

A Furified Freestyle: Homer and Hip Hop

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That's hip-hop, you know what I'm saying, when you could just feel it...you can feel the beat flow through you, man, where you just know every lyric gonna come on time, and half the words gonna rhyme.

—Large Professor on freestyling¹

Since Albert Lord published *The Singer of Tales* in 1960, the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory has been applied to various kinds of poetry from all over the world. Ruth Finnegan has studied *griots* in West Africa (1977), John D. Niles has studied traditional Anglo-Saxon poetry (1983), and John Barrie has studied the formulas of country blues singers in the United States (1978). I want to explore this theory's possible applications to rap music.

Rap music is a young black urban art form where lyrics are rhymed over sounds sampled from previously recorded songs. It was first created in the mid-1970s on the streets of the South Bronx out of what can be called a post-literate culture.² This culture—known as “hip hop culture” (the

¹ Quoted in Fernando 1994:287. I would like to thank Jonathan Scott for all his insights on freestyling.

² I call hip hop culture “post-literate” rather than “secondary oral” (Ong 1982) or “oraliterate” (Finnegan 1977) to underline how profoundly different this culture is from that of primary oral cultures. Lord (1960) correctly perceived that any culture influenced by literacy can no longer be considered oral in any meaningful sense of the word. The term “post-literate,” then, acknowledges the historical progression from orality to literacy to post-literacy rather than a circular development back to orality; it implies that post-literate poetry both incorporates and exceeds literate poetry, and therefore is not inherently inferior to literate poetry, and it distinguishes this third kind of text from both oral and literate

culture that produces rap music, graffiti art, and break-dancing)—exists within a typographic (print) culture and yet produces both oral and literate elements in its art forms.

The hip hop community initially consisted of the original South Bronx MCs, DJs, and dancing audience members, but now has grown worldwide to all urban areas that have established a network of MCs, DJs, producers, underground radio shows, independent record labels, and rap collectives (such as the Native Tongues and the Five Percenters).³ Some hip hop communities, of course, are more developed than others, and the community in New York—partly because it is where hip hop was first created—is the most developed because it has established the most complex network of cultural production.

This definition of hip hop culture, however, may be misleading since fixed definitions cannot account for a culture constantly in flux. This is not to say that hip hop culture might one day be produced by white upper class executives; the hip hop community is defined in relation to the various groups that are hostile to its existence.⁴ But any definition of the culture

poetries.

Given that oral poetry is composed and performed simultaneously by pre-literate poets, and literate poetry is composed through writing and meant to be read, post-literate poetry, then, is composed through writing, but meant to be performed. Most rap music is pre-written and meant to be performed: a post-literate poetry. Freestyling, because it is composed and performed simultaneously with no pre-written materials, is the closest one can get to the oral poetry of primary oral cultures. But even in freestyling—since hip hop exists in, and is influenced by, the larger literate culture—there exist literate elements such as freestylers' emphasis on the self and the use of rhyme, both of which I will discuss below.

³ Hip hop culture began in the mid 1970s when Disc Jockeys (DJs) such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and other set up their massive sound systems in South Bronx parks, and started playing their record collections to make people dance. A few years later, DJs began inviting Masters of Ceremony (MCs) to say a few words through a microphone in order to help get people moving. At first these words consisted merely of short phrases such as, "Everybody say 'hey,' everybody say 'ho!'" and "Everybody throw your hands in the air / And wave 'em like you just don't care!" By the end of the '70s, however, MCs had become more sophisticated in their phrases and rhyming, and the genre developed a name that incorporated both the MC's role and the DJ's role: "rap music."

⁴ These various groups cannot be consolidated into a vague notion of "white culture" since they include black church leaders (Calvin Butts, Al Sharpton), black politicians (Dolores Tucker, Jesse Jackson), and black intellectuals (Cornel West, bell hooks), in addition to the music industry and other industries plagued by racism.

must be understood to be a working definition—always subject to reworkings and readjustments—rather than a static, definable object.

The various groups antagonistic toward the culture need hip hop to be a static, definable object. They attempt to stereotype and label hip hop (as in the conception that black urban youths are all violent criminals whose activities must be carefully monitored) in order to maintain control over this shifting and seemingly incomprehensible culture. In order to undercut the fixity that these various groups attempt to impose, hip hop must be constantly in motion.⁵ Wherever hierarchies, establishments, or categories form, it moves in and, like the wind that scatters Sibyl's leaves, shuffles the order. DJs sample⁶ bits of various songs and scramble them into a new order, pulling together bedfellows as strange as James Brown, Beethoven, Miles Davis, and the Rolling Stones.

MC and DJ competitions, moreover, constantly challenge the reputations of the popular MCs and DJs to prevent canons from forming. In the rap music industry, what's old and what's new exchange places at whirlwind speeds. Songs recorded a few months ago are already outdated, although they might be sampled by another artist and suddenly become new again. Recorded texts are fixed only for a month or two while they circulate around the community through the trunks of jeeps and the sound systems of clubs. After this short period, they disappear, possibly forever, but more likely to be sampled by a future artist.

