

## homer and hip-hop: improvisation, cultural heritage, and metrical analysis

The Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, came to hold a central position in the cultural heritage of many Greek states and peoples by the start of the ancient Greek Classical Period (480 BCE). In some ways they still do: some years ago, on a visit to Greece, I found myself being informed in the middle of the night on an Aegean ferry by a fellow-traveller about a modern legend that Odysseus' travels reached as far as America. Conversely, a few weeks earlier, in a Peloponnesian village — a small village now, but a major city in antiquity — I had delighted a resident by informing her that her town was mentioned in the *Iliad's* 'Catalogue of Ships' that went to Troy. A continuous written heritage stretching back more than 2500 years is nothing to be sneezed at.

Could hip-hop ever come to have a similarly privileged position? In a less extreme sense it already does: hip-hop is strongly associated with a specific subculture, and at the same time is a mainstream commercial success. Its detractors might, reasonably, protest that hip-hop is unlikely to last two and a half millennia, and that hip-hop is not ideally suited for narrative verse, but comparing Homer and hip-hop is not just an idle joke.<sup>1</sup> The similarities (and differences) are not limited to the iconic status of each genre within its culture. They also have profound technical similarities in aspects of their linguistic character and these similarities are tied to the grounding of both genres in improvisation. Not much hip-hop is genuinely improvised, and most scholars believe that the Homeric epics were not strictly speaking improvised either. However, both genres are inextricably linked to an improvisational style.

<sup>1</sup> Homer and hip-hop have been compared previously: Erik Pihel, 'A Purified Freestyle: Homer and Hip Hop,' *Oral Tradition* 11 (1996): 249-69, also focuses on shared linguistic features.

I have little to say about comparing the two genres in terms of quality; except to note that not all early Greek epic shares the stature of Homeric verse. Even the most die-hard fan of Homer, and the greatest enemy of hip-hop, would have difficulty sustaining the view that the pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis* is in some absolute sense better than the best that modern hip-hop has to offer. That is what happens when you compare the worst of a great genre with the best of a newer genre. But there: no more about quality.

First, a bit of historical background. One of the most difficult things to establish about Homer is the relationship between the epics as they were composed, on the one hand, and on the other, the written texts that have survived. There is abundant evidence that Homer's work was performance poetry: the epics were sung or chanted to the accompaniment of a *kithara*, or hand-held concert harp with soundbox, and were not intended for silent or private reading. But there is a distinction between performance as improvisation and performance as recitation. We are looking at a spectrum of at least three performance models: 'improvised' performance where story outlines and tropes are traditional, but the details and verbal expression are improvised; 'recaptured' performance where the performance, primarily in the context of competitions at major civic festivals, attempts to recapture earlier performances with stricter constraints on reproduction; and 'recited' performance that replicates an authoritative recorded version — for example, based on a text or performance script — with an insistence on verbatim repetition.

Until the early twentieth century it was widely assumed that Homer was a creature of the third type of performance.<sup>2</sup> Parry and Lord tried very hard to move Homer into the first type, through their comparative fieldwork and their analysis of the Homeric formulaic system as suited to improvisation.<sup>3</sup> Current opinion has now shifted firmly to an intermediate category of 'recaptured' performance,

<sup>2</sup> Although a not-very-useful distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' epics was also adopted to explain the differences between Homer and canonical works that are more closely tied to written texts.

<sup>3</sup> The foundational works are Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), a collection of Parry's papers from the 1920s and 1930s; and Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). For an updated model of improvisation see Joachim Latacz, 'Neuere Erkenntnisse zur epischen Versifikationstechnik,' *Erschließung der Antike*, ed. Joachim Latacz (Stuttgart, Leipzig: Teubner, 1994), 235-55. Some writers continue to insist on the first performance model, e.g. Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29-63; but that view is not now widely held.

albeit not necessarily in the form I have expressed it here. This is simply because it is a technological impossibility that our texts of Homer are a record of the 'improvised' type of performance. Nonetheless, the traditional tropes we see in Greek epic — metrical (rhythmic) formulae, type-scenes, and so on — give every appearance of having developed in an improvisatory context.<sup>4</sup>

