rhyme's challenge

HIP HOP, POETRY, AND CONTEMPORARY RHYMING CULTURE

david caplan

RHYME'S CHALLENGE

RHYME'S CHALLENGE

Hip Hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture

DAVID CAPLAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Caplan, David, 1969-
Rhyme's challenge : hip hop, poetry, and contemporary rhyming culture /
David Caplan.
pages cm
Includes index.
ISBN 978–0–19–533712–9 (hardcover)—ISBN 978–0–19–533713–6 (pbk.)
1. English language—Rhyme. 2. Hip-hop—United States. 3. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism. 4. American poetry—21st century—History and criticism. I. Title.
PE1517.C36 2014
808.1—dc23
2013030719

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *vii*

Introduction: Because It Rhymes 1

1. Reduced to Rhyme: Contemporary Doggerel 25
2. The Art of Rhymed Insult 53
3. Making Love in Mirrors: Hip-Hop Seduction Verse 81
4. The Inheritors of Hip Hop: Reclaiming Rhyme 103

Conclusion: On the Present and Future of Rhyme 133

Credits *139*
Notes *143*
Index *171*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe many people many thanks for their help with this book. My students broadened my perspective, offering numerous suggestions, including recommendations of artists whose work I should consider. In particular, I would like to thank Simon Brown for sharing his encyclopedic knowledge of hip hop with me.

Stephen Burt, Adam Bradley, James Longenbach, and Adrian Matejka read the manuscript in its entirety; Heather Dubrow reviewed a chapter. No author could hope for more generous, insightful readers. Even our disagreements proved useful as they challenged me to think harder about rhyme and its many uses.

I have been extremely fortunate to work with talented editors. This project started in a meeting with Shannon McLachlan. Ably assisted by Stephen Bradley, Brendan O'Neill expertly steered the book into publication, with good humor and perceptive guidance. Rick Huard copyedited and arranged permissions.

Several chapters have been presented in various forms at conferences, including the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, Arts of the Present Conference, and the Annual Convention of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and invited lectures at Bonn University, University of Ghent, and Trinity College, Dublin. I want to thank Ian Kinane, Gillian Groszewski, Stephen Matterson, Frank J. Kearful, Sabine Sielke, Christian Klöckner, and Sarah Posman for arranging these visits and treating me so well during them.

Several fellowships helped me immensely. The Bill and Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University and University of Liège, where I served as a Fulbright Lecturer in American Literature, offered welcoming, stimulating environments. Martine Brownley, Director of the Fox Center, and Michel Delville showed me remarkable hospitality during my time at their respective universities. A Thomas E. Wenzlau Presidential Fellowship from my home institution, Ohio Wesleyan University, gave me time to write. Provosts William Louthan and Charles Stinemetz also deserve thanks for their support.

Finally, this book is dedicated to Ana and Andy.

RHYME'S CHALLENGE

INTRODUCTION

Because It Rhymes

The Gutenberg era, the era of rhyme, is over.

—DONALD DAVIE[1]

that fuddy-duddy device of end-rhyme

—PAUL COLLINS[2]

Most intellectuals will only half-listen.

—NAS[3]

WE LIVE IN A RHYME-DRENCHED era. Rhyme flourishes in advertisements, tabloid headlines, and aphorisms. Nearly all forms of popular music, including country-and-western, rock, pop, punk, soul, and, most notably, hip hop, rhyme. Rhymes fill our lives, crowded with idiosyncratic echoes and associations, both intimate and shared, as rhymes find each other in playgrounds, bedrooms, and on the Internet. The era of rhyme seems over to those who only half-listen. I propose we open our ears and rediscover an amazing rhyming culture.

Consider the following list:

ta-da Tears for Fears tea tree teeny peeny teeny-weeny teepee

> teeter-totter telltale Temporary Contemporary tent event
> Texas Exes Tex-Mex thigh high think pink thinktank thin's in, but fat's where it's at[4]

Harryette Mullen's abecedarian "Jinglejangle" documents rhymes; it does not invent new ones. It consists of ten pages, all organized according to alphabetical sequence and rhyme. The list gives the impression it could continue forever. This stanza, for instance, ranges widely. It includes erotic arousal and sexual humiliation, innuendo and insult, fleshly comeliness ("fat's where it's at"), and emasculating put-down ("teeny-weeny"). It rhymes the thin and the fat, as well as the adult and juvenile, food and music, the bodily and the intellectual ("thinktank"). Its musical geography encompasses England, home of the 1980s pop band whose name reportedly truncated the psychologist Arthur Janov's description of his primal scream method, "tears as a replacement for fears,"[5] and the American South, where George Strait crooned, "All my ex's [*sic*] live in Texas/And that's why I hang my hat in Tennessee."[6] The rhymes recall other rhymes; one example generates the next. For instance, the Canadian hip-hop artist Drake honors Strait's rhyme, "All my exes live in Texas/ Like I'm George Strait"; Drake carries it across genres as well as nationalities and races.[7] In this respect, "Jinglejangle" resembles the website "Pentametron," whose algorithm charts rhymes that different Twitter user accounts make, re-tweeting fifteen to twenty couplets daily.[8] When Mullen read drafts of the poem, she asked the audience for suggestions, some of which she incorporated into later versions. The poem continues this project; it documents our culture's propulsive desire to rhyme.

