TWO Rhyme

RHYME IS THE music MCs make with their mouths. When T. J. Swan sings the title line on Biz Markie's "Make the Music with Your Mouth, Biz," he's not just telling Biz to beatbox, he's inviting him to rock the mic with rhymes. While some MCs are also known for singing with melody and harmony—Mos Def and Lauryn Hill come to mind—most rappers don't sing at all. What they do instead is rhyme in a cadence. Rhyming words gives rap its song, underscoring the small but startling music of language itself.

Everyone knows rhyme when they hear it, but few stop to examine it. Rhyme is the concordance of sound. It works by establishing a habit of expectation in listeners' minds, conditioning them to identify patterns of sound, to connect words the mind instinctively recognizes as related yet distinct.

All rhyme relies on the innate human impulse to recognize patterns and to anticipate what will follow. A skillfully rendered rhyme strikes a balance between expectation and novelty.

It might be useful to think of rap rhyme on a sliding scale of listener expectation, with one end representing unwavering rhyme regularity and the other no rhyme at all. Either extreme leads to collapse, but between them is a wide range of possibilities that satisfy the listener's desire for rhyme. Free-verse rap, rap that does not rhyme at all, is rare, if not nonexistent. At the same time, rap that rhymes incessantly and perfectly soon grows tiresome.

The most common rap rhymes are end rhymes, those rhymes that fall on the last beat of the musical measure, signaling the end of the poetic line. Two lines in succession with end rhymes comprise a couplet, the most common rhyme scheme in old-school rap. In addition to defining the line, rhyme serves a secondary purpose of organizing rhythm by dividing sound into recognizable units. "Along with word choice and sound patterns, the sound effects of rhyme and repetition help create the rhythm of a poem," notes Frances Mayes. "Recurrence of a sound is itself a music. Like the chorus in a song, a refrain or rhyming pattern, once set up, rewards our anticipation."

Rhyme is the reason we can begin to hear a rhythm just by reading these lines from 50 Cent's 2007 hit "I Get Money": "Get a tan? I'm already black. Rich? I'm already that / Gangsta, get a gat, hit a head in a hat / Call that a riddle rap. . . ." The first line establishes a pattern of stressed syllables in successive phrases ("al***rea***dy ***black***, al***rea***dy ***that***") that he carries over into the next two lines ("***get*** a ***gat***, ***hit*** a ***head***, ***in*** a ***hat***, ***r***iddle ***rap***"). Three of these four phrases end in rhymes, one a perfect rhyme ("gat" and "hat") and the third a slant rhyme ("rap"). The overall effect of the performance rewards our anticipation by balancing expectation and surprise in its sounds.

Rhyming renders familiar words unexpected and fresh. Whether falling at the end of lines or cropping up somewhere in the middle, rhymes result in heightened, artificial, almost ceremonial remixes of everyday speech. Rap's rhymes rely heavily on the oral tradition, inscribing patterns that may appear quixotic on the page but build unmistakable sonic structures when performed. For instance, chain rhymes—extended runs of the same rhyme sound over a series of lines, often with both end and internal rhymes—have become increasingly popular among MCs in recent years. As rap has evolved, the range of rhyme patterns has expanded to include a host of strategies that fulfill the listener's expectation for rhyme even as they explore new expressive possibilities. Without melody, with rhythm alone, rap organizes words into forms that are strange yet familiar to the ear.

Rap's reliance on rhyme distinguishes it from almost every other form of contemporary music and from most contemporary literary poetry. Many other genres of popular lyric can take rhyme or leave it. And in recent years, literary poetry has seemingly neglected rhyme or, if not neglected it, subsumed it more fully into its form, eschewing discernable patterns of end rhymes for subtler arrangements of internal ones.

Rap celebrates rhyme like nothing else, hearkening back to a time when literary poetry still unabashedly embraced the simple pleasure and musicality of verse. Rap rhymes so much

and with such variety that it is now the largest and richest contemporary archive of rhymed words. It has done more than any other art form in recent history to expand rhyme's formal range and expressive possibilities.

Rhyme consists of the repetition of the last stressed vowel sound and all the sounds following that vowel—such as in the words "demonstrate" and "exonerate." Rhyme is the echo of sound from one word to another, an echo that simultaneously announces similarity and difference. To put it another way, rhyming words begin different but end the same. This balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar is the very spirit of rhyme. As Alfred Corn explains, "Where there is no similarity, there is no rhyme. Where the similarity is too great, boredom sets in. Skillful rhyming involves finding a balance between identity and difference."

In its most basic sense, rhyme is a sonic balance between identity (or replication) and difference that relies upon the ear's capacity to draw connections between two distinct but related sounds. When identity is absolute, MCs are "rhyming" the same word—a practice that is generally frowned upon in rap circles, but has nonetheless been employed to good effect by certain artists. On the other hand, when the difference between words is too great, no rhyme registers at all. Broadly understood, rhyme also includes a host of other linguistic strategies that rely upon the echo of sound across words. Alliteration, once called head rhyme, is older even than rhyme itself. It consists of the repetition of initial consonants, as in "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." Similarly, assonance is the rhyming of vowel sounds alone ("How now, brown cow?"), and consonance is the duplication of consonant sounds within words, rather than necessarily at the beginning of them.

The simplest rhymes are monosyllabic, like "cat" and "bat." Disyllabic rhymes achieve a different effect, like "jelly" and "belly." Multisyllabic rhymes may be found between two words, like "vacation" and "relation"; between two equal phrases, like "stayed with us" and "played with us"; or in some combination of phrases (called a broken rhyme), like "basketball" and "took a fall." Poets may rhyme different parts of speech or the same, words with close semantic relations and those at a remove from one another. Rhymes can be perfect, or they can be imperfect (also called slant or near), like "port" and "chart" or "justice" and "hostess." Rhymes can also fall at different points and in different relations to one another along the line, from end rhymes to internal rhymes to a host of specific rhyme patterns.

Most of us were first exposed to rhyme as children through nursery rhymes or childhood songs that emphasize patterns of sound. Rhyme appeals to adults for many of the same reasons it appeals to kids, most notably because it is a source of pleasure tied to a purpose. We don't even need to be consciously aware of rhyme's purpose for it to work on us, but stopping to contemplate rhyme's reason brings many rewards.