While the Homeric poets preserved the traditions of Greece, the only thing preserved in hip hop culture is an assurance that things will keep changing. The culture is constantly recreated and redefined from the

⁵ To freeze rap music into something fixed is to destroy it, because rap is made up of the DJ's creation of rhythms and beats, the MC's lyrical flow, and the dance movements of the audience. Recording, then, poses a problem since it threatens to impose fixity on a culture based on movement. The first hip hop DJs, such as Kool DJ Herc and Grandmaster Flash, proved that records did not have to be fixed recordings. They developed techniques known as "scratching" and "punch phasing." Scratching involves pulling the record backwards so that the same sound plays over and over again. The original recording is altered so that the DJ may use only those portions of a record that he or she needs for that particular mix. Punch phasing involves playing one record and then "phasing" a section of a second record (usually a vocal or a drum hit or a horn) over the first record. The hip hop DJ creates rather than plays music; he or she destabilizes the fixity of records by erasing the boundaries of where one recording ends and another begins.

⁶ Sampling involves looping portions of previously recorded records onto a track and then mixing them together to produce a new collage of sound. This music then provides the beat over which the MC will rap.

bottom up rather than preserved through traditional formulas, diction, and meter by a group of bards trained since early childhood. A rap song captures a moment in hip hop culture; it does not encompass the culture. One cannot say what hip hop culture *is*; one can only explain the processes by which it changes. And the site of cultural production where it changes most rapidly is the freestyle competition.

Any discussion that asks whether rap is oral poetry must begin, and perhaps end, with freestyling. Freestyling—rapping spontaneously with no pre-written materials—is how MCs battle each other to see who is the best rapper. Also called “off the head” and “rapping off the top of the dome,” freestyling is by definition a live performance. It is composed and performed simultaneously. The pressure of performing live in front of a potentially hostile audience with no prepared lyrics scares away the fronters⁷ and the fakers, and demonstrates who the real MCs are.

Once the performance is finished, the freestyle ceases to exist. Even if a rapper attempts to recreate a similar freestyle at another performance, it will never be performed the same way twice. Memorized raps that have been pre-written (which would include any rap with a chorus, a single theme, or a second rapper emphasizing certain words or phrases) are not freestyles. Even a rap that is freestyled in a recording studio cannot be considered a freestyle because the rapper is able to do a limitless number of takes before he or she decides on the final version. A freestyle, then, is a live performance in front of a live audience—whether an audience at a club or listeners to a freestyle competition on live radio.

Freestyling is an outgrowth of various African and African-American oral traditions. These include the praise songs and genealogies of West African *griots*, African-American preachers and poets, and African call-and-response techniques, but the tradition most immediate to the original Bronx MCs is signifying.⁸ Signifying is a ritual often involving

⁷ To “front” means to put up a front, to hide your true feelings, to pretend to be someone you’re not. This accusation is often leveled against those who pretend to have rapping skills, but actually do not.

⁸ The ritual of signifying in black communities of the United States derives from the Signifying Monkey poems, a group of poems that originated during slavery and began to be recorded in the twentieth century by black musicians. The main characters in these poems are a lion, an elephant, and a monkey. The monkey starts trouble by falsely telling the lion that he heard the elephant insulting the lion’s family. The lion then goes to hunt down the elephant who, of course, denies these insults. In some versions of the story, the lion mauls the elephant to the immense enjoyment of the monkey. In other versions, the elephant convinces the lion of the truth, sending the lion back to the monkey, who is

two (though sometimes more) participants exchanging insults. These contests to see who can come up with the most clever and biting insults are fiercely competitive, since one's reputation in the community is at stake. Even though signifying often involves two people, there is always a group of spectators either laughing at a clever insult or criticizing a weak and predictable one.

Those who develop exceptional skills in signifying gradually accumulate a storehouse of quick replies for various contexts. These ready-made insults come in handy in tight situations when the insulted party has to think quickly of a reply. As Thomas Kochman has shown, the winner of these contests is often not the one who has the most original insults, but the one who has the largest quantity and can outlast his or her opponent (1969:33). The one who gets the last word in is usually the winner, although if one participant continually comes up with weak insults, the crowd will quickly let him or her know.

Many freestylists are also experts at signifying. Through the trials of signifying, they learn to come up with quick replies. This skill is also essential in freestyling because the performer must be able to produce lines quickly without pausing. Too long a pause in either signifying or freestyling might mean losing the battle. Freestyle competitions have elevated signifying contests to a more complex art form, with more complicated rhythms, more complicated rhymes, and the use of prerecorded music. While an insult in signifying only needs to be clever and insulting, in freestyling the rhymes must be "dope" and the beats must be "funky" in order for the song to be accepted by the hip hop community. The winner of a freestyle competition is determined by the audience. Audiences of competitions become wildly exuberant for def freestyles and mercilessly unforgiving toward wack performances.⁹ These evaluations are based on three factors: the MC's flow (the rhythm of the rap), the clarity of his or her words (the audience must be able to understand what the rapper is saying, at least most of the time), and the cleverness of his or her punchlines.

laughing so hard that he falls out of the tree. The lion jumps on top of the monkey, but, just before the lion mauls him, the monkey asks the lion to let him up so that they can have a fair fight. The lion agrees and the monkey quickly climbs back up the tree, only to cause more trouble through signifying. The main theme of all the poems is how the weakest party becomes the strongest through his expertise in language. For a detailed account of this tradition, see Gates 1988.

