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Performing poetry slam and listening closely to slam poetry

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Abstract

The article addresses poetry slam as an example of an oral turn captured in contemporary poetry practices that seems to extend the landscape of literary arts (Gioia, 2003). We investigate poetry slam as a phenomenon that mediates between at least two quite different (audio) language cultures – namely the contemporary Western literary poetry reading and a literary network, on the one side, and, on the other side, the rap battle connected to hip hop culture (other genres, such as e.g. stand-up comedy, could also have been drawn into the discussion, but in order to clarify our argument we have chosen to keep focus on the two mentioned). The article builds on a generalised perspective negotiating poetry slam as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon in between hip hop culture and literary culture, but it also includes a close reading/listening aspect deriving from a specific example, namely a performance by the 2012 poetry slam world champion Harry Baker. Positioning poetry slam in between literary culture and more popular cultural forms has previously been addressed by for instance Jeremy Kaye (2006) discussing the relationship between academic and popular aspects of poetry slam, Helen Gregory (2009) studying poetry slam in terms of interactions between avant-garde and established art worlds and Kathleen Crown (2001) pointing to poetry slams as subscribing to both popular and literary/poetry-based cultural influences.

This article will describe poetry slam as a contemporary phenomenon raising important theoretical perspectives. It will present poetry slam as a practice and research field that builds both on aesthetic/literary positions and on cultural analytical positions, negotiating identity and performance. In this sense, poetry slam seems to renegotiate different cultures and genres.¹ Our main interest is to point to distinctive stylistic and rhetorical aspects of poetry slam that seem to renegotiate rhetorical aspects known from the battle scene of rap. Poetry slam thus seems to mediate and renegotiate both the poetry reading and the rap battle – it is connected to both, but creates an autonomous practice (Crown, 2001). The article will balance between a generalised perspective negotiating poetry slam as an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon that can be placed in between hip hop culture and literary culture, but will also include a close reading – that is a close listening – aspect: a formal analysis of a specific performance by Harry Baker. This empirical example is of course not exhausting the field of poetry slam in any sense, which contains numerous different kinds of poetry slams and slam poetry (we will come back to this distinction later on). The field is much broader, more complex and differentiated than we will account for in this article. However, our example is suitable for making clear the analytical points of the article, which are, through the rhetorical and performative concepts of ‘positioning’ and ‘delivering’, to establish a close reading/listening of a concrete act of poetry slam. In doing so, the article wishes to establish a meeting between a literary analytical strategy and a more culture-

oriented understanding of the rhetorical argument as crucial to the poetry slam practices. Though one cannot argue that Baker is representative of the whole scene (one could question that any one poet can be representative of poetry slam) or even that there is just *one* scene, Baker's performance is able to illustrate a couple of general traits of slam poetry. In addition, he is very well-known and (at least in some parts of the poetry slam scenes) highly rated, as indicated by the aforementioned world championship victory.

As mentioned above, the article will relate poetry slam to the cultural and rhetorical practices of rap battle. Poetry slam seems to embody the audible side of poetry by engaging in an oral, live culture around poetry underlining both the production and the perception of poetry as genuinely performative (Bernstein, 2011). Regarding the research field of rap and hip hop and comparing this to the research on poetry slam, it seems evident that there are differences between the two academic fields. Research on rap primarily deals with sociological aspects of hip hop culture, including subjects like resistance, rap as a weapon against social and racial inequality, what one could call 'ghetto realism', and hip hop as an identity-supporting factor (see e.g. Forman, 2002; Frith & Neal, 2004; Rose, 1994; Perry, 2004). Some academic analyses of poetry slam share these cultural analytical and social interests, for instance – dealing with aspects of identity or power relations (Somers-Willett, 2009; Gregory, 2009) – how slam participants construct their identities and negotiate complex power relations which structure their everyday interactions (Gregory, 2009, pp. 3-4). However, the aesthetic and literary aspects of research literature on poetry slam seem far more present in the sense that it to a great extent emerges from poetry studies. A feature that seems to interest both the aesthetic/literary as well as the contextualized cultural research fields is the role of rhetorical arguments as inherent in the poetry slam practice. This rhetoric argument or effect of the poetry slam event is what we find interesting to point to, referring to the performative aspect of poetry slam as genuinely rhetorical, including a tentative method to analyse this performative aspect.

