

Notice: This material may be protected
by copyright law (title 17 U.S. code).

If this material has missing or unreadable pages, please contact the
Georgia State University Library Interlibrary Loan Office
at libill@langate.gsu.edu or (404) 413-2790.

Thank you for using Interlibrary Loan and ILLiad.

‘Every time I dress myself, it go motherfuckin’ viral’: Post-verbal flows and memetic hype in Young Thug’s mumble rap

MICHAEL WAUGH

Newcastle University, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK

Abstract

Hip-hop studies have historically centred on issues of the ‘street’ or virtuosic lyricism and flow, foregrounded as evidence of the ‘seriousness’ of the genre. While these have undoubtedly been valuable theoretical approaches, the prominence of social networking in the 2010s (with its vast implications for communication and identity politics) has sculpted a generation of rappers whose vocal style and self-representation disintegrate prior assumptions about hip-hop identity. These artists, who have flourished in tandem with the rise of streaming services, have been disparagingly dubbed ‘mumble rap’ by traditionalists owing to the apparent indecipherability of their vocals and a lack of emphasis on observational or poetic lyricism. In this article I argue that this myopic label undervalues the groundbreakingly post-verbal nature of the music being created by these rappers, and highlights the innovations of mumble rap, exploring the centrality of social media, memes and streaming to its existence while critically examining its protagonists’ unconventionally stylised vocals. After analysing the impact of streaming, information overload and audience participation (through social media hype and memes) on contemporary hip-hop, I survey the growth of melodic Auto-Tuned vocals and repetitive lyricism in the work of pioneering mumble rappers such as Future, before turning to an extended examination of Atlanta’s Young Thug, whose controversially malleable vocal style, which prioritises experimentation with vocal textures while confounding the rules of hip-hop flow, is mirrored by his impulsive exploitation of social media and androgynous fashion sense, establishing him as the most revolutionary archetype of so-called mumble rap.

Overwhelmingly, debates surrounding hip-hop in academia have centred on issues of the ‘street’ (McLeod 2006; Judy 2011; Kelley 2011; Baldwin 2011) or virtuosic lyricism and flow (Adams 2009; Caplan 2014; Dyson 2011; Kent 2014). These elements have been foregrounded as evidence of the ‘seriousness’ of the genre (and, as such, its worthiness of discourse), incorporating numerous examinations of hip-hop identity and masculinity (Krimms 2000; Jeffries 2011; Hess 2005). While these have undoubtedly been valuable theoretical approaches to hip-hop studies historically, their scope has become limiting in a musical era driven by social media interaction (Jenkins *et al.* 2013; Jenkins 2012; Margiotta 2012). The prominence of social networking in the 2010s, with its vast implications for communication and identity politics, has sculpted a new generation of rappers whose vocal style and self-representation disintegrate prior assumptions about hip-hop identity. These artists

have been disparagingly dubbed 'mumble rap' (de Paor-Evans 2017; Kane 2018) by traditionalists, despite flourishing in tandem with the powerful streaming services that have changed 'the structure of the music industry' (Johansson *et al.* 2017: 2). This 'myopic' label, named in reference to mumble rap's frequently 'incomprehensible' vocals, undervalues the groundbreakingly 'post-verbal' nature of the music being created (Cook-Wilson 2018). These rappers celebrate the mutability, ephemerality and meme-driven cultures of social media rather than constructing verisimilitudinous, poetic reflections of urban African-American 'street' culture. They formulate their sound by subversively repurposing or deconstructing central elements of hip-hop without consideration for generic tradition. Robotic, Auto-Tuned singing replaces the rawness of the MC's intonation; 'lackadaisical delivery and lyrically sparse' repetition usurps the 'precise and professionally effortless [...] socio-political' poeticism of these young musicians' forebears (de Paor-Evans 2017).

Artists embracing these new sounds have been hugely successful commercially and critically in the 2010s, with key figures such as Migos, Future, Fetty Wap, Desiigner, Kevin Gates and many more frequently appearing in the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 200 (albums) and Hot 100 (songs) charts (Suarez 2016). This trend culminated in 2018's 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X, which ultimately became the longest-running number one single in Billboard charts history (Anderson 2019). Academic discourse surrounding contemporary hip-hop (which as of 2017 is officially the most listened to musical style globally on streaming networks; Lynch 2018) thus requires a shift in focus: while analysis of socially observational lyricism will always be crucial in hip-hop studies, it is necessary to also consider recent sonic/vocal innovations and the impact of audience participation and social media hype on the genre's production and exhibition.

This article foregrounds the innovations of mumble rappers, exploring the centrality of social media, memes and streaming to their output and success while critically examining their oft-unintelligible and unconventional vocal styles. Note that I employ the label 'mumble rappers' throughout: this is partially for clarity, but is primarily due to the term succinctly (albeit unintentionally) highlighting the subversions of these artists. I first provide a summary of recent developments in hip-hop, highlighting the impacts of streaming, information overload and audience participation (through social media hype and memes) on the genre. I then explore the growth of melodic Auto-Tune-driven vocals and repetitive lyricism in the work of pioneering mumble rappers such as Future and in genres including trap, crunk and drill. I analyse Atlanta's Young Thug as an extended illustrative case study, as his controversially malleable vocal style reminiscent of 'Jackson Pollock splatters' (Richards 2015), his impulsive, inconsistent exploitation of social media and his androgynous fashion sense have established him as the most extreme and innovative example of a so-called 'mumble' rapper (*Genius* 2017).

First it is critical to provide a brief overview of discourse regarding the impact of digital media on contemporary audiences, and to document the role of social media and streaming in popular music in general and hip-hop in particular, as these specific factors have directly contributed to the development of mumble rap. Jurgenson, inspired by posthuman discourse, suggests that 'there was and is no offline' (Jurgenson 2012a). Echoing and expanding on van Dijk's influential conceptualisation of a 'network society', in which social 'infrastructure is changing under the influence of communication networks [and] the changing social infrastructure of society shapes communication technology' (van Dijk 1999: 156), Jurgenson argues

that 21st century ‘augmented reality [exists] at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology. [It] is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline’ (Jurgenson 2012a). He insists that developments engendered by this shift are not positive/exciting or negative/distressing for young people today: they are simply taken to be natural, unremarkable aspects of lives led in absolute tandem with digital networks. This is largely due to a normalised symbiotic relationship with social networks, with everyday actions and emotions informed by ‘the logic of social media’ as ‘we have come to understand [our] lives through the logic of digital connection’ (*ibid.*).

While there is much worthy analysis of the socio-cultural impact of the cyborgian relationship between (particularly young) people and digital devices/networks (Kroker 2014; Castells 2004; Waugh 2017), there are two consequential aspects of these developments that are particularly crucial to this study of contemporary hip-hop. Here, I explore both the ‘crisis of over-documentation’ (Reynolds 2011: 55) generated by the Internet’s nigh-infinite archival structures (only amplified by the recent ascendancy of streaming services built on a veil of consumer ‘choice’; Morris and Powers 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018) and the rise of a social media-driven ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2012; Jenkins *et al.* 2013), where ‘new media technologies [allow] average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways’ (Jenkins *et al.* 2009: 8). In analysing these developments, I explore the changes that they have informed within hip-hop, arguing that it is the genre’s acutely chameleonic (re)positioning within the current media sphere – consistently communicating directly with an audience marked by the posthumanism described by Jurgenson – that has facilitated its commercial dominance over other musical styles.

Reynolds’ ‘crisis of over-documentation’ (Reynolds 2011: 55), a phenomenon more frequently termed ‘information overload’, refers to the apparently overwhelming impact of excessive exposure to digital platforms. Drawing on Berardi, Fisher argues that members of the networked society are victims of an ‘insomniac [...] besieging of attention’ (Fisher 2014: 37) brought about by vast quantities of data and cultural ephemera. According to these critics, young people are ‘overwhelmed by the incessant demands of digital communications’ (Fisher 2014: 290), incapable of focusing on simple tasks or singular pieces of information for an extended period. Instead, diffusion and mutability create unstable identities and inconsistent taste values. Many psychologists (Carr 2011; Loh and Kanai 2015) suggest that exposure to these depths of information shortens attention spans and generates an insatiable appetite for constantly locating new stimuli, decreasing the importance of ‘deep processing’ (Loh and Kanai 2015). They observe ‘a shallow mode of learning characterized by quick scanning, reduced contemplation, and memory consolidation [...] attributed to [the] ease of online information retrieval’ (*ibid.*). These psychological and cultural shifts can be attributed to the Internet’s huge archival systems, the user-friendly nature of search engines such as Google, social media’s emphasis on brief, immediate status updates and – increasingly – the endless hyperlink ‘rabbit holes’ of streaming sites (audio and video) whose algorithmically tailored recommendations render their allure almost irresistible.

In a popular musical context, this profuse fountain of information, manifested in convoluted Twitter timelines, disorganised Facebook newsfeeds and streaming platforms with libraries of tens or hundreds of millions of songs/videos, ‘supplies [people today with] immediate access to abundant pop culture, to a near infinity

of packaged sensation, [to] purpose-built, easily accessed pleasure and escape' (Morley 2013). It is within this unfiltered musical landscape that streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music and TIDAL have developed, with their 'networked mobile personalisation' (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018) meeting the demands of an audience simultaneously seeking additional cultural content and a more streamlined method of accessing it (particularly given the decline of traditional gatekeeping music journalists initiated during the Internet's early blog/piracy eras; Laing 2006). The impact of music streaming services and so-called 'Spotifyfication' on listening practices has become a focal point for much academic discourse surrounding contemporary popular music (Vonderau 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018; Morris and Powers 2015; Johansson *et al.* 2017). Spotify and its competitors' effect on hip-hop has been no less profound, with streaming directly influencing its aesthetics, distribution and promotion, but rappers have demonstrated their remarkable adaptability to the Internet's enculturation of 'over-documentation' long before the establishment of paid-subscription platforms.

Prior to the rise of Spotify (launched in 2008 but not dominant until its USA release in 2011) and more independently minded services such as SoundCloud, Bandcamp and Audiomack, Internet-literate hip-hop artists utilised free streaming platforms such as social network MySpace, mixtape-hosting websites DatPiff and LiveMixtapes, and YouTube videos to reach an audience online. During the 2000s, chart-topping artists such as Lil Wayne and Gucci Mane cultivated their reputations and fanbases as much through the uploading of literally thousands of free tracks (either as part of lengthy mixtapes or as one-off 'loosies' or as 'leaks') as they did through their official major label commercial releases (see Westhoff 2011: 185–199, 243–53; Anderson 2013: 52–3), a trend that undoubtedly informed the quantity-over-quality mentality that has defined much mumble rap distribution (see the incessant release schedules of Future and Chief Keef discussed below). Lil B and Soulja Boy, contemporaries of Wayne and Mane, built their own cult followings through an even more hyperbolic application of this method. Lil B maintained 'more than a hundred MySpace accounts' (Marantz 2012), consistently uploading vast mixtapes (comprising tens, or even hundreds, of tracks) and hundreds of YouTube videos of spontaneous rapping over hastily located sounds and beats, while Soulja Boy's 'digital strategy' saw him 'flood the system [and] prioritize brand recognition and scalability' (Garvey 2015) long 'before words like "content," "viral," and "Internet presence"' came to dominate musical marketing strategies (Phillips 2016a). This influential approach enabled them to overcome their competition in an oversaturated online hip-hop scene, with both relentlessly introducing huge quantities of material (regardless of quality) to the cultural conversation in the knowledge that their online fans continuously sought new stimuli in a period of information overload. However, Spotify's emergence in the 2010s, alongside the 2014 Billboard (the USA charting company) decision 'to include on-demand streaming and digital track sales' in its charting figures (Krishnamurthy 2017), shifted the balance away from these innovative forms of DIY promotion/distribution by granting major labels a platform from which to streamline (and thus exploit) the wealth of musical material available to audiences.

