential feature of the genre. Here, penmanship and the ability to rap quickly, the longtime markers of a great rapper fall away. Nobody wants to hear you rap fast in mumble rap. Nobody wants to hear your pre-written complicated rhymes schemes. Nobody wants to hear your pretentious theorizing about woke culture or racist police. We want you to shut up and vibe. This new paradigm infuriates an older generation of successful battle rappers, the Eminem's and Pete Rock's of the world, for whom technical ability is the meaning of the craft. They and the popular rappers who follow them are among the most outspoken critics of mumble rap. They mourn the death of their craft, while the most successful artists in their genre consistently break the canonical mold of what makes a great rapper. The phase in and out of legibility, deforming and manipulating language and speech to fit the shape or vibe of the production.

The Value of Inarticulacy

What is the value of imprecision, of in-betweens, of inarticulacy? Is there language in mumbling? This question seems to animate the critique of mumble rap, and it comes weighted with layers of presuppositions and prescriptions about the nature of art.

The gangsta rap of the mid-to-late 1980s was offensive to liberal sensibilities for its violent, drug-riddled, often misogynistic, and homophobic portrayal of street life. Even Black political activists like C. Delores Tucker and musicians like Wynton Marsalis have framed and attacked gangsta rap as a sort of negative, dark, hegemonic force. They see it as something that pollutes the minds of the young and compels them to enact violence on the world. They establish that the subject matter of the genre is dangerous and so the music itself is dangerous. Conversely, mumble rap is largely framed as having the opposite problem; while some critique the genre in identical ways to gangsta rap (too violent, sexist, morally impure, etc), the overwhelming majority of its detractors accuse the genre of almost entirely lacking substance, especially lyrical substance. It's seen as garbage, devoid of meaning, and incomprehensible. The repetition of this criticism might leave the uninformed listener to expect mumble rap to sound much more atmospheric like field recordings or ambient music, something meandering or aimless, something without composition or structure. Perhaps the more attuned listeners would draw on these disparate genres and recognize certain formlessness that they hold in common.

While this formlessness, inarticulacy, or imprecision is a source of derision and controversy for casual listeners of the genre, internet commentators, think-piece writers, and other amateur cultural commenters, I see it instead as something thematically and theoretically important to the music. Rather than rejecting this lyrical ambiguity outright, I see the form of speech that mumble rappers engage in as affective, affecting, and

anti-structural; a decentering performance of Black freedom that dismantles hegemonic binaries and carves out a space for Black life.

Their style is deeply musical, but lyrically ambiguous. They turn stutters, coughs, slips of the tongue, and other material realities of speech into music through a vocal delivery that is often semiotically unclear, but dynamic and rich with information.

Whether intentionally or not, these formal qualities push back against the canon of rap music; the most successful mumble rappers are outsiders. While they're uber-popular with late millennials and a disaffected Generation Z, they don't go on late-night talk shows or win big awards. It took a fundamentally global phenomenon in Migos and Lil Uzi Vert's Bad and Boujee to bring mumble rap to Grammys in 2016, years after Migos and Lil Uzi Vert became household names to anyone under 25 years old. They lost to Kendrick Lamar's DAMN, an album beloved by academics, poets, artists, and cultural commentators for both Kendrick's dynamic performances and his brilliant lyricism. It has always felt paradoxical to me that mumble rap is discredited thanks to aesthetic expectations for rap that are steeped in classist determinations about value. When Kendrick writes about Compton in his voice it's worthy of massive praise, but when Lil Durk documents his life in Englewood, it's seen as violent or negative. Mumble rap has something of a presentation problem. Critics refuse to see the poetry in raggedy speech, in something imprecise or unresolved. They craft portraits of their lives as they are in an almost stop-motion fashion. They move from clubs to Ubers to moments of

extreme emotional intensity to street fights to Paris in streams of vignettes without necessarily stopping for critical analysis or value judgments. They're excellent cinematographers, showing only what's important to their work in a given moment. They might lack overarching narratives or happy endings, but that's what allows them to so deftly capture the surreal and often confusing nature of Black life in the United States of America.