⁹ In hip hop culture, "def" means innovative and "wack" means banal.

In tracing the possible connections between rap music and the Parry-Lord theory of oral-formulaic composition, we need to look at what techniques rappers use in freestyling. Do they rely on formulas when composing their raps? How is a freestyle rap related to hip hop culture? Does this culture play a large role—that is, to the degree usually associated with oral cultures and oral poetry—in supplying the themes and ideas that emerge in a freestyle?

Los Angeles freestylist T-Love says that “in a lyrical freestyle, the MC can rap about whatever he/she wants, in any style he/she chooses. The only confinements in the rap are: first, it should rhyme; second be comprehensible; and third, be on beat, if done to music” (Cross 1993:306). I will first look at each of these three elements, then examine whether freestylists use formulas in the Parry-Lord sense of the term, and finally consider the ways in which rappers use freestyling as a political tool to return rap to its oral foundations.

Rhyme

While not all freestyles conform to T-Love’s categories of coherence and staying on beat, all freestyles (as well as all written raps) rhyme. This is one of the two most significant differences between freestylists and traditional oral poets (the other being that freestylists think of themselves as original creators rather than as vessels for a tradition). Most oral poetry is metered and unrhymed to aid the poet in composing. Homer’s meter is functional: it helps him compose and also helps him remember important information through formulas that fit the phrase-units of the line. While the hexameter line certainly may give the poem an even, rhythmic flow, its two main functions are to make composing easier and to act as a mnemonic device.¹⁰ A freestylist’s use of rhyme, on the other hand, is aesthetic: it

¹⁰ Homer’s composing process, however, is not devoid of aesthetic considerations, and critics are now questioning Parry’s overemphasis on the economy of Homeric verse. John Miles Foley writes that the point is not that “*ideas* are economical or uneconomical,” but that “the *phraseology* used to express those ideas is thrifty.” Moreover, for poetry composed in performance, it is not so much the phrases themselves that are important, but rather the “relationships among phraseologies” (1991:26). This emphasis on the movement from one phraseology to another is analogous to the freestyling technique of “flippin’ the script,” which I discuss below.

actually makes composing more difficult,¹¹ but in doing so, it makes the rap more rhythmically varied and complex. The aesthetics of freestyling are centered on overcoming difficulties. A freestylist's rhyme skills show how well he or she can overcome obstacles and transform a structural challenge into verbal art. The freestylist must come up with as unexpected a rhyme as possible because predictable rhymes create dull poetry and a freestyle audience craves the unexpected. The ability of a freestylist to turn an unexpected phrase or create a novel rhyme determines who wins the competition.

Unlike traditional literate poetry (where meter is self-consciously counted out) and traditional oral poetry (where meter is "felt out"), freestyles do not have a consistent meter. Without a consistent meter, a rap's rhymes are less predictable because the listener (as well as the freestylist) is never sure quite where the next one is going to fall. And because the rhymes are less predictable, the freestylist can construct more complicated rhythms.¹²

Coherence

In order to freestyle, the rapper must be "in command" of the culture. He or she must have a wide range of cultural references and be able to manipulate these materials with ease. The artist must be able to access the culture that has shaped him or her—then reorganize it, reshape it, and recreate it at the moment of the performance. Freestylists are relatively unconcerned with narrative unity since, unlike the Homeric poets, there is no single story they want to tell. Instead, one of the defining techniques of freestyling is "flippin' the script"—the ability to change subjects mid-rap. This is the focus because what is important is not narrative unity, but rather

¹¹ While rhyme does make freestyling more difficult, there is one way in which rhyme actually makes composing freestyles easier: it helps organize the poem by providing direction for freestylists, who know they must rhyme with a word they have already said. Freestyling an unrhymed rap might be more difficult in this respect because the possibilities for the next line are limitless. Given this exception, however, rhyme serves an aesthetic rather than a mainly functional purpose.

¹² This is characteristic of many African-American poets (Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Quincy Troupe, June Jordan, Paul Beatty, and others) who reject the use of a consistent meter but still use rhyme. For these poets, rhyme is a catalyst for rhythm. As in freestyling, without a consistent meter, the placement of the rhyme is unexpected and can be manipulated to construct complicated rhythms.

the ability to express many different styles. The more flexible the freestylist is, the better he or she will be able to adjust to any situation that might come up during the performance. When T-Love says that a freestyle must “be comprehensible,” he does not mean that the freestylist must somehow connect the different narrative strands into one unified work,¹³ but that each “script” (section of a freestyle defined by a single theme) must make sense in and of itself before the MC “flips” to the next one. A weak MC is one who raps nonsensical lines because he or she has not yet mastered the art of maintaining the rhyme while composing a line that makes sense.

Rhythm

T-Love’s final criterion for a freestyle is that it must “be on beat, if done to music.” The rhythm of the MC’s rap must fit over the beat of the DJ’s music track. The DJ, while varying the samples, usually keeps a consistent beat (though not always, as we will see later) so that the MC can get into a flow. The DJ’s track determines the rap’s beat and shapes the rap’s lyrical rhythms, but only partly: the freestylist has free reign with his or her rhythms as long as they stay on beat.