Krishnamurthy explains that the 'on-demand streaming' of paid-subscription streaming networks such as Spotify, Apple Music, TIDAL, Amazon Music, SoundCloud Go and YouTube Music allows consumer 'autonomy to select, skip and repeat songs', with Billboard programming 'its internal algorithm [to] give

streams the most emphasis [...] on the charts' (compared with radio and sales) to 'reflect consumer choice' (*ibid.*). In principle, this means that artists can continue to upload vast amounts of music through a seemingly more user-friendly medium. In practice, however, streaming platforms' 'branded musical experiences [...] create circumscribed tiers of content access for a variety of scenarios, users and listening environments' (Morris and Powers 2015), with major labels signing expensive promotional/exclusivity deals with specific services in order that their signees may gain prominent placements on popular playlists such as Spotify's RapCaviar (Marks 2017; Gensler 2017) and more frequent appearances in users' lists of algorithmically recommended music. Commercially successful artists Drake, Future, Kanye West, Beyoncé and JAY-Z have all (either temporarily or permanently) released their music 'exclusively' to particular streaming services (Apple Music or TIDAL), undermining each platform's claims of 'consumer choice' and 'comprehensive' libraries (Luckerson 2015; Glass 2016). As noted by Kameir, streaming service

mandates increasingly overlap with the role historically played by major labels – releasing and promoting albums [and] offering guidance on the production of videos. [They have] the power to control cultural narratives [and] the incentive to do so. [...] Costly obstacles like licensing and targeted marketing are more easily navigated by artists backed by Apple Music and TIDAL. (Kameir 2016)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that a select few acts have consequently come to dominate these platforms' charts of the 'most-listened-to' songs and albums. Hip-hop artists (and their labels) have generally reacted particularly successfully to the potential for chart success that streaming services have introduced (Krishnamurthy 2017; Marks 2017), primarily by drawing on the 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2012) that is central to social media (and, by extension, to contemporary popular music).

Noting that participatory culture is 'driven [by] resource sharing, conversation and coordination' (Jenkins *et al.* 2013), scholars that celebrate its potential cultural upheaval argue that it 'wrest[s] control of media distribution from traditional mass media outlets in ways that empower' the online audience (Garcia 2013). This idealised view, however, heavily understates the corporate nature of the social networks, websites and streaming services that are the main platforms for the facilitation of audience participation. Nevertheless, it is difficult to dispute the fact that these spaces 'naturally [encourage] many-to-many discussion' (Nitins and Burgess 2013) and self-curation processes, with music fans increasingly sculpting their own playlists (again, in lieu of journalists, whose influence continues to wane; Laing 2006; Reynolds 2011), connecting with listeners with comparable tastes via hashtags, and sharing their favourite sounds on a variety of personalised social media accounts. As illustrated in the analysis of Young Thug below, hip-hop artists that encourage interaction with their audiences online have tended to achieve the most commercial success and fan loyalty. Much has been written, for example, about the fact that 'internet-conscious pop star[s]' (Cliff 2015) such as Drake (Harrison and Black 2016), Beyoncé (Zimmerman 2016) and DJ Khaled (Hoby 2016) understand 'how to communicate for and with a legion of fans who live their lives online' (Cliff 2015). Instinctively exploiting specific components of different social media outlets (Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat in particular) to promote both their music and their own brands/personas, 'using [each] platform's native language, [...] understanding the nuances and subtle differences that make each platform unique, and adapting [their] content to match' (Vaynerchuk 2013: 22), these artists' interactive

techniques have become commonplace in contemporary music (Isom 2016; Corrigan 2017), even inspiring the marketing campaigns of major corporations (Chafkin and Frier 2016).

At the core of these participation processes is a cultural phenomenon that has been especially intelligently exploited by hip-hop artists: the 'meme'. Referred to as 'the closest thing to a native cultural form the Internet has' (Marwick 2013), Shifman defines memes as 'cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying, [user-driven] imitation and remixing' (Shifman 2013: 4). As Jurgenson elaborates, 'a meme is a unit of culture. [The term describes] how cultural products pass virally from person to person by multiplying themselves throughout the social body' (Jurgenson 2012b). These shareable phenomena, whose format (images, words, videos) varies depending on the social media platform, are frequently designed to be humorous, and they continued to grow in popularity over the course of the first two decades of the 21st century [resulting in much analysis of their socio-political impact (Penney 2017; Leavitt 2014; Kesvani 2017; Jurgenson 2012b) and their role in the rise of extreme right-wing groups in the 2010s (Wilson 2017)]. Roughly divided into two broad categories by Marwick – 'viral' ('trendy pictures or videos that get passed around verbatim') and 'memetic' ('encourag[ing] a type of iteration, imitation, parody, and satire that can spawn literally thousands of variants') – memes are 'raw materials for creativity [that] demonstrate the sprawling variety' of the Internet (Marwick 2013).

Memes have become central to a hip-hop culture that is increasingly driven by audience participation and the ephemerality of hype (which here refers to hyperbolic, but fleeting, excitement and promotion in fan and media discourse online). The genre's huge fanbase actively engages with their favourite artists in an assortment of digital spaces: transcribing and interpreting lyrics on the website *Genius*; debating the merits of rappers on forums such as *KanyeToThe* and *Reddit's* hip-hop sub-forum; searching for complete/high-quality versions of leaked song snippets; sharing conspiracy theories about murdered stars (Britton 2018); and creating memes about rap 'beefs' [such as Drake's battles with Meek Mill in 2015 (Muller 2015) and Pusha T in 2018 (Gorsler 2018)]. Echoing assertions regarding the socio-political significance of hip-hop's sonic futurism (Eshun 1998; Krims 2000), it has been suggested that these forms of online participation have empowered the genre's marginalised African-American audience, as digital communication stimulates novel 'techno-dialogic' forms (Parham 2017). 'Memes born of the black diaspora and intended for black audiences [serve as] a language composed of tongues unburdened by whiteness' (*ibid.*), thus representing a contemporary form of 'Afrofuturism' native to 'the digital turn' (Anderson and Jennings 2014: 32).

In this context, hip-hop has evolved to exploit its audience's willingness to build and share content, recognising the potential free publicity that comes from 'user-imitation and remixing' (Shifman 2013: 4) and thus looking to cultivate the hype of these fans and convert it into music streams. In the second half of the 2010s, hip-hop entered a period of chart dominance 'powered by viral success', with singles by Rae Sremmurd, Migos and Future attaining 'acclaim and popularity' owing to the circulation of 'fan-generated memes' (Raw 2017). These are just three examples of what has become a ubiquitous trend in contemporary music [see also Drake's 'Hotline Bling' (2015), Childish Gambino's 'This Is America' (2018) and 21 Savage's 'Bank Account' (2017)]. In the cases of Future's 'Mask Off' (2017) and Migos' 'Bad And Boujee' (2016), these memes related to particular lyrical/musical

aspects of the songs themselves. ‘Mask Off’, ‘built around an infectious flute sample and an earworm chorus, [fuelled] its own viral challenge where fans recreated, twisted and parodied the track’s loop across social media’ (*ibid.*), while the opening couplet of ‘Bad And Boujee’ – ‘raindrop/drop top’ – inspired an average of ‘2500 mentions a day on Twitter’ in November 2016, with many of these tweets including an accompanying humorous image or rhyme (Weiner 2017). This hype drove ‘Mask Off’ to peak at number five on the Billboard Hot 100, while ‘Bad And Boujee’ reached number one (both in 2017).

Rae Sremmurd’s ‘Black Beatles’ (2016) also got to the top of the charts, primarily owing to its deployment in a viral video trend dubbed the ‘mannequin challenge’ (‘a completely unrelated craze where participants stood still while a camera panned around them’; Raw 2017), and the mechanics behind this example illustrate the can-niness of rappers/labels in responding to fan enthusiasm online. As Raw explains, Rae Sremmurd’s label Interscope

hired Internet marketing firm Pizza Slime to push the song to notable Instagram influencers, linking the unrelated song and meme just as the challenge was going viral. [This] raises uncomfortable questions regarding the authenticity of ‘organic’ hits, [but it] could also be seen as the platonic ideal of music marketing: a great song that found its audience and mainstream acceptance [through] direct engagement with its audience’s interests (*ibid.*)

This ‘wheel-greasing’ approach has become increasingly prominent in contemporary hip-hop (and music more broadly), with labels approaching popular meme creators to promote their artists on Instagram (*NBC News* 2017) and exploiting lip-syncing/dance video apps such as TikTok and (the now-defunct) Musical.ly in an attempt to manufacture hype and participation through association with viral dance crazes (Friedlander 2016). Notably, however, fan-driven chart success is far less predictable than that generated through more traditional channels (such as radio play), with its almost-random nature making it difficult for labels to prepare to market a newly hyped track. There is always the danger that ‘if a label can’t capitalize on an unexpected hit [...] in a timely manner with a marketing campaign or video, the moment might pass’ (Raw 2017). This has resulted in something of a return to the excessive release strategies displayed by mixtape artists such as Soulja Boy and Lil B, with the number of tracks included on albums expanding significantly as the 2010s progressed. One reason for this ‘spray-hose’ approach to distribution, alongside aforementioned issues of information overload, is the logic that constantly ‘putting out new music’ increases the chances of fans latching onto a song and turning it into a viral hit (Marks 2017). This ‘track-list overstuffing’, exemplified by Drake’s chart-topping 20-plus-song releases *Views* (2016), *More Life* (2017) and *Scorpion* (2018), is also ‘seemingly designed to exploit [...] anticipated streaming performance’ (Suarez 2016), with Billboard’s weighting of streams meaning that it is possible for most (or all) songs on a popular album to chart on the Hot 100 at the same time.

It is within this context that mumble rap has developed. ‘Mumble rap’ is ‘arguably the art of not rapping. Rather than rapping clearly, eloquently, articulately and with prowess and esteem, mumble rappers string occasional words together. [...] Mumble rappers tend to do just that, they mumble’ (de Paor-Evans 2017). While there is much aesthetic diversity to be found beneath the umbrella term, in general mumble rap has tended toward experimentation with vocal tone and baroque production rather than the ‘clever, eloquent storytelling and wordplay’ of virtuosic hip-hop poets, foregrounding often ‘lackadaisical delivery and [lyrical] sparse[ness]’

(*ibid.*). It is for this reason that there has been such a significant backlash against the style from hip-hop traditionalists, whose defence of lyrical prowess and conscious storytelling manifests in often vitriolic dismissal of acts – variously described as ‘mindless’ (Aroesti 2018), ‘moronic’ (Beaumont-Thomas 2018) and ‘lackadaisical’ (de Paor-Evans 2017) – seen to be belittling these elements (Iandoli 2016; Kane 2018). The question, ultimately, has centred on whether artists who reject lyrical complexity in favour of slurred vocal stylings can be accepted within a genre that celebrates poeticism.

