

MUMBLE IN THE BRONX: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF 'MUMBLE RAP' AS ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

Delon Alain Omrow
Equity Studies
York University
delonominfo@gmail.com

Delon Alain Omrow earned his PhD at York University, specializing in Cognitive Injustice, Discourse and Frame analysis. His interests lay in cultural criminology and the reconceptualization of Rap and Hip-Hop as environmental discourse, capturing the lived experiences of under-represented groups. He currently teaches in the Equity Studies Department at York University in Ontario, Canada.

ABSTRACT

Rap and hip-hop articulate a black rhetoric which is rooted in a legacy of resistance against white supremacy. This article provides an alternative theorization of 'mumble rap', linking the musical genre to Valentin Volosinov's seminal piece *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Invoking a Volosinovian lens, I argue that mumble rappers challenge the unaccentual nature of language and infuse their art form with polyvocal and multiaccentual approaches to language. 'Mumble rap', then, serves as a cultural zeitgeist for resistance among contemporary rappers who hold contempt for racist institutions in the United States.

Keywords: Environmental Discourse, Mumble Rap, Resistance, Human Ecology, Hip-Hop, Black Culture.

INTRODUCTION

When I informed my peers that I was authoring an article on the cultural phenomenon known as 'mumble rap', I received bewildered stares. This may have been because my dissertation at York University focused on cognitive justice, human ecology and environmental sociology; suffice to say, my peers failed to see the connections between rap music and such disciplines. However, human ecology is an interdisciplinary approach to studying the relationship between humans and their *social* and *built* environments (Young, 1974). What is more, there have been some very interesting developments in English literature programs across the United States, whereby rap music is now being conceptualized as contemporary poetry and environmental literature. Rapper Kendrick Lamar's recent acceptance of the Pulitzer Prize for his record, *DAMN* (2017), signals a paradigmatic shift in the role rap music plays in contemporary America. Lamar was the first non-classical or jazz artist to receive the prize and his album was heralded as a "virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African American life" (Grady, 2018, p. 2). Lamar's recognition as a poet of sensuous scholarship also lends credence to new explorations of the interactions between social actors and their social surroundings, re-positioning rap music as environmental discourse, which captures the overlooked, lived experiences of black people in America. As such, it behooves scholars to revisit rap music through a different lens, recognizing its potential as a pedagogical tool within classrooms.

A recent addition to the rap cannon, 'mumble rap' has dominated the North American billboard charts since 2016, after hip-hop artist Wiz Khalifa introduced the term during a radio interview on Hot 97 FM. While the nomenclature of the genre is attributed to Wiz

Khalifa, the art of mumbling is much more nuanced, having been practiced by artists such as Future, Gucci Mane, Chief Keef, Migos and many others for several years. The purpose of this article is threefold: first, I conduct a literature review of the role rap music plays in articulating a black rhetoric; this is followed by a socio-cultural exploration of how ‘mumble rap’ conforms to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), garnering contempt from critics, many of whom adopt a uniaccental perspective of language; finally, drawing upon Valentin Volosinov’s seminal piece *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, I engage in a Volosinovian analysis of ‘mumble rap’, arguing that this genre of music can be interpreted as a form of resistance against system-level structures of white supremacy.

The ‘Streets’ as Sensuous Scholarship

Before the major themes of this article are presented, I would like to take a moment and say a few words about the importance of encouraging a dialogue between conventional, academic scholarship and alternative epistemological bases. David Redmon (2018) promotes the use of unconventional modes of scholarship, suggesting that traditional representations of crime, disorder, inequality, etc. can only extend so far, and that sensuous knowledge can “communicate sonic textures from multiple perspectives” (p. 505). Sensuous accounts of the lived experiences of young black men immerse audiences into their social realities, encouraging the most effective formats of experiential learning and *knowing*. Spencer (1991, p. v) writes:

“The black scholar cannot afford to be separated from the the black rapper, and vice versa. Neither can we allow the audiences of these two teachers to be divided, lest divided they fall...Both the rapper and the engaged scholar seek to provide the black community with wisdom that can serve as critical ingredients for empowering the black community to propel itself toward existential salvation, that can overcome disempowering, genocidal, hell-bent existence”

It is high time, then, that we members of academia make a more concerted effort to push the boundaries, and taken-for-granted assumptions, about knowledge and its ontological specifications. Whereas traditional modes of scholarship inculcate the virtues of positivism and quantitative and qualitative research in students, we must signal a paradigmatic shift in the creation of knowledge, using sensuous *ways of knowing* to capture the lived experiences of social actors. It is the vibrancy of sensuous knowledge, then, which is of import for me. Its ability to emotively touch listeners from all walks of life lends credence to what Halifu Osumare (2001) refers to as the connectivity of hip-hop and the perseverance of the attendant “connective marginalities”. It is my contention, then, that we can situate ‘mumble rap’ into the sensuous scholarship category through a rigorous analysis of its politics.

Rap as Rhetorical Resistance

From the traditional Griot storytellers and travelling singers of West Africa to the modern, spoken word lyricists of the United States, the power of poetry has been central to maintaining the black rhetorical continuum through its “polyvocal conversations” (Rose, 1994, p. 2), which are rooted in the black oral culture of call and response. Hip-hop and rap are terms used interchangeably to denote a musical genre born out of the lived experiences of black people living in the United States of America during the 1970s (Baker, 1993). Much ink has been spilled over rap music’s bioregional emphasis on urban spaces and its re-conceptualization as an urban environmental discourse (Sanger, 1995; Spencer, 1996;

Rosenthal, 2006). The musical genre has been reconfigured as a language of alternative landscapes, highlighting its “metaphorical geography of Afro-American expression” (Dixon, 1987, p. 2). The genre’s inception, most importantly, was the result of the creative outlet of marginalized city youth, attempting to cope with the social and structural dislocation they endured. The political and economic reforms of the latter part of the twentieth century brought with it pronounced declines in manufacturing jobs, which led to chronic rates of unemployment, creating a black ‘underclass’ (Wilson, 1987; Katz, 1993; Dyson, 1996; Massey and Denton, 1993). Such political, economic and social factors, coupled with the misguided War on Drugs in the 1980s, fostered a culture of generational dissatisfaction and rebellion against a system designed to oppress and criminalize African Americans. Like dominoes falling in a chain reaction, American cities succumbed to the economic despair of neo-liberal reforms: from the South Bronx to Queens and Brooklyn, social angst and status frustration found the appropriate channels through which a national black identity could be negotiated.

It stands to reason, then, that rap music was a direct result of the circumstances mentioned above. Craig Watkins (1998) suggests that the creation of the ‘underclass’ forced these communities to devise ways to eke out a living for themselves. Rap music provided viable economic opportunities for certain impoverished black youth, enabling them to exercise social and economic mobility so that they might extricate themselves from the proverbial ghetto. Black youth, then, envisioned themselves in a culture war and their ammunition, so to speak, included portrayals of hyper-masculinity, violence and ‘gangsterism’- the perfect defence mechanisms against a system which denuded them of their sense of self-worth. As an urban environmental discourse, rap music conforms to the legacy of African American literature- particularly, with its emphasis on the city. Debra Rosenthal (2006) intimates that while some rap music celebrates the urban metropolis, the city landscape also “challenges urban youth”, presenting a theorization of notions of emplacement. The author proceeds by arguing that rap music and its lyrics encapsulate black lived experiences in the urban setting, serving as an indigenous US musical and literary medium which captures the conditions of *built* environments and an African American “ecological way of seeing” (p. 666). Therefore, rap music can be interpreted as a bioregional chronicle, expanding the field of environmental literature. Focus on the musical genre as both sensuous knowledge and urban discourse is important, allowing scholars to contextualize and historicize subversion and resistance against the system-level structures of racism and white supremacy.

