In this thesis I will argue that the term “Mumble Rap” fails to function as an accurate descriptor of a new generation of mainstream American hip-hop artists, instead being used to mainly disparage its artists, sounds, and ideologies. In doing so, I will attempt to refute the unfair criticisms of those that do not care for this new wave of hip-hop. I will show that Mumble Rap is not used to describe any sort of linguistic property and that this perception of so-called mumbling is simply a phonetic phenomenon that is fairly common throughout any given language. By using language stigmatization models, explanations for the misguided usage of the term and the criticisms of naysayers will be offered. Additionally, I will question the importance of intelligibility in hip-hop music by offering different means of extracting semantic value from an utterance. Ultimately, the unfair stigmatization of these artists will be made clear.

A special thanks goes to professor Patricia Irwin (Swarthmore) for their insight on language stigmatization models and her course LING 41 Dialects of American English, as well professor Jane Chandlee (Haverford), Clare Hanlon (Swarthmore), and Jackson Ramsey (Swarthmore) for their outstanding feedback over the course of this thesis’s completion.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The term Mumble Rap has been used in recent years to refer to a new generation of mainstream hip-hop artists. While there have existed sub-genres and classifications for rappers, such as the notion of a conscience rapper, none have been as peculiar as this term. This is due to Mumble Rap not being a useful term for describing the given group of artists that it tries to describe. In this thesis, I will argue that these artists are not being grouped together due to actually mumbling while rapping, but rather for non-linguistic reasons of behavior and belief. Naysayers often cite not only issues of how a Mumble Rapper might rap, but also how these artists interact with the greater hip-hop narrative and what the specific aspects they focus on in their music. The term Mumble Rap has become conflated with notions that do not fall in line with traditional hip-hop beliefs and as such been used to disparage a group of young artists.

In order to explore this issue of stigmatization, the problem with Mumble Rap will be approached from several linguistic vantages. A phonetic analysis will attempt to describe the actual linguistic phenomenon that is being taken for mumbling. From there, a semantic approach will be taken in order to address some of the criticisms of this new generation that do not have to deal with vocal production, but rather content. This will then allow for a discussion of the sociocultural factors within language stigmatization and the hip-hop world with relation the notion of Mumble Rap. Ultimately, we will see that the term Mumble Rap is not being used to describe vocal production; instead, the term acts as an umbrella term to express the old guard’s discontent and disconnect with the new guard.
i. Brief History of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop, a term often used interchangeably with rap, is a musical genre said to be born in the 1970s. The first hip-hop song to be created is generally agreed upon to be Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” \[1\]. The song features iconic lyrics that capture the sound and ideas of early hip-hop such as, “I said a hip hop, hippie to the hippie, the hip, hip a hop and you don’t stop, a rock it out.” These lighthearted vocals were produced with clarity and intent, much like the content of lyrics of the initial years of hip-hop.

Since its conception, the sound and intentions of hip-hop have changed and been revamped many times over. The 70s featured the genre’s pioneers such as Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash as they experimented with and discovered the art form and culture. The following decade yielded the next wave of hip-hop legends such as KRS-One and Melle Mel and formed “new-school hip-hop” in the sound of New York City and West coast hip-hop, such as the Gangsta rap popularized by artists like Ice-T and eventually N.W.A. The late 80s and early 90s comprise the “golden age of hip-hop” as the music was innovated and diversified through the likes of Run-D.M.C., Beastie Boys, OutKast, and A Tribe Called Quest among others.

In the 90s, hip-hop achieved new levels of mainstream success with the help of artists such as Public Enemy, MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, and Snoop Dogg. It was this decade that arguably shaped modern hip-hop the most, with the rivalry of the east and west coasts, with The Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac as the poster children, the bubbling of Southern styles such as that of Master P, and the early mafioso braggadocio of Nas and Jay Z. At the turn of the century, Eminem captivated the world as one of the biggest white rappers to achieve such success and took hip-hop to a new level of mainstream acceptance.
The 2000s began with the braggadocios and Gangsta rap that had begun in the decades prior, which nearly became synonymous with the mainstream through artists such as 50 Cent. Hip-hop eventually grew to become popular music, attaining a distinction between mainstream and underground. Though, with the early works of Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco, this decade also sparked alternative hip-hop which challenged the materialistic ideologies and Gangsta rap that had plagued the genre for years before. After such rampant success, the genre took a hit in sales in the mid-2000s as the mainstream began to grow stale and new technologies and software combatted the record industry; Nas had even dubbed his eighth studio album *Hip-Hop is Dead* as a reflection on the state of the genre.

Despite this, within a few years the genre found new breath with technological innovations in music and experimentation. The era of Gangsta rap was brought to a metaphorical close as Kanye West outsold 50 Cent in 2007 in a glamorized sales feud. Albums such as Outkast’s *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* and Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak* not only innovated with new sounds and experimentation, but also sparked a generation of rappers open to their feelings and introspection. New Orleans rapper Lil Wayne, despite having been active since the 90s achieved the pinnacle of his career during this time, being a musical feature on what felt like every other song on the radio. In 2008, Wayne was synonymous with hip-hop as he announced his “I Am Music” Tour. The influence and mainstream dominance of Southern hip-hop began to materialize and continued into the 2010s with innovations including T.I.’s trap music.

