

Identifying the Importance of Sound:
the Grain of the Voice in Slam Poetry

Ilse van der Voorn

5931266

BA Thesis

5454 words

British English

Utrecht University

1 July 2019

BA Liberal Arts and Sciences - Modern Languages: Education and Multilingualism (English)

Supervisor: Dr. A.L. Poletti

Second reader: Dr. S.J. Cook

Abstract

This thesis analyses the importance of sound to slam poetry by paying attention to the element of sound in voice through Roland Barthes' "Grain of the Voice". It discusses the text and sound of two poems by two slam poets, "My Father's Coat" by Marc Kelly Smith and "Somebody Blew Up America" by Amiri Baraka. Both analyses are split up in a close reading and a close listening which expands upon the interpretation of the close reading. Both analyses agree on close listening adding to close reading and "the Grain of the Voice" showing the importance of sound in slam poetry, though both poems show different ways in which this turns out to be important. "My Father's Coat" demonstrates that "the Grain of the Voice" helps in understanding the limitations and connections between the poet, the speaker, the subject and the addressee in a poem and that this changes between the close reading and close listening. "Somebody Blew Up America" shows that the poet can change and expand the meaning of a poem in the close listening by adding and repeating words and stanzas in a different "Grain of Voice" that utilizes the potential of sound and deepens and complicates the perspective of a poem.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
1.1 Methodology	5
1.2 Theoretical framework	5
2. Chapter 1: “My Father’s Coat	8
2.1 <i>Close reading</i>	9
2.2 <i>Close listening</i>	12
3. Chapter 2: “Somebody Blew Up America”	15
3.1 <i>Close reading</i>	16
3.2 <i>Close listening</i>	19
4. Conclusion and discussion	22
5. Works Cited	24

“Poets have always cared for the sound effects of their vocabulary, for its roughness and smoothness, its harmonies and tones, its rhymes, alliterations, and onomatopoeias, and therefore the sound quality of signifiers in poetry can be said to be at least partially motivated or thickened with intention”

– Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (49)

The rise of slam poetry and its new take on performance and verse has been a subject of critique from literary critics starting from its very beginning when Marc Kelly Smith climbed the stage in Chicago in 1986 to address the rules of this new artform (Poetry Slam, Inc. qtd. in Wheeler 144). Originated from the Dadaist movement, slam poetry evolved into a new interactive and theatrical competition for poets (Somers-Willett 3). It rapidly spread in popularity around the globe while at the same time receiving a lot of criticism. Scholars find it “hard to imagine an appreciation of serious poetry being deepened among readers who witness these faintly embarrassing speech acts” (Shulevitz 34), regard it as “methods of delivery and gimmickry that owe more to show-biz than to literature” (Wojahn 268), or warn that it weakens the comprehension of a poem because “the educated inward ear can do more with the rhythms, vowels, syncopations and stresses of any poem than the amateur human voice can hope to do” (Glassco qtd. in Middleton 27). Despite - or maybe because of - these aversions, slam poetry has grown over the years, and many countries have national competitions where poets gather to perform their work (Glazner 1). The “oral culture” of slam poetry is an important aspect of it, especially because the audience eventually decides the winners of these competitions, as they act as the jury in slam poetry events (Somers-Willett 16). Some scholars picked up on this sound element in slam poetry and have tried to analyse this, though most attention went into the performance (Middleton), identity (Somers-Willett) or voice as a metaphor in the textual form of the poem (Wheeler). Nevertheless, sound is an important aspect, maybe even the most important aspect of the performance as regarded by poets themselves. Louis Zukofsky claims that “the sound of the words is sometimes 95% of

poetic presentation” (qtd. in Middleton 48). Marc Kelly Smith argues that voice and performance are most important to “fire to life the passion, sense and subtleties of the poetic words” (Smith and Kraynak 1). Voice and sound are crucial factors in the perception of slam poetry and looking into this can help to obtain a deeper understanding of the poetry of slam poets. In this thesis it is therefore argued that by paying attention to the element of sound in voice through Roland Barthes’ “Grain of the Voice”, the importance of sound to slam poetry becomes clear.