Poetry slam is often described as the martial art of poetry. 'Slam' is the competitive, timed performance of poems by single authors or author teams, often judged by audience members (usually in a bar) who assign points to the poem performance (from 0-10, including decimal places). The phenomenon has its origins in the late 1980s in Chicago as a way to 'overcome the frustration of the academic monopoly on poetry readings and the attending highbrow airs of these events. Slam poetry is rowdy and popular in form and reception' (Somers-Willett, 2009, p. 6; Crown, 2001; Elevald, 2003). In this sense, the poetry slam culture genuinely seems to emerge from a remediating perspective, mediating the aesthetic qualities of poetry readings with more popular or everyday cultural aspects as well as the competitive character of hip hop and rap culture. 'Poetry slam deliberately took verse outside of

the academy', as Susan B. S. Somers-Willett puts it (2009, p. 6). The poetry slam practice can include a number of constraints or official rules: The performers must be the authors of the work they perform (and they write it ahead of the performance), the performance can only last three minutes and 10 seconds, and the performers are not allowed to use costumes or props. A poetry slam is a competition at which poets read or recite original work. These performances can be judged in a number of different ways, for instance on a numeric scale by previously, but accidentally selected members of the audience. In this sense, the aesthetic judgement of taste in poetry slam, which in traditional literary culture would be performed by experts and institutions, is often conducted by randomly chosen members of the audience. The judgement of taste can thus be carried out in a genuinely democratic way and is based on parameters that are not necessarily estimated as good taste, as it would appear in a literary public, for instance parameters of entertainment, impact force, authenticity, technical skills and timing. The rules can vary, but they all subscribe to the importance of rhetorical argument. The competitiveness of the event adds a fundamentally different aspect to literary culture. According to Blitefield, this is more than an aesthetic judgement: 'fundamentally, slam poetry is not rooted in appreciative aesthetics but in rhetorical judgement' (2004, p. 107).

The present article deals with the rhetorical aspect, in the sense that it seeks to highlight what characterises the performative element of the practice of poetry slam, hereby also addressing the way poetry slams renegotiate parallel and related practices or genres.

What interests us is, as stated, the way this rhetorical practice apparently mediates between two very different language cultures – namely the writing (and reading) of poetry and a literary network, on the one side, and the rap battle connected to hip hop culture, on the other. As we will get back to later in the article, poetry slam can be placed between rap and contemporary Western literary poetry reading in different aspects; in the close listening at the end of the article the main focus will be on the rhythmical character of a specific kind of poetry often heard at poetry slams: slam poetry.

We are here entering a complex terminological terrain: The term 'poetry slam' refers to a *contest* in which performers of different kinds of oral poetry are competing; the term 'slam poetry', on the contrary, refers to a certain kind of poetry that has emerged from these competitions. This kind of poetry is one of the different kinds of oral literature found at poetry slams – alongside several other literary forms such as poems, sound poems, prose texts, history telling etc. One can argue that it is reasonable to think of slam poetry as the prototypical kind of oral poetry found at poetry slams. The one aspect of slam poetry that we are particularly interested in here is its strikingly rhythmical nature.

Insisting on putting emphasis on such a formal aspect, we challenge some of the theoretical paradigms emerging from the culture of poetry slam. The general conception of the culture seems to emphasise the performativity of the culture as primarily a kind of blueprint for cultural identity matters: 'His or her speech, dress, gestures, voice, body, and so on reflect in some way on the poem at hand [...] convey nuances of cultural difference that a page cannot. [...] slam poetry is defined less by its formal characteristics and more by what it wishes to achieve or effect', Blitefield writes (2004, pp. 18-19). We do not disagree that the contextualised 'now', the effect of the authentic engagement with the audience, no doubt appears to be crucial to poetry slam as a phenomenon, but this does not entail that the formal characteristics of this practice are not important. Building on the argument that the rhythmical character may actually be one of the most important ways of achieving an effect, in this article we investigate a concrete example in terms of the formal and rhythmical character of a specific performance.

According to a very general media perspective, the practice of poetry slam mediates between the experience of reading a written book (silence, time-based, the tactile dimension of the book object) and the musical performance (oral, time-based, consisting of sound waves, the object becoming preferentially performative, fluent and ephemeral). This dichotomy is of course reductive, as reading a book in silence can also be experienced in a performative way. Also, rhythm, gesture, alliterations and tone of language can be experienced as a written matter (Stougaard Pedersen, 2008). However, poetry slam as a genre pushes the identity of poetry in new directions, underlining and refining the performative element of poetry partly by building on a genuinely rhetorical judgemental register.