Throughout the 2010s, hip-hop continued in commercial success. Artists such as Drake, Kendrick Lamar, and J. Cole grew to the forefront with their ability to balance substantial lyrics and mainstream or popular sounds. Simultaneously, the South, specifically Atlanta, Georgia,
began producing rap stars that challenged the very notion of lyricism with the likes of Young Thug, Future, and Migos. These styles featured vocals that were allegedly either too fast or too warbled to decipher. This boom in Southern influence as well as the democratization of hip-hop (with the assistance of social media and outlets such as SoundCloud, YouTube, and the presence of production equipment and software for personal computers) spawned the modern era of hip-hop, whose music is often times referred to as Mumble Rap.

ii. Defining “Mumble Rap”

While criticisms of Mumble Rap are rampant, many true, comprehensive definitions are not, and its origins are blurred at best. Some attribute the birth of modern Mumble Rap to Chicago artist Chief Keef who shocked the world with his abrasive hit “Love Sosa” in 2012 [2]. The track featured Keef as his syllables faded into elongated moans. In June of 2013 Atlanta’s Young Thug achieved another level of mainstream success and criticism with his contribution to Rich Gang’s “Lifestyle”. His vocals on the chorus were, to many, wildly indecipherable, leading to many jokes and critiques on social media and in popular culture [2]. Despite this, HipHopDX’s Justin Hunt believes Atlanta native Future to be the one who started it all with his 2011 smash hit “Tony Montana” [3]. He cites an interview with Peter Rosenberg where Future claims to have been so intoxicated that he couldn’t even open his mouth while making the song [4]. He goes on to say that the next morning he listened to the track and couldn’t understand what he was saying, but knew that he loved it.

This indecipherability of vocals is conceded by the artists themselves, and it seems the artists themselves are aware of the implications of a different or variant pronunciation. Future cited drug use as the cause of his “mumbling”, and while drug usage has had a close and
controversial relationship with hip-hop [5], it cannot be used to distinguish who fits under the umbrella of Mumble Rap. In 2016 on HOT97’s morning show *Ebrow in the Morning*, when asked about Lil Yachty, a 21-year old artist from Atlanta who completely refrains from substances and alcohol, Pittsburgh rapper Wiz Khalifa stated that he called Yachty and others of the same generation “Mumble Rappers” [6]. It was here that the term “Mumble Rap” was coined and popularized, but the disparaging attitudes had been present long prior [2].

In the same *Ebrow in the Morning* broadcast, the host of the show, Ebro Darden, mentions Lil Yachty along with Lil Uzi Vert, a young rapper from Philadelphia. He references a past interview where Uzi had refused to rap over an older hip-hop instrumental, one that was deemed a classic [7]. This then prompted Khalifa’s response of, “We call it Mumble Rap. It ain’t no disrespect for the little homies, they don’t want to rap.” Uzi’s refusal to rap over such an instrumental, as well as his dismissal of older hip-hop styles, was received poorly by Ebro and his audience [7]. With this, the idea of disrespecting the hip-hop’s traditions and the idea of “mumbling” while rapping became conflated.

The idea of a rapper not wanting to rap is confusing and contradictory, as it challenges the traditional notion of the rapper. Uzi and Yachty, in their respective interviews with *Ebrow in the Morning*, have expressed the idea that they aren’t rappers, but rather artists, or rockstars in Uzi’s case. While this is nothing new in the world of hip-hop—Kanye West, Lil Wayne, and many others have denounced the title of rapper and claimed titles such as artists, rockstars, and even creative geniuses in the past [8]—it did not sit well with Ebro [7].

Lil Yachty has been made out to be one of the poster children for the new wave of Mumble Rappers, in some sense. His claim to fame as an eighteen year old with bright-red braids and a voice with heavy autotune modifications happened—what felt like—overnight [9]. With his
aesthetic already fairly unordinary for hip-hop, he brought the wrath of hip-hop heads upon themselves with his disrespectful attitudes and ignorance of early hip-hop legends [10]. Most notably, New York legend Pete Rock took aim at the young rapper, dubbing his content as Mumble Rap and attacking its lack of lyricism.

From these few accounts alone, we see that what constitutes a Mumble Rapper is blurred and even contradictory. The term *Mumble Rap* seems to simultaneously describe everybody and nobody. That is, the term does not accurately describe any particular individual, but rather multiple individuals. These artists dubbed as Mumble Rappers do not seem to care for the label [11], considering it reductive and unfitting. In their respective interviews with the New York radio morning show The Breakfast Club, both Lil Yachty and fellow Atlanta rapper 21 Savage expressed their confusion and frustration with the term, asserting that they do not mumble in their songs [11][12].

There is an issue when artists with vastly different sounds and styles, such as Lil Yachty, 21 Savage, and Young Thug are being grouped together. Where Young Thug may warble and squeal, Yachty sings with autotune [47]. In relation to the two, 21 Savage is direct and straightforward with his delivery. Aside from speaking some non-mainstream dialect of American English, the three do not share much in terms of vocal production.

Often times it appears that those who fall under the umbrella of the term Mumble Rapper are simply those who do not conform to traditional hip-hop roles and practices. This seems possible when considering the attitudes of older hip-hop statesmen in response Lil Uzi Vert’s refusal to rap on the radio or Lil Yachty’s ignorance of older hip-hop. Similarly, being straightforward with one’s lyrics seems to be viewed as not being lyrical. At times, the label is used disparagingly in response to the actions of the rapper rather than their actual rapping, but as
it stands currently the term does not appear useful or consistent for describing a rapper’s actual vocal production. Those who are dubbed as Mumble Rappers are supposedly guilty of either poor lyricism, unintelligibility, or disrespecting the culture and its traditions.

II. PHONETIC ANALYSIS

i. Phonetic Reduction

Despite the label being called “Mumble Rap”, there does not appear to be any real mumbling involved. Traditional definitions of mumbling refer to uttering in a low, confused, indistinct, or inarticulate manner [13]. In this context of modern hip-hop, it is the indistinctness or inarticulateness that best describes this working notion of Mumble Rap more so than the consideration of low volume, tone, or pitch. This manner of production can be defined as phonetic reduction [14][15], or the absence or alteration of certain syllables or sounds in the production of a word or phrase. Phonetic reduction occurs for a plethora of reasons, but it occurs throughout all speakers of living language [14]. So much so that in any given conversation, more than sixty percent of all words can be reduced or relaxed in some way [14]. When reduction occurs, it reveals untempered speech, speech that is unmonitored and more natural to the speaker [15]:

Since the times of Old English, the loss of phonemes and obscuration of vowels have been a prominent feature of the language [16]. Unaccented syllables have reduced to the point that words that were once three-syllable words, in both production and orthography, such as camera, carriage, and evening, have become two-syllable words, changing in production despite maintaining their original orthography [16]. These deletions and reductions do not occur
randomly or sporadically. Consider also the widespread tendency to delete /θ/ and /r/ in initial syllables when preceding a stressed syllable beginning with /v/ and /r/ in words such as polite [p’lait], collide [k’laid], parade [p’æid], and corrupt [k’rupt] when used colloquially in American English. As these phenomena suggest, there exist certain rules and expectations that govern when and how productions of words will change.