The label was coined by Wiz Khalifa in 2016 (de Paor-Evans 2017), but discontent about apparently incomprehensible vocals had been dominating hip-hop culture for at least the previous five years, with prominent artists such as Fetty Wap, Gucci Mane and Chief Keef facing criticism during that period. According to Alyse, however, ‘the mumble rap conversation seems to always come back to Future and one song in particular: his 2011 trap banger “Tony Montana”’ (Alyse 2017). The sound of ‘Tony Montana’ is archetypal mumble rap, with Future’s chorus comprised of repetitive chanting (of the song’s title) and verses built from almost unintelligible murmuring and shouting. This seemingly unsophisticated song-writing is in fact conducive to a social media era of apparently shortened attention spans (Carr 2011; Loh and Kanai 2015), with the persistent hook’s catchiness reliant on comparable techniques to those utilised in advertising slogans. Indeed, de Paor-Evans argues that mumble rap ‘offers relief from the invisible acceleration of life, yet concurrently praises the disposable production–consumption model that ignites this acceleration in the first place. It is creativity born out of boredom’ (de Paor-Evans 2017). The repetitions of Future have effectively birthed an entire generation of mumble rappers, with the muttering incantations of 21 Savage, Kodak Black, Desiigner and others exemplifying an era when ‘communication is conducted in a ruthlessly efficient, text-based pidgin language, made up [of] abbreviations, punctuation marks, and semaphores. [Mumble rap is] a version of this hyper-compressed language’ (Greene 2013).

If the much-imitated vocal stylings of Future are to be taken as the catalyst for mumble rap, several key lines of influence on the movement must be noted. The first is the late-2000s growth of a melodic, Auto-Tune-driven aesthetic that exists as a crossover between hip-hop, R&B, rock and electronic dance music. This sound, which has seen hip-hop artists ‘obliterating boundaries between rapping and singing’ (Weiss 2018), was pioneered by Kid Cudi and 2008–2010-era Lil Wayne, popularised by Kanye West on *808s and Heartbreak* (2008), and perfected by three of the most commercially successful hip-hop/R&B artists of the 2010s: Drake, The Weeknd and Post Malone (Garland 2016; Greene 2015a; Holmes 2017; Phillips 2016b). These artists often display a tone that is either ‘bitter, confused, self-pitying, defensive, and accusatory’ (Greene 2015a) or ‘sensitive, [...] intimate and emotional’ (Phillips 2016b), favouring melody and affecting production over politicised conscious lyricism.

These tropes would become central to mumble rap over the next decade, although the lucidity (even beauty) of these earlier artists’ vocals means that they themselves would not fit within the categorisation. Critically, though, their foregrounding of Auto-Tune (particularly West and Wayne) allowed these innovators to construct cyborgian vocal identities while disrupting the conventions of hip-hop’s historical subject matter. In West’s case, he amplified the emotionality of his confessional songs by establishing a ‘fusion’ between human and machine (Auner 2003: 101), his vocals ‘becom[ing] more and not less poignant as [their] mechanical and

artificial characteristics are foregrounded [through] sinking pitch and extreme *ritardando*' (*ibid.*: 103). Wayne, in contrast, used 'dissociative Auto-Tune wailing' in order to expressionistically portray the impact of his excessive use of the prescription cough syrup and soft drink cocktail 'lean' or 'purple drank' (Kramer 2017). Both of these approaches undoubtedly inspired the sound of Future, 'hip-hop's paranoid android' (Weingarten 2014) and 'robocroon superstar' (*ibid.*), and arguably the prototypical mumble rapper. Future produces 'the most unprecedented noises [in] mainstream pop music: rodent squeaks, baby gurgles, goat-bleats, [and his] mangled voice becomes just another firing piston in the cartoon assembly line of [his tracks'] production' (Greene 2013). This, coupled with a particularly strong emphasis on slurred ('purple drank'-influenced) self-reflection during his incredibly prolific (two solo albums, four mixtapes and a collaborative album with Drake in roughly 16 months) and much-documented October 2014 to February 2016 period (Charity 2016), was central to Future's aesthetic becoming a jumping-off point for many subsequent mumble rappers. While Young Thug, analysed below, is the most visible example of this, Future's robotic murmurings can be heard in the output of artists as sonically distinct as Kevin Gates, Travis Scott and Fetty Wap.

Of equal importance to the increasing prominence of mumble rap are the (brief) popularity of 'crunk' (started in Memphis, with connections to Atlanta and Miami) and Chicago 'drill', and the (far more extensive) subsequent dominance of 'trap' (a form of Atlanta-based hip-hop that, particularly in its post-2011 incarnation, is effectively synonymous with mumble rap). These styles have all faced accusations of promoting anti-lyricism despite being the primary inspiration for much hip-hop in the latter half of the 2010s. Criticism of these sounds can be traced back to East and West Coast hip-hop's historical mockery of rap from southern states, regarding the music produced there as 'less intelligent' (Westhoff 2011: 5–7) than that produced in the north (although drill originates in Chicago, its deployment of trap-esque beats, slurred vocals and Auto-Tune resulted in associations with comparable southern movements). These sub-genres, led by figures such as Chief Keef, Lil Reese and Lil Durk (drill), Lil Jon and Three 6 Mafia (crunk), and Young Jeezy, T.I., Gucci Mane and – crucially – Future (trap), exemplify particular aspects of mumble rap as defined above.

Chief Keef was exploring Auto-Tune as early as Future, with Keef's garbled singing on releases such as *Nobody* (2014) 'often sounding like [he is] drowning in the sound of [his] own voice' (Greene 2015a). Keef also exploited similar incessant release strategies to those of Lil B and Soulja Boy (and, indeed, Future), appealing to the insatiable appetites of his audience in the same way that rewarded the prolificacy of those trailblazers. However, Keef faced accusations of inconsistent quality, transitory worth and musical simplicity, with much of his work being 'marked as "difficult" "fringe experiments"' (Drake 2018) by traditionalists despite the influence of its 'complex, cohesive, evolving aesthetic language' on subsequent mumble rap (*ibid.*). Crunk, 'raucous party music [not] particularly concerned with lyrics or flows' (Westhoff 2011: 178), predates mumble rap by at least a decade (its commercial apex occurred between 2003 and 2008). The style is, however, notable for its mumble rap-influencing departure from traditional hip-hop into a form of hedonistic escapism (*ibid.*, pp. 83–93, 173–84). Although its vocalists were primarily intelligible, their lyrics were largely simplistic, repetitive and presented as secondary to the bass-driven production, conceived to encourage club/party singalongs. Drill and crunk were ultimately usurped by trap, named after the spaces in suburban projects

where drug deals are completed. Trap encompasses gritty street-rap and production that mixes 808s, 'heavy bass, [...] layered synths and hi-hats' (Patterson 2013). Started by rappers such as Gucci Mane, T.I. and Young Jeezy and producers including Zaytoven, Lex Luger and Mike WiLL Made-It in the 2000s, in the 2010s it became the most prominent (and commercially-successful) form of hip-hop. Trap acts such as Future, Young Thug and Migos became rap's newest stars, pop/R&B artists including Beyoncé, Justin Bieber and Katy Perry began to sing over trap-influenced production, and a globally popular Latin trap sound emerged in the second half of the decade. Mumble rap developed as a convergence of these three sub-genres, but it is marked by far less regional specificity.

While there is certainly much aesthetic diversity within mumble rap, ranging from murmured repetition to Auto-Tuned crooning (Rossen 2018), one totemic and divisive artist incorporates all of these elements and more into his style: Young Thug. Despite his commercial success [including appearances on two Billboard number one singles, Camila Cabello's 'Havana' (2017) and Childish Gambino's 'This Is America' (2018), and a number one album: 2019's *So Much Fun*], Thug's delivery and style is decidedly non-traditional in a genre preoccupied with poeticism, consciousness and historicity. Sundermann, discussing the impact of Thug's early-career guest appearance (performing 'About The Money' with T.I.) on *The Tonight Show* in 2014, argues that he 'is not a rapper, that his garbled up, nearly unintelligible voice and his tendency toward melody and chaotic song structures rather than strict 16 bar verses shows he doesn't have much respect for the craft' of hip-hop (Sundermann 2014). Thug, who wore ripped skinny jeans, a pink scarf and a tight waistcoat for the 'About The Money' performance, was already demonstrating a contrarian disinterest in paying his respects to the genre's past, courting vitriol with inflammatory statements such as 'I would never buy [JAY-Z's music] because of his age' (Sullivan 2015). As discussed below, comments such as these, coupled with his gender-fluid costuming, caused significant controversy online (especially in relation to his sexuality) in an early 2010s hip-hop scene continuing to prize respect for artists that have gone before, alongside hyper-masculine body types and loose-fitting street-wear. West Coast rapper The Game's homophobic and transphobic tweets in response to Thug's costuming and rejection of iconic hip-hop artists, including threats such as 'I will beat the Victoria Secret out that boy/girl [sic]' (Grace 2016), are illustrative of the contempt he experienced early in his career. Regardless of the scene's response, though (much of which, since his rise to mainstream prominence, has become increasingly celebratory), Thug's self-image and sound remain self-conscious and deliberate in their rejection of hip-hop's historical tropes. He 'push[es] the genre to a new level, finding ways to inject lyricism into increasingly bizarre forms' (Sundermann 2014) while 'twist[ing] circa-now street-rap boilerplate into messily abstract personal art' (Breihan 2018). Before analysing his compositional techniques, though, it is important to highlight the self-consciously 'mysterious', 'carefree' and spontaneous approach (Sundermann 2014) that Thug takes to distribution and self-promotion online. He exploits the fluctuations and information glut of digitality with a 'prolific, assembly-line nature of working and [an] unplanned release schedule' (Weiss 2014) that rivals that of Lil B and Soulja Boy. This 'off-the-cuff production lends itself particularly well to the era of social media and the search for instant authenticity' (Locke 2015), illustrating a comprehension of his fans' insatiable appetite for new stimuli.

While there are drawbacks to Thug's oversharing, not least the fact that many fascinating tracks are released with little fanfare [and no attachment to larger projects, in the cases of 'Safe' (2017), 'MLK' (2018), 'Pacifier' (2015), etc.], he has evolved beyond the 'quantity over quality' issue that often marred his predecessors' output, producing songs that demonstrate either groundbreaking experimentation or mainstream potential with unprecedented frequency. Referring to his break-out singles, Thug boasts that he 'can do a perfect song in ten minutes. I did ["2 Bitches (Danny Glover)"] in eight minutes. "Stoner" took me almost an hour' (Sandberg 2015). These tracks achieved then-improbable recognition for such an instinctively spontaneous writing/recording style – 2013's '2 Bitches (Danny Glover)' was popular in clubs internationally and 2014's 'Stoner' charted at number 47 on Billboard – but Thug's influence has subsequently led to high chart positions for comparably impulsively produced tracks such as Lil Uzi Vert's 'XO TOUR Llif3', Future's 'Mask Off', Lil Pump's 'Gucci Gang', 21 Savage's 'Bank Account' and Playboi Carti's 'Magnolia' (all 2017).

This spontaneity, now prominent across mumble rap, undermines the carefully constructed poetry of hip-hop's revered lyricists, rejecting the time-consuming processes of conceptualisation and self-editing in favour of piecing together tracks out of the first words/sounds/ad-libs [ad-libs being the punctuating 'vocal asides' heard in many hip-hop songs, becoming 'increasingly complex [and] important' in the 2010s (Raymer 2017)] that the artist improvises. While Thug's own release rate had admittedly decelerated a little by 2017, with his label 300 Entertainment seemingly favouring a more considered strategy, his earlier productivity was exemplified by the fact that a massive 2015 illegal leak of over 100 unreleased songs (Davis 2015) did little to slow him down (with a further three lengthy mixtapes appearing later that year alone). The rise of Thug (and his successors) is an inevitable consequence of information overload in hip-hop and culture more widely: a figure whose output is not only seemingly inexhaustible but also profitable, matching abundant quantity with consistent quality.