Rhyme is no mere adornment in rap. It isn't simply a mnemonic device or a singsongy trifle. It is rap's most obvious way of remaking language, of refashioning not simply sound, but meaning as well. Rhyme works on the brain as well as the ear. A new rhyme forges a mental pathway between distinct but sonically related words and carries with it both linguistic and cognitive meaning. It invites the listener

to tease out the semantic threads embedded within the sonic fabric of the words. What emerges is a simple but seismic truth: MCs don't just rhyme sounds, they rhyme ideas.

In a classic verse from 1989's "Fight the Power," Public Enemy's Chuck D spits something like a working definition of rhyme's reason: "As the rhythm's designed to bounce / What counts is that the rhyme's / Designed to fill your mind." He is, of course, speaking of "rhyme" here both as the practice of patterning sounds and as another name for the verse as a whole. In both meanings, rap's rhymes have filled our minds with many things, not all of them useful. But it is more than a matter of content—be it women and cars or prisons with bars—it is also a question of poetic form. Rhyme exercises its sound in the construction of meaning. Saying something in rhyme doesn't simply sound different from saying the same thing without rhyme, it fundamentally transforms the meaning of the expression. As the critic Alfred Corn explains, "The coincidence of sound in a pair of rhymes is a recommendation to the reader to consider the rhyming words in tandem, to see what meaning emerges from their juxtaposition. The meaning will emerge as one of affinity and opposition." Within this tension between similarity and difference, rap's expressive potential is born.

Rhyme accounts for a large part of what makes great rap great. We value rap largely according to its ingenuity: the MC's skill in saying something unexpected within a given set of formal limitations. "MCing, to me," Common once said by way of describing Eminem's lyrical excellence, "is when you hear a dude say something and you tell your homie, 'You heard what he said?'" Such virtuosity is as much about constraint as it is about creativity. Creativity without constraint

is unmoored, a wandering thing that never quite settles into shape. As the poet Steve Kowit observes, "The search for a rhyme-word forces the mind out of its familiar track and onto more adventurous and unfamiliar paths. . . . End-rhyme, then, is not only a delight to the ear of the reader when used well, but a spur to the imagination of the writer."

For MCs, rhyme, along with the beat, provides the necessary formal constraints on their potentially unfettered poetic freedom. If you can say anything in any way you choose, chances are you might not say anything at all, or at least anything worth remembering. It's possible, in other words, for an artist to be too free. "The imagination wants its limits and delights in its limits," Nobel laureate Derek Walcott explains. "It finds its freedom in the definition of those limits." What can you do in the space between the line's opening and its ending in rhymed relation to the line before it, or after it, or both? How do you say what you want to say but in a way that maintains that necessary association of sound that your listeners expect? Exceptional MCs, like skilled literary poets, balance sound with sense in their rhymes.

Run-of-the-mill rappers often find themselves overwhelmed by rhyme's dual challenges of sound and sense. Instead, they relinquish control of their rhymes to one or the other. The results can be disastrous. A rapper insistent on expressing a particular meaning in particular terms may find it almost impossible to rhyme at all. Much more common, however, are those rappers so insistent on how their rhymes sound that they lose control over what they are actually saying. They spend so much time making sure that one line rhymes with the next that they fail to develop metaphors or tell stories or make observations. Often they'll resort to

rhymes so soiled with use that they almost cease to register as rhymes at all, so bereft are they of that essential quality of surprise. The result is not simply rhymes that sound the same, but rhymes that say the same things.

Some rap critics, and a fair number of rap fans, have bemoaned the limited thematic range in mainstream rap in recent years. The culprit they most commonly blame is big business—the record labels, radio conglomerates, and other commercial forces that treat rap as product rather than poetry. Undoubtedly, rap's growing commodification plays a significant role in limiting the variety of lyrics we hear, and yet another answer lies in rap's rhymes themselves. When MCs settle into familiar pairs of rhyme words, they also tend to settle into familiar themes and attitudes. Someone who sets out to sound like 50 Cent will likely use many of the same rhyme words that 50 employs and, as a consequence, end up rapping about the same topics.

It's easy to spot rap's true lyrical innovators because not only will they likely be rapping about different things from everyone else, they'll be using different words to do it. Eminem, for instance, had to conceive a bunch of new rhyming words to describe the experiences of a working-class white kid from a trailer park in Detroit who rises to superstardom. Who else would think to rhyme "public housing systems" with "victim of Munchausen syndrome"? Similarly, as Andre 3000 has grown throughout his career—from southern playa to ATLien to whatever his present incarnation happens to be—the words he rhymes have grown along with him. He's gone from "pimpin' hos and slammin' Cadillac do's" to rhyming "Whole Foods" with "those fools." And who could imagine that an MC would ever associate a Hebrew language

with origins in tenth-century Germany, a green leafy vegetable, and an imaginary sport from a children's book, as Asher Roth does when he rhymes "Yiddish," "spinach," and "Quidditch" on his 2008 mix tape *The Greenhouse Effect*? The point is that rhyme is not simply about the relationship of two or more words, two or more sounds—it is also about rhythm and image, storytelling, and, above all, meaning. With new rhymes come possibilities for new expressions, new ideas, and new styles that point the direction toward the future of rap's poetry.

In the hands of unskilled poets and MCs alike, rhyme can be an impediment, an awkward thing that leads to unnatural sounds and unintended meanings. But rhyme well used makes for powerful expression; it at once taps into the most primal pleasure centers of the human brain, those of sound patterning, and maintains an elevated, ceremonial distance from regular speech.