A potential cause of ambiguity with regard to mumbling may come from the ability of words to reduce in multiple ways. Take for example the word probably. Dalby’s study of schwa deletion in their investigation of fast speech in American English includes four distinct productions of the word, each with a varying number of syllables and phones [17]. A summary of the findings has been reproduced below in Table 1, along with two additional productions that are possible and commonly used, [præb] and [præl]. The target word can be produced and understood, by different groups and speakers, when featuring as few as only a fourth of its original number of phones and a third of the original number of syllables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[præbəblı]</th>
<th>[præbli]</th>
<th>[præli]</th>
<th>[præl]</th>
<th>[præb]</th>
<th>[præ’]</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Σ</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of unchanged phones</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>3/8</td>
<td>3/8</td>
<td>2/8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Variant pronunciations of probably.

Phonetic reduction has deep roots in language, and with the capacity for words to have multiple reduced variants, the number of possibilities seems extensive. However, not all productions are equally accepted by communities of speakers. Certain productions may be favored over others based on societal conditions and awareness.
ii. AAVE

The breadth of phonetic reduction is seemingly vast, and yet many still react negatively toward variant pronunciation. The ubiquity of phrases and words such as *want to* \([\text{want tu}]\) and *should have* \([\text{jud hæv}]\) being pronounced as *wanna* \([\text{ˈwane}]\) and *shoulda* \([\text{ˈʃʊrə}]\), respectively, is overlooked while reductions such as those found in *something* \([\text{ˈsʌmθɪŋ}]\) as *sum* \([\text{sam}]\) or *that* \([\text{ðæt}]\) as *dat* \([\text{dæt}]\) are criticized and looked down upon. Such hypocrisy indicates the overwhelming ignorance or unawareness of the existence of such high rates of phonetic reduction among speakers. This inability to consistently distinguish phonetic reduction parallels the inconsistencies that occur when discerning mumbling in modern hip-hop music.

In order to identify where stigma against certain phonetically reduced productions stem from, we must examine the production in the context of its language and, more specifically, dialect. American variants of English run deep in number, ranging from mainstream dialects to creoles or pidgins. Hip-hop was born in African-American communities and as such is founded in variants of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) \([1]\). It should be noted that there are numerous variants within AAVE itself, and that AAVE is not a monolith. However, there remain a few notable characteristics that are consistent throughout many variants and dialects \([18]\).

AAVE features phonetic reduction, perhaps most prominently in consonant cluster reduction. Often, final consonant clusters are reduced when preceding a vowel, such as in *trus’ each* \([\text{trəs ɪʃ}]\) instead of *trust each* \([\text{trʌst ɪʃ}]\) \([18]\). Middle and final [r] gets reduced as in *aight* \([\ˈeɪt]\) instead of *alright* \([\ˈɔːlrait]\) and *cah* \([\ˈkɑː]\) instead of *car* \([\ˈkɑɹ]\). With final position nasals, reduction causes the preceding vowel to become nasalized as in *mae’* \([\ˈmæ]\) instead of *man* \([\ˈmæn]\) \([18]\). Furthermore, /s/ in a final position is absent when used to denote a third-person
present tense verb, as in *he talk* instead of *he talks*; possession, as in *man dog* instead of *man’s dog*; and plurality, as in *many time* instead of *many times* [18].

AAVE also allows phonetic “relaxations” that are both accepted in standard and mainstream dialects, such as *coulda* ['kʊrə] or *hafta* ['hæftə] instead of *could have* [kəd hæv] or *have to* [hæv tu], and relaxations that are criticized and found incorrect. These stigmatized relaxations include using /fl/ or /v/ in place of /θ/, as in *troof* [tʃuːf] instead of *truth* [tʃuːθ]; the substitution of /skr/ for /str/, as in *skreet* [skriːt] instead of *street* [striːt]; and even the metathesis, or rearrangement of sounds, found in *aks* [æks] instead of *ask* [æsk] [18][19].

Outside of reductions and relaxations, AAVE features characteristics and grammatical functions such as the use of habitual *be*, as in *it be crazy* or the use of stressed *been* to denote a state or action that was and is still relevant, as in *I been known him* [18][19]. All of these distinguishing features of AAVE have been subject to criticism from speakers of mainstream or standard dialects of English. Many of these features are shared with dialects outside of AAVE as well and garner criticism to varying extents. For example, due to reasons geographical and political in nature, much of AAVE has overlap with Southern and rural English dialects. Southern and rural variants suffer from being considered incorrect or inferior, just as AAVE variants do, and so it follows that it is not necessarily the features of the dialect that give rise to stigmatization, but rather something else [20].

### III. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

#### i. Source of Semantic Value

Critics of popular contemporary hip-hop often cite a decline of lyricism in the mainstream music of today [21]. It is difficult to evaluate any given lyrics without expressing some sort of
subjectivity, and so the content of the semantic value drawn from lyrics will not be argued for or defended. However, it is possible to determine the source of semantic value without any interference of personal bias. While meaning from music has traditionally been found in the content of the lyrics of a song, it can also be found in a lyric’s manner of vocal production.

Many modern mainstream hip-hop artists seem to have prioritized conveying meaning through their delivery and flow, or cadence and rhythm, over doing so through their lyrics [15]. In other words, the semantic value of lyrics has moved from the lyrics themselves to their manner of vocal production. This is not to say modern popular hip-hop music is devoid of any lyrics with intent or substantial meaning; there still exist mainstream artists such as Kendrick Lamar who are able to deliver meaning through both lyrical content and vocal production [22]. However, many popular contemporary hip-hop artists claim their focus is more on how they say something than what they say [4].