Baruti Kopano (2002) argues that rap music must, perforce, be analyzed as part of the black rhetorical continuum, expanding on a prodigious tradition of creative use of language as both rhetorical style and strategy. Author and recording artist, Molefi Kete Asante, also, draws upon Frantz Fanon’s use of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) to theorize the genre of rap music. Asante (1987) observes “always the protester must use different symbols, myths, and sounds than the established order...The oppressed must gain attention and control by introducing another language, another sound” (p. 114). The author, furthermore, suggests that black rhetoricians use what he refers to as “guerrilla rhetoric”, a subversive method to preserve one’s African roots. Historicizing music as a social function for slaves uprooted from Africa and brought to the “New World”, then, we begin to understand how rap music can serve as a narrative for African American “ecological way of seeing”, but also resistance to the cruelties of a new environment. Regina Bradley (2016) adds that hip-hop sonically and culturally centralizes the traumatic black experience in a white, supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal society. This sentiment is echoed in Elarick Jerry Persaud’s (2005) comments about rap music serving as a distinct narrative for African Americans. The author maintains that the

genre of music possesses a didactic function, integrating thematic themes such as colonialism, dispossession, oppression, disenfranchisement, violence, powerlessness, etc. into its medium. The synthesis of lived experience and resistance to social dislocation is captured in rappers' ability to disturb and disrupt the American, national imaginary through teasing out the contradictions of the white supremacist imaginary.

A Gramscian analysis of rap music would argue that the genre constitutes a form of cultural resistance against the cultural domination of the white, ruling class in the United States. Kopano uses Gramscian thought to suggest that rap music produced a new rhetoric and form of protest. According to the author, rap's antecedent is the musical genre known as bebop. It, too, was designated as "radical" and "nonconformist", rebelling against white America's oppressive systems. Today, however, it is rap music which has gained currency among young black men, extending their rhetorical tradition of cultural resistance through manipulating and altering the 'oppressor's language'. Drawing upon a rich history of African reverence for words and artistic festivals such as East Africa's *Gikuyu*, Kopano (2002) applauds modern rappers for their continuation of the art of improvisation- that is, of creating "something out of nothing" (p. 211). This, therefore, is the most powerful form of resistance against white supremacy because the inversion of the 'oppressor's language' breathed new life and meaning into a vocabulary that was designed to denude blacks of their humanity. The violent imposition of the English language upon black peoples during the Transatlantic Slave Trade opened vistas of resistance through what Asante (1987) refers to as *orature*- "the sum total of oral tradition...including vocality, drumming, storytelling, praise singing and naming" (p. 60). It is this subversive process which enabled black expressiveness, or as the author so eloquently states "the empowering of the oppressed by listening to their voices" (Asante, 1987, p. 22). In a related vein, Spencer (1996) highlights the empowering features of black music, referring to it as a 'rhythmic confidence' to stand up against the quotidian attacks against black culture. 'Rhythmic confidence' also entails resisting the erasure of the black self, imagination and creativity through the reclamation of identity and a politics of difference.

Michael Eric Dyson, professor of sociology, explores the nuances of language, stating: "language is crucial to understanding the questions of identity that blacks and all Americans wrestle with...because language reminds us that we exist at all. Using many languages, speaking in tongues, is a habit of survival that African American people across the board have learned" (Dyson and Spivey, 1996, p. 1). The role of language in mumble rap warrants a closer analysis because this ghetto grammar, or ebonics, serves as a type of sociolect, excluding "outsiders" from the vibrant subculture of hip-hop and its form of communication. Consider, for example, rapper Nelly and his album *Country Grammar* (2000). The album introduced a distinct sociolect to the masses, developing a vocabulary of its own. Another noteworthy example is UK lyricist Karl Hinds, whose 'hood' grammatology aims to "dislocate the oppressive logos of standard grammar in both form and mechanics" (Persaud, 2005, p. 127). These examples of sociolects have furnished the genre of rap music and hip-hop culture, enabling both artists and audiences to develop a distinct subculture of communication and black aesthetics based on an 'urban expressivity' (Baker, 1993). The ability to convey social angst, hopes and dreams, then, serve as lyrical poetry for the marginalized, disenfranchised and dispossessed. Referring back to Kopano's concept of "guerrilla rhetoric", for a moment, we begin to see the pivotal role language plays in hip-hop culture. This esoteric means of communication entails "the coining of terms, the creation of linguistic combination, the mastery of double entendre and other coded linguistic forms" (Kopano, 2002, p. 1).