Rap rhymes are often characterized as simplistic, but nothing could be further from the truth. Over the years, rap has undergone profound shifts in the range and variety of rhymes that MCs create. Rhyme comes in numerous varieties, each with a distinct function in sound and sense. *Perfect rhyme*, also known as full rhyme or true rhyme, is rhyme where words contain the same vowel sounds (usually accented) followed by identical consonant sounds (as in "all" and "ball"). *Slant rhyme* (or imperfect rhyme) is rhyme that usually involves shared final-consonant sounds, but different vowel sounds (as in "all" and "bowl"). Rap uses both. Kurupt offered author James G. Spady this fascinating insider's look into the craft of rhyming, worth quoting at length:

> Perfection of the rhymes. Like Perfection. Selection.
>
> Interjection. Election. Dedication. Creation. Domination. Devastation. World domination. Totally, with no Hesitation, you know what I mean? These are perfect rhymes. . . . Really. Silly. Philly, you know.
>
> These are perfected rhymes. Where you could take a word [sic] like *we will* and you connect that with a full word like *rebuild*, you know what I mean? You got two words in *we will*. One word in *rebuild*. But perfect rhyme connection is the key to writing when you write your rhyme. And meaning too.
>
> When you're saying something that makes sense. Them are the keys to writing a rhyme. Perfect rhyme connection. And *style*.

While perfect rhymes satisfy our rhyming mind, slant rhymes tease us a little, denying us the satisfaction of completion. The result is often a creative tension. Literary verse from the nineteenth century until today has witnessed the rise of slant rhyme from an occasional variation of form to a form in itself. Emily Dickinson is the poet most often associated with slant rhyme, but she is not alone. Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Wilfred Owen have made slant rhyme an accepted part of modern poetic practice. This speaks to the growing influence of conversational style in literary poetry, something it shares with rap.

Slant rhymes are common in rap, just as they are in other poetic forms found in the oral tradition. "Some artists use line after line of slant rhyme, but because of their flow and the way they pronounce the words, you don't even hear the words as being slant rhymes," observe Emcee Escher and

Alex Rappaport, the authors of *The Rapper's Handbook*. Slant rhymes are in obvious display in these lines from the prodigious Michigan MC One Be Lo:

> I rock their minds like the sling shot of David do
> Liver than pay-per-view
> You couch potatoes don't believe me? Call the cable crew
> Every time I bus' kids think they on their way to school
> This grown man ain't got no time to play with you
> Theresa didn't raise a fool . . .

One Be Lo augments the perfect rhymes in his lines ("do," "crew," "you," and "school," "fool") with slant rhymes ("view" and "fool"), and all are equally satisfying. Oral expression is generally more forgiving of sonic difference, offering a wider definition of what constitutes rhyme. Rap celebrates both perfect and imperfect rhymes, often using them together to achieve subtle effects of sound and sense.

Some purists, however, are dismissive of rap's practice of employing partial or slant rhymes. Slant rhymes, they suggest, testify to a lack of discipline and originality on the part of the artist. Such criticisms, however, ignore the fact that oral poetry has always been more liberal than written verse when it comes to what constitutes rhyme. Rap, like oral poetry through the ages, goes by the ear rather than by the book.

Rap rhyme took a formal leap with the popularizing of *multisyllabic rhymes*. While rap's pioneers occasionally included a multi in their arsenal, no MC has made it a signature element of style quite like Big Daddy Kane. For Kane, the

multisyllabic rhyme is a versatile tool, a way of doing things with words. He often employs it to connect a single multisyllabic word with a balanced multisyllabic phrase. He then strings together lines, sometimes in couplets, sometimes in fierce runs of the same rhyme. Compared to conventional monosyllabic rhymes, multis not only provide a broader range of possible complimentary words, but also achieve a sonic effect of speed and virtuosity.

Multis are also sometimes associated with more-complex and thus potentially less-commercial lyricism. The fear is that if the rhyme calls too much attention to itself, it will leave too little attention to the beat, or the hook, or the other elements of a song that tend to ensure mass appeal. This seems to be precisely what Lupe Fiasco is addressing on "Dumb It Down" from his 2007 album, *The Cool*. While the hook sardonically warns "You goin' over niggas' heads Lu (Dumb it down) / They tellin' me that they don't feel you (Dumb it down) / We ain't graduate from school, nigga (Dumb it down) / Them big words ain't cool, nigga (Dumb it down)," Lupe's verse defiantly demonstrates the very lyrical complexity the hook warns against:

> I'm ***FEARLESS***, now ***HEAR THIS***, I'm ***EARLESS*** (less)
> and I'm ***PEERLESS*** (less), which means I'm ***EYELESS***
> which means I'm ***TEARLESS***, which means ***MY IRIS***
> resides where my ***EARS IS***, which means I'm blinded

Lupe relies on multis to render the kind of abstract rhymes that flout the warnings of the hook. In four lines he delivers eight multis—some perfect, some slant; some individual words, some two-word phrases.

For range and quality of multisyllabic rhymes, one contemporary artist comes to mind: Pharoahe Monch. On the standout track "Simon Says" from his solo debut, Pharoahe spits this series of multis:

> You all up in the Range and shit **INEBRIATED**
> Phased from your original plan, you **DEVIATED**
> I **ALLEVIATED** the pain, with a long-term ***GOAL***
> Took my underground loot, without the ***GOLD***

He begins by rhyming three words likely never before rhymed in the history of rap, "inebriated," "deviated," and "alleviated," then caps it off with a slant rhyme, "goal" and "gold," for good measure. He does all of this without sacrificing meaning or getting forced into unintended expressions.

Some of the most formally sophisticated rhymes often escape notice, in large part because they work so well. After all, the reason MCs conceive elaborate rhymes in the first place is not to show how clever they are, but to put words together in such a way that they do something to the listener. One of the most reliable ways, therefore, to uncover poetically innovative lyrics is to pay close attention to those lines that stick in your head, that just *sound* right. Like any rap fan, I have many such lines stored in my mental catalog. They'll come to me at all times during the day—while I'm at the gym or out to dinner, sometimes even while I'm lecturing in class. As students of rap's poetry, we do well to listen to this intuitive part of our critical intelligence; it is often a truer guide than our more intellectualized thought process. That intuitive sense brought me to these lines from Pharoahe Monch, part of another virtuosic verse from his first album:

The ***LAST*** **BATTER** to ***HIT***, ***BLAST***, **SHATTER**ed your ***HIP***
Smash any ***SPLIT***ter or ***FAST***ball, that'll be ***IT***