The unit of a rap is determined by the DJ’s beat rather than by a set meter. In other words, freestyles can be broken down into rhythmic units rather than metrical units. Let us look briefly at a freestyle by Harlem rapper Big L.¹⁴ In transcribing this freestyle, I have broken the lines at the rhythmic units determined by the DJ’s beat. Each line, therefore, takes up an equal time span in the rap. I will use Tim Brennan’s technique of marking stressed words in boldface and caesuras with the symbol (*).

¹³ This is not always true for written raps, which are often organized around a main theme that is emphasized by a chorus. DJ Romeo, discussing written raps (not freestyles), says that one “characteristic of a good rapper is to have some continuity to a rap. A lot of times people who will start rapping about one thing here and then later on in the song they’re rapping about something else—they get off on a tangent. People with talent can stick to a theme and take it from A to B and bring it back and keep the continuity to it” (1993: 237-8). This kind of “continuity” is possible only with written raps, and is neither possible nor desirable in freestyling.

¹⁴ Big L both freestyles and writes his rhymes. To hear his written raps, check out his studio record *Lifestylez Ov Da Poor & Dangerous* (Columbia, 1995). On at least three tracks of which I am aware—“All Black,” “Da Graveyard,” and “Let ‘Em Have It ‘L’”—Big L takes various lines composed during freestyles and inserts them into these written raps.

MCs be actin' like they top **gunnin'** (*)
Yo talkin' like villains
 But won't **pop** nuttin', (*) so stop **frontin'** (*)
 Before I **pop** you like a phat rope, I'm phat dope
 I'm mad far from flat broke—Frontin'? I let my gat **smoke** (*)
 Big L is a nigger you can't call **wack**, (*) front and get your jaw cracked
 My format is war, **Black**, I'm all **that**
 Phatter than horse flies, (*) known to extort guys (*)
 This ain't Cali, (*) it's Harlem, nigger, we do walk-bys

In this freestyle, as in all freestyles, there is no set metrical pattern that predetermines the rhythm or line length. Each line makes up one rhythmic unit, but within that rhythmic unit, the placement of stresses and the number of syllables vary greatly. To assure that each line takes up equal time over the beat, Big L either (1) uses caesuras, hesitating or pausing before delivering the next phrase, or (2) overloads words into a short space (the words “Big L is a nigger” are said so fast that they take up the time of a single word delivered at his “normal” speed). These two techniques constantly alter the rhythm to keep the audience's attention. The passage from “Before I pop you” to “gat smoke,” for example, was delivered so fast that the audience began howling in awe.

Supernatural and Live Radio

I don't shoot bullets, I throw books, I throw verbs
 And one thing I love to do is puff herbs
 That's my favorite all-American pastime
 Puffin' herbs, hittin' skinz, and kickin' dope rhymes
 —Supernatural

Most freestylists incorporate their immediate surroundings into their rap. At a live show, this usually involves rapping about specific audience members, commenting on the sound system, and, if this is a one-on-one competition, insulting your opponent. Besides the club, another popular arena for freestyle competitions is live radio. Stretch Armstrong and Bobbito Garcia's radio show on Columbia's WKCR (89.9 FM) in New York airs live freestyle competitions. The freestyle I will look at is a rap by Brooklyn freestylist Supernatural that was part of one of these KCR competitions. In 1993, Supernat (as he is often called) won the Battle for World Supremacy and also the freestyle competition at the New Music

Seminar. Although he lost his NMS title to Craig G in 1994, he is still considered one of the best freestylists around.

Freestyling follows the immediacy of oral poetry rather than the revisable and premeditated art of literate poetry. In the particular performance on which I will focus, Supernat, while discussing numerous subjects, incorporates the immediate surroundings of the KCR studio into his freestyle. Two subjects that recur in Supernat's rap are that Bobbito has placed a twenty-five minute time limit on each freestyle ("My man Bobbito said we only got 25 minutes / to win it") and that Supernat's friend George is eating a bagel in the studio:

Supernatural gonna step in and I'm-a stand in
 For George 'cause you know he's able
 But he can't flow right now 'cause he got a stupid bagel
 Crumbs in his mouth so let me turn it out

This passage demonstrates not only that immediate surroundings can be instantly incorporated into a freestyle, but also that Supernat's intentions can shift from one line to the next. At the moment that he raps "he got a stupid bagel," Supernat is focusing only on rhyming with "able." This line then unpredictably leads into "crumbs in his mouth." If this were a written rap, the author could go back and erase the article "a" in front of "stupid bagel" now that he or she knew the subject to be plural ("crumbs") rather than singular ("bagel"). In freestyling, of course, this is not possible. The direction of the narrative can change so rapidly that the freestylist sometimes must be able to adjust mid-word.

This revision process—which does not and cannot go back over what Supernat has already said, but constantly moves forward, adjusting itself—is most evident in the following passage:

I kick logic for the brothers in the projects
 The ones that's out there throwin' facts
 Flippin' styles, even the kids out there sellin' vials

After he says "facts," Supernat thinks of the word "crack" and begins constructing a line that will end with "crack." What happens, however, is that when he says "Flippin' styles" (his mind still on the subject of crack cocaine), he rhymes this phrase with "vials." This ability to discard one's initial intentions and to adjust immediately to new developments in the rap is essential in freestyling.

