



# IN DEFENSE OF MUMBLE RAP

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*“Made a mil’ off that, uh/ Off that mumblin’ shit.”*  
– Playboi Carti, “R.I.P.”

## INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF MUMBLE RAP

Mumble rap is a polarizing topic within the rap community among emcees and fans alike. Mumble rap is a microgenre of rap music that gained prominence in the late 2010s with artists like Lil Pump, Lil Uzi Vert, Future, Young Thug, Lil Peep, Juice WRLD, and Playboi Carti situated at the forefront of the style. Many of these artists found audiences and created communities on the audio-sharing platform SoundCloud, and thus, SoundCloud rap is another name for mumble rap. The style was given the “pejorative name mumble rap by many in the rap and popular music mainstream. The term referred to SoundCloud rapper’s unclear vocal deliveries (mumbling), as well as lack of lyrical content, absence of message and inconsistency of flow. To rappers of another era these new rappers were hardly rapping at all” (Phillips 2021, 125). Mumble rappers employ techniques like “Auto-Tune, mumbling, repetition, ad-libs, and triplets” with a focus on “intense aesthetic creativity” when it comes to the production, creating a new distinctive sound and “pushing the bounds of rap” (Phillips 2021, 125). With this unique style, mumble rap became an undeniable presence in the late 2010s. From “Broccoli” by D.R.A.M. feat. Lil Yachty to “XO Tour Llif3” by Lil Uzi Vert to “Trap Queen” by Fetty Wap—just to name a few—mumble rap songs launched artists’ careers and created pervasive cultural moments in the mid-to late-2010s: songs in this style created innumerable quotable lines that remained in popular culture, such as the Migos’ inescapable phrase “bad and boujee” from the group’s 2016 breakout hit by that name, and Fetty Wap’s call-out “1738” from the beginning of “Trap Queen.” The music was an innovative sound in rap, exemplified by the instantly-recognizable electronic beat in Lil Uzi Vert and Playboi Carti’s popular collaboration “wokeuplikethis\*.” While many outside the SoundCloud rap scene have disparaged it as ruining the integrity of rap music, others have embraced the genre as



a fresh wave of rap, as it showcases rap music's spirit of innovating and pushing generic boundaries. Also, even a few years after the heyday of SoundCloud rap from 2015-2019, some of the most popular and successful rappers are mumble rappers. In 2021, many top spots on the Billboard's Year End R&B/Hip-Hop Chart were occupied by mumble rappers: Lil Baby is at #3, Lil Dirk is at #6, YoungBoy Never Broke Again is at #18, and Lil Uzi Vert is at #20 (Billboard 2021).

This paper will consider mumble rap and the conversation that it opens up to explore a few discursive trends surrounding rap music in America. Firstly, to address how critics of mumble rap refer to the integrity of rap as a genre, we should unpack what makes a *good rapper* or *good rap music*. While many celebrated and significant rappers are credited for lyricism, is it necessarily the only deciding factor of what is *good* and aesthetically and culturally valuable music? Specifically, we will unpack the reasons why mumble rap is disparaged today by turning towards the past: the Golden Age of hip-hop, spanning the late 1980s to early 1990s, when the genre gained a lot of mainstream recognition. If mumble rappers sound like they are "hardly rapping at all" to rappers of a different era, what elements of style is traditional rap music proud of that mumble rap fails to capture (Phillips 2021, 125)? In the following section, this paper will argue that we can think of mumble rap as embodying the essential spirit of traditionally-celebrated rap music, which served as one of "the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world" for young Black people (Rose 1994, 19). While mumble rap deviates from the Golden Age's focus on lyricism, it maintains its essential spirit and driving force: it serves as a voice for marginalized Black youth to portray their material conditions through genre-bending music, and in this way, mumble rappers are actually following in the tradition of Golden Age rap.

Next, because rap/hip-hop is one of the most popular genres of music in America today, these questions about *good rap music* lead to another big question: how is cultural value discerned? This paper will explore this question particularly in the context of Black artistic production, thinking about how artistic and cultural value may be determined by white normative standards, as a huge majority of music critics (82.8%) are white and a majority of rap listeners are non-Black people (Zippia 2021). In the third section, we will interrogate the standards used to measure aesthetic and cultural value by a predominantly white music industry and audience. We will tackle what it means for Black art to need to prove its "worthiness of discourse" to a majority white audience, and see that white normativity is being reproduced in today's discourse around mumble rap and rap music in general (Waugh 2020, 208).