Condensed within these sonically packed two lines, Pharoahe Monch constructs a rich texture of sound variations. The verse as a whole is dominated by this same energy of insistent repetition—from perfect rhymes to assonance and consonance—delivering on the promise he makes in the song's hook of presenting "the next millennium rap." In the above lines, he employs a rhyme variation called *apocopated rhyme*, where a one-syllable word rhymes with the stressed portion of a multisyllabic word (like "dance" and "*roman*cing"). In this case, he matches the first line's monosyllabic internal rhymes, "last" and "blast," with an apocopated rhyme, "***fast***ball," on the next line. He does the same thing in reverse with another rhyme sound as well, using "hit" to form an apocopated rhyme with "***split***ter" and a perfect rhyme with "it." This creates a formal structure of rhyme that binds the two lines together. Add to that the slant rhyme of "hip," the assonance on the long *a* sound ("last," "batter," "blast," "shattered," "smash," "fast," "that") and the consonance on the *t* sound, and you have a couplet where almost every word is doing some kind of rhyme work.

Not surprisingly, the rhymes in these lines also shape the rhythm, with a pattern of stress carrying over from phrase to phrase ("batter to hit" with "shattered your hip" and "that'll be it"). Notice how the lines retain structure even when the words themselves are removed:

Duh Da **DA-DA DUH DA**, Da **DA-DA DUH DA**
Da Duh-duh da da duh da-da, **DA-DA DUH DA**

In these lines rhyme not only functions as adornment, but as a guide for Pharoahe's flow. Such syllabic patterning, using rhyme to fashion a rhythm, has become increasingly common in rap over the years, with artists as different from one another as Cam'ron and Eminem taking full advantage of its effects.

Pharoahe Monch's verse is the work of a poetic technician, to be sure, but what makes it also the work of a virtuoso is that the lyrics are completely unburdened by the potentially ponderous weight of this intricate structure. On the page and, even more, in the performance, the lines gain an effortless, almost offhanded eloquence that liberates the listener to enjoy the line in the sound alone. Looking behind the rhymes takes none of that pleasure away. What it does instead is add a measure of respect to the craft of fitting rhymes to beats.

MCs inevitably run up against the boundaries of expressive possibility through rhyming two words together. In response, they often employ rhyme techniques that cross the limits of word pairs to fashion rhyme groupings made up of several words that relate to one another in rhyme. The Notorious B.I.G. does this on "Who Shot Ya": "Saw me in the drop, three and a **quarter / Slaughter**, electrical tape around your **daughter**." Blending end rhyme and internal rhyme, Biggie creates an aural sensation that emphasizes the key words in the lines.

By contrast, *broken rhyme*, or split rhyme, involves rhyming a single multisyllabic word with several monosyllabic words. In the Western poetic tradition, such a technique is most often employed for comic effect, as it is in these famous lines from Canto XXII of Lord Byron's *Don Juan:*

"But—Oh! ye lords of ladies ***intellectual***, / Inform us truly, have they not ***hen-peck'd you all?***" As the punch line for the canto, Byron's playful rhyme underscores the humor of the lines. In contrast to the more conventional perfect rhymes in the lines that precede it ("wed," "bred," and "head"), the broken rhyme delights the ear.

But where broken rhymes were nearly always played for comic purposes in literary verse, rap has made them a commonplace element of its poetics. Rap has given broken rhymes a new and larger life. Like multis, broken rhymes have becomes more pervasive and versatile as rap poetics has developed. So while we might hear a broken rhyme like this from Melle Mel on "White Lines," "Ticket to ride a white line ***highway*** / Tell all your friends that they can go ***my way***," we get a more inventive use of the technique when the Notorious B.I.G. boasts on "Hypnotize," "***escargot, my car go*** one-sixty, swiftly." The difference is that Melle Mel's example is intuitive, even obvious, while Biggie's is unexpected and fresh. Not surprisingly Big Daddy Kane, the master of the multi, was also fond of broken rhymes. On "Wrath of Kane," he unleashes a swarm:

> 'Cause I never let 'em ***ON TOP OF ME***
> I play 'em out like a game of ***MONOPOLY***
> Let us beat around the ball like an ***ASTRO***
> Then send 'em to jail for tryin to ***PASS GO***
> Shakin' 'em up, breakin' 'em up, takin' no stuff,
> But it still ain't loud enough . . .

In both Biggie's and Kane's rhymes, the intended effect is far from comic. Certainly there's an unmistakable playfulness in Biggie's enumeration of his riches—the fancy snails contrasting with the fast and fancy cars—but the broken rhyme is less about comic relief than it is about evincing a self-aware rhyme virtuosity. The same holds for Kane. In a verse where he is extolling his lyrical excellence, the broken rhymes manifest that very excellence with audible evidence.

A host of effects accompany rhyme, all relying upon the echo of sound across poetic lines. *Alliteration* is the repetition of initial consonant sound. It is older even than rhyme itself. In the following lines from *Piers Plowman*, written in the fourteenth century, alliteration works to underscore the music of language itself:

> A feir feld ful of folk fold I ther bi-twene,
> Of alle maner of men, the men and the riche . . .

Repetition has reached almost to the point of parody here; indeed, in a contemporary piece of writing, it would be difficult to read these lines as anything else. Such sonic effects can come in subtler forms as well. When alliteration occurs at different places within words rather than simply at the beginning, we call it *consonance*. These lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* show alliteration (the *h* sound) and consonance (the *d* and the *g* sounds) working together to achieve a common effect:

> ***H***eaven opene***d*** wi***d***e
> ***H***er ever-***d***uring ***g***ates, ***h***armonious sound
> On ***g***ol***d***en ***h***inges of movin***g*** . . .

The sonic repetitions in Milton's lines are at once unobtrusive yet inescapable; they underscore a unity of thought and expression. Consonance such as this is quite often employed in rap, whether to underscore rhyme or to offer a kind of rhyme substitute. Lauryn Hill's lines from the Fugees' "Zealots" show consonance at work alongside rhyme:

> Rap rej***ec***ts my tape d***eck***, ej***ec***ts proj***ectile***
> Whether Jew or Gent***ile***, I rank top percent***ile***
> Many st***yle***s, more powerful than **gamma rays**
> My **grammar pays** like Carlos **Santana plays**

Consonance with one sound ("eck") shifts to multisyllabic rhymes with another sound ("projectile," "Gentile," "percentile") and then another ("gamma rays," "grammar pays," "Santana plays"). The result is as intricate as it is effortless.