Part of this could be that mumble rap is often missing an aspirational character, common in the more culturally acceptable work of Black artists like Kendrick Lamar, Common, Tribe Called Quest, JAY-Z or Kanye West. I deeply cherish works by these artists, but they often appeal to a narrative that the material conditions of Black people can be improved through the hard work and determination of the individual. Mainstream critics often cast them as heroes, who made it out of their depressed neighborhoods through grit and exceptional moral character. These protagonists are victims who rise above their circumstances against all odds to become pillars in their communities and positive influences on the next generation of disenfranchised Black youth. Conversely, the image of mumble rap is unresolved and depressed, filled with all of the bizarre forms, in-between states, and the contradictions of everyday life. This representation of Blackness is likely more problematic, but it is also deeply generative and worthy of deeper investigation.

Chief Keef

South Side Chicago's Keith Cozart or "Chief Keef" was born in the afterlife of slavery: from his earliest moments he was thrust into a deeply traumatizing world of violence and oppression, a world without refuge, especially for young Black men. He was named after his deceased uncle Keith Carter, who was known as "Big Keef." Chief Keef's mother was 15 when she had him, the same age at which he dropped out of high school. A year later, Cozart joined a gang and was placed under house arrest for 60 days after firing a gun in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood. While under house arrest, Cozart began uploading drill music to his YouTube channel, BigGucci Sosa, with a cadre of other teenage gang members like Lil Reese, Fredo Santana, and Lil Durk. This music, drill music, featured improvised vocals, lyrics about everyday Black life under neoliberalism, frenetic, borderline polyrhythmic hi-hat and snare patterns, booming 808 basslines, and bright synthesizers. The sound of drill was heavily influenced by Atlanta's Lex Luger, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the next generation of trap stars like Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert. Keef and his collective's music passed through Chicago's high schools, house parties, parks and cars, but it was through the internet that Chief Keef entered a truly stratospheric height. His anthemic *"I Don't Like"* became a mainstay in Chicago's party circuit and the perfect punch in the face of punitive neoliberalism, because as one party promoter tightly summarized it "****** just hate everything out here." *I Don't Like,* which features Lil Durk over a bell and synthesizer laden production by South Side native Young Chop is an Afropessimist experiment in spontaneous energy, an emphatic disavowal of the punitive neoliberal order. The powerful chorus, one that is profoundly resonant with a disaffected and

trapped generation, is a floating list of the categories of people Chief Keef doesn't like: fakes, snitches, bitches and sneak dissers alike. His target is amorphous and infinitely broad in scope. We have all been guilty of being and come across these types of people and so the power isn't necessarily about the precision of this diagnostic, but the simplicity and relatability of the text. It's memetic, fans can enter this song as they choose and they're instantly exposed to the intensity of Chief Keef's scathing assault on dishonesty, cowardice, and sneakiness. Through his music, he seizes power, strength, and otherwise unusual confidence given his material circumstances.

Carti and Uzi

In this introduction to his late 2020 offering, *Whole Lotta Red*, mumble rapper Playboi Carti seems to respond to surplus outlined earlier in the work of Fred Moten with his constant, repeated refrain of "Never too much" over a rumbling, distorted beat. We as an audience are left to speculate, "what is never too much?" Perhaps this refers to bling, the unending desire for material gains that has become synonymous with hip hop. In the music of Carti and his peers, there is never too much material value, but there is also never too much affective value. To quote another of his peers, Lil Uzi Vert, "money got longer, speaker got louder, car got faster," in this world they're crafting, there is never too much money, there is never too much volume, never too much speed, never too much sexual arousal, never too much intoxication.