To understand contemporary rhyme, we must listen carefully and widely. Over the course of this book, I will examine legal and political documents, novels, poems, and lyrics from a number of forms of popular music. Together they suggest the technique's far-reaching force and underappreciated sophistication. At a time when expert readers periodically lament poetry's marginality, these examples confirm the great range of rhyming activity at work in our culture.[9] These everyday rhymes demand greater study and less condescension. Accordingly, my analysis seeks to encourage more scholarly work on both neglected texts and the broader underlying issues: for instance, how rhyme functions within and across specific musical and literary genres, not just in individual artists' works, and how it operates in the popular culture, not just in the most prestigious forms of print-based poetry.[10] In this respect, I hope my work might clarify opportunities for future scholarship to pursue.

The most daring, inventive, and conspicuous contemporary rhymers, though, necessarily demand the bulk of my attention. Hip-hop artists dominate the contemporary art of rhyme; they remain most alert to the resources that the culture and the language provide. The effects they achieve are nothing short of astonishing, showing how thrilling rhyme can be, how sexy and appalling. For this reason, most of this book concentrates on their work—more specifically, the kinds of rhymes that hip-hop artists favor: doggerel, insult, and seduction. This attention to particular kinds of rhymes acknowledges both individual and collective achievement, as artists draw from and revise shared techniques. To clarify this accomplishment, I also will review the rhymes' history and current uses. The last chapter will return to the question of hip hop's relation to the most prestigious forms of

print-based poetry, considering what a younger generation of American print-based poets has learned from hip hop's achievements.[11]

Hip hop has accomplished so much in rhyme partly because its practitioners hold a particularly useful attitude toward it, one at odds with that of most contemporary print-based poets. This difference extends beyond the striking fact that virtually all hip hop rhymes, even in languages that lack strong traditions of rhyming poetry, whereas the vast majority of contemporary poetry in English does not, even though the language enjoys a strong history of rhyming verse.[12] In this respect, Japan offers an illuminating example. Japanese hip hop, two scholars report, "has come to adopt a notion of rhyme even though there is no basis for it in traditional Japanese poetry."[13] While hip hop defines rhyme as essential to the art, contemporary American poetry and literary criticism typically see rhyme as optional, if not unappealing. Contemporary American print-based poets rarely rhyme and, when they do, they generally do so unobtrusively. They favor less overt rhyming gestures; for instance, they seldom use consistent end rhyme, a visible method of organizing a poem around the technique. The few exceptions—most prominently, Frederick Seidel, the Irish-American Paul Muldoon, and, less consistently, Mullen—almost defiantly depart from the literary norm: to borrow a scholar's description of Muldoon, each might be called "a maverick of rhymes."[14]

Specific attitudes underlie both sets of practices and views. Hip hop possesses a specific confidence in rhyme at odds with American literary culture's general skepticism. Much contemporary poetry criticism repeats a certain truism: in Donald Davie's sweeping phrase, "the era of rhyme"

"is over." This idea has grown familiar enough for novelists to parody it.[15] A character in Tobias Wolff's *Old School* rants:

> Rhyme is bullshit. Rhyme says that everything works out in the end. All harmony and order. When I see a rhyme in a poem, I know I'm being lied to. Go ahead, laugh! It's true—rhyme's a completely bankrupt device. It's just wishful thinking. Nostalgia.[16]

Disappointed that his poem did not win the school prize, the schoolboy blames the judge, Robert Frost, a visitor to the prep school, and lashes out at the kind of poetry Frost writes. "I mean, he's still using *rhyme*," the student grumbles, italics underscoring his incredulity and contempt (*OS*, 44). According to this view, rhyme condemns any poet who employs it. It both marks and encourages falsehood. Archaic and morally reprehensible, it perpetuates out-of-date values.[17]

Set in 1960 and published in 2003, *Old School* shows how certain arguments recycle and persist. The novel looks back at an earlier era, while glancing knowingly at the contemporary poetry scene. Such arguments hardly ended in 1960. As if explicating the student's rant, Matthew Zapruder recently declared, "Indeed, nowadays there's simply no way to rhyme and not sound a bit out of time. Our world is too wary and conscious of the different space rhyme and meter create."[18] Zapruder's language remains more measured than the schoolboy's. Both, though, share a similar belief. Rhyme, they insist, cannot escape a particular fate: it always sounds "out of time." It cannot bear the pressure of contemporary reality.