To examine this, two slam poets are analysed through an analysis of textual and sound elements; each chapter is divided into a close reading and a “close listening” that expands upon the interpretation of the close reading (Bernstein 4). Chapter 1 is an interpretation of “My Father’s Coat” by Marc Kelly Smith. Chapter 2 focuses on “Somebody Blew Up America” by Amiri Baraka.

In order to gain a deeper insight into the notions of voice, “the Grain of the Voice”, sound and “close listening” it is first important to define these concepts. Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* examines meaning and audience. She argues that taking the audience of a literary work into account results in the recognition of a connection between the work and our daily lives; whereas critics only prize literature “for its qualities of otherness” (4). She argues that the existing notion of literature as a purely connotative mimesis does not fully encompass the knowledge that literature can bring to the reader. She regards the knowledge in literature to be about our social life which can “expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are” (83). Because of this it can help shape and transfigure readers (87). Lesley Wheeler observes the phenomenon of audience in relationship to the voice of the author in *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. She examines voice in three ways: in relationship to sound (3) as a metaphor for “originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence (3) and as “the right or ability to speak or write” (3), though Wheeler

denies the notion of the physical voice as important to the literary discussion because it has never been allowed a place in the discussion in the first place: “When literary critics, creative writers, and composition theorists deploy voice as a term of analysis, after all, they generally mean it as a metaphor for some quality within a printed text” (23). Therefore, Wheeler’s notion of voice is used as a means of analysis in the close readings. Voice as a sound element is part of Felski’s argument about knowledge, where she argues that the knowledge we gain from literature is not just circumstantial, but also factual knowledge on society. The notion of voice is observed through the concept of “cultural grammar”, where varieties of English formed through the relationship with another language and culture “fall outside the repertoire of standard English and that convey something of the pervasive if largely unconscious patterns of experience” (98). A focus on this part of the voice will “cause new meanings to unfold” (98). Peter Middleton observes sound in his book *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, however he does so from a literary, philosophical and linguistic perspective, and disregards the discipline most closely related to sound: music (54). Roland Barthes focuses on voice from a musical point of view. Barthes argues that a voice loses its individual identity in music when language is used to try and analyse it (179). According to Barthes the solution to this is not to avoid language, but to change and displace the discussion of language and music toward “the Grain of the Voice”: “the very precise space (genre) of the encounter between a language and a voice” (181). According to Barthes this Grain can be found in the by Julia Kristeva called “genotext”: “the bio-physiological entity” (Dunsby 114). Barthes renames this the “geno-song”: “the volume of the singing and speaking voice”, to unravel the meaning of sound (182). Therefore, in the “close listening” of this thesis there is a focus on the three main strategies Barthes argues to use in analysing this Grain: the volume of the voice (182), the melody of the voice working on the language (182) and “the diction”, the style of enunciation in voice (183). This concept

of “close listening” was first mentioned by Charles Bernstein in his book *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, where he examines essays of scholars that focus on performed poetry. He created this term to “contradict “readings” of poems that are based exclusively on the printed text and that ignore the poet’s own performances, the “total” sound of the work” (4).

Slam poetry is where the voice in its literal sense occurs most. It is here that sound and performance fuse with the strength and appreciation for the poem. Peter Middleton starts his essay “Poetry’s oral stage” by arguing that the meaning of a poem is extended through performance, however he concludes that it does not add deeper meaning, because of “how active a place that silence [reading] has in a wider dialogue of language and action” (59). He also only focuses on the presence of the author in space and the sound of the poem, not necessarily the voice itself. By extending this research with Wheeler’s notion of voice in text, Bernstein’s practice of “close reading” and Barthes’ “Grain of the Voice”, this thesis will show the importance of sound to slam poetry.

Chapter 1 “My Father’s Coat”

Most of us have suffered through poetry readings during which the poets were about as animated as roadkill. No facial expression. No gesture. No intonation. No sign of life whatsoever. Even the poet’s skin seemed ashy, as if he had just stepped off the set of *Night of the Living Dead*. A zombie who threatened to kill us all – not by eating our flesh but by droning on and on in a deadening monotone until he had sucked bone dry all our will to listen and to experience the poetry he was lowering into premature grave.

- Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak, *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word* (introduction)

In 1986 poet Marc Kelly Smith invented the poetry slam in a jazz club in Chicago (Wheeler 144). After years of experimenting with poetry in different art-forms and through different formats this new formula to performing poetry took its place amongst poetry readings. The “Uptown Poetry Slam” was based on competition and an audience that served as a jury, and it was the beginning of the international format of slam poetry. Smith therefore has been called the poet that “played a major role in its inception” (142). He performed in slam poetry events for years, published a book on the how-to of the competition (*Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word*) and became an important name within the world of spoken word. Despite his fame not many scholars have written about, or analysed Smith’s own work. His name is one that pops up often when referring to slam poetry (Wheeler 143; Somers-Willett 3; Gregory 1) however, his oeuvre has not been examined through literary analysis.

On June 19, 2011, at 63 years old, Smith performed one of his better-known poems called “My Father’s Coat” at The Green Mill in Chicago¹. Through the connection between the close reading and close listening it will become clear that “the Grain of the Voice” helps in understanding the limitations and connections between the poet, the speaker, the subject

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqtNDkuPcw>

and the addressee in a poem and how this changes between the close reading and close listening. It shows that the close listening helps to expand upon the analysis of the close reading, and that close reading and close listening are needed together to get a full account of the poet, speaker, subject and addressee in slam poetry.

Close reading

“My Father’s Coat” is a poem on the process of acceptance of the speaker for wearing the coat that once belonged to his father. Smith symbolizes the relationship between the speaker and the father through the coat and reflects on the connection between identity and clothing, which becomes clear in stanzas 7 and 8 where the explanation of the father’s identity who was a “narrow man” (16) who “should have done” (17) and “should have tried to understand” more (18) concludes with that “the coat fit him well” (19). It establishes a connection between this identity and the coat. In stanza 8 the relationship between the coat and identity is further explained:

“Most of us show off to one another

Fashions of who we are

Sometimes buttoned to the neck

Sometimes overpriced” (23-26)

By using ambiguous words that can relate to both identity and the coat the two become connected in the stanza. This happens for example in “show off” (23) which refers to the act of flaunting clothing or to display abilities, or in “fashions” (24), which references a style of clothing or a manner to do something. As the coat is the possession of the father (“My Father’s Coat”) and the speaker explains that “It fits me now” (20), a connection between the subject of the poem (the father) and the speaker of the poem becomes clear. The speaker goes

through the journey of taking over this identity which is linked to the coat, and which connects to Wheelers notion of voice as a right to speak (3), as the speaker takes over his father's identity and voice now that his father has passed away.

The speaker assuming this voice and accepting the coat as his own is an important part of the poem. The change in the tone of voice of the speaker in this process of acceptance shows mostly through the change in verb tenses. In the first two stanzas the contrasting "but" shows his aversion of wearing a coat that is coming from a man that he dislikes:

"I'm wearing my father's coat

He has died. I didn't like him,

But I wear the coat.

I'm wearing the coat of my father,

Who is dead. I didn't like him,

But I wear the coat" (1-6)

The grammar used gives an important shift in his road to acceptance. In these stanzas the "wearing" is still an ongoing moment in time, something that is not fixed and can be stopped. In the last stanza the speaker is no longer wearing, but it has changed in: "I wear my father's coat" (29). "Wear" is a fixed action that is ongoing and timeless. Especially the last two sentences where the coat is something "we have taken to be our own" (33-34) the acceptance in the voice of the speaker becomes clear, as the use of the present perfect shows that the taking of the coat is not the issue anymore as this action has already been performed. The only thing left is to observe the consequences of this new identity on the speaker.