A related linguistic technique is *assonance*, which relies upon the replication of unaccented vowel sounds. Its purpose in oral expression is to delight the ear, but also to center the listener's attention on a given set of lines. Often the exercise of assonance is imperceptible, though its subconscious effect is almost always pronounced, helping to generate a subtle mood or tone. Consider the effect assonance has on these lines from John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820): "Thou still unravished bride of quietness, / Thou foster child of silence and slow time." Its long *i* sound extenuates the sound of the line beyond its actual bounds, adding an unmistakable languorous quality.

In rap, one of the masters of these techniques of sonic identity is Eminem. Eminem's style favors both assonance and alliteration; he has elevated them to an art. In the following lines, a guest verse on "Renegade," a track Eminem produced for Jay-Z's *The Blueprint* (2001), Eminem demonstrates a virtuoso's control of sound and sense.

> Now who's the king of these rude ludicrous lucrative lyrics
> Who could inherit the title, put the youth in hysterics
> Using his music to steer it, sharing his views and his merits
> But there's a huge interference—they're saying you shouldn't hear it

Rhyme, at least full rhyme, is almost absent from this verse, replaced instead by the concordance of sound. Assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds, is the governing structure here; he packs no fewer than thirty-seven instances of it into the full verse's twenty lines (the *u* sound predominates). When he does employ rhyme, it is most often slant. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is the chain of interlocking slant rhymes, both internal and end rhymes, that spans the lines quoted above ("lyrics," "inherit," "hysterics," "steer it," "merits," "interference," "hear it"). Those who doubt the conscious artistry exercised by rap's greatest MCs need look no further than these lines for evidence of its vitality.

When rhyme and all of its allied forms are at work in a single performance, the effect is often unforgettable. In 1995, shortly after leaving prison, Tupac Shakur released what would become perhaps his best-known song, "California Love." It reached number one on the *Billboard* charts, and *Rolling Stone* included it as Tupac's sole entry in its 2004 list of the five hundred greatest songs of all time. Produced by Dr. Dre, who also spits the first verse, the song is driven by an infectious piano riff and a catchy hook performed by Roger Troutman of Zapp and Roger. All of this would likely have

made it a hit; Tupac made it a classic. His opening lines are among the most unmistakable in all of rap:

> Out on **BAIL** fresh outta **JAIL**, California ***DREAMIN'***
> Soon as I stepped on the scene, I'm hearin' hoochies
> ***SCREAMIN'***

In just two lines, Tupac combines rhyme (both end and internal), assonance, and alliteration to create a feeling of tension and energy. The first line includes three rhyme elements: a monosyllabic internal rhyme ("bail" and "jail") and the first part of a multisyllabic rhyme ("dreamin'," which he rhymes in the next line with "screamin'"). Along with this, he includes alliteration with the *s* and *h* sounds. Almost every word is somehow sonically connected with some other word in the lines. Hip-hop fans often talk about an MC sounding "hungry," the necessity with which they're driven to express themselves. These may be the hungriest two lines in rap history.

Rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance combined often produce tongue-twisting linguistics. Big Punisher's "Twinz" includes this couplet, as inspired in its way as Tupac's lines. "Dead in the middle of little Italy / Little did we know that we riddled a middle man who didn't know diddly." Like a jazz sax run or a scat riff, Pun's lyrical delivery balances sound with sense, using the full array of rhyme techniques to underscore the rhythm of his flow. Keying in on a single sound, he runs a staggering series of rhyme variations ("middle," "little," "riddled," "middle," "diddly"), which he further builds upon with consonance

(*d*) and assonance (*i*) and alliteration (*d* and *l*). This is what happens when a poet is in complete control of his or her rhymes.

Sometimes, however, rhyme can take control, leading the poet to unintended and unwanted expressions. This is what John Milton feared when he spoke of rhyme as "a constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than else they would have exprest them." Not surprisingly, he includes not a single end rhyme in *Paradise Lost*. A generation before Milton, the English poet Thomas Campion warned in 1602 that the "popularitie of Rime creates as many Poets as a hot summer flies." Rhyme, he argued, could actually impede good poetry.

All rhyme, after all, is a kind of coercion: The poet forces the audience to connect disparate words and reconcile them, both in sound and meaning. Of course, as mentioned before, this accounts for a great deal of the pleasure to be had in rhyme: that process of recognition and differentiation and the balance achieved between them. But what happens when poets are overwhelmed by rhyme's coercive force—when, either for the purposes of sound or sense, poets find themselves with few rhyming options for a given word? Maybe the MC uses a word, like "pizza" or "olive," that doesn't have a perfect rhyme to fit it. Or maybe the problem is that the perfect rhyme comes too easily, and too obviously.

There was a time when Lexus was the car of choice in hip hop; it seemed like every MC was rhyming "Lexus" with "Texas"—for no other reason than it is one of the few words that rhyme with "Lexus." Whether Lexus became less popular among rappers or the rhyme became too predictable

(or both), you rarely hear this pairing nowadays. But it demonstrates an important tension in rhyme: the problem of overdetermination.

Overdetermined rhymes are those that the MC or poet chooses not out of conscious design but out of desperate necessity or lackadaisical passivity. Overdetermined rhymes are in effect forced upon the poet by the limits of language itself rather than emerging out of the imaginative use of language as a tool. They signal the loss of poetic control.

For an MC and literary poet alike, it is almost always a bad thing if the audience can complete your rhyme. This suggests that your rhyme lacks freshness, which is essential to powerful communication. Artists in any genre that employs rhyme face a similar challenge. One lyricist who has given a tremendous amount of thought to the process of rhyme composition is Bob Dylan. Dylan alongside rappers may be an unlikely combination, but it is fitting. Like the best MCs, Dylan revels in the ingenuity of his rhymes. He offers a striking insight into the mind of a rhyming lyricist, in the midst of the "unconscious frame of mind" necessary for the artistic process:

> Staying in the unconscious frame of mind, you can pull yourself out and throw up two rhymes first and work it back. You get the rhymes first and work it back and then see if you can make it make sense in another kind of way. You can still stay in the unconscious frame of mind to pull it off, which is the state of mind you have to be in anyway.