For the earliest phases of the Greek epic tradition, appropriate modern Western comparisons include improvised and semi-improvised performance genres like: rap and hip-hop music, especially freestyling; classical jazz; and sermons given by American folk preachers. The similarities do not lie in the content (though even in content, there is more common ground between the *Iliad* and gangster rap than meets the eye). They lie in the roles played by *improvisation* and by a communal, inherited *tradition of tropes* that govern performance. In each genre performers use several tools in conjunction, including:

1. a pre-imagined framework or intent for the performance, which may take the form of: (a), a chosen topic (hip-hop, folk preachers); or (b), a pre-composed story or song (epic, jazz);
2. an inherited tradition of linguistic devices, formulaic phrases, rhythmic motifs, rhymes, set-piece sequences, and repetitions;
3. technical skill in improvisation, which includes the skill of producing off-the-cuff variations on elements 1 and 2, and the skill of reacting, live, to the setting in which the performance takes place; and
4. the intent to affirm one's social group and/or the values of that social group.

Points 1-3, which are about performance techniques, represent the cognitive toolkit of the performer. But point 4 is important too. Performance genres are closely tied to the community in which they are performed: performers have to seek the approval of their audience. In Homer, this community means a civic cultural heritage; in rap, it means urban communities, mostly young in America, mostly African-American, and often on the margins of civic culture. The communities are different, but the social role of performance is in some

<sup>4</sup> In this respect things have moved on from the binary alternatives of *either totally improvised or totally fixed*, envisaged, for example, by Ken Dowden, 'Homer's Sense of Text,' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996): 47-61. For readings of Homer through the lenses of these oral-traditional tropes, see Elizabeth Minchin, *Homer and the Resources of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ruth Scodel, *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

ways comparable: both affirm the social group's cohesiveness and values.

The way that the performer affirms this social role, however, takes very different forms. In the case of Homer, the community being affirmed is central and mainstream — at least in the 'recaptured' performance model — which is structured around civic and religious festivals. We know that in ancient Greece several poetic genres were performed competitively at major festivals. There were competitions in both athletics and choral poetry at the pan-Hellenic festivals of Olympia and Delphi, for example: the Olympic games were about song as well as sport. In Athenian festivals, poets competed at the Great Dionysia in dithyrambic and dramatic poetry, and at the Great Panathenaia in epic — specifically, in the performance of Homer. It seems to be a result of the role of Homer and tragedy in these Athenian festivals that they came to their pan-Hellenic prominence in the late sixth and early fifth centuries.<sup>5</sup> It was at the same time that it became possible for there to be such a thing as a pan-Hellenic cultural identity. In extant texts, the poet's affirmation of a communal cultural heritage takes the shape of appeals to the Muses. For example: in the *Iliad*, 'Sing, goddess, of Achilles' anger'; the *Odyssey*, 'Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways'; and, the *Catalogue of Women*, 'Now sing of the tribe of women, sweet-voiced Olympian Muses'.<sup>6</sup> In these examples, and elsewhere, the Muse represents the poet's adherence to a civically acknowledged performance tradition, and the poet is expected to perform *kata kosmon* 'in a properly-ordered way'.<sup>7</sup>

In hip-hop, however, the affirmed community is perceived as being on the margins

<sup>5</sup> It is firmly established that the Homeric epics as we have them were not widely disseminated until the late sixth century BCE, though the epics themselves had been in existence for well over a century by that time; see especially Martin L. West, *Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad* (Munich, Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2001), 15-19. Not all of West's claims are widely agreed upon, but on the specific point of dissemination, evidence in pictorial arts and non-Homeric poetry points the same way: see respectively Anthony Snodgrass, *Homer and the Artists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67-100; and Jonathan S. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer & the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 114-29. Linguistic and other evidence shows that the epics had been *in existence* since the early seventh century; *legends told* in the epics were always well known; but the epics themselves were not widely known until about 530-520 BCE.