The studio itself becomes the setting of the rap. A friend eating a bagel, technicians laughing at a clever line, or a producer wearing a strange

hat can all be instantaneously transformed into art. While rappers who write out their raps also transform their surroundings into art, the results are much more immediate and apparent in a freestyle. Since almost no time elapses between the freestylist's perceptions and their incorporation into the song, it is as if the studio itself becomes the rap. While this nearly instantaneous interchange creates very exciting, immediate, and energetic poetry, there are always uncontrollable factors that threaten to disrupt the freestyle. Since all freestyles are created as they are composed, there are no second takes, rewritings, or overdubs. Freestylists, therefore, must be prepared with techniques to deal with unexpected developments during the performance.

Ruptures

Tricia Rose writes that hip hop DJing is centered around three concepts: flow, layering, and ruptures in line. The DJ layers his or her samples to create a flowing track, but then periodically interrupts this flow by scratching or introducing new musical passages onto the track. Rose (1994:39) writes that

these effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish and transform them. But also be prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, *plan on* social rupture.

Although Rose never discusses freestyling, this act of “plan[ning] on social rupture” is nowhere more strongly emphasized. At one point in Supernat's freestyle, his DJ, Grand Ghetto, suddenly changes the music and, like all skilled freestylists who can instantly respond to changes in their surroundings, Supernat begins to rap in a soft, whispering voice to fit with the music:

[Normal freestyling voice:]
 When it comes to a freestyle battle
 I'll dismantle, displace 'em, dyslexics dismantle
 [Music changes] And that's the way that I am comin'
 [Raps more quietly:]
 I do not understand it, he changed the beat
 Let me complete, now I can get biz with the style

Flip the fly-stro, I think it's time for the maestro
 Oh Grand Ghetto, love the way you're whisperin'
 'Cause I'm dissin' that discipline

Supernat's adjustment time is one line: he finishes the line he began when the music shifted ("And that's the way that I am comin'"), but then the next line is already adjusted to fit with the music, satisfying T-Love's requirement that a freestyle must "be on beat, if done to music."

Supernat's aesthetics are based on his ability to transform unexpected difficulties into art. As we saw earlier, this mode of transformation is built into the art form itself—that is, all freestyles must rhyme—but it also involves responding to difficulties that occur during the performance. Grand Ghetto changes the music in order to challenge Supernat's abilities to flip the script—a challenge Supernat meets and uses to develop his style. Alongside such interchanges between MC and DJ, however, unexpected difficulties arise that are controlled by neither the DJ nor the MC.

During Supernat's rap, the record skips and this is enough to throw him off for a second. He stops short the line he is currently composing and, in a normal speaking voice, says, "Yo George, man, the record skipped." This technical difficulty threatens to bring the freestyle to a screeching halt. But Supernat immediately returns to his highly rhythmic freestyling voice and, of course, rhymes with what he has just unexpectedly said ("the record skipped"):

He's trippin' out, I'll still rip
 Never booin', I'm pursuin', I'm not pollutin'
 Stretch said, yo George, kid what you doin'?'
 But that's OK, yo kid, that's the breaks
 On live radio, yo we all make mistakes
 It don't make no dif', I can switch
 Every time I hit, yo stretch around the pitch

Supernat is the batter who can "hit" any "pitch" thrown at him by his DJ, the producer, or any other unpredictable element in his environment. He can "hit" obstacles head-on, "switch" the freestyle in a new direction, or, like the name of his host, "stretch" around the obstacle. Supernat does not let a technical problem—the skipping record—interfere with his freestyle. This is not because he is so focused on his freestyle that he ignores this detail: the DJ's music track is an important element in freestyling. Instead, he acknowledges the "mistake" and uses it as a catalyst for a new narrative direction, a direction the rap never would have taken had the record not skipped.

This transformative agility is even more impressive when the mistake is the freestylist's own. At one point in the rap, Supernat stutters on the word "thousand:"

Every time I rock an old well
 Fifty thou-an-ousand nine million cells
 Oh shit, I fucked up, I started to stutter
 But when I come back, I melt the mic just like butter
 I can make my mistakes sound dope¹⁵ 'cause that's how dope I am
 And everybody out there love the way I slam

There is no attempt to front and cover up mistakes. Everything is laid out in the open, examined, and then transformed into art. There is not even a pause between the stuttered line and the "compensating" line. In fact, it proves difficult to define what a mistake is in Supernat's freestyles because mistakes—that is, unintended utterances—necessarily become part of the freestyle and are quickly incorporated. That is, the "mistake" words are rhymed, and employed as catalysts to take the rap in new and unexpected directions (both narratively and rhythmically).

Supernat's ability to flip the script (change styles, adjust to new situations) is most apparent when he becomes a fish underwater and continues freestyling—that is, rhyming, rapping (semi-)coherent lines, and staying on beat—all this while making bubbling noises to indicate that he's underwater. This incredible ability to flip the script obviously involves years of practice and this particular technique—rapping underwater—was certainly practiced before the night of this performance. The lines themselves, however, are freestyled. Through the process of freestyling, some techniques are perfected, but individual lines are not.