This article thus points to the importance of analysing these rhetorical aspects, highlighting two performative aspects of poetry slam: 'positioning' and 'delivering'. These performative and rhetorical aspects are tested in the Harry Baker example – which functions precisely as an example. We do not provide a comprehensive reading of poetry slam as such, but create a dialogue between a rhetorical, performative aspect of poetry slam and a formal analytical approach to an example of slam poetry. Baker does not act as a representative of the genre, but represents our tentative method for analysing positioning and delivering as rhetorical figures and in this sense leaves out a number of alternative interesting aspects.

Performativity

Before we move on to comparing the performative character of poetry slam and of freestyle rap battle and from here concentrate on the Harry Baker example, we will make a short introduction to a variety of positions regarding performativity as a concept, bringing this in dialogue with the rhetorical, performative aspects of

poetry slam. The performative aspect of poetry slam practice will both be studied in terms of the conceptual aspects of performativity and combined with a more formal approach to the poetic performance.

The concept of performativity was introduced in a talk given by the philosopher J. L. Austin, as part of the William James lecture series at Harvard University in 1955, and subsequently published in 1962 under the title *How to do things with words*. Austin set out to investigate everyday language on conditions that were different from the basis formed by empirical positivism, to which utterances can either be true, false or nonsense, suggesting a fourth category, namely the performative utterance. As Jonathan Culler explains, 'Austin proposes a distinction between *constative* utterances that make a statement, describe a state of affairs, and are true or false, and another class of utterances [...] that actually perform the action to which they refer: *performatives*. To say "I promise to pay you" is not to describe a state of affairs but to perform the act of promising' (2000, p. 1). An important new insight related to this shift or extension of language use seems to be the change of criteria. Instead of being either true or false, the performative utterance is either successful or unsuccessful – a premise that seems extremely important in delivering poetry in a slam. Austin in his lecture even ends up with a concept of language use that accentuates the relevance of the performative utterance, hereby providing an understanding of language that in general points to the importance of action.

Since the 1960s there has been considerable divergence in terms of readings and rewritings of Austin's speech-act theory. Two of these stances of particular interest in the context of this article are the positions taken by Judith Butler and Erika Fischer-Lichte. Butler (1990) considers Austin's thoughts on language in a broader cultural context by constructing a feminist-based theory on gender as performed. To Butler, the fundamental categories of identity are in fact a product of culture and societal norms. In this sense you are not born to a specific gender, you become a gender by means of conventionalised repetitions of acts. In this sense, gender is not stable, and you can perform your gender 'wrong' on purpose and in this process create new images and conceptions of what is female or male and what is not. 'Performativity is a matter of repeating the norms by which one is constituted; it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate and constrain the gendered subject' (Butler, 1993, p. 231).

The distance between Austin and Butler is visible. Austin deals with overlooked aspects of language use and Butler uses the idea of performativity as a model for thinking about crucial social processes, including the nature of identity, the functioning of social norms and the relationship between the individual and social change (cf. Culler, 2000, p. 8). Another difference is that Austin's analysis of performativity primarily raises the points of interests from the power of singular meaning

acts, while Butler's concept of performativity is based on massive, daily repetitions of conventions.

The theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte and her colleagues at Freie Universität Berlin also have a position on Austin's theory that is interesting in relation to discussions about poetry slam and battle rap. *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004) has given new impact and vitality to the concept of performativity connecting performative aspects with bodily meaning. Fischer-Lichte was originally interested in Austin's theory in relation to her own work on semiotics, but as she developed her theory the idea of the sign became less important. This becomes evident in her analysis of the famous 1975 live performance *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramovic. The act of the artist torturing herself in front of an audience disassembles the semiotic *meaning* of the act, but emphasises the *effects* of the artist's actions emerging from the sensorial relation between act and recipient. This focus on acting also seems crucial to the poetry slam situation, where the ability to establish contact and achieve an effect in relation to the audience seems to be a leading parameter, supporting the rhetorical judgement as crucial to the poetry slam performance.

Continuing this train of thought, it is interesting to consider how an aesthetic of the performative may change from theatre to literature, music and hybrid forms like poetry slam. It will probably be necessary to make distinctions from media to media in order to use performativity in an analytical approach. As already mentioned, in literature it may be necessary to make a distinction between the bodily performative forms of literature in loud readings, jazz and poetry, poetry slams etc. and a silent reading act, which can be described as performative in terms of the inherent character of the written rhythm, tone, sound and gestures that can be activated through reading. In that case, you are dealing with performativity as a methodological approach and as such you may propose a performative reading or listening. It will also be necessary to discuss the difference between performance and performativity when it comes to music, again to make distinctions between modes of analytic approaches.