*"I always knew I was a prophet, but I couldn't find a decent job."*  
– Jay-Z, "Drug Dealers Anonymous."



## PROPHETS OF THE STREET: BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF HIP-HOP

When thinking of *good*, traditional rap music, we as fans naturally point towards the Golden Age of rap (late 1980s to early 1990s), when rappers generally prioritized lyricism to communicate issues related to poverty and anti-Black racism (History of Hip-Hop, n.d.). During the Golden Age, rap music centered on “issues of the ‘street’ or virtuosic lyricism and flow. These elements have been foregrounded as evidence of the ‘seriousness’ of the genre (and, as such, its worthiness of discourse)” (Waugh 2020, 208). Yet, it is impossible to deny the importance of a “sonic innovator” like Kanye West to the 2000s and 2010s hip-hop scene, and his impact as a producer (especially his creative sampling) influenced the sound of some of the most prominent artists of this millennium (Battan 2016). On one hand, some pockets praise the “gifts” and “prolific genius” of Lil Wayne, who famously doesn't pre-write his bars before stepping in the booth, as he focuses more on playing with flow (Battan 2016). On the other hand, many revere the intricately-constructed verses of MF DOOM, who was one of the most clever and crafty rhymers of our generation.

Mumble rap prioritizes different aesthetic elements than Golden Age rap music, particularly by deviating from its focus on “virtuosic lyricism,” but it plays a similar role as traditional rap for its makers and listeners—it creates a space for young Black artistic expression of social issues that deviates from white normativity and threatens the social order, just as rap music did in the Golden Age. *Black Noise* by Tricia Rose, published in 1994, is one of the most important pieces of early scholarship on hip-hop, and it offers us insight into the discourse around Golden Age rap music. Rose writes that “rap music is fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of black culture as an internal threat to dominant American culture and social order. Rap’s capacity as a form of testimony, as an articulation of a young black urban critical voice of social protest has profound potential as a basis for a language of liberation” (Rose 1994, 144). In this way, Rose presents Golden Age rap music as a space for young Black people to articulate their lived experiences and the material conditions of the “streets,” and in doing so, these rappers destabilize white normative narratives of American culture that would render their marginalized voices invisible and silent. Therefore, Rose argues that the cultural value of rap music came from the way it functioned as a “cultural glue that fosters communal resistance,” and this was mainly done through virtuosic lyricism (Rose 1994, 100).

There are some very clear examples of contemporary rap music by lyricist rappers as a “critical voice of social protest,” like Kendrick Lamar’s song “Alright,” which is described as “one of this generation’s most important protest anthems” due to frequent its use in Black Lives Matter demonstrations (McKinney 2020). But, we can think of mumble rap as a “young black urban critical voice of social protest” as well, showing how it has cultural value by Golden Age standards, too (Rose 1994, 144). To



start, similar to how Golden Age rap sprang from and reflected the issues of the “streets,” SoundCloud rap was also produced in conditions of socioeconomic oppression, as it “had its roots in the experience of young African Americans trapped in socio-economic conditions of poverty, unstable family systems, and gang violence, drug use and juvenile incarceration” (Phillips 2021, 129). The ethos of SoundCloud as a platform meshes with this illustration of the context in which the music was made:

With a utopian vision of accessible music creation for the people, SoundCloud became a champion for any up-and-coming artist. New musicians, without ever having to leave their bedroom, gained stratospheric stardom, circumventing the conventional methods of going to professional studios and working with record labels. SoundCloud’s design is more aligned with social media websites than streaming services, which lowers the barrier between artist and audience (Bartol 2021).