The *process* of freestyling is emphasized over any kind of final product to ensure that the work being done is broadly cultural rather than the random thoughts of isolated individuals. Freestylists prove themselves by showing how they can overcome any difficulty or unexpected circumstance. This ability is highly regarded in the hip hop community because it often has to respond to unexpected circumstances imposed on it by the hostile larger culture. Freestylists, then, recreate the instability of their communities in competitions so that freestyling becomes a cultural workshop where techniques are developed for working through the contradictions of living in a racist society.

¹⁵ In hip hop culture, "dope" refers to particularly good rhymes or beats, as in a "dope rhyme" or a "dope beat."

In the unstable environments of both the hip hop community and the freestyle competition, developing a set of fixed codes of behavior would be counterproductive. Rather than creating a written, fixed text that will outlive its author and the historical moment of its creation, hip hop develops techniques that will allow its members to adjust to sudden changes in their environments. Rather than emphasizing a final product, freestyle emphasizes the author's techniques (to compose complex rhythms and unexpected rhymes) and abilities to compose under the most difficult of conditions (performing in front of screaming audience members or knowing one's words are being simultaneously broadcast to all of New York City). I now want to explore whether freestylers use formulas to help them cope with these difficult tasks.

Freestyling and the Oral Formula

Specifically, I now want to examine Supernat's use of recurring phrases and see whether these can be considered oral formulas. Milman Parry's definition of a formula is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (1971:272). Given that rap is not a metrical poetry, it seems that we should exclude rap from the category of "oral-formulaic poetry," but we can do this only if we think of oral poetry as necessarily metered.

Albert Lord cites three criteria for a phrase to be considered a formula: meter, usefulness, and repetition (1960:ch.3). The phrases employed in freestyling are useful (that is, they make composing easier) and repeated, but rather than using formulas for metrical purposes, freestylers must develop techniques for rhyming, since that is the single most difficult aspect of their task. Supernat says, "When I freestyle I'm thinking about the next three lines before the first is even finished" (Destiny 1994:55). A rhyme must always be thought out ahead of time rather than felt out as with rhythm. DJ Romeo, a freestyler from the hip hop community of Columbia, Missouri, says (1993:237) that

a lot of times you'll use formulas that help you maintain that spontaneity. There are certain end-line words that are easier to rhyme with. Obviously, "lay," "he," the vowels "a," "i," "o," and "u." And then there's other tools like suffixes, "-tion"—"prediction," "resurrection," "persecution." You can throw all that kind of stuff in there, "reiterate," "exasperate," whatever. You use those kinds of words as often as you can.

What DJ Romeo refers to as “formulas” are not the metrical formulas to which Parry and Lord refer; rather, these are rhyming formulas that help the freestylist continue rhyming with previous lines. Through years of performing, the freestylist gradually accumulates a repertoire of rhymes. Words that often come up have standard accompanying rhyme words: “Brooklyn” is often rhymed with “took and” or “tooken;”¹⁶ “MC” is often rhymed with “me;” “chillin” is often rhymed with “illin’;” “it’s all real” is often rhymed with “this is how I feel;” and “freestyle” is often rhymed with “wild.”

Along with these rhyming formulas, freestylers also use formulaic phrases. In the 254-line freestyle that I have been examining, Supernat employs the phrase “I’ll tell you what” eleven times, “far as I can see” three times, and “it don’t make a dif” five times. “I’ll tell you what” and “far as I can see” serve no narrative purpose and the freestyle would lose nothing narratively if they were left out. Instead, their function is threefold: they provide a rhyme,¹⁷ they give Supernat time to think of what to say next, and they help develop the rhythm. Supernat’s repeated phrases can be considered formulas because they function as formulas do in Homeric verse; that is, they aid in the poem’s composition. They do not serve the same purposes, however, because freestyles are built on rhyme and rhythm, while Homeric verse is built on syllabic meter and narrative patterning.¹⁸

¹⁶ Like freestylers, rappers who write their lyrics also place rhythm and rhyme over grammatical rules: “I met her on the subway on my way to Brooklyn / Hello good lookin’, is this seat taken?” (Eric B. & Rakim, “What’s On Your Mind”); “Rap brings back old R&B and if we would not / People coulda forgot” (Stetsasonic, “Talkin’ All That Jazz”); “Hollywood or would they not / Make us all look bad like I know they had” (Public Enemy, “Burn Hollywood Burn”). Whether attempting to pick up a woman on a subway, defending rap against ignorant critics, or criticizing the racism of the Hollywood movie industry, all of these raps have one thing in common: rhythm, rhyme, and idiomatic expressions are more important than grammatical rules because the rules (grammatical and otherwise) of the larger literate culture are irrelevant.

¹⁷ Sometimes “I’ll tell you what” rhymes and sometimes it does not, while “far as I can see” has a rhyme partner in all three of its occurrences. In addition to the three functions (rhyme, time, and rhythm) of the first two formulas, “it don’t make a dif” also works as a thematic aid. It fits well with Supernat’s aesthetics of “it doesn’t matter what difficulty comes up; I will transform it.”