<sup>6</sup> The quotations are respectively *Iliad* 1.1, *Odyssey* 1.1, and *Catalogue of Women* fr. 1.1.

<sup>7</sup> On telling a story *kata kosmon* see further George B. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 3-21, especially 8-9.

of civic culture. This is evident even in mainstream and commercial recordings and performances. One of the most common ways for a performer to place him or herself at the centre of that subculture is to make a claim of dissidence from mainstream culture.

To illustrate this point, I turn to yet another genre, which makes parallel claims of dissidence, but which has a somewhat higher cultural status in some academic circles: 'slam poetry'. Slam poetry also uses dissidence to construct a subculture for which it is iconic; and in fact, similar claims tend to appear in the large (but often over-theorised) corpus of academic writing on the topic.<sup>8</sup> Slam poetry has developed in American urban coffee shops and university campuses into a kind of 'bohemian' middle-class counterpart to rap.

One aspect of this 'dissidence' lies in the fact that accounts of slam poetry often have a strong anti-intellectual leaning, in spite of the fact that they are without exception written by academics. Maria Damon sets up literary criticism from decades ago as a strawman for polemics against 'academicians' (we are not supposed to recall that she is one herself), and subscribes fully to the notion that transcription and publication — the 'recited' performance model — is the end of art.<sup>9</sup> John Miles Foley insists, of Homeric verse, that '[t]he best companion for reading oral poetry is an unpublished dictionary,' and goes on to illustrate this point with examples that are, in fact, dealt with by published dictionaries in exactly the way that he requires.<sup>10</sup> Somers-Willett, like Damon, attacks academic

<sup>8</sup> Sample discussions: Maria Damon, 'Was that "different," "dissident" or "dissonant"? Poetry (n) the public spear: slams, open readings, and dissident traditions,' in Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 324-42; John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Martina Pfeiler, *Sounds of Poetry: Contemporary American Performance Poets* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2003); Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). Of these, Pfeiler's is by far the most balanced account.

<sup>9</sup> Damon, 'Was that "different,"' 326, 336-38.

<sup>10</sup> Foley, *How to Read*, 162. Foley requires that every item of vocabulary in an oral poem can only be understood in terms of every utterance of the word in the oral genre. This kind of context is exactly what we are given in a dictionary such as R. J. Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (London: Blackie, 1924): every word has a full concordance (with a citation of every utterance) and is framed in every one of its diverse contexts. But every dictionary does the same thing to a lesser extent.

literary criticism and characterises slam poetry as ‘poetry that performs an attitude of resistance to a dominant literary elite’; elsewhere she refers to a ‘War of the Roses between academic and popular verse’ (where the latter is supposed to refer to slam poetry).<sup>11</sup>

Some accounts of slam poetry are written by academics who are also practitioners, and these are especially explicit in their claims of membership in a ‘dissident’ subculture. Somers-Willett insists that not just slam poets, but all poets of ‘popular verse in performance...are bohemian, vagabond, militant, or otherwise countercultural’ (in other words: there is only one kind of performance poetry, and it is slam).<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere she refers to ‘the “formulaic rage” of loud, self-righteous declarations’ as a typical trope of slam poetry, and sharply criticises another slam poet for getting tired of the trope; and she repeatedly characterises slam poetry as an attack on petit-bourgeois culture (albeit without using that term). At one point Damon inadvertently and neatly illustrates the contradictory tensions involved in affirming and circumscribing a social group as ‘dissident’. In the space of just two sentences she first celebrates competitive performance events as ‘opportunities for community formation, education, entertainment’; then she continues by saying, ‘[d]issidence, dissonance, and difference are not punished but rather studied, celebrated’.<sup>13</sup> So which is it? Is slam poetry about community formation, or is it about dissidence? The answer is, of course, both: affirmation is also exclusion. But making sense of Damon’s claims requires a broader perspective. The confusion arises because she is making claims about herself as well as about her subject matter, namely that she herself is on the ‘correct’ side of the boundary.