There is, however, an undoubted erraticism to his persona that reflects the unpredictability of musical distribution in the streaming era, and Thug often 'give[s] [the] impression that [he is] making up [his] music in real-time' (Greene 2015b). His career has been defined by insecure release dates (in particular his still-unreleased album *Hy!£UN35*, promised since 2015), morphing mixtape titles (2016's *I'm Up* was dubbed *Slime Season 3* until the day before its arrival, before a different *Slime Season 3* appeared several weeks later), and surreal promotional strategies built around his label's attempts to produce meme-able content. A YouTube video for his 2016 USA tour featured the rapper riding a horse around Atlanta, while a funeral-themed announcement for *Slime Season 3* signalled the 'death' of that trilogy of releases, but the most explicit attempts to build social media hype undoubtedly surrounded 2016's *JEFFERY* and 2017's *BEAUTIFUL THUGGER GIRLS* (originally *No, My Name Is Jeffery* and *EASY BREEZY BEAUTIFUL THUGGER GIRLS* respectively, further illustrating Thug's mutable naming methods). *JEFFERY* was marketed alongside a campaign by Thug/300 for the public to adopt his given name 'Jeffery' instead of his pseudonym 'Young Thug', a modification that seems to have been designed entirely to manufacture temporary hype (given that 'Young Thug' has remained the name attached to all of his subsequent projects, in spite of Thug's also-unfruitful 2018 declaration on social media that he would now go by the name 'SEX'). The project's apparently 'personal' nature,

emphasised by the foregrounding of Thug's legal name, was amplified by the rapper's election to pay homage to his idols – 'RiRi' (Rihanna); 'Wyclef Jean'; 'Guwop' (Gucci Mane); 'Floyd Mayweather', etc. – in the name of each track (despite there being no correlation between the songs and their titular figures). Yet even this choice proved characteristically vague and playfully elusive, with track titles changing after release [closer 'Kanye West' was originally dubbed 'Elton John', then 'Pop Man' (Balfour 2016)], artists such as Gucci Mane and Wyclef Jean making guest appearances on different tracks to those named for them, and one social media-baiting song bearing the name 'Harambe' in reference to the much-mourned/memed gorilla shot at Cincinnati Zoo in 2016 (Judah 2017; Lee 2016).

The provocative artwork for *JEFFERY*, featuring a photograph of Thug wearing a decidedly androgynous outfit designed by Alessandro Trincone (discussed in greater depth below), certainly seemed to have been selected in the hope it would go viral. *BEAUTIFUL THUGGER GIRLS* used cover art to similar effect, pairing imagery inspired by Lil Wayne's 2009 rap-rock hybrid album *Rebirth* with amateurish photo-editing (Thug's legs appear to have been cut off in the photograph) to reflect the genre clashes of the mixtape and trigger the production of memes. Thug claimed, in the run-up to the mixtape's release, that it was to be executive produced by Drake (Pearce 2017), although there is little evidence in the record's liner notes that the star was actually involved. Whether a result of later changes in the project's construction or deliberate miscommunication on Thug's part, it certainly succeeded in building anticipation on social media. Intentionally or otherwise, Thug's impulsiveness and inconsistencies have proven incredibly effective as a marketing tool, with examples ranging from his February 2018 insistence that he would release no music that year out of respect for his deaf brother (Renshaw 2018) before putting out an EP titled *Hear No Evil* two months later, to his frequent airing of tantalising snippets of forthcoming music on Snapchat. He could certainly claim to have most successfully exploited the 'treasure hunt' mentality of participatory culture in hip-hop through the continual teasing promise of these unreleased excerpts. Young Thug's musical distribution and promotion methods thus combine the interactive musical promotion engendered by social media with the ephemerality of the Internet's information overload.

There is no question, however, that the unpredictability and spontaneity of Young Thug are exemplified in his vocal style, whose experimentation exceeds those of his mumble rap predecessors in its rejection of classical hip-hop techniques. Thug's rapping – if, indeed, it can be referred to as such – pushes the limits of human vocalisation while dissolving the fundamental rules of hip-hop flow. In his musicological overview of 'flow', Adams concludes that, despite the diversity of flows deployed within the genre, there has historically been a specific set of unifying technical rules and expectations binding them all together (Adams 2009). Indeed, he suggests that the 'rhythm' of flow was the element of hip-hop that most 'developed as rapping evolved [into] an art form' (*ibid.*). The musicality of rappers' flows has, alongside observational lyricism, thus long been held up as a signifier of the genre's importance and worthiness-of-discourse. Yet instead of following these stringent (but unwritten) rules by remaining on-beat or staying 'in-the-pocket', Thug constantly ignores/eludes the rhythmic patterns of the production over which he raps. He is more interested in performing a variety of novel vocal acrobatics to make himself sound as alien as possible, switching swiftly from falsetto crooning to percussive

scatting, and from surreal mumbling to discomfiting whines and yelps, even if this means completely disrupting the flow of the track.

This 'structureless hip-hop' (Wilhite 2018) is demonstrated on early hit 'Lifestyle' (2014), whose almost unintelligible chorus relies on purely emotive vocalisations to connect with its audience; listeners are forced to hum along with the melody in the absence of discernible lyrics. The song, which also featured fellow Atlantan Rich Homie Quan and Cash Money label-head Birdman, was released in conjunction with the collaborative project *Rich Gang: Tha Tour Part 1* (2014), and the novelty of both had immediate impact (Drake 2014; Pearce 2014; Vozick-Levinson 2014). Undoubtedly Thug's most prominent placement to that point, he utilised the platform presented by Quan's more reserved and comprehensible crooning to foreground his own 'tantalising unorthodoxy', 'hieroglyphic raps' (Zaworski 2014) and 'impulsive, almost volatile' vocalisations (Pearce 2014). On *Rich Gang...*, Young Thug 'leap[s] octaves without warning, often vaulting from a purr to a squawk. [He lets] certain vowels buzz in the back of his throat so that they become percussive enough to imply rhythm [and he fills] empty spaces with nonsensical blah-blahs' (Richards 2015). Indeed, the overall effect of Thug's sound is so unique that journalists have found it difficult to locate a language to define it precisely. Descriptions vary from 'onomatopoeic' (Sandberg 2015) to 'Jackson Pollock splatters' (Richards 2015) to comparisons with the improvised chaos of 'free jazz' (*ibid.*), highlighting the intense abstraction of his aesthetic.

Thug often replicates the repetitive stylings of mumble rappers such as Future, twisting his voice into new shapes and employing unique patterns with each recitation, ultimately locating the structure/tone that best amplifies that section's emotionality (see, for example, the rapid chanting on the chorus of 2016's 'Digits' or the surreal slur of 2014's 'OMG' with Gucci Mane). While he can certainly 'rap' conventionally (see, for example, his virtuosic performances on tracks such as 2014's 'Givenchy', 2016's 'Drippin' and 2017's 'Sacrifices', a collaboration with Drake and 2 Chainz that features an uncharacteristically lucid verse from Thug), he seems to deem words somewhat inconsequential (exemplified by the repetition of certain basic themes, lines and phrases across his catalogue, their presence existing merely as convenient tools/outlets for his vocal experiments). Thug's sound is a celebration of form over content, emphasising the invention of novel flows and atmospheric soundscapes (constructed by producers such as Metro Boomin, TM88, Wheezy and London On Da Track, and mixing engineers Alex Tumay and Kesha Lee) rather than poetic language. According to producer Dun Deal, Thug does not actually write lyrics prior to recording these outbursts of emotion. He 'draw[s] what he want[s] to do on paper. He would draw [...] weird signs and shapes [and say] "I don't need no words"' (Greene 2015b). This abstract (perhaps apocryphal) compositional technique provokes the image of Thug using his voice as a spontaneous instrument, favouring tone, repetition and melody over technical lyricism. 'Stoner' exemplifies all of these aspects, taking the previously discussed sloganeering of Future's refrains to a logical conclusion. Its procession of repeated hooks, bridges and choruses eliminates the complex poetic verses of traditional hip-hop in favour of looping but distinct refrains including 'I feel like Fabo', 'I'm a stoner' and 'just like a boss'.

This playful abandonment of conscious lyricism affords Thug a uniquely raw form of Afrofuturistic self-expression. Lyrics in US hip-hop have predominantly been regarded as signifiers of a rapper's identity, emphasising their connectedness to a specific locale or culture, yet Thug shuns this form of representation. The

slippery futurity of his vocal stylings renders his words undefinable, ungraspable, uncontrollable; he eludes the trappings of the colonial English language.¹ The

squishy syllables [of Young Thug are] a tacit rejection of [hip-hop] verses that depended on enunciated rhymes, reliable rhythms and clever metaphors to tell coherent stories. [He has] scrapped those values in favour of immediacy and improvisation. [...] His actual words are secondary to the fact that they're built out of whimpers, snarls, yammers and yawps. (Richards 2014)

Thug creates emotive and self-representational music without decipherable lyrics or a consistent flow, displaying what linguist Flynn refers to as 'reduction in speech' (Flynn in *Genius* 2017). Through deliberate inarticulation, Thug's vocals can represent 'a more natural, authentic kind of speech [and] emotion' (*ibid.*), illustrated on affecting songs such as 2016's 'Worth It' and 2017's 'Feel It' and 'Me Or Us'. The 'intonation' in Thug's music is 'both emotive and evocative', enabling each listener to 'feel [and] hear something different' (*ibid.*), producing a unique expressive format that does not need to rely on limitations of words. His ambiguous vocals are therefore perfectly positioned to enthuse his participatory fanbase online. Locke suggests that 'sounds as self-expression may offer a more participatory role for [Thug's] audience. [...] Rather than explain a social commentary through lyrics, he can leave the layers of analysis to his fans on Instagram [and] *Genius*' (Locke 2015).²

The absence of intelligible words in Young Thug's earlier music – and the resultant encouragement for fans to formulate and debate their own interpretations – is a further example of Thug's potential virality. The website *The Book Of Thug*, created by Aditya Ranganathan, even attempts an in-depth musicological analysis of the harmonies, melodic contours, organisation and rhythmic forms of Thug's vocals. Ranganathan asserts that 'his sound is incredibly distinctive, rich with expressivity and phonological meaning' (Ranganathan 2015). A few of the 'phonological' techniques employed by Young Thug include a Future-esque use of Auto-Tune that distorts his voice until it sounds alien ['Flaws' (2015); 'Guwop Home' with Gucci Mane (2016)]; background vocals and ad-libs whose textural immediacy matches that of the lead vocal [see, as one extreme example, the 12-second 'skrr' ad-lib during the first verse of 'Halftime' (2015)]; mispronouncing words so they resemble other words entirely (his repetitive enunciation of the title of 2014's 'Siblings' sounds – perhaps self-consciously – like 'sibilance'); abruptly cutting off the end of significant words (2014's 'Hookah', with Tyga); and inventing his own slang (such as 'slatt', a term located throughout his discography).