In Rosenberg’s interview with Future, the Atlanta rap star explained his thoughts on ambiguous vocal production. For Future, the ambiguity in a given production is what adds new meaning to the lyric. They likened the experience of hearing a variant production to that of seeing a compelling piece of art, suggesting that it is the experience of audition which provides semantic value for the auditor [4]. When asked about why he choose to keep the variant production, Future explained:

“But I loved it! This shit sound raw though! This shit sound good, I’m not going to change it. Because like you say, when I freestyle something it—I be—I KNOW it’s a little something that you can’t really understand but it’s that that make you feel like you like it. That’s what you like it for... ...If I could just say ‘Tony Ma’ on the whole song, that shit hard. Just the moment, a moment of just a phrase, just changes your whole perspective of the way you look at somebody — and people forget that. They get caught up in other things, but that’s what it is. You know what I’m saying? It’s graffiti on the wall. A good picture, just a word. Somebody just graffiti they shit... and you being able to see it in the right spot. Somebody just put a graffiti sign on the main highway of New York, man, they just get praise for that. You know what I’m saying? That’s what it’s all about to me — that’s art.” — Future
Evidently, the artists are cognizant of their attribution of meaning. As traditional hip-hop artists consciously placed semantic value in their lyrics through the means of literary device, wordplay, or storytelling, modern hip-hop artists do so through their manner of vocal production.

**ii. Ad-libs & Onomatopoeia**

Traditionally, hip-hop songs are the product of some combination of lyrics and instrumentation. However, artists often employ additional vocals that are not the main intended lyrics, but rather vocal augmentations to the main lyrics or instrumental. These additional vocals are known as ad-libs and have been a part of hip-hop, and music in general, for decades [23]. Within the context of hip-hop, ad-libs originated as the duty of the hype-man, one who supports the rapper by using exclamations to excite the audience [24]. It became a key part of the rapper’s music when innovators such as New York’s Dipset began experimenting with additional vocals, though it was Southern trap artists such as Jeezy and T.I. that popularized their use in mainstream hip-hop music [24]. It was during these times that ad-libs worked not only to embellish lyrics, but also to index identity as evidenced by Jay Z on DJ Khaled’s “I Got the Keys” when they rap, *y’all know it’s one of one soon as y’all hear that ‘uh, huh-uh, uh’* in reference to their iconic ad-lib.

In the modern day, ad-libs are ubiquitous in contemporary hip-hop music. They have transcended the role of indexing identity and have made their way to smooth out flows or rhythms, finish lyrics, and accentuate the main vocals of the track [23]. Not only this, but, like flows, ad-libs have come to be treated as public domain, as many rappers utilize the same ad-libs over and over for different songs [51].

Often times these ad-libs are onomatopoeic, signifying the movement of cars or the sound of firearms. Perhaps one of the most famous ad-libbers is New York’s Desiigner who, in his
debut single “Panda”, utilized large, boisterous grrrrrrrraaaaah and gyeh, gyeh, gyeh sounds to replicate the sound of a firearm in order to add to the hard-hitting nature of the song’s lyrics and instrumental. While ad-libs tend to live only in music, Desiigner has come to utilize his iconic ad-libs in his everyday speech, which serve as both a reference to his hit single and an index of his brand as an artist [25]. Furthermore, onomatopoeic ad-libs have been shown to transition from non-word productions to items in hip-hop’s lexical inventory. Such is the case with the popular skrt ad-lib which has gone from being used to mimic the speedy movement of a vehicle to meaning the act of leaving in itself as in Floridian rapper Kodak Black’s “SKRT” where he says, *Stick and move, then I skrt* or Lil Yachty’s “Free K$upreme Freestyle” with, *End of the year we gon’ skrt off in Ghost* [26][52].

One of the most peculiar cases of these non-words entering the collective lexicon is that of British comedian Michael Dapaah’s viral parody song, “Man’s Not Hot”. Under the character of Big Shaq, Dapaah exclaims on the refrain, *The ting goes skrrrrah / pap, pap, ka-ka-ka / skidiki-pap-pap / and a pu-pu-pudrrr boom / skya, du-du-ku-du-dun-dun / poom, poom, you dun know*, in attempt to parody popular contemporary hip-hop artists and their excessive use of ad-libs [27]. Similarly, in 2015 Californian hip-hop artist Hopsin created a song entitled, “No Words” where he claims to not have recited actual words, but rather just made ambiguous noises in order to poke fun at Mumble Rappers [28]. Despite these efforts in parody, it seems that mainstream hip-hop fans enjoy these ambiguous non-words as Dapaah’s song has been certified silver by the British Phonographic Industry and Hopsin’s song has often been called his best song to date [29][30].

In the hip-hop of these so-called Mumble Rappers, it appears that the semantic value of a word or phrase has been subordinated by the utterance’s contextual semantic meaning. Typically,
we construe an understanding through the meaning of the words of a given lyric, but here we are more so to construe understanding from how the words are said. While delivery, the way one produces a lyric, has always been a key component of rapping, it has today become just as much the vessel for relaying meaning as the delivered words themselves. As such, this new generation of hip-hop artists has innovated upon and transcended the traditional means of conveying semantic meaning through their music.

### iii. Complexity

As we’ve seen, common criticisms of AAVE, among most variants and dialects, touch on notions of inferiority and incorrectness. In conjunction with MAE being propagated and institutionalized throughout the nation’s education system, the stigmas against AAVE have created false stereotypes that speakers of AAVE must be less intelligent and that their language must be much simpler than MAE [20]. Such claims seem unfounded and off-base, as suggested by the complexity and presence of rules that govern the many features of AAVE variants. Despite the inherent intricacies that compose all language, criticisms of AAVE and its features remain.