The same tactic was intrinsic to rap from its beginnings. One of the most commonly repeated sentiments in hip-hop is an assertive statement of self-affirmation by casting oneself as an outlaw. Damon refers to a famous line from Snap!: ‘I’m the lyrical Jesse James’. That is a well-known example, though relatively understated as the trope goes. There are more elaborate examples, such as the well-known lines performed by Inspectah Deck as follows:

I bomb atomically  
Socrates’ philosophies and hypotheses

<sup>11</sup> Somers-Willett, *Cultural Politics*, 40 and 21-22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31. Damon, ‘Was that “different,”’ 334.

can't define how I be droppin' these  
 mockeries  
 lyrically perform armed robbery flee with the lottery  
 possibly they spotted me.<sup>14</sup>

As well as being an example of the *self-praise-as-outlaw* trope, this extract is also of interest for being one of the more striking paradigms that the linguist Jonah Katz cites in a study of the relationship between rhyme and syntax in hip-hop — one of the very, very few metrical analyses of hip-hop that have so far been done.<sup>15</sup>

Katz first analyses the phonetic elements of hip-hop rhymes, and manages to confirm a few basic points: first, that hip-hop strongly favours matching rhymes in the nucleus of a syllable (where a rhyming syllable consists of a consonantal *onset*, a vocalic *nucleus*, and a consonantal or vocalic *coda*); matches are also favoured in the coda, though less strongly; but matching in the onset is very strongly avoided, much more than chance would dictate. He also brings out some interesting points about unstressed syllables adjacent to stressed rhyming syllables.<sup>16</sup>

After these useful results he goes on to analyse various extracts — including the extract above — using a model of *prolongation*, developed in music theory. This part of his argument is not so convincing. He argues that rhyme can act as a prolongational relation whereby a phonic relation within a syntactical unit is prolonged into the subsequent syntactical unit, thereby reinforcing the phonic

<sup>14</sup> Wu-Tang Clan, 'Triumph' (audio recording), *Wu-Tang Forever* (Loud Records/RCA/BMG, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Jonah Katz, 'Towards a Generative Theory of Hip-hop,' MIT (2008): <http://web.mit.edu/jik-atz/www/KatzGTHH.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-7. A caveat: Katz's treatment of *multis* (polysyllabic rhymes) is muddled, as he does not distinguish between different degrees of stress on a syllable. A multi is a rhyme consisting of multiple 'domains,' e.g. 'Behavin' type choosy'—'beige and light blue please' (Katz, 5); but Katz defines 'domain' too simply, as a stressed syllable followed by an unlimited number of unstressed syllables. In this example, in the first rhyme I see one primary stress, one secondary, and one tertiary; the second contains two primary stresses, and two secondary (or one secondary and one tertiary). Katz counts this multi as '3 (or 4?)'-fold. How can it be decided which stresses count? The only sensible course is to treat these rhymes on a syllable-by-syllable, stress-by-stress basis, and avoid vague terminology like 'domain.'

relation. The poetic phenomenon of enjambment (a lack of a syntactical break between separate rhythmic units) is therefore important for him and he has to posit various laws of interaction and promotion in the hierarchy of phonic relations. So, for example, in a quatrain with the rhyme-scheme ABAB — in Katz's notation,  $A_1B_1A_2B_2$ , where  $A_1A_2$  and  $B_1B_2$  are rhymes — the quatrain holds together because  $B_1$  has the same relation to  $A_1$  as  $B_2$  has to  $A_2$ . Katz asserts and generalises this principle, and calls it *R-incorporation*.