Building on the insights of the concepts of performativity, we will now discuss poetry slam and rap battle from two different perspectives, both dealing with rhetorical attitudes: *positioning* and *delivering*. In this analytical discussion we study performativity as a rhetorical agent in the concrete performance by Harry Baker. The rap battle is chosen due to its element of liveness and strong focus on competitive elements, which formally make it comparable to the poetry slam competition.

Positioning

Poetry slam installs a competitive mode to the art of poetry, which can seem rather unfamiliar. This clear rhetorical aspect it borrows from hip hop culture and rap as a

genre, for instance ‘playing the dozens’: ‘Playing the dozens is an African-American custom in which two competitors – usually males – go head to head in a competition of comedic trash talk. They take turns “cracking on”, or insulting, one another, their adversary’s mother or other family member until one of them has no comeback’ (Kadidal, 2004).

This element is well known from rap battles as a verbal fight on skills. According to Henry Louis Gates, ‘playing the dozens’ is part of a larger register of rhetorical figures which he names signifyin(g): ‘The black trope of all tropes – signifyin(g) implicative speech that makes use of the tropes of marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out, sounding, rapping, playing the dozens and so on’ (Gates, 1988, pp. 51-52).

In poetry slam this rhetorical argument is not transferred as a battle one-to-one but as a regular competition where the competitors perform one after one. Quality in poetry slam does not refer to whether you succeed in smearing your competitors. The competition is acted on skills, both as the quality of the poetic language itself, of the performance and somehow also of the performer’s ability to stay present. ‘Many audience members are evaluating not only the writing and performance of a poem, but also the scripting and performance of identity’ (Somers-Willett, 2005; Gregory, 2009).

The perspective of gender – a matter of massive daily cultural repetitions performativity rather than of biology, following Butler – seems to be negotiated through very different codes than in hip hop culture. In rap the masculine stereotypes can seem exaggerated and extremely rhetorical, in the sense that every aspect of performance appears competitive and power-related. Our analytical example, poetry slammer Harry Baker, on the contrary, represents a completely different gender position, which we will take a closer look at later.

A rap battle is highly competitive, and you do the best you can to enhance yourself on behalf of the others – through dissing and boasting. Roles of masculinity play a major role in vast parts of the hip hop culture, and it is generally accepted that hip hop culture worships and practises the idea of masculinity through various expressions: attitude, style, movements, semantics and rhetorical figures such as ‘dissing’ (Gates, 1988, p. 51). This practice, no matter how stigmatising and sexist it may seem, can be understood as acts through which you perform your masculinity or your gender. The general use of aliases and masks in hip hop culture as well as the ‘countercultural’ attitude in hip hop can thus be viewed as a kind of role play using performativity in creating an identity and a masculinity design. Performativity in rap could be described as dealing, on the one hand, with what is semantically discussed – how the rapper stages him/herself or performs him/herself by maintaining superiority. Battle rap can include seduction verse as well as rhymed insult (Caplan, 2014). However, it is important to hold on to the fact that to rap and hip hop culture the masculinity aspect must to a great extent be analysed as a rhetorical

positioning strategy. Such masculinity stereotypes are being questioned and challenged in Harry Baker's performance.

Delivering

Evidently, the performativity concept can in many ways be used in investigating both the verbal language and musical elements of slam poetry – that is from a delivery-aesthetic approach to the phenomena.

The rhetorical aspect of poetry slam deals both with skills in constructing the poems, which in that sense remain aesthetic entities, and, as already mentioned, skills in delivering the poem – creating a rhythmic feeling that is the micro-rhythmic sense of turning, stretching the rhythm and stress of single words and phrases as well as the use of rests. Poetry slam in that sense mediates the rhetorical strategies of the oral fight, respecting the poem as a finished entity, though delivered in a performative, oral mode.

In rap music the rapper also performs him/herself through attitude, style and aesthetic features – such as rhyme, rhythm, stresses and sounding features in general. Performative gestures of rap music also deal with what goes on at the limit of semantics, that is rhythmic feeling, stresses, modulations and accents in both words and music. These features belong to a performative understanding of the language and the lingo of rap, and they are crucial to understanding the attitude and aesthetics of rap in general. The rap flow, one can argue, is the signature of the rapper or the rap group. It can be defined as the way the rapper, on rhythmic, tonal and articulatory levels, is moving in relation to the beat of the groove.² Concerning the role of rhythm, Robert Walser highlights the role of rhythm, rhyme and rhetoric in rap music, particularly pinpointing rhythmic declamation and the rhetorical strategies (cf. Walser, 1995, p. 212) as crucial to the performative aspect of rap. He is in this sense pointing to rhythm as a rhetorical agent that participates in building the argument of the performative situation. The rhythmic declamation creates a certain feeling, and the character of this feeling will always be linked to the performative function of the rhythm and the music – thus, the micro rhythmic feeling of rhythm in rap music must also be considered phenomenological: a performed, experienced matter.