Thug also has a tendency to relentlessly switch between vocal personas during his songs in a subversion of hip-hop's traditional reliance on authentically stable identity, a trait that exemplifies his relationship to the mutable ephemerality of social

¹ This article does not study Young Thug's output in the context of discourses of race in depth, focusing instead on its relationship to social media. However, it could certainly be argued that his oft-unintelligible – 'alien' – vocals (and those of mumble rap in general) demonstrate a new evolution of Afrofuturist experimentation in popular music, an artistic trend located in hip-hop/R'n'B (Rammellzee, OutKast, Janelle Monáe, etc.) and beyond (Sun Ra, Drexciya, Parliament-Funkadelic, etc.). There is scope to analyse Thug's position in this history of 'post-soul possibility' (David 2007) elsewhere. For more on Afrofuturism, see Dery (1994) and Eshun (1998, 2003).

² It is worth noting that this article was completed prior to the release of Young Thug's 2019 album *So Much Fun*, on which he exhibited a more comprehensible – if still malleable and experimental – set of vocal techniques.

media hype. His vocals prize inscrutable inconsistency, mirroring the instability of contemporary existence. As Richards notes, 'rap music is an attempt to make sense of this world out of rhythm and rhyme. [...] Thug is the sound of that world being dismantled. [His] post-verbal eruption [...] reflects the incomprehensibility of the right now' (Richards 2015). His flows, delivery styles and even genre selections transform from line to line without warning, reflecting the changeability of digitality. The rapper inhabits multiple voices and personas on songs 'Best Friend' (2015), 'Haiti Slang' (2011) and 'Offshore' (a 2018 collaboration with Swae Lee whose improvised two-minute Thug verse demonstrates a vast array of flows and vocal inflections), creating the illusion that several vocalists appear on each track. The disparate vocal identities depicted in contrasting tracks such as 'Harambe' (with its barks, squeals and grunts), 'Me Or Us' (a gentle acoustic serenade) and 'Kanye West' (where Thug wails and hums over a Wyclef Jean-featuring calypso pastiche) serve only to amplify this diversity, as does Thug's tendency to employ a different flow on every verse of a single song (see 'Safe', 'Texas Love' (2016) and 'Gangster Shit' (2016)). Phillips observes that mumble rappers have an instinctive 'grasp of spontaneous switch-ups. In the middle of any verse, the rapper can completely alter their approach. They're married to no flow' (Phillips 2018). Thug has equally refused to be restricted by the genre limitations of hip-hop/trap, effortlessly morphing his voice to explore country ['Family Don't Matter' (2017)], EDM ['Heatstroke' with Calvin Harris (2017); 'I Know There's Gonna Be (Good Times)' with Jamie xx and Popcaan (2015)] and Latin pop (his appearance on Camila Cabello's 'Havana'); indeed, it could be argued that he has moved beyond hip-hop entirely.

Thug's songs even continue their inconsistent composition process post-release, with projects such as *JEFFERY* and *BEAUTIFUL THUGGER GIRLS* being changed *after* their initial arrival on streaming services (with the respective later addition of guest vocals by Travis Scott to 'Floyd Mayweather' and Quavo to 'You Said') in an echo of Kanye West's much-publicised 2016 evolving album *The Life Of Pablo* (Caramanica 2016). In addition to his changeable voice and his lyrical/representational indecipherability (further illustrated in the unpronounceable title of unreleased debut album *Hy!EUN35* and in his insistence that 'I don't want to explain [anything]. I hate explaining'; Stephenson 2014), Thug 'raps obsessively about wetness, frequently bragging about the drippiness of his diamonds and the viscosity of his sexual encounters. [He] sloshes syllables around in his mouth, cultivating a new kind of fluidity' (Richards 2015). His malleable ability to make words sound formless and ephemeral, partially a result of his foregrounding of extended vowels, contrasts with the solid consonance of more conventional rap. He has an 'allergy to consonants. He extracts them from words. [He] repeatedly blurts [words that do not] require him to close his mouth [and] reshapes the vowels of certain words [to] make them rhyme' (*ibid.*). On 'Drippin' and 'Nigeria' (2013) he rolls words around his mouth as if gargling liquid, evoking abstract aural images of flowing water and provoking the previously mentioned comparisons with Jackson Pollock's drips and splatters. The tender sounds of 'Worth It' – a dedication to his fiancée Jerricka Karlae – are generated through a similar stretching of words such as 'whine' until they become onomatopoeic. Thug's fascination with twisting and reshaping vowels allows him to rhyme words and phrases that would otherwise be non-homophonic (a trait he undoubtedly inherited from Lil Wayne, whom he has proclaimed to be his biggest musical influence; Cook-Wilson 2015). A typical Thug verse can rhyme

'unlocked', 'watch', 'charge' and 'narcs', followed by 'emotions', 'roaches', 'rolling', 'broadie', 'macaroni', 'token' and 'cozy' ('You Said') fluently.

Clearly, then, Young Thug's molten voice anthropomorphises ambiguity and slipperiness, but even his lyrical content – certainly somewhat secondary within his work – explores these themes (at least after the words have been deciphered by the listener). Thug relishes the use of surreal linguistic symbolism reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's melting paintings, deploying lyrics such as 'diamonds they shower me' (2015's 'Dome') and 'that pussy wet so I'ma slide' (2014's 'Imma Ride'); producing track titles including 'Drippin'' and 'Florida Water' (2014); and exhibiting an ever-present preoccupation with 'slime'. He utilises onomatopoeic sounds in both his ad-libs (see, as just one example, the punctuating 'aah' on each line of 2017's 'On Fire') and lyrics ['Diamonds they go boing/Hop inside that pussy like a trampoline, boing boing' and 'Beep beep beep like a bus on that ass' from 2015's 'Raw (Might Just)'], replacing lyrics with infantile noises.

There is an improvisational quality to his lyrics, resulting in often illogical, stream-of-conscious verbal content [in the space of two lines on '2 Bitches (Danny Glover)' he goes from stating that 'I don't like using profanity' to bragging that he likes to 'fuck [his] bitches' buddies'] and consistently surreal imagery, particularly in reference to standard trap subjects such as money, jewellery, cars and women. On 'Givenchy', he 'split[s] that money up in eight ways like I'm an octopus'; on 'Numbers' (2015) 'All my diamonds come in yellow like a Funyun/Yeah all my gold made 'em sick and they can vomit'; on 'Killed Before' (2018) he has 'different colour diamonds/I'm a peacock'; and on 'Family Don't Matter' he adopts a Southern drawl to state that 'Country Billy made a couple milli/Tryna park the Rolls Royce inside the Piccadilly'. His Drake and 2 Chainz collaboration 'Sacrifices', perhaps Thug's most technically impressive (and, thus, stylistically conservative) performance, still succeeds in introducing one abstract idea after another: 'I'm talkin' sweet, deer meat/I'm talkin' suite like he sleep/We ain't doin' too much talkin'/I'm talmbout talkin' like a speech/Like the President, I kill 'em neat/I'm talkin' neat like freak'. Even when rapping 'traditionally', Thug continues to adopt an improvisational method built on immediacy, self-consciously pausing midway through his verse to repeat his witty wordplay for an audience that may be struggling to keep up ('I'ma use your name like, "Who is he?"/You get it? I said I'ma use a name [username] like, "Who is he?").

Thug is wholly enamoured of sexual processes (hence the aforementioned 'SEX' name change) and bodily fluids ('I make her squirt on the couch' and 'CAT scan, white stuff on my jeans', from 'You Said', are typical examples), arguably more so than any other rapper (except, perhaps, Detroit's Danny Brown). His vivid descriptions of carnal experiences tend to comprise blunt vulgarity, strange metaphors and surreal scenarios, as demonstrated in lyrics such as 'I want that pussy in a Wraith' (from 'Feel It') and the entirety of 'Kanye West'. Thug's sensual imagery is often genuinely bizarre, moving away from hip-hop's extensive depictions of sexual dominance or violence (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2012) into an abstract space in which eroticism is visceral, taboo and even queer in its fluidity (although his attraction is primarily and explicitly heterosexual). Nonsensical imagery ['I'm so geeked up I might fuck a condom' from 'Thief In The Night' (2015)], infantilism ('Kiss that little girl one time, then I'll never let her let up/Kiss that little baby one fucking time' from 2013 Gucci Mane collaboration 'Punchanella'), crude surrealism ['These pussy niggas tighter than a wedgie, weegee' from (2015's 'Just Might Be')] and a somewhat

sex-positive focus on pleasuring his partner ('I lick on that puss on a pill, and I make her stand up like some bunny ears/I bite on her butt and I suck on her toes and her soul go outta here' from 'You Said') proliferate, none of which could be described as representative of 'standard' sexual expression in contemporary mainstream hip-hop. While it would be something of a leap to claim that Thug's unique lyrical exploration of hypersexuality is truly revolutionary [it remains mired in hip-hop's much-documented misogyny (Jeffries 2011; Rose 1994), and has also historically been practised by acts such as 2 Live Crew], its outré nature does contrast with the hegemonic heteronormative masculinity foregrounded in more archetypal hip-hop (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2012; Dhaenens and De Ridder 2014; Hess 2005).

This problematic heteronormativity has historically led to male rappers rejecting characteristics that might 'threaten the "normal-ity" of black manhood [in favour of] homophobia, sexism and misogyny. [They] dissociate themselves from [...] queer identities while representing women in binary inferior roles', presenting an unambiguous and 'solid' image of hyper-masculine black identity in lyrics, vocal tone, costuming and body shape (Dhaenens and De Ridder 2014). Whether or not Thug's lyrical representation of sex is deemed to run counter to this, his vocal tone – predominantly high-pitched, comprising yelps and squawks – can certainly be regarded as subversively androgynous. Thug, described as 'gender fluid' in *The Guardian* (Wolfson 2015), seems to revel in blurring boundaries between conventional expectations of the masculine and the feminine. He claims that there is 'no such thing as gender' (Bulut 2016), reflecting this mentality in both his relationships with fellow rappers and in his fashion sense. On Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram he frequently dubs peers (such as Quan, Birdman, Lil Uzi Vert and Future) 'hubby', 'bae', 'lover' and 'baby' (Lamarre 2014) while posting suggestive photographs/videos with them (including images of him sucking Uzi's chain, engaging in shopping sprees and going on bicycle rides with Future). This alone has caused significant backlash from many hip-hop fans (at least those that conform to the import of images of secure hyper-masculinity), with discussion on social media and forums being dominated by debates about his sexuality and homophobic slurs such as 'fag' and 'fruity' (Goddard 2018). However, where many rappers might move to quell these rumours and dispel these insults, fearing for the security of their 'street' persona, Thug actively leans into them ['I like everything that people say. [...] "You gay" [or] "you a punk"'] (Thug in Wolfson 2015)] with his provocative clothing selections. Thug's self-representation through costuming is as fluid as his vocal style, and he maintains an androgynous fashion sense that mirrors the diversity of his flows and rejects the dominance of the hyper-masculine rapper. Instead of adopting the stereotypical 'loose baggy garments' of gangster rap (Persaud 2011), he frequently wears tight outfits, highlighting his slim body shape. Penney explains that

Tight clothes [draw] attention to the entire male form. [...] By sexualising [the] male body, [they emphasise] a to-be-looked-at-ness which invites the gaze of the other. [...] The threat that [this poses] is not [...] queer sexual orientation, but [a] queering of straight male hip-hop style and subsequent blurring of identity boundaries. What really [concerns hip-hop's hegemonic men] about presumably straight rappers wearing tight clothes is the ambiguity it engenders [through] queer pollution. (Penney 2012)

His 'leopard-print dresses, pleather baby tees, miniskirts, circular Elton John sunglasses, [and] draped, unconventional tunics', selected in collaboration with personal stylist Jojo Zarur (Sandberg 2015), are accompanied by manicured/painted nails,

fetishistic facial piercings and ever-changing hair colours and styles. As mentioned above, Thug even modelled a piece by Alessandro Trincone on the cover of *JEFFERY*, embracing the 'androgynous identity' of Trincone's designs and his 'belief [in] no-gender binaries between men and women. [...] The feminine side of every male is explicitly shown [in the garment], hoping to introduce a new meaning of masculinity' (Petrarca 2016).