For Dylan and for rap's rhyme animals, the process of lyrical composition is fundamentally a process of rhyming. "It

gives you a thrill to rhyme something you might think, well, that's never been rhymed before," Dylan told an interviewer. "But then again, people have taken rhyming now, it doesn't have to be exact anymore. Nobody's going to care if you rhyme 'represent' with 'ferment,' you know. Nobody's gonna care." Dylan's remarks point the way towards rap's rhyme revolution, its expansion of rhyme's formal possibilities in the face of overdetermination and the loss of meaning.

MCs have found many ways around rhyme's restrictions. While perfect (or full) rhymes still play an important role in rap's poetics, they increasingly exist in the context of a host of other rhyme strategies. We've already looked at slant, multisyllabic, and broken rhymes, but another category is intentionally forced rhymes, what I'll term *transformative rhymes*. Transformative rhymes start with words that only partially rhyme or don't rhyme at all and alter the pronunciation to fashion perfect rhymes. For an example outside of rap, think of these famous lyrics from Arlo Guthrie's "Coming into Los Angeles," once heard at Woodstock: "Coming into Los Angeles / bringing in a couple of keys / Don't touch my bags if you please / Mister Customs Man." Guthrie fashions a transformative rhyme when he playfully alters the emphasis and pronunciation of "Los Angeleez" to forge perfect rhymes with the words that follow, "keys" and "please."

Rap often takes these transformations of pronunciation to the extreme. On "So Many Tears" Tupac delivers the following lines: "My life is in denial, and when I die / Baptized in eternal fire." They look straightforward enough on the page, but in the performance he makes "fire" rhyme with "denial" by essentially pronouncing it "file." The transformation

achieves a pleasing echo of sound across the lines without sacrificing comprehension. Similarly, the Notorious B.I.G. artfully demonstrates this technique by refashioning language through rhyme on "Juicy":

> We used to fuss when the landlord ***DISSED US***
> No heat, wonder why ***CHRISTMAS MISSED US***.
> ***BIRTHDAYS*** was the ***WORST DAYS***
> Now we sip champagne when we ***THIRST-AY***

In the course of four lines, he offers two sets of multisyllabic rhymes; first, "dissed us," "Christmas," and "missed us," and next "birthdays," "worst days," and "thirst-ay." It is with this last rhyme that he demonstrates the creative capacity to use rhyme's restrictions in his poetic favor, adding flavor to the verse by forcing "thirsty" just this side of its breaking point to rhyme with the two words before it.

Kanye West has made such forced rhymes an important part of his poetic style. In ways that are playful and sometimes mischievous, he uses rhyme to reshape words themselves—taking two words that do not naturally rhyme and bending one of them, sometimes nearly to the breaking point, until it fits the other. For instance, on "Gold Digger," one of his biggest commercial hits to date, he rhymes the following names: "Serena," "Trina," "Jennifer." It's obvious which one of these doesn't belong, but Kanye makes "Jennifer" rhyme with the others by transforming it into "Gina-fa." The rhyme is forced to the point of not being forced at all. Quite the opposite, it appears by design, just another way to do something with language. Here's another example from Kanye's "Can't Tell Me Nothing" (2007):

> Don't ever fix your lips like collagen
> To say something when you're gon' end up apologin'

"Collagen" is a word with absolutely no perfect rhymes. Rather than avoid the word entirely, Kanye instead uses the word's intractability to rhyme as a tool to reshape another word. We immediately understand what he means when he says "apologin'," so he has not sacrificed meaning. Or take this rhyme from "Barry Bonds": "I don't need writers I might bounce ideas." He somehow makes "writers" rhyme with "ideas" by transforming the former into "wry-tears." What he has done in each of these cases is distorted sound for the sake of style, the poetic equivalent of Jimi Hendrix using his amp's feedback in his solo. Certainly many other artists have forced words to rhyme—often awkwardly, in a desperate attempt to make it fit—but few have forced them with such purpose and such measured understanding of the desired effect.

Where MCs rhyme their words has become just as important to rap's poetics as how they rhyme them. Rap is often presumed to rely heavily upon rhyming couplets. Most rap parodies are nothing more than a series of rigid couplets. But real MCs are rarely bounded by such limitations. While end rhymes, and particularly couplets, remain the foundation of rap's rhyme scheme, they are far from the only rhyme scheme in rap.

Over the years rap has undergone an internal rhyme revolution. Internal rhymes broaden rap's expressive range, enabling MCs to satisfy their listeners' lust for rhyme even as they claim greater freedom of motion to express complex ideas beyond the bounds of end rhyme. Unlike literary poets,

who also wished to liberate themselves from the restrictions of end rhyme, MCs have done so while still satisfying their audience's desire for lines rich in rhyme. The explanation for this lies in rap's orality. Because rap is meant to be heard rather than read, it matters less where exactly the rhymes fall in the line. Two rhymes in the same line, while not the same as two lines with end rhymes, still have a pleasing effect on the ear. Notice how Posdnuos from De La Soul uses this technique on "The Bizness":

> While others ***EXPLORE*** to make it ***HARDCORE***
> I make it ***HARD FOR*** wack MCs to even step in***SIDE THE DOOR***
> 'Cause these kids is ***RHYMING, SOME-TIMING***
> And when we get to racing on the mic, they line up to see
> The lyrical **KILLING**, with stained egos on the **CEILING**

He begins with four rhymes in the first two lines, follows that with an internal rhyme in the third, no rhyme in the fourth, returning to an internal rhyme in the fifth. You would not have been likely to find that unrhymed line in rap's early years. Andre 3000 is a master of using internal rhymes to create opportunities for unrhymed lines, often eschewing end rhymes for a complex pattern of internal ones. Consider these lines from his guest verse on the R&B singer Lloyd's 2007 song "I Want You (Remix)":

> I said, "What time you get off?" She said,
> "When you get me off." I kinda laughed but it turned into
> a cough
> 'Cause I swallowed down the wrong pipe.
> Whatever that mean, you know old people say it so it
> sounds right.