Before acceptance however, there is justification of this action to the addressees in the poem, in particular “a younger man” (7) who is introduced in the third stanza and who seems to be a younger version of himself the speaker talks to from that point on. The younger man “has asked” him where he obtained “a coat like that?” (9), which provides a juxtaposition between the very specific “a younger man” and the vague “has asked” that does not have a specific anchor in time but is used in the same sentence as the ongoing “stopping me on the street” (7). Because of this division in time throughout the sentence the younger man seems to be part of the past and future of the speaker, which establishes a connection between the younger man and the speaker’s life. The link between the speaker and the younger man becomes clear especially when the speaker refers to the coat being something that not just him, but “we have taken to be our own” (33-34), to include the younger man in his journey. With the younger man being a part of the speaker’s life, and the speaker himself establishing that he “didn’t like” his father (2; 5) it becomes clear that the younger man does not like the coat and shows an aversion for it when he asks where the speaker found a coat “like that” (9). Hence why the speaker feels the need to justify his wearing of the coat to the younger man, as he goes through the reasons as to why he was not proud of his father and what his father should have done with his life. It is after this that it becomes clear that the coat symbolizes all the flaws in his father’s identity as he explains that the coat “fit [his father] well” (19), after explaining all the things that were wrong with his father:

“There was more of everything he should have done

More of what he should have tried to understand” (17-18)

It also becomes clear that the speaker understands the inevitability of taking over these flaws as he refers to him now fitting into the coat (20). By universalizing the wearing of the coat to the “us” in stanza 8 and 9, the speaker tries to justify to the younger man that his

taking over of this identity is something that “most of us” do (23; 31): a universal given to defend his own actions.

Close listening

“This is probably the only poem that will ever be remembered after I’m dead” (0:12-0:17) Marc Kelly Smith tells the audience before starting his performance of “My Father’s Coat”. Instead of mentioning the title Smith talks about his own relationship to the poem. By referring to death, an important theme and word used in “My Father’s Coat”, in connection to his own mortality, he forges a bond between the poem and his life. This way his voice as an authorial presence becomes clear, which also links with Wheeler’s notion of voice to voice as a sound element. This shows the importance of sound to slam poetry as it makes the connection between the poet and the speaker more explicit.

Where a close reading of the first two stanzas establishes the hostility towards his father and the ongoing acceptance of the wearing of the coat, this aversion is magnified in the Grain of Smith’s voice with the volume and melody used in the words “died” and “coat”. Both words are spoken aloud in a much lower and deeper voice than the rest of the two stanzas, which makes it sound like a slant rhyme and shows the relationship between the two. This similar intonation forms an analogy to death and therefore it becomes clear how much the speaker dislikes wearing the coat. In the last stanza “coat” receives this same intonation (1:41), however in this stanza not “died” but “own” (1:52) is the other word which receives the lower and deeper intonation. By forging a relationship between the coat and the possessive Smith admits that the coat now belongs to him, that it has become his identity and voice. The Grain in Smith’s voice thus shows the connections with the speaker and magnifies the meaning of the established relationship between coat and speaker that already became clear in the close reading.

What becomes apparent as well is that there is a limited connection between the speaker and the younger man as the addressee, and that the attention of the speaker shifts to the audience as the addressee. Smith uses a different diction in the Grain of his voice to identify the voice of the younger man and that of the speaker. When he intonates the question of the younger man: “Where did you get a coat like that?” (0:41-0:43) he talks in a higher and much faster voice than his general voice that is used throughout the poem. The rising tone in the Grain of Smith’s voice demonstrates that the remark is a question instead of an aversion. The younger man therefore mostly seems surprised to find the speaker in the coat, instead of showing a dislike of the coat itself. “The Grain of the Voice” is therefore important to get a full account of the intentions of the younger man. It demonstrates that his younger self is mostly surprised that he would ever become like his father, instead of being repulsed by the coat. The fourth stanza is pronounced in a much lower and slower voice, which demonstrates the difference between the younger man and the speaker, but also between the general voice of the poem and the answer given to the younger man:

“I answer that it was my father’s

Who is now gone, passed away

The younger man shuts up” (0:47-0:56)

The intonation of this stanza resembles the melody and volume of Smith’s voice when he pronounces “coat”, “death” and “own”, and therefore, shapes a bond between Smith’s answer to the younger man, his identity and the coat. It demonstrates how much the speaker starts to identify with the coat and the sound expands on the idea that the poem is about accepting the inevitability of the speaker’s resemblance to his father. The younger man has a much smaller role in the performed poem as Smith’s intonation in the other stanzas demonstrates that it is not directed to him anymore. It is, however, more turned towards the

“us” in stanza 8, who turn out to be an important part of the poem. Smith connects to this new addressee as his voice returns to the general intonation used throughout the poem. From this point the Grain in his voice goes up in volume to channel the sound to the audience rather than performing in the microphone, forcing a connection between “us” in the poem and the audience. This way they become part of the poem, which is especially important when the speaker defends wearing the coat:

“most of us show off to one another

Fashions of who we are [...]