Mumble Rap and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

A derivative of ‘trap’ music, ‘mumble rap’ originated in Atlanta, Georgia. Cultural theorist Adam de Paor-Evans (2017) explains that ‘trap’ music reflects the practise of creating and selling crack-cocaine – the ‘trap’ referring to the dwelling in which such activities occur. The genre, therefore, offers a narrative framework, producing ethnographic and auto-ethnographic accounts of real people and their experiences. One question immediately comes to mind: might ‘mumble rap’ serve as a cultural zeitgeist of the ‘black experience’ in contemporary America, extending the black oral tradition of “guerrilla rhetoric”? Let us briefly look at the origins of the musical genre and some of the debates surrounding it. Justin Hunt (2017), content writer for HipHopDX, argues that Atlanta rapper Future, and his single *Tony Montana* (2012) gave birth to ‘mumble rap’. Future’s vocals in the production are so indecipherable that it is often attributed to his substance abuse. The artistic endeavours of Chief Keef and his 2012 single *Love Soca* also earned the designation ‘mumble rap’ due to Keef’s faded syllables which sounded more like elongated moans (Abraham, 2018). The following year, Young Thug’s collaboration with Rich Gang, *Lifestyle* (2014), contributed to the ‘mumble’ phenomenon. It paved the way for a flurry of artists such as Lil Yachty, Lil Uzi Vert, Migos and others.

Abraham (2018) suggests that the term ‘mumble rap’ has come to denote those artists who do not conform to hip-hop’s traditional form. While critics of the genre lambast mumble rappers for their phonetic reduction of syllables, words and phrases, the author engages in a socio-phonetic analysis of the musical style, revealing how American variants of the English language stem from creoles and pidgins. The crux of Abraham’s argument, then, is that rap music was created by African-American communities and, as such, features variants of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). While not monolithic in nature, there are noteworthy properties of this vernacular which warrant a socio-cultural analysis- namely, its phonetic variations via consonant cluster reduction and phonetic relaxations. Now, while Abraham highlights the presence of AAVE in ‘mumble rap’, there are also racial undertones to this vernacular through a critical race perspective. For example, AAVE is pitted against Mainstream American English (MAE), and it is the former which is usually stigmatized as being spoken by those who are less intelligent. This raises extremely important implications for the social construction and identification of myriad dimensions of identity. Consider, for example, how Kevin Heffernan’s (2010) analysis of phonetic reduction, relaxation, vowel space dispersion and consonant lenition index aspects of one’s identity. The author explores the relationship between distinct phonetic patterns and variables such as education, knowledge, regional accent, machismo, material wealth and self-confidence. Using Principle Component Analysis, Heffernan aggregates the aforementioned scales and asks listeners to analyze the speech patterns of eight American (male) radio DJs. The results revealed that listeners were able to ascribe semantic values to the DJs’ masculinity, social class, personality and regional accent (Heffernan, 2010).