This notion of stigmatized language being basic or reflecting lower intelligence parallels the stigma against Mumble Rappers being less intelligent or creating simpler content. Language being inherently complex does not appear to be sufficient for critics, and understandably so, as MAE may be equally complex as AAVE. However, it is entirely possible that AAVE and other variants may have complexities that a mainstream dialect would lack [18] [20].

Though meaning is traditionally ascribed to a word or utterance, there exists some semantic value in the production of the utterance as well. Phonetic distinctiveness is the clarity of a production, and discrepancies in clarity suggest certain characteristics about the speaker [19].
That is, features such as phonetic reduction, relaxation, vowel space dispersion, or consonant lenition can index some aspect of the speaker’s identity. For example, Kevin Heffernan’s work on the relationship between phonetic distinctiveness and identity found that certain discrepancies in clarity can suggest whether or not the speaker is perceived to be masculine or macho [31].

Heffernan took the speech of eight male American radio DJs and presented them before listeners. These participants were to rate the likelihood of whether a certain DJ fit a certain characteristic with the metric of: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The ten characteristics the DJs’ speech was rated on were: regional accent, technical ability, education, knowledge, friendliness, machismo, physical-size, composure, material wealth, and self-confidence.

Some of the ten characteristics seemed to correlate with one another. DJs who were considered machismo tended to be perceived as larger in physical size as well. In order to reduce this possible noise, Heffernan aggregated the scales with a Principle Component Analysis, allowing them to derive the smallest number of components which convey as much of the possible data. With this, the ten characteristics were reduced to four. The study found that just from the phonetic distinctiveness of a given production, listeners were able to ascribe semantic values on the speaker’s masculinity, social class, personality, and regional accent.

The idea of phonetic features and characteristics, such as phonetic reduction or vowel space dispersion, being tools for indexing identity suggests a greater level of complexity inherent to variant forms of language. Regardless of the semantic value of an utterance, the characteristics of its production seem to convey some sort of information which can be found relevant.

In a more general sense, the very act of phonetic reduction can be said to have its own inherent complexity in some form. Julie Sedivy suggests that phonetic reduction is the human
parallel of a computer’s data compression [14]. As established, there exist rules that govern when an utterance reduces. However, not all words and phones reduce with equal probability. It should follow that common words, such as train, would reduce more often than uncommon words, such as slain, due to our familiarity with and rampant usage of the more common words [14]. Sedivy also finds that reduction occurs more often in predictable contexts. She suggests the word fine is reduced more in, You’re going to be just fine, than it is in, The last word of this sentence is fine. Such subtle and specific rules of phonetic reduction may indicate the efficiency of human language production. Speakers are able to convey semantic value and information in their productions while using as few physiological resources as possible. Notions of variant dialect speakers being lazy or incorrect in their pronunciation become sullied when these instances of phonetic production are interpreted as calculated attempts at efficiency.

IV. SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS

The phonetic reduction found in Mumble Rap is rarely ever considered within the larger context of the phonetic reduction found in general language use or other forms of hip-hop. This hypocrisy maintains when acknowledging the parallels of the stigmatization of Mumble Rap by the hip-hop community and the stigmatization of AAVE by the mainstream English speaking community; due to the existing stigma against the beliefs and practices of a target group, the group’s vocal production became considered falsely equivalent manifestations of the original stigma. 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.
i. Stigmatization

Consider the notion of a variant or dialect being considered incorrect. Such a value judgement implies the existence of a correct or accepted dialect: the aforementioned mainstream and standard dialects, often times dubbed Mainstream American English (MAE). It is the very nature of not complying with the institutionalized norms of MAE that appears to forge stigma. In other words, the state of being different from what is considered the norm is reason enough for stigmatization. This reactionary hatred toward the foreign is not one that is exclusive to language and vocal production, but rather one that is present in society itself [20].

Stigma originates and is placed on speakers of a variant before it is placed on the actual variant production itself. Historically, language has been used as a divisive tool, creating barriers in distinctions such as class, sex, gender, and race [18][20]. Those with the power and influence are able to maintain and affect those that lack in societal standing [18][20]. In the context of AAVE, many modern speakers have roots in the struggle for equality that they found in living in the United States. In America, from the onslaught of slavery to 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.

As the stigma against AAVE developed from the pre-existing stigma on AAVE speakers and their practices, the stigma against mumbling may have arisen from the existing stigma against young hip-hop artists and their practices. In this language stigmatization model, the dominant group’s stigmatization of a minority group based on behavior and practice eventually causes the stigmatization of that minority group’s language. At any given point there has existed
an old guard of hip-hop that does not understand the behaviors of the new guard, suggesting a power dynamic between the existing and rising artists. The old guard’s disapproval of the new guard’s actions may manifest in the criticism of vocal production with the disparaging label of Mumble Rap, just as the stigmatization of AAVE speakers manifests in the intolerance of AAVE and variants.

**ii. The Communicative Burden**

In everyday conversation there exist certain dynamics between participants [20]. Ideally, speakers adjust their speech in accordance with non-linguistic factors such as familiarity, respect, or deference, in order to yield a conversation that is acceptable and comprehensible by each participant. That is, each participant has a responsibility to the other participants such that there is mutual understanding and expectation; they work together in order to establish new insight and progress the conversation. However, not all exchanges feature speakers that are on equal footing in terms of societal and power dynamics. It is here that preexisting stigma can affect our speech production and the outcome of the conversation.

Historically, native American English speakers make the decision of whether or not to participate in a given conversation when faced with a variant of English that is foreign to them [20]. When the decision to not participate is made, the responsibility of understanding is placed solely on the other speaker, signaling that the speaker who opted out has no intention of working to establish understanding. Those who belong to the dominant or mainstream variant seem to believe that they can forego their responsibility and place the burden of communication upon the minority variant speaker [20].
When the medium changes from conversation to song, these notions of responsibility and communicative burden persist. The expectations are no longer between speakers, but are now between the artist and the audience. Experimental and avant-garde pieces aside, most music is made with the intention of an audience consuming it and—to varying extents—comprehending it. The responsibility of the artist is to provide enough in their music such that the audience will be able to understand what is being conveyed. The audience, in turn, must be able to listen and process the intent of the artist. If either side fails in their responsibility, the relationship between artist and audience begins to dissolve and the medium of song proves useless for exchanging information and ideas.