It is worth noting here that the anonymity of the Internet enables 'individuals to experiment with various guises of their identity such as bodily form and sexuality' (Elund 2012), forming a generation increasingly comfortable with queerness and a fluid sense-of-self (underlined by a much-publicised 2015 *YouGov* poll; Dahlgreen 2015). As I have argued elsewhere, the 'online self becomes a canvas for "inventiveness and innovation", enabling web users to escape [binary ideas of] identity and self-representation. [One can] diversify representations of one's self through [anonymising social] networks' (Waugh 2017). Today, Internet users do not separate their physical identities from the avatars that they present online (Jurgenson 2012a), instead performing multiple selves on digital media platforms and frequently engaging in digital queering. This mutable and queer self-representation manifests in Young Thug's performative fluidity and feminised fashion sense. His androgyny ('Thug says he is neither gay nor straight'; Wolfson 2015) is a threat to the traditional masculinity of hip-hop because he embraces the mutability of 'queerness' and revels in his own 'femininity' (in his performance and costuming) while simultaneously foregrounding his attraction to women (both in his explicit lyrical content and in his long-term relationship with swimwear entrepreneur and model Jerrika Karlae). It is impossible for traditionally 'masculine' artists to distance themselves from Thug's mutable self-image by defining him as a LGBTQ or female 'other', as his is a more flexible form of masculinity that is not fully distinguishable from that being performed by his detractors. This ungraspable shape-shifting is exemplified in his previously discussed name changes (his own, as well as the titles of his projects and songs), with his inconsistent erraticism ultimately becoming just another element of his queering. In videos such as 'Best Friend' he plays multiple characters, as if his own identity is literally splintering into an infinitude of different selves. He even has, in 'Young Thug', an almost parodically generic and 'masculine' hip-hop pseudonym that, in contrasting with his outré aesthetic and style, serves to mimic (and thus deconstruct) the personas of male rappers.

Many progressive 21st century rappers including Mykki Blanco, Angel Haze, Tommy Genesis, Cardi B, Brockhampton and Frank Ocean have challenged hip-hop's homophobia, transphobia and misogyny by illuminating their queerness or femininity, and these groundbreaking figures have truly disrupted the dominance of these regressive views in both the underground and the mainstream. Their rejection of hegemonic masculinity is overt and visible, however, meaning that they have often been dismissed as 'other' by hegemonic artists/audiences 'protecting' the so-called "'normal-ity" of black manhood' (Dhaenens and De Ridder 2014). The ambiguity of Thug's persona – a straight male embodying queerness – may provide an arguably more dangerous and less intelligible destabilisation, hence increased social media debate (and panic) about his prospective 'queer pollution' of hip-hop (Penney 2012). Admittedly, this virality provokes accusations that Thug only makes his transgressive fashion choices in order to build social media hype and encourage memetic content. As he raps self-consciously on 'Halftime': 'every time I dress myself, it go' motherfuckin' viral'.

Whether Thug's gender-fluidity is authentic or little more than an extended digital PR stunt, however, is arguably of little significance in a music industry increasingly centred on corporate influence over social media and fan participation. As suggested earlier, extended digital PR stunts are effectively central to the construction of an identifiable (even 'authentic') public identity in contemporary music (and hip-hop in particular). Artists, celebrities and influencers are increasingly 'expected' to be PR experts – both by the industry and by their followers – and so the line between 'real' and 'constructed' identities has become blurred. If Young Thug's embodiment of marginalised African-American sexualities and genders, alongside a passion for musical hybridisation, is genuine then it offers a much-needed victory for diversity in a genre whose mainstream representation of this has been minimal at best. Indeed, it undoubtedly laid the foundations for the eventual 2019 success of Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road', a song by an openly gay artist that rose to prominence on TikTok in late 2018 and explicitly fuses mumble rap with country, a genre similarly mired in issues of homophobia (Thug provided a guest verse for one of the single's many remixes). Even if not 'genuine', though, it remains significant owing to its foreshadowing of the practised social media promotion techniques central to the musical landscape that followed his emergence. Certainly, Thug's subversive, provocative self-image and improvisational vocal compositions have proven influential throughout subsequent mumble rap, indicating that fluidity and transgression are effective at provoking digital hype and virality (see the attention-seeking antics of post-2015 'meme rappers' such as Lil Xan, Doja Cat, Big Shaq, Lil Pump and Bhad Bhabie). His approach, driven by contemporary cultural trends such as memes, information overload and malleable digital identities, acutely mirrors the present context, proving more representative of fading attention spans and fluctuating selves than the virtuosic poeticism and stoic heteronormativity of classical hip-hop.

I conclude by noting that, while the mumble rap outlined here displays the ways hip-hop is evolving in tandem with digital networks, a still younger generation of artists continues to exhibit an even more symbiotic bond with the Internet. These musicians (many still in their teens) are frequently referred to as 'SoundCloud rappers', owing to their 2015–2019 emergence on the titular independent streaming platform (Turner 2017; Caramanica 2017). The term has been applied to a vast array of figures such as (and certainly not limited to) Lil Uzi Vert, Lil Yachty, Kodie Shane, Trippie Redd, Juice WRLD, 6IX9INE, Lil Pump and Playboi Carti (as well as the late XXXTENTACION and Lil Peep), all of whom have grown up alongside social media and thus have a wholly organic relationship with its communicative, distributive and participatory methods. These protagonists (whose punk rock-inspired costuming almost uniformly comprises multi-coloured dreadlocks, luxury streetwear, piercings and facial tattoos) exploit SoundCloud and social media as spaces to distribute and hype their music directly to their online audience, fully embracing the digital PR techniques and narratives so effectively deployed by Young Thug. While exhibiting significant musical diversity, almost all SoundCloud rappers deploy vocals that take the stylised melodies and post-lyricism of mumble rap to new extremes. The 'restless immediacy [of their] scattershot' self-representation resonates with 'a generation that has grown up on social media' (McQuaid 2015: 30), while their preoccupation with digital promotion and rejection of lyrical complexity reverses hip-hop's valuation of 'substance over style' (Turner 2016).

Transported rapidly into the media spotlight by trendsetters and fashion designers such as Adam22, A\$AP Rocky, Ian Connor and Zeus Trappin, the success

of these rappers is completely embedded in a culture of instantaneous communication and social media hype. Inspired by the mumbling of their predecessors and the fashion of Young Thug, this new wave provokes further debates about lyrical devolution, digital PR campaigns/stunts and queer costuming in hip-hop that are unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. I end with reference to the movement here, however, because there is no question that the vocal techniques, relationship with social media, incessant release schedules and lack of distinction between online and offline exemplified by SoundCloud rap are direct products of the subversions of Young Thug – the hip-hop artist that has, to this point, most innovatively exploited, embraced and embodied the cultural upheavals of digitality.

References

- Adams, K. 2009. 'On the metrical techniques of flow in rap music', *Society for Music Theory*, 15/5, <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.adams.html>
- Allyse, J. 2017. 'Let's ask ourselves, is mumble rap really a thing?', *Vibe*, <https://www.vibe.com/featured/mumble-rap-essay/>
- Anderson, R., and Jennings, J. 2014. 'Afrofuturism: the digital turn and the visual art of Kanye West', *The cultural impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 29–44
- Anderson, T. 2013. *Popular music in a digital music economy* (Abingdon, Routledge)
- Anderson, T. 2019. 'Winner's circle: Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" breaks record with 17th week atop Billboard Hot 100', *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8524235/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-longest-number-one-hot-100>
- Aroesti, R. 2018. 'Lil Pump review – mindless, parent-resistant mumble rap', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/nov/21/lil-pump-review-brixton-academy-review-gazzy-garcia>
- Auner, J. 2003. "'Sing it for me": posthuman ventriloquism in recent popular music', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 128/1, 98–122
- Baldwin, D. 2011. 'Black empires, white desires: the spatial politics of identity in the age of hip-hop', *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop studies Reader*, ed. M. Foreman and M. Anthony Neal (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 182–202
- Balfour, J. 2016. 'Best new track: Young Thug – "Kanye West"', *Pitchfork*, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/18509-young-thug-kanye-west/>
- Beaumont-Thomas, B. 2018. 'Lil Xan: *Total Xanarchy* review – moronic rap to make you feel old', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/apr/05/lil-xan-total-xanarchy-review-moronic-rap-to-make-you-feel-old>
- Breihan, T. 2018. 'Album of the week: 03 Greedo – *The Wolf Of Grape Street*', *Stereogum*, <https://www.stereogum.com/1986862/album-of-the-week-03-greedo-the-wolf-of-grape-street/franchises/album-of-the-week/>
- Britton, L.M. 2018. 'Is XXXTENTACION still alive? All the conspiracy theories surrounding the rapper's death', *NME*, <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/is-xxxtentacion-still-alive-what-are-the-drake-rumours-all-the-conspiracy-theories-surrounding-the-rappers-death-2341984>
- Bulut, S. 2016. 'Young Thug says there's no such thing as gender', *Dazed*, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/31936/1/young-thug-says-there-s-no-such-thing-as-gender>
- Caplan, D. 2014. *Rhyme's Challenge: Hip-hop, Poetry and Contemporary Rhyming Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press)
- Caramanica, J. 2016. 'Kanye West is fixing his album in public. You'll want to read the edits', *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/arts/music/kanye-west-life-of-pablo-flop.html>
- Caramanica, J. 2017. 'The rowdy world of rap's new underground', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/arts/music/soundcloud-rap-lil-pump-smokepurp-xxxtentacion.html?mcubz=3>
- Carr, N. 2011. *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way we Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books)
- Castells, M. 2004. *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar)
- Chafkin, M., and Frier, S. 2016. 'How Snapchat built a business by confusing olds', *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-how-snapchat-built-a-business/>
- Charity, J. 2016. 'Well actually, Future was the best rapper alive in 2015', *Complex*, <https://www.complex.com/music/2016/01/future-better-than-drake>
- Cliff, A. 2015. 'How pop songs connect in a hyper-connected world', *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/10/30/drake-adele-hotline-bling-hello-internet>
- Cook-Wilson, W. 2015. 'Get "Barter": How Young Thug remade the style, sound, and soul of Lil Wayne', *Grantland*, <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/young-thug-lil-wayne-barter-6/>
- Cook-Wilson, W. 2018. 'Playboi Carti's radical *Die Lit* expands the parameters of SoundCloud Rap', *Spin*, <https://www.spin.com/2018/05/playboi-carti-die-lit-review/>