Clearly, the practise of phonetic reduction engenders pre-conceived ideas about the intersectionality of one’s identity. Abraham (2018) maintains that the stigmatization of AAVE by mainstream English speakers is merely an extension of white supremacist ideology denigrating black culture: “just as the hate and criticism toward African-Americans and their culture extended to criticism toward their language, the criticism toward this new generation of rappers and their ideologies extends toward their manner of vocal production” (p. 18). The very notion of the AAVE variant being “incorrect” raises questions about value-laden judgements, which seem to imply that MAE, an entrenched and institutionalized way of speaking, is a “correct” and accepted dialect. Deviating from this norm, AAVE is subject to stigmatization and, most importantly, so are the speakers of this sociolect. Abraham

historicizes the stigmatization of AAVE, arguing that language has always been a tool of divisiveness, utilized to erect barriers along social categories such as race, class, sex, gender, etc. Furthermore,

“in the context of AAVE, many modern speakers have roots in the struggle for equality in the United States. In America, from the onslaught of slavery to the modern societal conflicts, speakers of AAVE have been considered secondary in society. Their culture and practices have been criticized, all the while being held in comparison to those of the dominant group, white Americans. The societal treatment of AAVE speakers is unfounded, as is the criticism of AAVE as incorrect” (Abraham, 2018, p. 19).

It stands to reason, therefore, that ‘mumble rap’ is a practice shaped in specific social, political, historical and cultural contexts, and the stigmatization model which is used to disparage AAVE is merely an extension of racist ideology.

A Volosinovian analysis of ‘mumble rap’

In this section, I would like to present an alternative theorization of ‘mumble rap’. While Abraham’s socio-cultural exploration of mumbling as AAVE provides a thoughtful analysis of the racial stigmatization model used by mainstream speakers of MAE, I would like to use the philosophy of Valentin Volosinov (1929) to explore how mumble rappers embrace the concept of multiaccentuality. According to Volosinov’s theory of signification, language is a symbolic arena of ideological struggle between different groups. Language also reflects a dynamic system of beliefs and serves as the structural foundation of the social networks we build (Hill and Fenner, 2010). While Abraham (2018) expounds on the racial undertones of ‘mumble rap’, providing a complex comparison between AAVE and MAE, he fails to link the AAVE/MAE dichotomy to a Marxist analysis of struggle between different classes. For example, Volosinov (1929) rejected the objectivist paradigm of language, which characterized communication as an abstract and fixed system of signs. He also refused to accept that language was an instrumental, and transparent, mode of communication; rather, it features an ideological struggle within the dynamics of language signification (Chuen-juei Ho, 1992). Formulating an alternative theory of language, he sought to reveal how language was a dynamic, ever-developing social practice among social actors. For example, language conveys meaning and social action, dependent upon a specific social relationship between participants.

If we explore the utility of language on the intra-group level, the individual is constituted through linguistic activities within this social group and, thus, individual consciousness takes shape through the signs, logic and laws created by groups engaged in the process of social intercourse. Volosinov (1929) expounds on the symbolic function of language:

“the claim can be made that it is a matter not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world, but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions” (p. 91).

Communication through language shapes how groups construct identity and solidarity and, most importantly, how discursive practices represent fluidity and the dynamic nature of language itself. In a somewhat related vein, language on the inter-group level is perceived as a form of communication, negotiation and confrontation. The product of social interaction,

language is produced by the circumstances of the discourse, and its materiality reflects *another* reality independent of itself which carries ideological, ethical, scientific and aesthetic functions (Chuen-juei Ho, 1992). This multiplicity of reference, what Volosinov refers to as “the polyvocality of accents”, reveals that language is sensitive to manipulation and it is this very dynamic nature of language that incites a struggle among different groups/classes to gain control over language. Volosinov, (1926) furthermore, predicts that the dominant class will attempt to stabilize the “dialectical flux of the social generative process” (p. 24) of language formation and use through a universalizing and eternalizing attempt to ensure that language’s multiaccentuality is turned into uniaccentuality.

How, then, does ‘mumble rap’ fit into Volosinov’s theory of signification? First of all, the musical genre must be explained on the inter-group level, with special attention being given to AAVE and its ‘polyvocality’. These rappers manipulate MAE, challenging the uniaccentuality of language. MAE, then, can be conceived as the mode of signs and communication used by the dominant class/group. This group’s ideologies are transmitted through MAE but discursive articulation and disarticulation occur through Volosinov’s theorization of the ideological struggle inherent in language. The slurring of words and indecipherable vocal delivery of mumble rappers constitute a form of contestation, liberating the symbols, signs and meanings of MAE from conventional chains of association.