The rhythmical, performative skills concerning the delivering aspect and the style of slam poetry and rap battle appear very different. However, we believe that the rhythmic delivery plays a crucial role to both performance cultures. Our claim is as follows: Generally, the rhythms of slam poetry are more metricised, regular and stylised than the ones of contemporary Western literary poetry readings, but typically less metricised, regular and stylised than rap lyrics (both the category 'contemporary Western literary poetry reading' and the category 'rap lyrics' are

described in more detail below). Slam poetry is typically placed somewhere between those two established forms. Thus, one could attempt to place a ‘standard’ slam poetry performance on a continuum that shows the amount of rhythmic stylisation in different sorts of vocal practices.

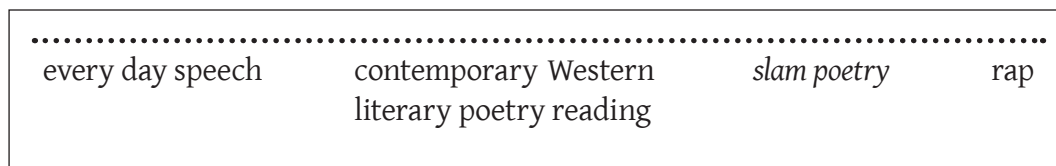


Figure 1: Slam poetry placed on a continuum that shows the amount of rhythmic stylisation in different sorts of vocal practices.

Contemporary Western literary poetry is, of course, an enormous and complex category, which is the reason why the reader should put emphasis on the preceding term ‘generally’: We are speaking of *tendencies* which in no way exclude examples of the opposite – a considerable number of writers, e.g. the so-called new formalists, do write metrical poems today. Nevertheless, the practice of writing in metre (or in other kinds of strongly rhythmic forms) is without a doubt an exception among important Western writers today. In *The Rise and Fall of Meter* Meredith Martin initially asks: ‘Why do most contemporary poets think that metrical poems are conservative or “old-fashioned”? Why is such a stigma attached to the word “meter”?’ (2012, p. 1). Here the crucial point is: Poets *do* think this way (most often). For a very long period of time the opposite was the case: The vast majority of poetry was metrically organised in patterns of syllables and accentuations – a fundamentally rhythmic form of organisation. However, the norm slowly changed during the 20th century, and parallel with an increasing orientation towards literacy, literary Western poetry became less bound by metre. Free verse gained ground, and later other kinds of non-metrical poetry became the prevalent forms (e.g. Perkins [1976, p. 310f.], Steele [1985, p. 294] and, regarding free verse and its descendants, Perloff [1998]) – a position they have kept until this day. It can be said that metrical poetry has emigrated to (and stayed in) the popular genres, to song and rap lyrics – and one could propound the idea that many contemporary Western literary poets have lost the connection to a broader audience partly in consequence of this development. There seems to be a connection between pronounced, sensuously appealing rhythms (e.g. metre, repetition and choruses) and popularity – and there is also a connection between metre and sound, on the one hand, and non-metricality and literacy, on the other. Finally, it is very important to underline that freer, less regular rhythms do, of course, not in any way mean less meaningful or less refined rhythms.

As contemporary Western literary poetry the rap text is, of course, also a huge and highly differentiated category. Still, we again take the liberty of generalising it in this particular context for the purpose of clarifying the thesis on rap’s rela-