Shoota begins with a lone muted synthetic keyboard, slightly touched in reverb. The texture is familar but foreign, more resembling a dinky Casio patch than an immaculate recorded Steinway. The descending piano figure repeats twice before Philly's Lil Uzi Vert enters the stage, warming up his voice like a supercar revving its engine. The performance requires preparation. As Uzi croons "Nooow is my time," pizzicato strings dance forwards and backwards, creating a Bacon-eqse portrait of a deranged mechanical orchestra of digital automatons playing in tandem. The sound reminds me of confetti or an explosion of fireworks; prismatic and celebratory, a flurry of vivid color. The texture disappears as soon as it comes, leaving us back with the sole keyboard texture, filling an imaginary stadium or auditorium. Uzi's voice enters again, in the form of an overdubbed Maaly Raw's producer tag, the pitched up and playful "That-that-that-that-that-that be Maaly Raw " that bounces around from left to right the speaker. A producer tag is like the opening credits to their film. The most successful trap producers are known by their tags alone, their tags are greeted with roars of excitement at festivals and in clubs. They become a part of the song's lyrics. Another key role of the producer tag is to signal where the drop of a trap production is. Often, trap songs begin with a drumless sample or composition, until the producer tag appears often in the first few seconds of the beat with the arrival of an 808 bass and digitally sequenced hi-hats, snares, cymbal, and additional synth textures. This moment where the 808 comes in and fills out the rumbling low-end of a song is called the drop. The distortion of an 808 is overbearing, raw noise, a low pervasive rumble that becomes the defining feature of a space. High volumes and large speakers are essential for these invocations into sonic

space, this ritual sonic intoxication that envelops one’s body. The rumbles are inescapable in a club, a car, a studio, or a pair of headphones. Trap music creates and claims space, its potent low frequencies are expansive. They push through thin apartment walls, bound through the doors of busy nightclubs, and pour out of Ubers parked at red lights. My encounters with these 808s fill me with deep pleasure, both affective and historical. The rich resonances vibrate my body like a massage: they rattle the seats of my car and close up my throat. The 808 is heard as it is felt, it shakes the body.

On Shoota, Maaly Raw subverts this expectation by continuing to loop the strings and piano without drums, creating the space for Uzi’s signature vocal delivery to take the focus of the song. Uzi's autotuned flow is sing-song and lighthearted as he describes his rise to financial success and stardom with a charming mix of kaleidoscopic vocal delivery and off-kilter poetics. Uzi refers to his car as a “pecan drop,” compares monogamy to getting arrested, and makes checks bleed. Uzi is all over the map with his performance, constantly switching the cadence and timbre of his voice and his melodic composition. He twists his words around to create unique melodic figures, manipulating his voice with each line to change shape and character. His storytelling is dramatic and hyperbolic, just as vivid and arresting as the instrumental. It isn’t until over halfway into the song that the rest of the arrangement is revealed, which includes an 808 bassline, a flurry of skittering hi-hats and snares, and celesta-like bell textures. At this moment, all of the tension of the song's build-up instantly melts away. Playboi Carti makes his first

appearance in the song with the lines “woke up with my toolie, what it do? / Meet me in the alley with the troops, uh/I got red shooters, I got blue/Let that thing down and point at you.” Instantly you’re suddenly in the passenger seat with Carti as he nonchalantly conjures images of a fearless fugitive on the run. Here Carti is someone so untouchable that they’d ask whether you should take a Bentley or a Ferrari to rob a bank as casually as they’d ask what you want for dinner. These stories on this album may be hyperbolic or deeply exaggerated, but there’s something deeper to their production. They blur the lines between autobiography, dreams, and fiction effortlessly, but with this super flexible, mumbled delivery that borrows liberally from various dialects of AAVE and nowhere at all. He uses imprecision to craft a new Black voice, something that is entirely his own and yet feels entirely ours.

Conclusion

Mumbling presents a new way of looking at the world and a new way of creating art within it. It takes the quotidian and ephemeral. and raises its volume to deafening heights. It captures the drama, the surrealism, the irresolvable contradictions of Black life and leaves them bare, we can only bask in the abstraction. While the form comes to us in the perpetual afterlife, the wake of slavery, we are grateful for its long coming arrival. From spirituals to blues, to jazz, to rock and roll, to soul, to funk, to hip-hop, to techno and beyond, mumble rap is only the most recent blossoming of a Black-American aesthetic tradition deeply rooted in the soul of a nation. It was sampled from the liquid scatting of Ella Fitzgerald, the warped noise of Ornette Coleman, the

electronic wizardry of Drexciya, the pounding cannonade of Clyde Stubblefield, and the oral histories of our ancestors, who may remain nameless to us, but whose resistance will never go unremembered. I hope this essay serves as a catalyst, an inspiration to explore and reimagine new sonic textures, new techniques of refusal, and new ways of living together in a divided world. Mumbling might be able to take us there if only we are willing to listen.