From the Proverbial Middle Finger to ‘mumble rap’

Images of rappers flipping ‘the bird’ have become synonymous with rebellion and resistance against authority- namely, the police. This obscene gesture communicates contempt for one of the most oppressive institutions of all: the criminal justice system. I suggest that ‘mumble rap’ is sonically equivalent to raising one’s middle finger to the system-level structures of racism and white supremacy in the United States. From Shakespearian biting of the thumb to mumbling on one’s record, this form of subversion mocks the dominant (white) class, appropriating their rigid rules of language (MAE) and inverts them. It comes as little surprise that rap music, let alone ‘mumble rap’, originated in a country featuring astounding racial and ethnic disparities in its prison systems. For example, the mass incarceration of racialized minorities has led to restricted unemployment prospects, family disruption, stigma and disenfranchisement (Clear et al., 2001). The social dislocation of racialized minorities, therefore, is a result of power structures that have denuded young black men of their dignity and self-esteem. This is precisely why the majority of mumble rappers adopt an extravagant aesthetic- their bodies adorned with tattoos, gold and diamonds.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the *Carnavalesque* (1929) can be applied here. Defined as an artistic and literary aesthetic formation which disrupts socio-cultural hierarchies, Bakhtin suggests that “normal” life is suspended during the carnival and normative behaviours disrupted. The moment black people were transported to the United States, their bodies were scrutinized and treated like mere commodities to be traded and sold. The indignities associated with branding, desecration, lynching, and castration are now inverted through mumble rappers’ adornment and re-appropriation of their bodies from ‘white America’. The more outrageous their gold chains, tattoos and hair-dye, the more militant their message is about disrupting the socio-cultural hierarchies in American society which have led to the lamentable statistic that African Americans are imprisoned at a rate that is 5.1 times the imprisonment of their white counterparts (Carson, 2015).

In Georgia, one of the states in which ‘mumble rap’ emerged, blacks make up more than half of the prison population. Specifically, The Bureau of Justice Statistics reveals that incarceration rates per 100,000 by race for certain states are quite telling. Referring back to Georgia, for a moment, black men and women are incarcerated at a

rate of 1066 per 100,000, compared to that of whites, which is 329 per 100,000 (The Sentencing Project, 2016). What is more, Georgia is leading in statistics pertaining to correctional control over its citizens with 5,828 per 100,000 adults serving a sentence of some sort: Federal, State, Local, Juvenile, Civil Commitment, Indian Country Jail, Parole and Probation. Note, the use of parole sentencing has grown substantially in recent years due to Georgia's use of privatized probation which tends to place racialized minorities with minor offences under this form of correctional control (Rabuy and Wagner, 2016).

The sentencing disparity between racialized minorities and whites is attributed to criminal justice policies and practices; implicit biases and stereotypes in judicial decision-making; and structural disadvantages in racialized communities. Certain policies and practices have led to the mass imprisonment of racialized minorities. Since the early 1970s, policymaking in the American criminal justice system has disproportionately affected black people. Whether it be minimum mandatory sentencing in 1973, or the expanded use of penal measures for a variety of felonies in the 1980s, black people in America have bore the brunt of harsher prison sentences. Statistics pertaining to drug use are quite telling because while blacks are four times more likely to be arrested for drug offenses, and 2.5 times as likely to be arrested for drug possession, whites and blacks engage in drug use at approximately the same rate (Nellis, 2016). Also, from 1995 to 2005, blacks accounted for 13 percent of drug users, but a whopping 36% of drug arrests and 46% of drug convictions (Mauer, 2013). Clearly, policymaking has engendered racial disparities, which perpetuate biases in the criminal justice system.