These four lines include no end rhymes, and yet they more than satisfy our desire for rhyme. He achieves this by including internal rhyme, a phonic echo that fuses lines one and two ("off," "off," "cough").

Heading in the direction opposite to that of MCs like Andre 3000, who often eschew end rhyme entirely, a host of MCs have embraced a rhyme style that extends the repetition of a particular rhyme sound even beyond the couplet. Embracing the restriction of rhyme repetition, they seek to accentuate rhyme's pure effect. Many southern rappers, from Gorilla Zoe to Plies, follow this model. It would be a mistake to dismiss their styles as pedestrian. Instead, it might be useful to interpret them as aspiring to a different aesthetic from those MCs with more complicated rhyme styles. The fact that Jeezy, for instance, ends every line of "I Luv It" with a straightforward rhyme doesn't get in the way of his rhyme style, it *defines* it.

We might think of these extended end-rhyme riffs as links that form a rhyme chain. *Chain rhyme* is a technique whereby a poet carries a single rhyme over a succession of lines. The effect is often incantatory, lulling the listener into an almost trancelike state. Rhyme takes on a kind of rhythmic function here, underscoring specific patterns of sound to achieve its desired effect. While chain rhyming is now common in rap, rap was certainly not the first genre to use it. We can trace chain rhyming at least as far back as the fifteenth-century English poet John Skelton, who composed these lines:

> Tell you I chyll,
> If that ye wyll
> A whyle be styll,
> Of a comely gyll
> That dwelt on a hyll:

But she is not gryll,
For she is somewhat sage
And well worne in age;
For her visage
It would aswage
A mannes courage.

Skelton's lines consist of two and sometimes three stressed syllables connected by rhyme "leashes"—extended runs of the same end rhyme. The style is known as Skeltonics. In the above example, Skelton rhymes six short lines with "yll" and another five with "age," creating bursts of sound, a quickened pace, and an aggressive assertion of pattern. It comes as little surprise, then, that Skelton often used such a style when delivering, as he does in the above example, comic insults. Like a fifteenth-century battle rapper, Skelton uses rhyme chains to underscore his energy, aggression, and—to use a very twenty-first-century word for it—swagger.

Fast forward from Skelton to the present day and we can witness numerous hip-hop artists extending the spirit, if not the explicit form, of his rhyme style. While the nature of rap beats won't allow for Skeltonics' strict adherence to two- and three-syllable lines, it leaves ample room for chain rhyming.

Among the increasing number of rappers who use the chain-rhyming style is Fabolous. Since his debut in 2001, Fab has been known for delivering two distinct and even contradictory themes in his rhymes: crafty punch-line disses and plaintive love laments. Regardless of the theme, however, he employs the same rhyme-rich style. On his 2001 hit "Trade It All" he spits these lines in chain rhyme:

You're the one, baby girl, I've never been so **SURE**
Your skin's so **PURE**, the type men go **FOR**
The type I drive the Benz slow **FOR**
The type I be beepin' the horn, rollin' down the windows **FOR**

Using identity (the repetition of the same end word in successive lines, like "for" and "for"), and rhyming internally as well as at the end of his lines, Fabolous delivers a verse dominated by the ebb and flow of his repetition. Such repetition is the hallmark of his style, as we can see when comparing the above lines to his more recent hit, 2007's "Baby Don't Go":

Through the time I been **ALONE**, time I spent on **PHONES**
Know you ain't lettin them climb up in my **THRONE**
Now, baby, that lime with that **PATRÓN**
Have me talkin' crazy, it's time to come on **HOME**
Now, I talk with someone ***ABOVE***
It's okay to lose your ***PRIDE*** over someone you ***LOVE***
Don't lose someone you ***LOVE*** though over your ***PRIDE***
Stick wit'cha entree and get over your ***SIDE***

Like "Trade It All," "Baby Don't Go" is dominated by Fab's run of rhymes. But his style seems to show some development in the direction of variety and versatility. Instead of rhyming on a single sound, he weaves together three distinct rhymes, interlacing the last two ("pride" and "love") through chiasmus (a rhetorical figure in which two clauses are related to each other through reversal of structure or terms). The rhythmic effect is just as strong as it was in the earlier example, but he has added to it a more varied range of poetic effects, of thought as well as sound. Rap poetics as a whole has

undergone a similar rhyme expansion and built upon its foundation to explore novel innovations in sound.

The way rappers rhyme has changed dramatically over time. Part of why old-school rap sounds old to our ears when compared to more recent rhymes is that it tends to employ simple end rhymes. The difference between the sound of old-school and new-school rap is largely attributable to the delivery and the position of the rhymes. Old-school rappers tended to employ end-stopped lines with rhymes falling at the end of lines, often in couplets. Their styles generally sound more effusive, dramatic, and artificial. Today you are more likely to hear conversational flows and natural rhymes, both internal and end rhymes, delivered in something closer to the rapper's natural voice. Rap rhymes in recent years have increased in variety and frequency. Layered patterns of internal rhymes and rhyme chains are now as important as end-rhymed lines.

To say that rap has developed, however, is not always to say it has improved. No rapper has ever improved upon the best rhymes of Rakim, or KRS-One, or Melle Mel. Distinguishing the ways rap's poetics have expanded in the years since these great MCs first recorded is not to discredit them, but rather to celebrate them anew for fashioning excellence with fewer poetic tools from which to choose.

Rap's rhyme revolution has not come in degrees, but in fits and starts—individual artists introducing new ways of rhyming, often going against the established practices of the era. Rap's development has also been responsive, new rhymes born to fit the increasingly complex and melodic rhythms in its instrumental production. New beats demand new rhymes.