- Corrigan, G. 2017. '6 new ways artists can break in 2017', *Pigeons and Planes*, <https://pigeonsandplanes.com/in-depth/2017/01/new-ways-artists-break-2017/>
- Dahlgreen, W. 2015. '1 in 2 young people say they are not 100% heterosexual', *YouGov*, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/08/16/half-young-not-heterosexual/>
- David, M. 2007. 'Afrofuturism and post-soul possibility in black popular music', *African American Review*, 41/4, 695–707
- Davis, J. 2015. 'Here's how 100 leaked songs from Young Thug, Rich Homie Quan, and more ended up on the Internet', *Complex*, <https://www.complex.com/music/2015/05/young-thug-leaked-songs-investigation>
- de Paor-Evans, A. 2017. 'Mumble rap: cultural laziness or a true reflection of contemporary times?', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/mumble-rap-cultural-laziness-or-a-true-reflection-of-contemporary-times-85550>
- Dery, M. 1994. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press)
- Dhaenens, F., and De Ridder, S. 2014. 'Resistant masculinities in alternative R&B? Understanding Frank Ocean and The Weeknd's representations of gender', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18/3, 283–99
- Drake, D. 2014. 'Young Thug, Rich Homie Quan, and Birdman's *Rich Gang* Mixtape is one of the best releases of the year', *Complex*, <https://www.complex.com/music/2014/10/rich-gang-mixtape-review>
- Drake, D. 2018. 'The music industry wasn't ready for Chief Keef', *The Outline*, <https://theoutline.com/post/3359/chief-keef-influence-essay?zd=2&zi=xdsmx2uc>
- Dyson, M. 2011. 'The culture of hip-hop', *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. M. Foreman and M.A. Neal (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 68–76
- Elund, J. 2012. 'The female body in *Second Life*: Considerations of feminism and queer theory in two female-only spaces', *Outskirts: Feminisms along the edge*, 27, <http://www.thefreeibrary.com/The+female+body+in+Second+Life%3A+Considerations+of+feminism+and+queer...-a0314254242>
- Eshun, K. 1998. *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Modern Fiction* (London, Quartet)
- Eshun, K. 2003. 'Further considerations on Afrofuturism', *The New Centennial Review*, 3/2, pp. 287–302
- Fisher, M. 2014. *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London, Zero Books)
- Friedlander, E. 2016. 'Teen-focused app Musical.ly is the music industry's new secret weapon', *Vice*, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wdbxxn/the-social-media-app-musically-is-changing-music-marketing-v23n07
- Garcia, A. 2013. 'Beautiful dark twisted pedagogy: Kanye West and the lessons of participatory culture', *Radical Teacher*, 97: 30–35
- Garland, E. 2016. 'Drake's *Take Care* is the greatest emo album of all time', *Noisey*, https://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/article/bnjdvw/5-years-on-drakes-take-care-is-the-greatest-emo-album-of-all-time
- Garvey, M. 2015. 'The influencer: A decade of Soulja Boy', *Pitchfork*, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9682-the-influencer-a-decade-of-soulja-boy/>
- Genius. 2017. 'A linguist breaks down Young Thug's vocal style', *Genius*, <https://genius.com/a/a-linguist-breaks-down-the-emotion-behind-young-thug-s-vocal-style>
- Gensler, A. 2017. 'Spotify's Tuma Basa on curating RapCaviar, what not to do when pitching and why he's no "gatekeeper"', *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/7865934/spotify-tuma-basa-curating-rapcaviar-pitching-playlists>
- Glass, S. 2016. 'Why Apple Music exclusives are good for artists', *Pigeons and Planes*, https://pigeonsandplanes.com/in-depth/2016/08/apple-music-frank-ocean-exclusive?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=oando
- Goddard, K. 2018. '21 Savage pokes fun at Lil Uzi Vert and Young Thug's friendship: "Y'all gay"', *HotNewHipHop*, <https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/21-savage-pokes-fun-at-lil-uzi-vert-and-young-thug-s-friendship-y-all-gay-news.49980.html>
- Gorsler, F. 2018. 'Twitter goes crazy after Pusha T ethers Drake on "The Story of Adidon"', *Highsnobiety*, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/internet-reacts-pusha-t-drake-adidon/>
- Grace, W. 2016. 'The Game reignites beef with Young Thug: "I will beat the Victoria Secret out that boy/girl"', *Style*, <http://stylemagazine.com/news/2016/feb/17/game-reignites-beef-young-thug-i-will-beat-victori/>
- Greene, J. 2013. 'Review: Future – *FBG*', *Pitchfork*, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17651-fbg/>
- Greene, J. 2015a. 'The coldest story ever told: The influence of Kanye West's *808s* and *Heartbreak*', *Pitchfork*, <https://pitchfork.com/features/overtones/9725-the-coldest-story-ever-told-the-influence-of-kanye-wests-808s-heartbreak/>
- Greene, J. 2015b. 'Chaos theory: the glorious unpredictability of Young Thug', *Pitchfork*, <http://pitchfork.com/features/overtones/9727-chaos-theory-the-glorious-unpredictability-of-young-thug/>
- Harrison, D., and Black, B. 2016. 'A brief anthology of Drake's reign as lord of the memes', *Crack*, <https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/brief-anthology-drakes-reign-lord-memes/>
- Hesmondhalgh, D., and Meier, L.M. 2018. 'What the digitalisation of music tells us about capitalism, culture and the power of the information technology sector', *Information, Communication and Society*, 21/11, pp. 1555–70
- Hess, M. 2005. 'Metal faces, rap masks: Identity and resistance in hip-hop's persona artist', *Popular Music and Society*, 28/3, pp. 297–311
- Hoby, H. 2016. 'DJ Khaled: A day in the life of a living meme', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jul/30/hip-hop-dj-khaled-day-in-the-life-of-a-living-meme>

- Holmes, C. 2017. 'Lil Wayne's worst album is also his most influential', *Complex*, <https://www.complex.com/music/2017/05/lil-wayne-rebirth-influence-lil-uzi-vert-travis-scott>
- Iandoli, K. 2016. 'The rise of "mumble rap": did lyricism take a hit in 2016?', *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7625631/rise-of-mumble-rap-lyricism-2016>
- Isom, E. 2016. 'Essential advice for every new artist', *Pigeons and Planes*, <https://pigeonsandplanes.com/in-depth/2016/12/best-new-artist-advice-how-to/>
- Jeffries, M.P. 2011. *Thug life: Race, gender, and the meaning of hip-hop* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press)
- Jenkins, H. 2012. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Philadelphia, PA, Routledge)
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., and Green, J. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value And meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York, New York University Press)
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., and Robison, A.J. 2009. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press)
- Johansson, S., Werner, A., Åker, P., and Goldenzwaig, G. 2017. *Streaming Music: Practices, Media, Cultures* (Philadelphia, PA, Routledge)
- Judah, S. 2017. 'How a dead gorilla became the meme of 2016', *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38383126>
- Judy, R. 2011. 'On the question of nigga authenticity', *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*, ed. M. Foreman and M.A. Neal (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 119–34
- Jurgenson, N. 2012a. 'The IRL fetish', *The New Inquiry*, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/>
- Jurgenson, N. 2012b. 'Speaking in memes', *The New Inquiry*, <https://thenewinquiry.com/speaking-in-memes/>
- Kameir, R. 2016. 'How today's streaming wars could rewrite the playlists of the future', *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2016/08/02/apple-music-tidal-streaming-wars>
- Kane, P. 2018. "'Mumble rap" poorly represents hip-hop's history and tradition', *The Daily Cardinal*, <http://www.dailycardinal.com/article/2018/02/mumble-rap-poorly-represents-hip-hop>
- Kelley, R. 2011. 'Looking for the "real" nigga: social scientists construct the ghetto', *That's the joint!: The hip-hop studies reader*, ed. M. Foreman and M.A. Neal (Abingdon, Routledge), pp. 135–56
- Kent, K. 2014. *The Literary Genius of Lil Wayne* (USA: CreateSpace IPP)
- Kesvani, H. 2017. 'How memes warped modern politics', *Vice*, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/wn993z/how-memes-warped-modern-politics
- Kramer, K. 2017. 'Lil Wayne invented the sound of modern drug rap with "Me and My Drank"', *Noisey*, https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/paa4n9/lil-wayne-invented-the-sound-of-modern-drug-rap-with-me-and-my-drank
- Krims, A. 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press)
- Krishnamurthy, S. 2017. 'This is how streaming became the new platinum standard', *XXL*, <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2017/07/this-is-how-streaming-became-the-new-platinum-standard/>
- Kroker, A. 2014. *Exits to the Posthuman Future* (Cambridge, Polity Press)
- Laing, D. 2006. 'Anglo-American music journalism: texts and contexts', *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. A. Bennett, B. Shank and J. Toynbee (New York, Routledge), pp. 333–40
- Lamarre, C. 2014. 'Young Thug calls Birdman his "lover" on Instagram', *XXL*, <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2014/09/young-thug-birdman-lover-instagram/>
- Leavitt, A. 2014. 'From #FollowFriday to YOLO: exploring the cultural salience of Twitter memes', *Twitter and Society*, ed. K. Weller et al. (USA, Peter Lang), pp. 137–54
- Lee, C. 2016. 'Songs we love: Young Thug, "Harambe"', *NPR Music*, <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/08/492950984/songs-we-love-young-thug-harambe?t=1530620419260>
- Locke, C. 2015. 'Young Thug isn't rapping gibberish, he's evolving language', *Wired*, <http://www.wired.com/2015/10/young-thug-evolution-of-language/>
- Loh, K. and Kanai, R. 2015. 'How has the Internet reshaped human cognition?', *Neuroscientist*, <http://nro.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/07/13/1073858415595005.full.pdf+html>
- Luckerson, V. 2015. 'How exclusives are hurting streaming music', *Time*, <http://time.com/3955992/streaming-exclusives/>
- Lynch, J. 2018. 'For the first time in history, hip-hop has surpassed rock to become the most popular music genre, according to Nielsen', *Business Insider*, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/hip-hop-passes-rock-most-popular-music-genre-nielsen-2018-1>
- Marantz, A. 2012. 'The dumb brilliance of Lil B', *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/04/the-dumb-brilliance-of-lil-b.html>
- Margiotta, M. 2012. 'Influence of social media on the management of music star image', *Strategic Communications: Elon University*, <https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/communications/journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/2017/06/01MargiottaEJSpring12.pdf>
- Marks, C. 2017. 'How a hit happens now', *Vulture*, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/09/spotify-rapcaviar-most-influential-playlist-in-music.html>
- Marwick, A. 2013. 'Memes', *Contexts*, 12/4, pp. 12–13
- McLeod, K. 2006. 'Authenticity within hip-hop and other cultures threatened with assimilation', *Journal of Communication*, 49/4, pp. 134–50
- McQuaid, I. 2015. 'Face the strange', *The Wire*, 385, pp. 28–33