Of course, the idea of a rapper mumbling is enough to suggest that, in the context of modern hip-hop, the artist is not upholding their responsibility—they would be falling short in the delivery of their message. However, we have seen that modern hip-hop artists are not necessarily mumbling, but rather indexing various features, such as identity, by phonetically reducing. It is not the artists that are failing in their responsibilities, but rather the audience—or at the least some portion of them.

Critics of modern hip-hop tend to make sweeping generalizations and false equivalencies regarding the actions and behavior of this new generation of rappers, as seen prior. Such unwillingness to interact with modern hip-hop is akin to choosing not to participate in the conversation. Instead of working with the artist's offering to build an understanding of what is being conveyed, those who critique are placing the burden of communication solely upon the artist, which is a strange feat in the context of hip-hop. Throughout hip-hop's history there have been many popular artists that have challenged the listener with their lyricism, whether it be
through clever metaphors or mind-bending wordplay. The audience has always been a part of the conversation [48].

This shift from audience participation to audience disengagement is telling of larger shifts in hip-hop culture. Many have noted the decline of lyricism, or expression in an imaginative manner, in the past decade or so of hip-hop’s existence [21][50]. Though a lack of lyricism on the artist’s part does not entail the artist’s rejection of communicative responsibility. If anything, lyrics that are simple and direct should aid in understanding. And so, it appears that those who do not wish to interact with contemporary hip-hop music fall into the model of those who do not wish to participate in a given conversation with a minority variant speaker.

The parallel drawn is only bolstered when considering the similarities in dynamics between mainstream speakers and variant speakers, and contemporary hip-hop artists and their critics. Mainstream speakers communicatively burden variant speakers because of their stigmatization of various linguistic features and cultural characteristics of variant speakers. This works similarly in the case of artist and audience. Those who disdain Mumble Rap communicatively burden Mumble Rappers because of their disapproval of the actions of Mumble Rappers. Because critics already stigmatize Mumble Rappers for how they do not fit into the traditional mold of hip-hop artists, they maintain their disapproval by not even trying to engage with the productions of Mumble Rappers.

iii. Shifting Landscapes

Since its founding, hip-hop has been subject to several shifts in paradigm and cultural practice. It seems that each decade brought new ideas and techniques into the collective consciousness of hip-hop culture, redefining what hip-hop meant each step along the way. There has always
existed an old guard of sorts, those that feel an attachment to what they knew as hip-hop, so much so that they reject whatever changes and advancements time might bring. This was the case when artists such as Kanye West and Drake popularized the notion of the rapper who also sings in the mid 2000s [32]. An exemplary instance of the clash of old guard and new guard was the years when autotune, artificial adjustments made to vocals, crept its way into mainstream hip-hop. Traditionalists such as Jay Z opposed the use of the technology, going so far as to create a song denouncing the practice, “Death of Autotune” [33]. However, many artists of a younger generation, such as Lil Wayne, T-Pain, and even Jay Z’s protege and close friend, Kanye West, embraced the use of autotune and pioneered the practice to the point that it became commonplace in mainstream productions [34]. The issue of Mumble Rap is yet another instance of traditionalist views clashing with changes in the culture.

Many view the simple lyrical content and directness of modern hip-hop music to be the “dumbing down” of the art form [2][21]. These shifts in style did not originate from untempered natural growth of the culture and medium. Rather, the constant hand of commercialization guided the sounds and styles of hip-hop to where it is today. Marxian hegemony theory offers an explanation as to why and how a fledgling genre such as hip-hop in its earlier years could be turned into a mainstream industrial machine [35]. The dominant class in a given society uses its privileged access to the institutions and ideologies of the society it dominates in order to influence it for the benefit of itself [35]. Mainstream capitalist institutions, such as the record or advertisement industries, were able to contract popular figures of the bubbling genre, exchanging capital for influence. With corporate influence, the sound of mainstream hip-hop became calculated and direct, all the while under the guise of achieving success in the mainstream.
With the advent of social media like Twitter and democratized content platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud, hip-hop gained a new boon in the 2000s. The underground, once referring to those artists not in the light of the mainstream, found a new home on the internet. The Internet Age had already conflicted with mainstream corporate interests in the early years of the decade with record sale hindering technologies such as Napster and LimeWire, eventually leading to the shift from record sales to record streams [36]. These advancements in information distribution allowed for the democratization of hip-hop music making resources. Anyone could download instrumentals or software to make instrumentals off the internet, record through a home microphone set up, and self-publish music before an audience of millions. Although these innovations led to the diminishment of corporate control, the influence of these industrial giants had already run deep, reducing the sound and style of hip-hop to catchy hooks and jingles.

In the modern day, hip-hop and R&B, two genres that have historically drawn from similar influences and sounds, are together the most popular genre in the United States [37]. While streaming services such as Apple Music, Spotify, and Tidal feature the music of most artists, the innovation and progress comes from those that inhabit the platform of SoundCloud. Dubbed “SoundCloud rappers”, these independent artists publish their content before the vast reaches of the internet. The name of the game has become virality; artists try to make their claim to fame through breakout hits, hoping for high view and follower counts. The influence of commercialization remains, however, through the prioritization of memorable melodies and sounds over substantial lyrical content and message. What’s more is that many of these aspiring artists are younger than ever, ranging from college aged individuals to the stylings of 13-year old Matt Ox of Philadelphia. As is, the current stage of hip-hop is vastly different from its original foundations and is capable of shifting even more.
In addition to changes in technology and ideology, mainstream hip-hop also experienced geographical shifts. In the early years, New York and the North in general had been the primary innovators and influencers of hip-hop [38]. The West coast eventually began to garner attention throughout the 90s, but the South had simultaneously started bubbling [38]. Throughout the 2000s, the South’s presence as the most influential in terms of sound and style came to be known [39]. With the rise of Southern artists came the propagation of Southern dialects, which tend to feature more variant production than dialects of the north or west. This may affect the perception of the speech of Southern artists as being unintelligible to some listeners.

iv. Foreign Hip-Hop

With the commercialization of hip-hop came its eventual globalization. Artists from all over the world and all walks of life have been able to use hip-hop as a medium for expression [40]. While many of these artists do not break out of their respective countries, there have been a few that have gained enough star power to make it to bigger markets abroad. Such is the case with Swedish rapper Yung Lean who broke out in the early 2010s and garnered an impressive following through the internet [41][42]. Yung Lean was able to develop his popularity through his eccentric and intriguing style, but his use of English certainly aided in relaying his music to global audiences. That being the case, it is the crossing over of hip-hop artists that do not utilize English to such extents that prove particularly interesting.