This model, though intensely abstract, is not as crazy as it may sound to the non-linguist; but it is still not a strong one. This is partly because it is entirely top-down. Katz treats the poetic character of the quatrain as a consequence of a superimposed hierarchical structure, and not at all the other way around. More importantly, Katz's model focuses on two structural features of hip-hop verse, to the exclusion of other elements that are at least equally important: rhyme; syllable stress ('accent'); colometry; musical beat; and, quantity. Some of these terms are obvious, but two are likely to be less familiar. Colometry refers to the analysis of text into *cola* (singular *colon*), phrases that are partly syntactical, partly rhythmic entities; some writers prefer the term 'prosodic phrase'. Quantity refers to *note-length*, that is, the temporal length of syllables. Of these, Katz's model incorporates only rhyme and accent; it deals with colometry very imperfectly; and musical beat and quantity are neglected. That is not to say the model is without promise, but it has a long way to go.

Kyle Adams offers another sophisticated metrical analysis of 'flow' in hip-hop. His 2008 and 2009 studies of hip-hop in *Music Theory Online* are important and impressively detailed, though still not perfect: Adams focuses on rhyme, musical beat, and quantity, neglecting accent and colometry.<sup>17</sup>

It is evidently not well-known to linguists and music theorists that the study of the elements listed above is a highly developed, and old, field. Metrics is an unusual discipline, in that most of the work that has been done on it was done in antiquity and the Middle Ages, by scholars such as Aristophanes of Byzantium, Herodian, and Demetrios Triklinios (also known as Triclinius). Modern

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17-19. Kyle Adams, 'Aspects of the Music-text Relationship in Rap,' *Music Theory Online* 14.2 (2008) <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.adams.html>; idem, 'On the Metrical Techniques of Flow in Rap Music,' *Music Theory Online* 15.5 (2009) <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.09.15.5/mto.09.15.5.adams.html>



scholarship has certainly refined their work, but it is a very specialised field: this is because the older sources are available only in classical Greek, and most of the best modern scholarship is in Italian. A good English textbook is West's *Greek Metre*, though note that it focuses more on literary verse, and on the historical development of poetic forms, than on oral-formulaic verse or analysis.<sup>18</sup> Metrical analysis of ancient Greek verse focuses primarily on colometry and quantity. Accent is relatively unimportant, though it is occasionally considered (ancient Greco-Roman verse-forms are quantitative, not stress-based); rhyme is extremely rare in ancient verse forms; and musical beat is left out of consideration because it is not recoverable from the textual evidence. Most metrical analysis focuses on literary verse, rather than the oral-improvisational style of Homer; but it is in Homer that colometry finds its true explanatory power.

Colometry is fundamental to the Homeric formulaic system. Colometry is, ultimately, what enabled the earliest epic poets to improvise. It is not the formulae themselves that are central to the improvisational style; few oral poetic traditions have a well-developed formulaic system. Rather, the key feature of improvisation is an *accumulative style*, whereby individual cola pile up one after the other: they accumulate successively, rather than being syntactically embedded in one another. Parataxis is the norm; subordination of syntactical elements is rare.

Homeric verse has a strict quantitative rhythm of twelve 'beats' or *hemipedes* (singular *hemipes*):<sup>19</sup>

—    ∪    —    ∪    —    ∪    —    ∪    —    ∪    —    ∪

These symbols represent long and short notes, so in musical terms this notation roughly equates to:

♪   ♪♪   ♪   ♪♪   ♪   ♪♪   ♪   ♪♪   ♪   ♪♪   ♪   ♪

except that in most cases ♪♪ can be replaced by ♪.<sup>20</sup> Each line has a tendency to divide into two or more cola, with the most common divisions being 5 + 7 hemipedes and 5½ + 6½; there are other lesser divisions after hemipedes 2,

<sup>18</sup> Martin L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> The rhythm of the whole line is known as *dactylic hexameter*, but that term refers solely to quantitative rhythm and has only an indirect impact on colometry (*hexameter* implies the subdivision into six rhythmic *feet*, not into cola).

<sup>20</sup> It is not quite as simple as that, unfortunately: the temporal ratio between — and ∪ is closer to 5:3 than to 2:1. See West, *Greek Metre*, for more details.