The earliest rhymes in rap were basic, improvised, almost coincidental, recalls Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers, one of hip hop's originators. "When I started out as a DJ, MC-in' as an art hadn't been formulated yet," he says. "The microphone was just used for makin' announcements, like when the next party was gonna be, or people's moms would come to the party lookin' for them." The MC was born out of necessity. Caz's description of how he came to rhyme reads something like a rap creation story:

> So different DJs started embellishing what they were sayin'. Instead of just sayin', "We'll be at the P.A.L. next week, October this and that," they'd say, "You know next week we gonna be at the P.A.L. where we rock well, and we want to see your face in the place," little things like that. . . . I would make an announcement this way, and somebody would hear me, and then they'd go to their party and they add a little twist to it. Then somebody would hear that and they add a little bit to it. I'd hear it again and take it a little step further 'til it turned from lines to sentences to paragraphs to verses to rhymes.

Somewhere in that space between lines and rhymes, rap was born. Caz himself would prove one of the pivotal figures in rap's development. It was Caz's book of rhymes that ended up in the hands of a pizzeria employee by the name of Henry Jackson, aka Big Bank Hank, and it would be Caz's rhymes that would soon appear in Hank's verse from rap's first mainstream hit, "Rapper's Delight." Caz would never receive compensation.

But his influence, and that of rap's other MC pioneers—Coke La Rock, Clark Kent, Cowboy, Melle Mel, and others—would shape the structure of rap's poetics. Rap's first

several years were dominated by the DJ; even the first rhymes were delivered from behind the turntables. In the late 1970s, however, the MC began to emerge as a coequal partner in hip-hop music. Around the same time, rap's center of gravity began its gradual move from clubs, basements, and block parties to the recording studio.

Rhyme, and the music it makes, has always had a cherished place in African-American expressive culture. From the ring shouts of the slaves to the singsong rhymes of children playing double dutch, from the verbal duels of the dozens to the ribald toasts told in barbershops and on street corners, black voices have found in rhyme a potent means of recreation and release. Muhammad Ali reveled in rhyme; a recent book, simply called *Ali Rap*, even called him "the first heavyweight champion of rap." But never before in black oral culture had an art form so relied upon rhyme to define itself. Rap takes rhyme farther than it had ever gone before.

The first rap song to hit the charts was "King Tim III (Personality Jock)" by the funk-disco collective the Fatback Band; it was released in late 1979, just before the Sugar Hill Gang officially inaugurated hip hop's commercial arrival with "Rapper's Delight." Listening to these songs now, in the era of lyrical wordsmiths like Andre 3000, Jay-Z, and Lil Wayne, it's a wonder that all of this music can go by the same name, so different is the oldest of the old-school from the new-school lyrics of today. The rhymes in "King Tim III" have a kind of innocent simplicity to them, a directness and predictability that sounds quaint to an ear attuned to slant rhymes and layered patterns of rhyming words. To understand the revolutionary nature of "King Tim III" and "Rapper's Delight" one must imagine a time when, save for a

select group of young New Yorkers, no one had ever heard a voice doing what these voices were doing to the beat.

> Just clap your hands and stomp your feet
> 'Cause you're listenin' to the sound of the sure-shot beat
> K-I-N-G the T-I-M
> King Tim the third and I am him
> Just me, Fatback, and the groove
> Are doing it all just for you
> Strong as an ox and tall as a tree
> I can rock it so viciously

The rhymes are simple, monosyllabic, and mostly perfect, rhymed in playful couplets that settle comfortably into the pocket of the beat. The tone is lighthearted, befitting a party spirit. These are good-times rhymes, uncomplicated by image or wordplay. And yet they embody a rhyme revolution; no other musical genre would so foreground the effects of language itself, its sound as well as its meaning. No other music would demand to be understood as both speech and song, poetry and music all at once.

This first generation of MCs made up the rules as it went along. By necessity, they drew from every source available to inform the way they put their words together. The rhymes nearest at hand were often those for advertising jingles or playground chants, even nursery rhymes. The language they fashioned was at once innovative and traditional.

That lines like King Tim's—so contrived, so simplistic to us today—were not only accepted but celebrated shows just how new the form actually was. By the 1970s, mainstream literary poets had mostly cut themselves off from rhyme,

especially end rhyme. The few sources where one could still hear it were often aimed at children. Rap stepped in to fill a cultural void, to provide the pleasure of rhyme in terms that adults could appreciate.

One MC above all others is responsible for consolidating and codifying the dominant rhyme style of the old school: Melle Mel. As mentioned before, Melle Mel emerged as perhaps the most talented MC of his era. As part of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Four (later the Furious Five), he pioneered, along with his brother Kid Creole, Cowboy, and Scorpio, the modern style of the MC. Beginning with "Superrappin'" in 1979 and continuing through a range of hip-hop classics like "The Message," "White Lines," "Beat Street," and more, Melle Mel stands as the dominant poetic voice of rap's early years.

Melle Mel's rhyme style began rather humbly. Kid Creole explains it like this: "When we first started rhyming, Flash would have guys on the microphone who'd just get on there and say his name, haphazard, no real talent being displayed. And my brother . . . I don't know, somehow or another he got in his head that he was going to try to make up his own rhymes, and that's what he did." The style of rhyming Melle Mel developed relied upon both regularity and occasional surprise. His verses establish patterns of end and internal rhymes, fusing both sonically and thematically his lines into verses. This method is in evidence in the opening bars from "White Lines (Don't Do It)":

Ticket to ride, white-line **HIGHWAY**
Tell all your friends, they can go **MY WAY**
Pay your ***TOLL***, sell your ***SOUL***

Pound for pound costs more than ***GOLD***
The longer you ***STAY*** the more you ***PAY***
My white lines go a long ***WAY***
Either up your nose or through your **VEIN**
With nothing to **GAIN** except killin' your **BRAIN**

Melle Mel begins the verse with a compound multisyllabic broken rhyme ("highway" and "my way"), then follows it up with three sets of couplets, each containing three rhymes on the same sound—two end and one internal. The result is a verse rich in rhyme and textured in sound.

In the years since Melle Mel and rap's other rhyme innovators, MCs have refined a range of rhyme techniques, extending both the rap tradition and the poetic tradition as a whole. Rap started a revolution of sense as well as sound, expanding the capacity of language to express the human experience in all its diversity.