Such assertions are hardly new; in broad terms, they might be called "modernist." Canonical Anglo-American

Modernism did not abandon rhyme; rather, it recrafted the technique. Consider, for instance, the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table.[19]

In a famous reading, the midcentury American poet John Berryman claimed modern poetry began with the third line. Berryman called the opening couplet "a nice rhyme—it sounds like other dim romantic verse," then noted, "[T]he third line proves that the author of the first two lines did not mean them."[20] In Berryman's language, the author did not mean the opening rhyme or, to be more precise, meant it to convey a jarring force, a diminishment or destruction.[21] This strategy proved immensely influential; it introduced into English what the scholar Daniel Albright calls "a Modernist style of rhyming," "a strain of brittle rhyme." Citing "Prufrock" as well as Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," Albright notes that in such works "rhyming is read as a retreat, a cowering before modern life. In some sense both Prufrock and Mauberley are personifications of rhyme itself, of passé modes of writing poems."[22]

In 1915, such ideas proved groundbreaking; nearly a century later, they inadequately describe a changed state of the art. More recent dismissals of rhyme as old-fashioned and nostalgic face a certain irony; they themselves sound old-fashioned and nostalgic. To add to the confusion, certain recent defenders of rhyme simply reverse the opponents' terms, instead of offering a more precise assessment. "When you rhyme," insists Glyn Maxwell, "you're somehow

engaging with something that's older than you are, that's older than your history, that's older than anything you really understand or experience."[23] Mentioned three times in one sentence, rhyme's alleged "oldness" serves as its main virtue.

Directly challenging both sets of assumptions, hip hop dramatically fuses two artistic commitments: rhyme and an intense focus on the contemporary moment. Hip hop is "about what's current," declares Jay-Z, "what's happening right this second."[24] In a characteristic strategy, hip-hop artists rhyme the most conspicuous conditions and symbols of contemporary life: its products, technologies, and personalities. Instead of using rhyme to maintain distance from contemporary culture, hip-hop artists regularly use the technique to evoke the era's distinctive features. Their rhymes couple new inflections, objects of desire, and horrors: rhyming "heaven" with "911" (the Porsche sports car) or "9/11" (the date of the terrorist attack), "Halle Berry" with "very," "Ferrari," or "honorary."[25] The nearly endless effects include the poignant, disconcerting, menacing, charming, attractive, and repellent. Their rhymes name figures of the moment. The odder the name sounds or the more arresting the connection it introduces, the greater its appeal. A master of this technique, Eminem several times offers the grotesque antonym rhyme, "Jeffrey Dahmer" and "Dalai Lama"; he also more lightly couples "naughty rotten rhymer" and "Marty Schottenheimer."[26] In another name-rhyme, Kanye West mixes the ephemeral and the eternal: "The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus."[27] Hip hop's dizzying rush to rhyme the present shows how quickly a cultural moment rushes into the past. West's couplet mentions two talk-show hosts whose names may soon grow as unfamiliar as that of Marty Schottenheimer, a football coach, especially

because all three celebrities subsequently retired from the jobs that made them famous. As in the rhyme Mullen records, the "Contemporary" is always "Temporary."

These ambitions inspire a set of rhyming conventions, replete with risks and opportunities. Such procedures depart from familiar models. "In the 'June Book' I made 'breeze' rhyme with 'trees,' and have never forgiven myself," confessed Wallace Stevens. "It is a correct rhyme, of course—but unpardonably 'expected.' "[28] Nearly two centuries earlier, Alexander Pope objected to the same rhyme for the same reason; he ridiculed poets who used "still expected Rhymes":

> Where-e'er you find the cooling Western Breeze,
> In the next Line, it whispers thro' the Trees;
> If Chrystal Streams with pleasing Murmurs creep,
> The Reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with Sleep.[29]

This rhyme persists because it so neatly serves a traditional subject and imagery. Just as nature remains one of lyric poetry's great concerns, the one-syllable rhyme couples two of its stock images, "breeze" and "trees." The rhyme perpetuates a rather bland literary history.

Hip hop's briefer, more frenetic development inspires a different rhyming vocabulary and style. Its artists favor timely references and multisyllabic rhymes as conspicuous as their subjects. Instead of hiding it, they emphasize the competitive nature of artistic technique. To offer the best rhyme is to own the object of desire.

As a demonstration of this principle, luxury cars remain a cliché of hip-hop rhyming. Countless artists, for instance, have rhymed "Lexus." Eye-Ku offers a triple rhyme, "We'll take a spin in a Lexus you can chill for dinner and breakfast/Long