3, 7, and 8, and these can be combined with each other and with the major divisions in regularised ways, to produce a line of three or more cola: so, for example, some common divisions are  $2 + 6 + 4$ ,  $3 + 2\frac{1}{2} + 6\frac{1}{2}$ , and  $5 + 2 + 5$ .

The Homeric formulaic system works by having many pre-fashioned phrases (formulae) that the poet can slot into each of these cola, in such a way that the rhythm of the line as a whole emerges perfectly. Some formulae are used relatively strictly, some less so. Below is a sample of relatively strict formulae, corresponding to the  $5 + 2 + 5$  division. Feel free yourself to try mixing-and-matching. Pick one formula from column 1; pick another from column 3, and slot it into the middle formula in place of the 'X'; and hey presto! not just a perfectly-formed line that fits the standard Homeric rhythm (once you render it in Greek), but one that actually makes sense.

Five hemipedes: in answer	Two hemipedes: X spoke to him	Five hemipedes: cunning Odysseus
glaring with a frown		Achilleus, quick on his feet
greatly angered		strong Diomedes.

Oral improvised verse typically follows a pattern of accumulation, whereby successive cola add new information, and/or supplement and qualify information in previous cola. This goes hand-in-hand with the paratactic character of Homeric verse. Consider the following extract: divisions between cola are indicated by line-end and the symbol  $\therefore$ :

by far first rose up  $\therefore$  the lord of men Eumelos  
 Admetos' own son  $\therefore$  he was excellent at horsemanship  
 and after him  $\therefore$  Tydeus' son rose up  $\therefore$  strong Diomedes  
 and he harnessed Trojan horses  $\therefore$  he once seized them from  
 Aineias  $\therefore$  though the man himself was rescued by Apollo.<sup>21</sup>

Notice how the sense is clear, even though my translation has abandoned punctuation, and even though normal English word-order is used only within each colon. Doing the same kind of thing with a more text-based verse style, such as Pindar's or Sophokles' sung lyrics, would yield gibberish. (Also notice that one of the formulae quoted earlier reappears here in a new context.)

Compare a colometry — albeit a simplified one — of the *Inspectah Deck* extract:

<sup>21</sup> *Iliad* 23.288-92.

I bomb atomic'lly : Socrates' philosophies  
 and hypotheses : can't define how I be droppin' these  
 mockeries : lyric'lly perform armed robbery  
 flee with the lottery : possibly they spotted me.<sup>22</sup>

This representation is simplified in that it does not indicate beat or quantity, and leaves rhyme and stress unmarked. Again I have abandoned punctuation; I have also abandoned the typographic arrangement used by the publisher. Each line of text corresponds to four musical beats, with the exact location of a line-break depending on colon-break. Line-end and the symbol still indicate divisions between cola. Colon-length is not as regularised as in Homer: here, the organising principle is not metrical formulae, but rhymes.

This colometry illustrates the accumulative style clearly. Accumulation completely takes the place of enjambment. Enjambment is strongly associated with written styles; it is disputed whether it exists at all in oral improvised styles. As the extracts illustrate, in each new colon there is either: a complete break (new sentence); or *expansion/clarification* (Homer: 'Admetos' own son,' 'who was excellent,' 'after him,' 'strong Diomedes,' 'but Apollo rescued'; Inspectah Deck: 'and hypotheses,' 'lyrically perform,' 'flee with the lottery,' 'possibly they spotted'); or *supplementation* within a syntactical clause, either supplementing a verb in the prior colon with a subject or an object, or else supplementing a subject or object in the prior colon with a verb phrase (Homer: 'the lord of men Eumelos,' 'Aineias'; Inspectah Deck: 'can't define,' 'mockeries').

Parataxis is common (with conjunctions in Greek, without in English); subordination of clauses is uncommon (there is only one subordinate clause, Deck's 'how I be droppin' these : mockeries').