Sometimes surprising even ourselves

In garments we would have never dreamed of wearing” (1:21-1:39)

The speaker thus justifies his reasoning by generalizing the taking over of this identity as something everyone would have done; instead of it being a justification to his younger self. Again this shows how “the Grain of the Voice” is able to expand on the analysis of slam poetry.

Chapter 2 “Somebody Blew Up America”

The face sings, alone
 At the top
 Of the body. All
 Flesh, all song, aligned. For hell
 Is silent, at those cracked lips
 Flakes of skin and mind
 Twist and whistle softly
 As they fall.
 - Amiri Baraka, “a poem for Willie Best” (1-8)

Everett Leroy Jones or Amiri Baraka is one of the most important political activists of the black movement and poet of the Black Art Movement in the sixties and seventies in America (Brown 17; Gwiazda 30). He is a poet that has a significant influence on poetry in many different forms. His work has been analysed by many scholars (Harper; Woodard; Muñoz) and is used as a source for rap and hiphop (Brown and Otuteye). Moreover, his poetry is a valuable addition to the world of slam poetry where both Baraka himself as well as others performed many of his poems like “SOS”², Ka’Ba³ or “Somebody Blew Up America”⁴. In 1954 Baraka joined the US Air Force; however, after being dismissed because of his political activities Baraka focussed his attention full-time on his poetry (Baym and Levine 669). After the murder of Malcolm X in 1965 Baraka started living in Harlem and used his poetry to bring the black community together in action (669). Most poems by Baraka need to be experienced through the medium of performance, because “Baraka’s use of rhyme, as well as other sound effects like alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, suggests that the poem is meant to be a public rather than private utterance” (Gwiazda 85).

Baraka’s journey from Everett Leroy Jones to LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka (which means “Prince, a Blessed One) (Baym and Levine 669) show the kind of poet that he has been

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJIYNDRKNgY>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NG5B0fAQ2c>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEu-pG1HWw&list=RDkUEu-pG1HWw&start_radio=1

throughout his life; that is a political poet with a never-ending search for heritage rights and identity. This is an important feature in the 2001 poem “Somebody Blew Up America” that Baraka wrote just weeks after 9/11. The poem caused problems for Baraka in America where it was regarded as “hate speech” (Gwiazda 74) and even a form of “anti-Semitism” (73) because of its negative references to white people and Israel. For example, Baraka “alludes to a rumor insinuating that the Israel government had prior knowledge of the attacks” (76). Eventually this almost caused Baraka to resign as New Jersey’s poet laureate (which he refused). After the problems in his own country Baraka went to Europe to perform his poem and in 2009 he was allowed to perform his poem at The Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, New York⁵.

In this analysis it becomes clear that the poet can change and expand on the meaning of a poem in the close listening by adding and repeating words and stanzas in a different “Grain of Voice” that utilizes the potential of sound and deepens and complicates the perspective of a poem. The poem that is used is “Somebody Blew Up America”, which has been published in *Somebody Blew Up America & Other Poems* (2004). In this close reading and listening the 2009 version from Troy, New York is used.

Close reading

As this poem was written just weeks after 9/11, the title of the poem has a very distinct connection to the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers. “Somebody Blew Up America” victimizes America as a whole, where “America” is used as a synecdoche for the Twin Towers, which shows that 9/11 is used here as a way to speak to the whole nation. By focusing on America, the title makes it seem like everyone in the country was hit by this attack and it magnifies the extent of it. It represents the “jingoistic rhetoric” (Gwiazda 5) that

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEu-pG1HWw&list=RDKUEu-pG1HWw&start_radio=1

the Bush government tried to promote just after the attack, by trying to put the blame on this “somebody” in the title, a person or group of persons that fall outside of the nationalistic idea of “us”, in order to create the feeling of an evil outside force that has infiltrated the good inside:

“Somebody Blew Up America

They say it’s some terrorist,

Some barbaric

A Rab” (1-4)

Baraka pinpoints “A Rab” as the perpetrator, this apparent evil force that has blown up “America”. Because the “A Rab” is now the somebody that “blew up America” Baraka creates a binary opposition with the other persons and groups of persons in the stanza that did not attack America and who seem like the good opposition:

“It wasn’t our American terrorists

It wasn’t the Klan or the Skin heads

Or the them that blows up nigger” (5-7)

It is an ironic binary opposition between this perpetrator and the victims of 9/11 as Baraka focuses on the fact that these victims are also terrorists, though they are “our American terrorists” (5). Baraka unites this binary opposition by calling both parts “terrorists”, demonstrating that it is clear that no one is exclusively victim to a crime.

The dialogue surrounding the question of who blew up America is held between “they”, “us” and another speaker that appears part of “us”, but examines the group from an external point of view. This last voice starts in stanza 3 where he examines “they”, something

“us” fails to do. This sets him apart from “us”. These three voices receive the right to speak, whereas the voice of the “A Rab” is disregarded and denied the right to speak about this blame that is put onto him. The poem starts with “they” pointing out the “A Rab” as the culprit: “They say it’s some terrorist, some barbaric A Rab” (1-3), followed by the “us” assuring that this culprit is someone outside the group: “It wasn’t our American terrorists” (5). The last speaker starts questioning and criticizing the line of reasoning from stanza 3, where “they” becomes the subject questioned throughout the poem, as this stanza starts the rhetoric anaphora of “who” that is used in almost every stanza from this point on:

“They say (who say?)

Who do the saying” (18-19)

The “they”/“who” is repeated in the poem from stanza 3 onwards, highlighting the relationship between the two; with “they” pointing out the “A Rab” as this evil outside force and the speaker asking who “they” are for determining a perpetrator in the first place. By asking these questions the speaker observes many other cases that show that “they” are not merely a victim to a crime but have caused a lot of harm as well. For example in stanza 3: “who had the slaves” (23), where “they” are linked to the slave trade. In stanza 61 he makes it explicit that “they” are not just a victim to 9/11 when he asks the question “who is the ruler of Hell?” (212). With the “who” as a direct link to “they” this demonstrates a comparison between “they” and the ruler of hell, the Devil. There is another link made to this ruler with the simile in lines 217 and 218:

“But everybody seen the Devil

Like an Owl exploding” (217-18)

This simile connects “an Owl” to the sight of the Devil. Because of this simile and stanza 61 both “owl” and “they” are connected to the devil and thus connected to each other.

The owl was an important symbol to the enslaved people in America for whom the owl represented death and torture by white slave owners, the “they” that would unleash hell upon enslaved people (Berry and Blassingame 510). This demonstrates that Baraka wants to amplify that there is no voice that has the prerogative to speak and that there are many perspectives to a story.

Close listening

The reading of the poem starts with “they say it’s some terrorist” (1), however in listening to the poem in the 2009 version as well as the other online versions⁶ Baraka adds words to the poem when he starts the performance with four other lines:

“Somebody Blew Up America
 All thinking people oppose terrorism
 Both domestic and international
 But one should not be used to cover the other
 Somebody Blew Up America” (0:04-0:29)

Because of the repetition of the title at the end of this part the lines can be understood as a prologue to the poem. It is a magnification of what is said in the first stanza where the binary opposition is created, and it extends on the emphasis put on the difference between us and them. The “thinking people oppose terrorism” (0:11-0:14), whereas the ones who blew up America cannot think and are “barbaric” (0:32). This principally textual element of adding lines highlights Wheeler’s so called authorial presence in connection to sound (3), as Baraka uses this, and the Grain of his voice to deepen and complicate the perspective of the poem