In recent years there has been a surge of hip-hop from Asian countries. 2015 saw the American mainstream breakout of South Korean rapper, Keith Ape. With the ability to switch back and forth between his registers of Korean and English, Keith was able to amass a following and even collaborate on the remix of his hit single, “It G Ma” with several famous American hip-
hop artists such as Wocka Flocka Flame, A$AP Ferg, and Father. Moreover, 2017 saw the mainstream crossover of Chinese hip-hop group, Higher Brothers. Consisting of members MaSiWei, DZKnow, Psy.P, and Melo, the Higher Brothers rap almost exclusively using their Chengdu or Sichuan dialect. Despite being active for less than two years, the group has already established a foothold in the West with plans to tour in North America in 2018.

Contemporary fans of mainstream hip-hop do not necessarily have the ability to understand what artists such as Keith Ape or Higher Brothers are saying in their lyrics, though they do seem to be compelled by their artistry. It should be conceded that these artists tend to make music similar in sound and style to popular contemporary American hip-hop, though their utilization of captivating flows, and sharp delivery seems to be enough to convey the energy and mood they wish to express. While critics berate modern artists for being ambiguous in their vocal productions, fans of said artists seem to be able to enjoy artists that are completely ambiguous and unintelligible to them without any issue.

This uncanny acceptance of these foreign artists with unintelligible raps in mainstream hip-hop seems to suggest the fading importance of lyrical content within the genre. This is bolstered by the fact that Rihanna’s Jamaican patois-tinged hit single, “Work” has gone six-times platinum in the metrics of the Recording Industry Association of America. Even with many mainstream consumers lacking the ability to comprehend patois, the song was able to reach number one on the Billboard Charts, begging the question if intelligibility is even a factor when it comes to consuming modern hip-hop music.

v. Hip-Hop’s History of Mumbling

While many claim the unintelligibility and ambiguity of lyrics from popular mainstream hip-hop artists to be a new style, hip-hop has a long history of artists with ambiguous lyrics and delivery
Many Mumble Rap naysayers seem to overlook the efforts of Fu-Schnickens in their 1992 single, “True Fuschnick”. On this track, member Chip Fu delivers a flurry of lyrics interspersed with not only non-sense words, but actual mumbling. Similar to the use of ad-libs and non-words and the practice of phonetic reduction in contemporary hip-hop, Chip Fu’s non-word mumbling is used to smooth out flows and maintain melody in addition to conveying the sporadic nature of his raps.

Chip Fu and the Fu-Schnickens may often be forgotten in the context of hip-hop’s extensive history, but even more mainstream and popular artists exhibited the production of ambiguous vocals. Wu-Tang Clan’s Ol’ Dirty Bastard was notorious for garbled vocal productions, but their affiliation to the Wu-Tang Clan seemed to spare them from the disdain of critics. When Atlanta trap music legend T.I. was asked of his opinions by Eliot Wilson on the then-poster child of Mumble Rap, Young Thug, T.I. rebutted by questioning if Wilson understood everything artists such as Ol’ Dirty Bastard or Bone Thugs-n-Harmony said in their songs. Wilson and the live studio audience admittedly conceded to T.I.’s point. Such responses raise the question: Why aren’t these artists of the past grouped in with all of the other “Mumble Rappers”?

V. ANALYSIS OF POPULAR HIP-HOP LYRICS

i. Purpose

It has become evident that the alleged vocal characteristics that constitute a Mumble Rapper of the modern day are equally applicable to artists of days past. This blatant hypocrisy on the part of critics of the modern generation of hip-hop suggests that vocal production is not what defines a Mumble Rapper. The previously discussed language stigmatization model suggests that the
stigmatization of this target group’s vocal production comes from the existing stigmatization of said group’s behavior and practices. This analysis of phonetic reduction in popular mainstream hip-hop music over the past two decades will work to show that this label of Mumble Rapper is based mostly on non-linguistic factors, as there is evidence for this “Mumbling” throughout hip-hop’s existence.

ii. Methodology

Six popular hip-hop songs were analyzed for instances of ambiguity and phonetic reduction. In order to reflect the preferences of mainstream hip-hop listeners and avoid potential biases, these songs were chosen from among the number one songs on the Billboard Year-End charts. Going backwards from 2016, songs were chosen five years apart such that as many different eras of hip-hop as possible were accounted for. The oldest song is from 1991 as Billboard introduced their hip-hop charts in response to the genre ascending in mainstream popularity during that time [46]. The six chosen songs were: “Treat ‘Em Right” (1991) by Chubb Rock, “California Love” (1996) by 2Pac featuring Dr. Dre and Roger Troutman, “My Baby” (2001) by Lil’ Romeo, “It’s Goin’ Down” (2006) by Yung Joc, “Look at Me Now” (2011) by Chris Brown featuring Lil Wayne and Busta Rhymes, and “Panda” (2016) by Desiigner.