Also notice that in the hip-hop extract, every colon-end features a full three-syllable rhyme, repeating the nuclei /ɑ/ – /ə/ – /i/ (atomic'lly, philosophies, hypotheses, etc.). The rhyme occurs elsewhere too (Socrates', possibly), and there are also partial rhymes, normally adjacent to a full rhyme (bomb, perform, flee); but the colon-end rhyme is clearly more important. Comparison with other raps suggests that this is an extremely widely-applied principle, though not an absolute rule.

for the whole twenty-five minutes : I could flip it

<sup>22</sup> Wu-Tang Clan, 'Triumph' (audio recording), *Wu-Tang Forever* (Loud Records/RCA/BMG, 1997).

it don't make no diff : 'cause I sit back and sip it  
 just like water : I am the author : yo I start to slaughter.<sup>23</sup>

Here the only irregularity is that the colon-end 'no diff' in line 2 features a partial rhyme, not the full two-syllable rhyme.

Why are accumulation and colometry so central to the improvisatory style? It is not hard to see why accumulation is important. A periodic style, with subordinate clauses, parentheses, etcetera, simply takes longer to organise and prepare, and that is unrealistic in a live performance context. Colometry reflects the fact that the units of accumulation are organised into manageable discrete components. The principles underlying what makes a well-formed colon are open to further investigation. It has been suggested that colon-length is associated with the capacity of human working memory, though the nature of the constraints is not clear.<sup>24</sup>

Metrical analysis of hip-hop will be hindered until it adopts an analysis that takes colometry as a starting point. The major obstacle to doing this, from the perspective of someone like Katz who is interested in coming up with a generative theory, is that the logical position of colometry in the analytic process is not clear-cut. How do we get to our colometric divisions? Which is logically prior, where do we start our analysis: by chopping the text into syntactic units, or into rhythmic units? Katz opts for starting with syntax; Adams, with rhythm. The problem with the question is the same one that confronts all top-down theories: it just does not work like that. Any assumption of logical priority will inevitably fall apart once the analysis is exhaustive enough. Purely top-down theories are not adequate to describe natural language; they are not adequate to describe hip-hop or the Homeric formulaic system either. Patterns are emergent and negotiable. As an illustration, Pihel has shown how structures (syntax, rhymes) and intentions can change drastically from one colon to the next, especially when the performance is genuinely improvised.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Supernatural or 'Supernat,' freestyling on live radio in 1993; quoted by Pihel, *Furified Freestyle*, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Koenraad Kuiper, 'On the Linguistic Properties of Formulaic Speech,' *Oral Tradition* 15.2 (2000): 279-305. Kuiper's claims about oral-formulaic composition in ancient Greece cannot, of course, be subjected to empirical testing. Most critics focus on larger-scale narrative structures, since they are more easily appreciated by Homer's modern audience (see Minchin, *op. cit.*).

<sup>25</sup> Pihel, *Furified Freestyle*, 259-62.

Here is not the place to outline a very far-reaching colometric theory of hip-hop. Still, there is something to see in this comparison. There are parallels and differences between Homer and hip-hop, on both the social and technical sides of performance. Hip-hop is, on the face of it, more complex, since it features more distinct musical qualities — rhyme, beat —; but that is really because we have so much more information about its performance context and social role, and we have better technology for recording and disseminating it.

It is hard to see that hip-hop could ever occupy exactly the same cultural position that Homer does in Greece, since it is so tied up with circumscribing a distinct subculture, rather than a culture common to the entire population. If it does, then for one thing we can expect it to lose the *self-praise-as-outlaw* trope. That trope is not just a matter of rappers' tastes and self-image, it is actually *required* by the social function of the genre. Hip-hop as the cultural property of an entire nation would necessarily lose its 'dissidence': out would go the imagery of criminality, theft, violence, handguns, etcetera. Even now it is not clear that these tropes are still necessary to the genre. Would the technical skills involved in performance have to change too? That is harder to see. Homeric style has long been accepted as central to one nation's heritage; the style of hip-hop might become more formalised, if it happened to follow the same course, but there seems little reason to suppose it would change beyond recognition.

peter gainsford  
wellington, new zealand