- Morley, P. 2013. 'The Rolling Stones will reign supreme until there is a new counterculture', *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/31/rolling-stones-glastonbury-counterculture-morley>
- Morris, J.W., and Powers, D. 2015. 'Control, curation and musical experience in streaming music services', *Creative Industries Journal*, 8/2, pp. 106–22
- Muller, M.G. 2015. 'The Meek Mill vs. Drake memes are never-ending', *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/07/30/meek-mill-drake-memes>
- NBC News. 2017. 'Living off memes: the life of a professional Instagram meme-maker', *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/living-off-memes-the-life-of-a-professional-instagram-meme-maker-1008671811872>
- Nitins, T., and Burgess, J. 2013. 'Twitter, brands and user engagement', *Twitter and Society*, ed. K. Waller et al. (USA: Peter Lang), pp. 293–304
- Parham, J. 2017. 'Say what you meme, meme what you say', *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2017/04/27/memes-black-twitter-diaspora-essay>
- Patterson, J. 2013. 'Trap music: the definitive guide', *Topman*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130225214033/http://magazine.topman.com/category/ctrl-music/trap-music-the-definitive-guide/>
- Pearce, S. 2014. 'Review: *Rich Gang – Tha Tour Pt. 1* (Mixtape)', *HipHopDX*, <https://hiphopdx.com/reviews/id.2352/title.rich-gang-tha-tour-pt-1-mixtape#>
- Pearce, S. 2017. 'Young Thug says new album, executive produced by Drake, is coming this week', *Pitchfork*, <https://pitchfork.com/news/73136-young-thug-says-new-album-executive-produced-by-drake-is-coming-this-week/>
- Penney, J. 2012. "'We don't wear tight clothes": gay panic and queer style in contemporary hip-hop', *Popular Music and Society*, 35/3, pp. 321–32
- Persaud, E.J. 2011. 'The signature of hip-hop: a sociological perspective', *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, 4/1, pp. 626–47
- Petrarca, E. 2016. 'The fashion designer behind Young Thug's *No, My Name Is Jeffery* album cover hopes to redefine masculinity', *W Magazine*, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/designer-alessandro-trincone-young-thug-album-cover>
- Phillips, T. 'Yoh'. 2016a. 'How Soulja Boy and MySpace brought hip-hop into the Internet era', *DJBooth*, <https://djbooth.net/features/2016-03-24-soulja-boy-myspace-internet>
- Phillips, T. 'Yoh'. 2016b. 'Remembering Kid Cudi's influence and impact on hip-hop', *DJBooth*, <https://djbooth.net/features/2016-09-15-kid-cudi-impact-on-hip-hop>
- Phillips, T. 'Yoh'. 2018. 'Future – *BEASTMODE 2* 1 listen album review', *DJBooth*, <https://djbooth.net/features/2018-07-06-future-beastmode-2-album-review>
- Ranganathan, A. 2015-. *The Book Of Thug*, <http://www.thebookofthug.com>
- Raw, S. 2017. 'Atlanta gone viral: How rap's premier city used memes to crack the pop charts', *The Fader*, <http://www.factmag.com/2017/06/08/atlanta-rap-viral-memes/>
- Raymer, M. 2017. 'Migos, Designer, Playboi Carti and the return of hip-hop ad-libs', *GQ*, <https://www.gq.com/story/return-of-hip-hop-ad-libs>
- Rebollo-Gil, G., and Moras, A. 2012. 'Black women and black men in hip-hop music: Misogyny, violence and the negotiation of (white-owned) space', *Popular Culture*, 45/1, pp. 118–32
- Renshaw, D. 2018. 'Young Thug says he won't put out any new music in 2018', *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2018/02/23/young-thug-deaf-brother-new-music>
- Reynolds, S. 2011. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London, Faber and Faber)
- Richards, C. 2014. 'Coughing up hits – Young Thug and Future find rap's magic in the back of their throats', *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/06/16/coughing-up-hits-young-thug-and-future-find-raps-magic-in-the-back-of-their-throats/>
- Richards, C. 2015. 'A loss for words: Listening to the post-verbal brilliance of Young Thug', *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/style/2015/09/17/a-loss-for-words-listening-to-the-post-verbal-brilliance-of-young-thug/>
- Rose, T. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press)
- Rossen, B. 2018. 'The role of emotion in AAVE pronunciation: Mumble rap as a phenomenon of language evolution', BA Thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen, https://theses.uibn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/123456789/6154/Rossen%2C_B._1.pdf?sequence=1
- Sandberg, P. 2015. 'Young Thug: eccentric-in-chief', *Dazed*, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/25802/1/young-thug-eccentric-in-chief>
- Shifman, L. 2013. *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press)
- Stephenson, W. 2014. 'Young Thug: came from nothing' *The Fader*, <http://www.thefader.com/2014/02/11/young-thug-came-from-nothing>
- Suarez, G. 2016. 'How streaming impacts, and undermines, the Billboard Hot 100 chart', *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/garysuarez/2016/12/20/streaming-billboard-hot-100/#76d506976aa7>
- Sullivan, E. 2015. 'Young Thug: what drugs sound like', *GQ*, <http://www.gq.com/story/young-thug>
- Sundermann, E. 2014. 'Young Thug proved he's the future of everything on *The Tonight Show*', *Noisey*, https://noisey.vice.com/en_au/article/6ee4k6/young-thug-jimmy-fallon-ti-performance-about-the-music

- Turner, D. 2016. 'Started from SoundCloud and now they're here: Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert', *MTV*, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2747565/started-from-soundcloud-and-now-theyre-here-playboi-carti-and-lil-uzi-vert/>
- Turner, D. 2017. "'Look At Me!": The noisy, blown-out SoundCloud revolution redefining rap', *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/look-at-me-the-noisy-blown-out-soundcloud-revolution-redefining-rap-123887/>
- van Dijk, J. 1999. *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, 2nd edn (London, Sage)
- Vaynerchuk, G. 2013. *Jab, Jab, Jab, Right Hook: How to Tell your Story in a Noisy Social World* (New York, HarperCollins)
- Vonderau, P. 2017. 'The Spotify effect: digital distribution and financial growth', *Television and New Media*, DOI: 10.1177/1527476417741200
- Vozick-Levinson, S. 2014. 'Review – Rich Gang: Tha Tour Part 1', *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/rich-gang-tha-tour-part-1-99412/>
- Waugh, M. 2017. "'My laptop is an extension of my memory and self": post-Internet identity, virtual intimacy and digital queering in online popular music', *Popular Music*, 36/2, pp. 233–51
- Weiner, N. 2017. 'Migos and memes: how everything from strippers to Donald Glover helped "Bad and Boujee" explode', *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7662485/migos-memes-donald-glover-strippers-hot-100>
- Weingarten, C. 2014. 'Future: How hip-hop's paranoid android became a robocroon superstar', *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/future-how-hip-hops-paranoid-android-became-a-robocroon-superstar-20140415>
- Weiss, D. 2014. 'Young Thug is Spin's 2014 rapper of the year', *Spin*, <http://www.spin.com/featured/young-thug-2014-rapper-of-the-year/>
- Weiss, J. 2018. 'Living legend: Why 03 Greedo matters', *Passionweiss*, <https://www.passionweiss.com/2018/04/29/03-greedo-watts-legend/>
- Westhoff, B. 2011. *Dirty South* (Chicago, IL, Chicago Review Press)
- Willite, M. 2018. 'Valee introduces his unique brand of anarchy on debut EP *GOOD Job, You Found Me*', *DJBooth*, <https://djbooth.net/features/2018-03-01-valee-good-job-you-found-me>
- Wilson, J. 2017. 'Hiding in plain sight: how the "alt-right" is weaponizing irony to spread fascism', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism>
- Wolfson, S. 2015. 'Young Thug: "I like everything people say about me – you gay, you a punk, you can't rap, you're the hardest"', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/oct/08/young-thug-hits-bring-money-lil-wayne>
- Zaworski, E. 2014. 'Review – Rich Gang: Tha Tour Part 1', *Exclaim!*, https://exclaim.ca/music/article/rich_gang-tha_tour_part_1
- Zimmerman, A. 2016. 'How Beyoncé manipulates the media: From Elevatorgate to *Lemonade*', *The Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-beyonce-manipulates-the-media-from-elevatorgate-to-lemonade>

Discography

- Calvin Harris, 'Heatstroke (Feat. Young Thug, Ariana Grande and Pharrell Williams)'. Columbia. 2017
- Camila Cabello, 'Havana (Feat. Young Thug)'. Epic. 2017
- Chief Keef, *Nobody*. Glo Gang. 2014
- Childish Gambino, 'This Is America'. RCA. 2018
- Drake, 'Hotline Bling'. Cash Money/OVO. 2015
- Drake, *Views*. Cash Money/OVO. 2016
- Drake, 'Sacrifices (Feat. 2 Chainz and Young Thug)'. Cash Money/OVO. 2017
- Drake, *Scorpion*. Cash Money/OVO. 2018
- Future, 'Tony Montana'. Self-released. 2011
- Future, 'Mask Off'. Epic. 2017
- Gucci Mane, 'Guwop Home (Feat. Young Thug)'. Atlantic/1017. 2016
- Gucci Mane, 'Punchanella (Feat. Young Thug)'. Self-released. 2013
- Jamie, 'I Know There's Gonna Be (Good Times) (Feat. Young Thug and Popcaan)'. Young Turks. 2015
- Kanye West, *808s and Heartbreak*. Def Jam. 2008
- Kanye West, *The Life Of Pablo*. Def Jam. 2016
- Lil Nas X, 'Old Town Road'. Columbia. 2018
- Lil Pump, 'Gucci Gang'. Tha Lights Global/Warner Bros. 2017
- Lil Uzi Vert, 'XO TOUR Llif3'. Atlantic. 2017
- Lil Wayne, *Rebirth*. Cash Money. 2009
- Migos, 'Bad And Boujee'. Quality Control Music. 2016
- Playboi Carti, 'Magnolia'. Interscope/AWGE. 2017
- Rae Sremmurd, 'Black Beatles'. EarDrummers/Interscope. 2016
- Rae Sremmurd, 'Offshore (Feat. Young Thug)'. EarDrummers, Interscope. 2018

- Rich Gang, 'Lifestyle'. Cash Money. 2014
Rich Gang, *Rich Gang: Tha Tour Part 1*. Cash Money. 2014
T.I., 'About The (Feat. Young Thug)'. Columbia. 2014
Tyga, 'Hookah (Feat. Young Thug)'. Cash Money. 2014
Young Thug, '2 Bitches (Danny Glover)'. Self-released. 2013
Young Thug, 'Best Friend'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, 'Dome'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, 'Drippin'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Family Don't Matter'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Feel It'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Flaws'. Self-released. 2015
Young Thug, 'Floyd Mayweather (Feat. Travis Scott, Gucci Mane and Gunna)'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Gangster Shit'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Givenchy'. Cash Money. 2014
Young Thug, 'Guwop (Feat. Quavo, Offset and Young Scooter)'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Haiti Slang'. Self-released. 2011
Young Thug, 'Halftime'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, 'Harambe'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Imma Ride (Feat. Birdman & Yung Ralph)'. Cash Money. 2014
Young Thug, 'Just Might Be'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, 'Kanye West'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Killed Before'. Epic/300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Me Or Us'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Nigeria (Feat. Gucci Mane and Peewee Longway)'. Self-released. 2013
Young Thug, 'Numbers'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, 'On Fire'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Raw (Might Just)'. Self-released. 2015
Young Thug, 'RiRi'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Texas Love'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Thief In The Night (Feat. Trouble)'. Self-released. 2015
Young Thug, 'Worth It'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'Wyclef Jean'. 300. 2016
Young Thug, 'You Said (Feat. Quavo)'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Stoner'. Self-released. 2014
Young Thug, 'Pacifier'. 300. 2015
Young Thug, *I'm Up*. 300. 2016
Young Thug, *JEFFERY*. 300. 2016
Young Thug, *Slime Season 3*. 300. 2016
Young Thug, *BEAUTIFUL THUGGER GIRLS*. 300. 2017
Young Thug, 'Safe'. 300. 2017
Young Thug, *Hear No Evil*. 300. 2018
Young Thug, 'MLK (Feat. Trouble and Shad Da God)'. Self-released. 2018
Young Thug, *So Much Fun*. 300. 2019
Young Thug and Gucci Mane, 'OMG'. Self-released. 2014
Young Thug and Gucci Mane, 'Siblings'. Self-released. 2014
Young Thug and Bloody Jay, 'Florida Water'. Self-released. 2014
21 Savage, 'Bank Account'. Slaughter Gang/Epic. 2017