The analysis consisted of counting and recording the number of instances of phonetic reduction or ambiguity found in each song as produced by the given hip-hop artists. This was then considered in relation to the total length of time where an artist is delivering unique vocals in the given song. Phonetic reduction or ambiguity was defined as any deviations from the MAE production of a given word. Considering the same reduction within the exact same environment, as as is the case in a repeated chorus for example, would only skew the data. In order to account
for this, repeated lyrics, such as in a chorus or refrain, were only accounted for once unless there
was significant variation in the repeated instance of vocal production. Additionally, the duration
of unique vocals were recorded for each track, ignoring repeated components once again. In
order to be certain whether or not a given vocal production was an ambiguity or reduction, the
lyrics of each song were referenced during the listening. These lyrics were obtained from Genius,
a popular crowdsourced annotation website that originally launched under the name Rap Genius.
While transcription is possible by anyone on Genius, there is a system of moderation in place in
the form of account requirements based on previous annotations and transcriptions. Furthermore,
artists themselves often engage with these transcriptions and annotations, verifying the
correctness of their lyrics and intentions.

iii. Results

The ratios of the number of unique instances of phonetic reduction or ambiguity to the
duration of unique vocal production in each song are presented below in Table 2.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td>Treat 'Em Right</td>
<td>California Love</td>
<td>My Baby</td>
<td>It's Goin' Down</td>
<td>Look at Me Now</td>
<td>Panda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Unique Vocals (Sec)</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction/Duration Ratio</td>
<td>26.76%</td>
<td>45.88%</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>48.91%</td>
<td>44.14%</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Analysis of Billboard Year-End Hip-Hop Chart Number Ones
iv. Discussion

From an initial glance at the results, there appears to be a fairly consistent presence of ambiguity and reduction from between the years 1996 and 2011 with an average of about 44.73% unique reduction/duration ratio during those years. “Treat ‘Em Right” boasts a mere 26.76% unique reduction/duration ratio while “Panda” features a ratio as high as 75%. In other words, Desiigner produced reduced or ambiguous vocals three quarters of the time that they produced unique vocals throughout the song. These results suggest the rising trend of increased reduction in popular mainstream hip-hop as the genre grew. However, there are additional factors to consider.

While the oldest song considered and the newest song considered had the lowest and highest unique reduction/duration ratios, respectively, there exists a nearly two decade span where ambiguity and reduction seemed to be present at an equivalent or at least similar rate. Contextually, these were the years of hip-hop’s commercialization as a genre. This could suggest that as the genre’s mainstream output grew, the presence of reduction became somewhat normalized and accepted by listeners. After all, there is a significant increase between the unique reduction/duration ratio of the Year-End number one of 1991 and that of 1996, one much larger than the differences between the years 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011. This ratio increase is fairly similar to the increase between the years 2011 and 2016. If such an increase between the years 1996 and 2001 maintained for the next two decades, perhaps the increase between 2011 and 2016 could become normalized in mainstream hip-hop in the years to come.

Other observations to be made include the regional and dialectal factors of each song’s creators. Chubb Rock is of the New York descent, while 2Pac and Dr. Dre represent the West coast, specifically California. The artists between 2001 and 2011 are predominantly from the
American South, such as New Orleans and Atlanta. Desiigner is from New York as well, however many have criticized them of mimicking Southern styles, specifically that of Atlantean Future [53]. These shifts in unique reduction/duration ratio fall in line with notions of Southern dialects featuring more variant features [18][20]. Lil’ Romeo’s “My Baby” features the second lowest unique reduction/duration ratio, however this could be accounted for by the fact that he was around 11 years old at the time of the song’s creation. The intent to market a child-friendly rapper may have played a part in Lil’ Romeo’s vocal productions.

Increasing the number of years accounted for and including songs that are closer together in age would definitely improve upon this analysis. But also, the analysis of multiple songs for each year may yield a better perspective on the reduction accepted in hip-hop in a given year. Further considerations could include a deeper dissection of the reduction by discerning specific reductions such as consonant cluster dropping or vowel deletion. Ultimately, one could apply this metric to non hip-hop songs as well, in order to answer the question of whether mainstream music consumers are embracing variant production in their music in general.

The obvious trend to take away from this data is the increase of reduction and ambiguity in mainstream hip-hop throughout hip-hop’s presence in the Billboard Year-End charts. However, perhaps the more salient point is that an increase of reduction took place in the first place. That is, the fact that an increase in unique reduction/duration ratio occurred between 1991 and 1996 maintained for so long suggests that this phenomenon of ambiguity and reduction is nothing new to the world of hip-hop, as listeners were faced with more ambiguity at the time of that shift as well.
VI. CONCLUSION

In its current context, the term Mumble Rap does not prove useful in defining any style of rapping. Rather, the term is used to disparage artists of a new generation who do not fit into the traditional roles of hip-hop. The term has little basis in actual vocal production and does not seem to refer to any linguistic characteristic shared by the artists the term tries to define. As such, the term Mumble Rap fails as a descriptor.

Furthermore, the various alleged shortcomings of the new generation are the result of ideological disconnects with the old guard. Many claims of the old guard, such as the decline of lyricism and lack of intelligence, are misguided in that the newer artists have taken these traditional practices and adapted them to their fitting in the modern climate. Notions of lyricism, meaning attribution, and complexity with regard to lyrics have changed over the years due to a multitude of contextual factors. And, as shown, these shortcomings are not suffered solely by the new generation of hip-hop artists, but hip-hop artists of years past as well.

The stigmatization of the contemporary mainstream hip-hop artist follows the pattern in which minority dialects and variants are stigmatized by mainstream language speakers; since the ideologies and practices of the modern hip-hop artist do not fit into those of traditional hip-hop, the old guard’s existing stigma against these new artists manifests as the stigmatization of the new artists’ vocal productions.

With the rapidly evolving climate of modern hip-hop in the Information Age comes changes in cultural thought and behavior. These new artists dubbed as Mumble Rappers are the result of corporate capitalist interests in hip-hop and have been shown to adapt the art form of rap within the confines of a post-meaning world. Hip-hop has historically struggled with welcoming the next era of ideas and practice, as evidenced by changes in technology and data
distribution methods, and while these newer artists may be alleged to be indecipherable, it must be remembered that there has always existed artists who “mumble”.
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