As SoundCloud created a more democratic environment to release music and lowered the barrier to entry to become a popular musician, it makes sense that mumble rap exploded on that platform. One producer heavily involved in the SoundCloud rap scene, Ronny J, even stated, “Everything is literally made with me not even getting out of my bed and a kid coming and getting on the mike and screaming or rapping” (Caramanica 2017). The way mumble rap was originally created, shared, and popularized on the platform SoundCloud reflects how the style was linked to artists with a lack of access to resources like professional studios, and it showed a rejection of the established way of becoming a popular musician—that is, by signing to a label and letting executives make decisions about your art. Instead, SoundCloud rappers made and spread their music on their own terms: creating tracks in home studios, releasing as many songs as they wanted to, whenever they wanted to. To musicians on SoundCloud, while the traditional music industry represented a “commercialization that prioritizes capital over creative exploration” and “its core value of revenue generation impedes communities” (Dunham 2022, 109), SoundCloud as a platform “seemed to be about sharing and community, about evolving culture, creating global networks” (Kardos 2017). Just as Golden Age rap music represented a way to create communal resistance against dominant social structures, SoundCloud similarly allowed young Black musicians to break into the music world and resist the traditional music industry (which often takes power away from artists) by claiming control over their art. However, we must note that SoundCloud provided creative freedom for emerging artists to share fresh and innovative ideas through music that could be unpolished, but being popular on the digital platform did not afford them the same level of financial support or industry access as a traditional record deal would.



The style of mumble rap reflects its creators' material conditions as well, namely the teen drug epidemic of the late 2010s, although we may need to dig deeper than the semantic content of the lyrics to understand how. In the Golden Age, artists like N.W.A., Public Enemy, and A Tribe Called Quest reflected their material conditions by responding to Reagan era conservatism and exploring topics like Afrocentricity, police brutality, anti-Black racism, and critiques of American capitalism in their music. Similarly, in SoundCloud rap, taking Xanax is a popular motif. The drug is even referenced in one of the best known SoundCloud rappers' name, Lil Xan (Phillips 2021, 129). Xanax use was a huge part of SoundCloud rappers' image, from Lil Pump celebrating one million followers on Instagram with "a Xanax-shaped cake" to Lil Peep, who tragically passed away from a Xanax and fentanyl overdose in 2017, taking "a Xanax out of a prescription bottle with the name scratched off" during an interview with the *New York Times* (Caramanica 2017). This aspect of SoundCloud rap's culture is a reflection of the surging rates of Xanax use and addiction in adolescents and young adults, with rates reaching new highs in 2018, coinciding with SoundCloud rap's heyday (Vestal 2018). The sonic atmosphere of SoundCloud rap reflected this social context, as the production style often sounds like:

a state of tranquilization. SoundCloud rappers like Lil Uzi Vert or Lil Xan did not only rap about Xanax, but also created its effects through psychedelic sounds that warped and played with the listener's sense of temporality. Here, the track itself created a druggy experience for the listener...Lil Pump's repetitive 'Gucci Gang' phrasing acts like a mantra, further slowing and warping time, as listeners get lost in the repetition (Phillips 2021, 129).

Thus, some of SoundCloud rap's most defining features—creative, psychedelic production and unintelligible, repetitive lyrics—are a symbolic representation of the epidemic of Xanax and other benzodiazepines in young people in the late 2010s. As Rose puts it, this music is "a form of testimony," and while it typically does not explicitly comment on the societal structures that produce drug addiction in young people, especially young Black people, it creates a sonic window into that world. By staying true to the innovative nature of the genre, mumble rappers are using their sound to maintain what makes rap and hip-hop exciting. Further, in their portrayal of disadvantaged material conditions, particularly climbing rates of drug addiction in young people, they are upholding rap's cultural value per Golden Age standards, when the genre was hailed for being a "central cultural vehicle" for reflection on social issues that affected primarily the Black community (Rose 1994, 18). With the FDA neglecting to sufficiently address the climbing rates of teen Xanax addiction, much less take strong institutional action to stop it the alarming trend in its tracks, this Xanax-influenced music and culture continues the Golden Age tradition of rap music destabilizing hegemonic American perspectives about social issues (Edwards 2011).



Thus, mumble rap does have cultural value by the standards we apply to the Golden Age, as it offers a sonic window into the contemporary “issues of the ‘streets’” (Waugh 2020, 208) — particularly surging rates of teen drug addiction — through its production motifs and characteristic flow, and it centers “young black urban” (Rose 1994, 144) voices and a form of artistic expression that deviates from white normativity.

*“As long as I’m in Polo smilin’, they think they got me/ But they would try to crack me if they ever see a Black me.”*

– Kanye West, “Gorgeous.”