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKhkVVkB12I&t=15s> ;
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOs_lYTgwHs&t=22s

when only reading it. This can be seen in the intonation of the second “Somebody Blew Up America” (0:26-0:29), which is cried out in a shrieking loud dark voice that is in shrill contrast to the first time which is intonated in the general voice Baraka uses throughout the poem. The contrast in sound creates another binary opposition that links to the opposition between the two different terrorists from the close reading, where in both cases the created opposition stays connected through the corresponding text. The voice of the second performance of “Somebody Blew Up America” depicts the outrage felt about 9/11 by the “they” whose America is blown up and can therefore be seen as a justification for putting the “thinking” (0:11) aside that once prevented terrorism. The added lines complicate the perspective of the poem on 9/11 as it justifies the response to the attack, but also warns that “one should not be used to cover the other” (0:20-0:23), by demonstrating times before where this did happen, for example with the link to slavery in line 23.

Another word Baraka adds to the poem is the “who” in between the stanzas that is written out only seven times but is spoken aloud four other times in the performance after stanza 48 (5:26), stanza 52 (6:14), stanza 58 (7:22) and stanza 59 (7:45). The extra cries increase in sound and amount in stanza 48, 52 and 58 and therefore intensify the question that is asked in the poem. With the reference to the owl in the poem the outcry of “who” sounds like an onomatopoeia for the hoot of an owl, and because of the negative connotation with the owl by the enslaved people the cries become a warning that is coming closer and closer with every bigger and louder outcry of “who”. The adding and repeating of words in the performance and the way Baraka uses volume and melody in his “Grain of Voice” thus magnifies the threat the owl seems in the close reading.

Another aspect of how the Grain deepens and complicates the perspective of the poem is the repeating of lines and stanzas by Baraka. This is what happens in stanza 61 with the line “who is the ruler of Hell?” (8:12-8:17). The first time Baraka performs this line there is no

change in intonation which eliminates the idea of question and instead puts this line as a statement. The second time performing the line the intonation goes up and thus also confirms it as being another question. In the close reading it was established that “they” is linked to “who” and thus to this ruler of hell, though by repeating the lines Baraka amplifies that there is more than one perspective, that it is not only a statement that “they” are the ruler as the Grain in his voice shows in the first performance of the lines, but that it is also a question who this ruler is. That it could be someone else than “they”. Baraka thus uses repeating and the Grain of his voice together to deepen and complicate the perspective of the poem.

Conclusion and discussion

In this thesis it has been argued that by paying attention to the element of sound in voice through Roland Barthes' "Grain of the Voice", the importance of sound to slam poetry becomes clear. By analysing the two slam poets, Marc Kelly Smith and Amiri Baraka it is demonstrated that close listening expands on what can be taken out of a close reading, and that sound is necessary to receive a full account of slam poetry. Both chapters agree that close listening adds to the close reading and "the Grain of the Voice"; thus highlighting the importance of sound in slam poetry. However, both chapters show different ways in which this turns out to be important. In "My Father's Coat" by Marc Kelly Smith it becomes clear that "the Grain of the Voice" helps to expand the perception of the limitations and connections between the poet, speaker, subject and addressee. The addressee in the close reading proved less important when considering the close listening, where another addressee became more apparent, and the connection between the poet and speaker turned out more explicit in the close listening. In "Somebody Blew Up America" by Amiri Baraka it becomes clear that the poet can change and expand on the meaning of a poem in close listening by adding and repeating words and stanzas in a different "Grain of Voice". This helps to deepen and complicate the perspective of the poem. By adding lines to the poem Baraka emphasizes the importance of the threat of the owl in the poem and the changing of the perspective on the victim and perpetrator.

In follow-up research on slam poetry it could add to turn the close reading and listening around to see how a reading can expand on the analysis of "the Grain of the Voice", as text on paper can sometimes show things that are not clear in listening to the poem. This happens for example in "Somebody Blew Up America" with the "A Rab", which receives a unexpected spelling that cannot be heard in the performance. Focusing on this can show another way in which the close reading and listening work together.

More emphasis on the notion of “cultural grammar” by Felski is needed to look at the relationship between sound and culture. This can be done by adding linguistic analysis of accents and dialects of poets. In the poem by Marc Kelly Smith there is a difference between his accent used in his general voice throughout the poem and the voice he uses when talking like the younger man. Analysing this might say more about meaning that can be taken out of cultural grammar.