¹⁸ Supernat prioritizes rhythm and rhyme over everything else, even—surprisingly—boasts of his own rapping powers: “Yo they love it, it’s me, the Nate, G / Some of them hate me, some of them wanna date me / You overrate me.” We cannot imagine a written rap ever containing the phrase “You overrate me.” We hear this not as Supernat making a mistake, but rather keeping his priorities straight: narrative is important,

Are these formulaic phrases in freestyling individual or traditional? The phrases are not individual in the sense of a literate poet who comes up with his or her own unique wordings. These phrases do not, as DJ Romeo asserts, “get their origins from songs, and then everybody starts using them” (1993:240). Instead, it works the other way around: “everybody starts using them” first. That is, these phrases originate in the everyday language of the hip hop community and only then do they find their way into rap songs. They become more widely known, of course, through the circulation of rap music, but almost all of these phrases originate in the everyday language of urban black youths.¹⁹

The phrases also are not traditional in the way that the Homeric tradition reserved specific phrases for composing oral poetry.²⁰ Of course, the phrases that freestylists use come from hip hop culture and their widespread deployment in rap songs demonstrates how oral and functional black language is; but, because Supernat can draw from *all* phrases currently in use in hip hop culture rather than a more specialized set, freestyling formulas cannot be considered traditional in the Homeric sense. Word choice is neither strictly individual (as in literate poetry) nor strictly traditional (as in oral poetry). Freestyling is a post-literate poetry that incorporates both oral and literate elements into its aesthetics.

but never as important as rhyme and rhythm.

¹⁹ Occasionally a rapper will invent a phrase that is not in use in the culture and subsequently begins to be used by people who have heard the song. DJ Romeo correctly points out (1993:240) that the phrase “O.P.P.” (“Other People’s Property/Penis/Pussy”) was not used in hip hop culture until the South Orange, New Jersey rap group Naughty By Nature wrote a song by that title. The case of “O.P.P.,” however, is an exception rather than the rule.

²⁰ It is worthwhile to note that, as in Homeric epic, there is a relatively stable pool of phrases in rap, but these occur among rappers who write their lyrics and therefore cannot be considered oral formulas. These phrases summarize an important idea that the rapper, as a member of hip hop culture, wants to express; they do not function as aids in composing. Examples of such phrases include “flip the script,” “paid in full,” “act like you know,” “if it ain’t rough, it ain’t right,” and “you know the time.” Like the Homeric poets’ pool of phrases, new ones are added and others gradually fade away, but the pool itself remains relatively stable. This type of phrase-pool is never found in literate poetry, but post-literate poetry contains characteristics of oral (as well as literate) poetry.

Goin' For Self

I have already mentioned two ways in which freestyling differs from traditional oral poetry: rhyme and the fact that freestylers think of themselves as original creators rather than as vessels for a tradition. While I have discussed the first point in detail, the second point needs to be more fully explained. G. S. Kirk writes that in traditional oral poetry, "it is misleading to think of genius all concentrated in one man, the monumental composer. Behind him there undoubtedly lay oral heroic material of very high quality; his special gifts were those of integration" (1962:288).²¹ The Homeric poet does not invent original themes, hero-types, or diction; he integrates traditional materials into a coherent form during performance.

In freestyle competitions, however, it is of utmost importance to be the sole original creator of the rap. Supernat, for example, claims to be more original than his opponent:

For the whole 25 minutes I could flip it
It don't make no dif' 'cause I sit back and sip it
Just like water, I am the author, yo I start to slaughter

Supernat emphasizes that he is the author of the freestyle, and it matters a great deal who wins the competition. It entitles one to boasting rights in the community. The claim of uniqueness, however, is not a claim for original visions or ideas. Supernat differs from others in his community not in kind but in degree: he is the one who is most representative of the hip hop community. Supernat is unlike others only in so far as he has absorbed and transmitted the community's values better than anyone else.

Freestyle competitions, or "style wars" as they are sometimes called, not only ritualize the conflicts of African-American communities, but also elevate the skills of all performers. As Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest raps in "Vibes and Stuff," "Competition's good, it brings out the vital parts / The abstract poetry, latest in recital arts." T-Love adds that such competitions are one of the reasons rap music has evolved so far since its origins. "Where there is competition," says T-Love (quoted in Cross 1993:306),

²¹ While Kirk argues that there is no "monumental composer" in the Homeric tradition, this does not preclude an oral poet's ability to be original. Kirk also argues that Homer was an exceptional, rather than a typical, poet among Homeric poets, and that "not every singer" of Homer's time would have been capable of "constructing such lines as his" and "extruding clumsy locutions as effectively" as Homer (1962:82).

there is change. And in order for an MC to be considered a worthy competitor, he or she must practice and freestyling is just that: drills for skills. It opens the mind, and helps to keep fresh and new ideas flowing, which improves the competition amongst MCs, therefore upgrading the quality of true hiphop flavour in rap music.

While freestyle competitions often involve bitter exchanges (the purpose is, after all, to insult your opponent as cleverly as possible while praising one's own MCing powers), they benefit the community because they 1) improve everyone's skills while weeding out the fake MCs and 2) assure that hierarchies do not crystallize.