### “RAP’S HIDDEN POLITICS”: JUDGING THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL VALUE OF BLACK ART IN AN ANTI-BLACK AND WHITE NORMATIVE AMERICAN SOCIETY (ROSE 1994, 145)

It would be irresponsible to discuss the artistic value of a certain style of rap music without acknowledging the political ways artistic and cultural value is determined in American society, which marginalizes Black people through nearly every aspect of its structures and institutions. While the previous section demonstrates that we can evaluate mumble rap by Golden Age standards and it proves to be culturally valuable, we must also acknowledge the issues with those standards the way mumble rap disrupts them. Rose alludes to this point back in 1994 too, saying that:

The interpretation of black expression constitutes rap’s hidden politics; hegemonic discourses have rendered these institutional aspects of black cultural politics invisible. Political interpretations of rap’s explosive and resistive lyrics are critical to understanding contemporary black cultural politics, but they reflect only a part of the battle. Rap’s hidden politics must also be revealed and contested; otherwise, whether we believe the hype or not won’t make a difference (Rose 1994, 145).

The conversation around “the interpretation of black expression” is ongoing today (Rose 1994, 145). For instance, in Tyler, the Creator’s press room interview after winning Best Rap Album for *Igor* at the 2020 Grammys, he explains his ambivalence towards the award, saying:

On one side, I’m very grateful that what I made could just be acknowledged in a world like this. But also it sucks that whenever we, and I mean guys that look like me, do anything that’s genre-bending...they always put it in the rap or “urban” category. And I don’t like the “urban” word, it’s just a politically correct way to say the n-word to me. So, when I hear that, I’m just like why can’t we just be in pop?... Half of me feels like the rap nomination was a backhanded compliment. Oh, my little cousin wants to play the game, let’s give him the unplugged controller so he could shut up and feel good about it. Another half of me is very grateful that the art that I



made can be acknowledged on a level like this. I don't do the radio stuff. I'm not played in Target. I'm in a whole different world than what the people here listen to (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2020).

What Rose and Tyler both point out is how the standards and vocabularies we apply to Black cultural production reproduce the othering of Blackness in American society. Tyler's analogy comparing *Igor* being put in the Rap category to giving a child an unplugged controller illustrates the infantilizing and belittling attitude of white normative society towards Black culture. When we are judging the aesthetic and cultural value of rap music—a form of art created, nurtured, shaped, informed by, and popularized by Black people and inextricably tied to Black culture—based on how *virtuosic* the lyricism is or to what extent it is communicating *issues of the "streets"* in order to determine the art form's *worthiness of discourse*, we are centering the white affect, a base-line demeaning and othering point of view on Black culture. Unless the underlying assumption is that Black artists inherently would not make much of anything that is *worthy* of discourse, there is no need for this standard to exist to *prove* that their art is worth our time or that it could have aesthetic or cultural value outside of being explicitly political. Also, to further illustrate how this point of view is white normative, said discourse is most often happening in largely white spaces, as 82.8% of music critics are white, and institutions like the Recording Academy are also white and male-dominated spaces—or as the Academy reports, most of its employees and members are “non-diverse” (Grein 2020).

The implication that mumble rappers are not virtuosic lyricists and not explicitly making political statements about the condition of Black Americans so their music is not artistically valuable reiterates reductionary standards for what expression of Blackness deserves to be celebrated and venerated in the public sphere. In Nicole Fleetwood's book *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, she uses imagery of prominent Black celebrity figures to explore racial icons in the realms “activism, political leadership, celebrity, and sports” (Fleetwood 2015, 2). She explains that an icon is “a notable public person who represents a set of attributes, traits, or talents valued by a given society,” a definition which we can extend into the sphere of rap—it characterizes rappers like Kendrick Lamar and Dr. Dre, who, unlike mumble rappers, are hailed for lyricism and making explicit social critiques (Fleetwood 2015, 7). Also unlike mumble rappers, lyricist rappers like Kendrick and Dre receive recognition both within the rap community as all-time greats, as well as within mainstream American society in the form of high-visibility platforms like Superbowl and Grammys performances. Situating “icons” in the framework of race, Fleetwood explains that racial icons “are part of the production and circulation of the racial narrative of this country,” as they stand for a “democratic notion of racial trajectory” to white American society (Fleetwood 2015, 3). Kendrick performing tracks from *To*