With respect to biases, Hetey and Eberhardt (2014) suggest that beliefs about *threats* to public safety intersect with individual perceptions about people of color. This is most evident in pre-sentence reports in which black offenders are subject to harsher sentences, compared to their white counterparts. In fact, the authors reveal through survey data that their respondents, irrespective of their race, continued to associate blacks with terms such as "dangerous," "aggressive," "violent," and "criminal." In a related vein, A 2013 Stanford University study revealed that public awareness of sentencing disparities among blacks actually *increases* support for harsher sentences, demonstrating the systemic biases in the criminal justice system, and the public's inability to overcome such biases (Nellis, 2016).

Finally, structural disadvantages in racialized communities account for the over-representation of blacks in the prison system. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, unstable family systems, public housing and exposure to family and/or community violence contribute to socio-economic vulnerabilities which, in turn, translate into involvement with criminal activity (Dorfman and Schiraldi, 2001). Social dislocation and marginalization, as a result of suburbanization, hurl young black men into criminal activity. Shihadeh and Ousey (1996) maintain that suburbanization undermines and isolates center-city black communities by creating wells of disadvantage and dislocation, exacerbating city-suburb inequalities. Consider, for example, metropolitan expansion theory, which suggests that suburbanization facilitates the movement of industry, resources and people into the suburbs, leaving behind a dearth of job opportunities for those residing in the city. The declining low-skill job base in cities, therefore, leads to a greater concentration of poverty and, inevitably, rising rates of crime in these predominantly black neighbourhoods (Shihadeh and Ousey, 1996).

A review of the variables contributing to the over-representation of black men in the prison system puts the defiant and *carnavalesque* act of mumbling and 'mumble rap' in its socio-cultural context. Like Gangsta Rap's use of the middle finger to demonstrate protestation and subversion of the criminal justice system's discriminatory policies and practices against young black men, 'mumble rap' distorts language in an attempt to conform to a tradition of resistance via AAVE and a black strategy of "guerrilla rhetoric". Let us

consider, for a moment, the lyrics to the single *Damage* (2017), performed by Future. In the song, the Atlanta mumble rapper states:

“Never ever let the money stop, dirty police trying to
fuck it up. If money come, he wanna pull you over
just to say something under there...Anytime I’m in
a new city, I prefer to do light drugs, police try to hit
the tour bus and try to fuck a nigga life up.
You can fuck a nigga life up, by trying to fuck a nigga
wife once, told you baby this is business. Please stop
tryna ruin it all”.

In this single, Future addresses some of the aforementioned factors contributing to the over-incarceration of young black men in America. His song features utter contempt for a racist institution which continually places black men under surveillance and social control. There are also allusions to the impact of discriminatory police practices and policies – most of which destroy the lives of these men. Therefore, ‘mumble rap’ has become both an environmental discourse and cultural zeitgeist for a generation of rappers providing a social commentary on the socio-political climate in the United States. From the Shakespearian act of biting one’s thumb, to the act of raising one’s middle finger to convey contempt for authority, the act of mumbling on records has become synonymous with rebellion, resiliency and resistance through the inversion (and distortion) of the oppressor’s language (MAE).

CONCLUSION

Up-and-coming artists from myriad cities are articulating their lived experiences through their art, inspiring fans and other artists across the globe. In Toronto, Canada, statistics reveal that 18 black men and one black boy were among the 52 who died as a result of deadly encounters with the police between 2000-2017 (Dunn, 2018). While these numbers account for 36.5 percent of the overall fatalities, black men comprise a mere 8.3 percent of the city’s population, signalling systemic racism and discrimination within the police organization. Is it mere coincidence that ‘mumble rap’ is becoming more prominent in this city? A cadre of new artists from Toronto are following their American counterparts, contributing their narratives to the popular art form. To recapitulate, this article presents a literature review of the role rap music plays in articulating black rhetoric; this is followed by a socio-cultural exploration of how the genre conforms to African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), garnering contempt from critics, many of whom adopt a uniaxential perspective of language; finally, I provide Volosinovian analysis of ‘mumble rap’, arguing that the genre of rap music can be interpreted as a form of resistance against system-levels structures of white supremacy in the criminal justice system.

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