Keepin' It Real

Rap is now being recorded and distributed worldwide, and freestyle competitions are no longer the most common site of cultural production. Most rappers now write out their raps beforehand, even though the main emphasis remains on performance. Rap videos on MTV give the false impression that almost anyone can be a rapper as long as he or she wears the right hat and sneakers, and can memorize a rap. This mirage has prompted many rappers and fans to engage in genuine as well as sentimental recollections of "back in the day" when hip hop was "pure" and "real." DJ Kiilu of Freestyle Fellowship (quoted in Cross 1993:288) says that

a lot of it started because there was a microphone attached to the turntable, kinda like crowd participation. Gettin' everybody to say "Ho!" and clap their hands and stuff like that. Rap is different now, all these images. Yeah, they just came up with an image. Rap is at a point where you gotta have an image and stick with the image, like gangsta, or a stick-up kid, or a fuckin' peace guy.

Video images and record contracts threaten to pull rap away from its roots in freestyling skills, and to extinguish a rapper's ability to come up with an "off the head" rhyme to defeat an opponent. As with traditional oral poetry, the visual/written/fixed text threatens to destroy the aural/oral/evolving performance. Anyone can memorize a rap and recite it, but in a freestyle, there is no time to fake or front. In order to keep the rap flowing, you must be practiced in freestyle skills and be able to capture spontaneously the spirit of the community at the moment of the

performance. Without a knowledge of hip hop culture, the freestyle will be empty and phony.

This tension in the community, however, is not between oral and literate elements, but rather between freestylists and frontiers. Post-literate cultures incorporate both oral and literate elements in their art, without antagonism and without hierarchy.²² Supernat, one of the most skilled freestylists, does not have a hostile relationship with those who write out their raps. He influences and is influenced by recorded rappers who write their rhymes, and often mentions their names in his freestyles. He does not think that rappers who freestyle are necessarily more skilled than those who do not; they are just different.

Instead, antagonism in hip hop arises between those who accurately represent the culture and those who do not. According to Supernat, the only unforgivable sin is pretending to freestyle (quoted in Destiny 1994:55):

Some MCs are just more partial to paper than others. It doesn't make you any less of a lyricist. The only thing that pisses me off is when a rapper gets on TV or radio and someone asks them to kick a freestyle and they start rhymin' and their homeboy is kickin' the shit right with them. *That* to me is wack.

If a second rapper emphasizes certain words or phrases of the main MC, it is a clear indication that the rap was written beforehand. To an experienced freestylist like Supernat, and to anyone familiar with hip hop's art forms, this is obvious. The danger is that those who do not know the culture's art forms (including members of the culture as well as those outside the culture) will hear this performance as an authentic freestyle. This kind of reception contributes to a process whereby freestyling loses its value. Eventually the culture as a whole may lose its credibility and perhaps its ability to preserve itself in the face of the hostile larger culture.

Freestyling, therefore, has become a way not only of tracing rap's origins, but also a way of connecting today's rap back to its original spirit. Freestyling "keeps it real" because you need verbal skills to manage it; you cannot rely on video images or pre-written lyrics. Both videos and

²² In a post-literate culture such as hip hop, oral and literate elements are for the most part not at odds. There is generally no antagonism between freestylists and rappers who write out their raps because both groups belong to the same culture. While a few rappers may argue that freestyling is the only true form of rapping, this opinion is fairly rare. A more common attitude is that rappers may pre-write their raps, but they also must be able to freestyle.

pre-written lyrics allow a rapper to formulate an image that he or she wants to convey. The inherent danger is that they give the rapper an opportunity to front, that is, to pretend to be someone he or she is not. And this allows those who are not part of hip hop culture to exploit and profit from the culture. T-Love explains that rappers who attempt to freestyle, even if they have not perfected their skills, prove that they are “committed to all facets of the music form, not just the ones that earn the duckets” (quoted in Cross 1993:306). Freestyling does not “earn the duckets” because freestyling is not preserved in a fixed form and marketed.²³ What the winner of a competition receives, however, is “props” (respect) from the hip hop community for proving his or her skills on the mic.

Supernat maintains that all written raps are freestyles before they hit paper (see Destiny 1994:55) because the source for all rap is the oral improvisation of freestyling. While we need to maintain the distinction between freestyling and written raps, the two styles influence one another and are becoming increasingly intertwined. While written raps have a wider narrative range because of the writer’s ability to revise, freestyling provides more varied rhythms and unexpected rhymes. To the uninitiated, written raps seem to involve more preparation, but, as we have seen, this is not the case. Even though freestyling is spontaneous and never pre-written, its techniques require years of practice before one can rap off the top of the dome.

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²³ While record companies have released CDs with titles such as “The Best of Freestyling” and “Freestyle Compilation,” these CDs all contain a freestyle flavor rather than actual performances. They usually feature dancehall rap and what’s called “house music,” songs that attempt to capture the excitement and energy of the original park jams in the Bronx (known as Old School rap). Also, many of these rappers in their lyrics rap that they are freestyling, but, again, even if they are actually doing so (most are not), they are allowed a limitless number of takes. This single fact disqualifies their raps as freestyles since a freestyle must be performed in front of a live audience. A freestyle record is not inconceivable, however, if someone were to record performances in clubs and live radio, select the best ones, and release them as a CD or cassette. As far as I am aware, no one has attempted such a project.

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