*Pimp a Butterfly* at the 2016 Grammys sparked conversation and much-deserved praise for his poignant message about mass incarceration and Black oppression onstage at music's biggest awards show (Leung 2016).<sup>1</sup> This moment exemplifies how Kendrick, a lyricist rapper, fits Fleetwood's characterization of a racial icon: by performing protest music with explicit and salient themes of Blackness and systemic racism with the Academy's support and critical acclaim, this moment demonstrates Fleetwood's idea of a racial icon showing a "racial narrative" about Black oppression and being a symbol of "racial trajectory" to mainstream America for publicly acknowledging these systemic issues. In this way, Kendrick exemplifies the role of lyricist-rapper-as-a-racial-icon, as his music is used as a quintessential example of *good rap music* in rap discourse, creating a framework where qualities like political legibility and lyricism persist as aspects of *good rap* and styles that do not have these qualities are disparaged as *lesser* mainstream production. In rap discourse, this paradigm is apparent when those who appreciate Kendrick are presumed to understand what *good* and *real* rap music is, and those who enjoy mumble rap, for instance, are not considered to have refined taste. This gatekeeping manifests itself in the larger American discourse too, particularly in terms of who gets mainstream recognition in the form of awards and access to platforms to perform.

Importantly, Fleetwood asserts that we must note "the polarity between the lauding of the racial icon and the dismissal and criminalization of black youth en masse" (Fleetwood 2015, 12). She questions, "How does the racial icon serve as the diagnostic and salve for the sickness that is the racial state?" (Fleetwood 2015, 12). A salve is an ointment meant to soothe the body superficially, rather than a treatment which works to eradicate and expel a sickness from within the body. Thus, Fleetwood implies that while racial icons facilitate larger conversations about racism, venerating such figures is not the same as actually mitigating the structural factors that marginalize and subordinate Black people. This logic can be used to destabilize the mainstream veneration of rappers who are lauded for centering lyricism and "issues of the 'streets.'" While, of course, there is much to love and appreciate about someone like Kendrick, the discourse around rap music which holds him up, and others that follow in that same vein of lyrical rap, as a gold-standard in order to disparage other forms of Black expression and creativity is not necessarily productive. Instead, mumble rap should be just taken on its own terms, as Black art deserves to be valued and celebrated for its own sake, as art in its own right, rather than measuring it by the yardstick of how much it tells a "racial narrative" or represents a "democratic notion of racial

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<sup>1</sup> Since *To Pimp a Butterfly* came out in 2015, Kendrick Lamar and his music have become synonymous with expert lyricism and social critique, especially on Blackness and poverty in America, with fans launching in-depth analyses of each artistic choice in his discography to unearth deeper meanings. In his 2022 album, *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*, he resists the public image of being the face of social justice in hip-hop.



trajectory” to the American public (Fleetwood 2015, 3). Further, rap music is listened to predominantly by white and other non-Black people, and that fact is overwhelmingly clear when looking at any rapper’s crowd at a festival or at the audience at their concerts. Thus, mumble rappers are signifying towards mainstream America. By refusing the mold of a lyricist-rapper-as-a-racial-icon and still being relevant musicians anyway, mumble rappers undermine and deconstruct the white normative standards of a mainstream audience for what a Black rap/hip-hop artist must create in order to become a notable name in the genre.

“Know I got a lot, lot/ I’m a rockstar/ I’m a rockstar.”  
– Lil Uzi Vert, “wokeuplikethis\*.”

### CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL VALUE IN RAP

Mumble rap does not fit the established parameters of artistic value in rap music, namely lyricism, yet it has become an undeniable presence in the hip-hop scene from the late 2010s onward. The conversation around mumble rap urges us to interrogate how we ascribe cultural value to Black art. Why do we have to default to political legibility and lyrical bars when we describe a *good rapper* who is making valuable contributions to American culture? Black artistic expression that does not fit those white normative standards should not be demeaned and sidelined. Instead, we must be cognizant of the way we center whiteness when judging Black art. Like Playboi Carti’s beloved and critically acclaimed 2018 mumble rap album *Die Lit* exemplifies, mumble rap as a genre conveys the infectious exuberance found in the chaos and instability of late 2010s, without needing to center lyricism (Rytlewski 2018). In that way, it feels like mumble rappers are doing what celebrated rappers have always done: capturing the elusive energy of the contemporary moment through innovative sounds. This is why mumble rap took over the late 2010s, and the pioneers of the sound are still topping the charts to this day with new, sophisticated iterations of their signature style. Maybe it’s time to reimagine what a rapper ought to represent in the public sphere and what rap music ought to be like for us to value its artistic merits. Let young Black artists make their art and express themselves creatively. They are pushing boundaries, resisting social scripts, and breaking the mold — and isn’t that part of what makes art, art?



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