Another aspect that needs research is the analysis of female poets. As videos of slam poets on YouTube are scarce and this thesis did not have access to the international slam poetry database there has not been a possibility to add female slam poets that could have been interesting to analyse.

Works Cited

AllThingsHarlem, prod. "Somebody Blew Up America – 9/11 Poem by Amiri Baraka."

YouTube. YouTube, 12 Sep. 2011. Web. 10 May 2019.

Baraka, Amiri. *Somebody Blew Up America*. Oakland: Oakland layout by Blackdotpress,

2001. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Print.

Baym, Nina, and Robert S. Levine, eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature:*

Volume E. Eighth ed., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. Print.

Bernstein, Charles, ed. *Close listening: Poetry and the performed word*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1998. *WorldCat*. Web. 22 June 2019.

Berry, Mary F., and John W. Blassingame. "Africa, Slavery, & the Roots of Contemporary

Black Culture." *The Massachusetts Review* 18.3 (1977): 501-16. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 June

2019.

Bridgit B., prod. "Amiri Baraka: Somebody Blew Up America." *YouTube*. YouTube, 19 Apr.

2013. Web. 10 May 2019.

Brown, Lloyd Wellesley. *Amiri Baraka*. Vol. 383. New York: Twayne Pub., 1980. *WorldCat*.

Web. 3 June 2019.

Connor, Steven. "CP: or, A Few Don'ts by a Cultural Phenomenologist." *Parallax* 5.2 (1999):

17-31. *Tandfonline*. Web. 6 May 2019.

Dunsby, Jonathan. "Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzera's Voice." *Journal of the Royal*

Musical Association 134.1 (2009): 113-32. *Tandfonline*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *The three voices of poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1954. Print.

Elysabeth Alfano, prod. "Marc Smith performs "My Father's Coat" on Fear No ART."

YouTube. YouTube, 18 July 2011. Web. 6 May 2019.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Print.

Get Lit – Words Ignite, prod. "Classic Slam 2012: "Ka'Ba" by Amiri Baraka." *YouTube*.

YouTube, 12 Dec. 2012. Web. 10 May 2019.

Get Lit – Words Ignite, prod. "Classic Slam 2012: "SOS" by Amiri Baraka." *YouTube*.

YouTube, 12 Dec. 2012. Web. 10 May 2019.

Glazner, Gary Mex. *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. San Francisco:

Manic D press, 2012. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Gregory, Helen. "(Re) presenting Ourselves: Art, Identity, and Status in UK Poetry Slam."

Oral Tradition 23.2 (2008): pp. *Muse*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Gwiazda, Piotr K. *US Poetry in the Age of Empire, 1979-2012*. New York: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2014. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Harper, Phillip Brian. "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s."

Critical Inquiry 19.2 (1993): 234-55. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Mediasanctuary, prod. "Amiri Baraka "Somebody Blew Up America"." *YouTube*. YouTube,

16 Dec. 2009. Web. 10 May 2019.

Middleton, Peter. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in*

Contemporary Poetry. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. Print.

Muñoz, José Esteban. "Cruising the toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, radical black traditions, and queer futurity." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2 (2007): 353-67.

WorldCat. Web. 3 June 2019.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. *WorldCat*.

Web. 3 June 2019.

Shulevitz, Judith. "The Close Reader: Sing, Muse... or Maybe Not." *New York Times Book Review* 107.48 (2002): 31. *WorldCat*. Web. 15 May 2019.

Smith, Marc Kelly, and Joe Kraynak. *Take the mic: The art of performance poetry, slam, and the spoken word*. Naperville: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2009. *WorldCat*. Web. 15 May 2019.

Somers-Willett, Susan B.A. *The cultural politics of slam poetry: Race, identity, and the performance of popular verse in America*. Michigan: University of Michigan press, 2009. *WorldCat*. Web. 15 May 2019.

Wheeler, Lesley. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Print.

Wojahn, David. "' A Kind of Vaudeville': Appraising the Age of the Poetry Reading." *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly* 8.2 (1985): 265-82. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.

Woodard, Komozi. *A nation within a nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black power politics*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. *WorldCat*. Web. 3 June 2019.