tionship to slam poetry. One thing is for sure: Rhythm is crucial to rap. 'Rhythm is rap's reason for being' (Bradley, 2009, p. 3), and '[r]hythm is rap's basic element' (Bradley, 2009, p. 4), as rap scholar Adam Bradley puts it. However, the question of metre and rap lyrics is quite intricate due to the decisive role of the beat (the tension between text and beat is described in more detail later). If we think of the regular, accentuated patterns of the groove as an integrated, 'internalised' part of the rap rhythm, this can indeed always be characterised as metrical. Additionally, countless rap texts do display 'regularly recurring counted entit[ies]' (Perloff, 1998, p. 88) in the form of the number of strong stresses per line, which very often corresponds to the number of beats per measure (which again very often is four). However, it is, of course, also possible to study the words of the rap lyrics autonomously, detached from the beat, e.g. by reading them on a printed page. In this case, many – particularly more recent – rap texts can be perceived rather as free verse poetry. In our view, though, the latter approach seems to miss the target, since rap is exactly drawing its special rhythmic feeling and force from the interaction between (a potentially implicit) beat and words. Thus, in this sense, the rhythms of many rap lyrics could perhaps be termed 'indirectly metrical'. Adam Bradley puts it this way: 'rap's meter is the drumbeat and its rhythm is the MC's flow on top of the beat' (see also Bradley, 2009, p. xixf). This interaction is closely connected to the concept of 'flow', which is the theme of the second note.

Moving back to slam poetry, the question now is: *How* is slam poetry generally more metricised, regular and stylised than readings of contemporary Western literary poetry and less metricised, regular and stylised than most rap? If we start out with a comparison of slam poetry and contemporary Western literary poetry, Dana Gioia, in the essay 'Disappearing Ink', writes that an 'interesting feature of the new popular poetry is that it is overwhelmingly, indeed characteristically, formal' (Gioia, 2003, p. 11). The horizon of Gioia's essay is the identification of a new orientation towards sound, the identification of an oral turn – at a civilizational level as well as on a specifically literary level. For Gioia, poetry slams are one of the new popular poetry's main appearances.

Naturally, the general development in literary poetry from metrical to non-metrical is also perceptible in *readings* of contemporary Western literary poetry. Though it has been convincingly argued that the rhythms of non-metrical poetry stand out as more poignant when read aloud by the author (Bernstein, 1998), those kinds of rhythms seldom appear as 'metricised, regular and stylised' as the ones found in slam poetry. Of course, there are hundreds of ways of reading a poem, but as Peter Middleton argues, poets instead tend to fall into only a few 'reading style' groupings (Middleton, 2005a, p. 24f.; within an Anglophone context, he lists three reading styles [Middleton 2005a, p. 25f.]). Similarly, Lesley Wheeler – within a North American context of what she calls 'academic poetry' – describes a poetry

reading experience as follows: ‘the quality of the performances exhibited the same range: dreadfully dull, intellectually galvanizing, emotionally moving, disparate in mood and audience, but never particularly surprising’ (Wheeler, 2008, p. 138). When Wheeler finds poets who ‘read expressively, emphasizing rhythm and performing dialogs’, her explanation is that it ‘may be because [they] are unusually sympathetic to spoken word, populist traditions’ (Wheeler, 2008, p. 139) – such as slam poetry. In other words, the mentioned reading features are very unusual within this context, a context that makes up the mainstream. More generally, Wheeler observes, ‘Poetry readings as manifestations of authentic authorial presence, rather than as demonstrations of vocal skill, would become the mainstream mode of aural dissemination’ (Wheeler, 2008, p. 12f.). Rap and slam poetry, in return, represent exactly this: demonstrations of vocal skills. Instead, ‘poets perform the fact that they are not performers’ (Wheeler, 2008, p. 140), Wheeler states with a poignant wording.

This kind of poetry and performance, which is not, among other things, emphasising rhythmic aspects, corresponds with the kinds of poetry Peter Middleton describes: ‘Many modern poetry movements have emphasised the importance of vernacular, idiomatic, and above all speech-based writing, but the important point of reference here is ordinary conversation, not the narratives of cultural memory encoded in special phrases and rhythms that demarcate an active oral tradition’ (2005a, p. 24). ‘Ordinary conversation’ is thus exactly the opposite of the ‘metricised, regular and stylised’ rhythms of for example rap – which is, again, encoded in the mentioned oral tradition.³

If we now turn to the comparison of slam poetry and rap, the affinity is touched upon by, for instance, Bruce and Davis (2000), Crown (2001), Eleveld (2003), and Somers-Willett (2003). However, one of the central features of rap is the rhythmic tension between musical pulse and lyrical rhythm. Because of the stable, fixed metre of the groove (sometimes only indirectly present, as an internal pulse in the mind of the rapper), the rapper is able to glide around the beat, to dance upon it. One can argue that this interaction is the very essence of rap music, its *differentia specifica*. Here we find the aforementioned pivotal rap concept of flow.

This is not the case for slam poetry, where this rhythmic tension disappears – because there is no music and no musical groove, there is no (neither implicit nor explicit) metrical, pulsating rhythm. What is the consequence of letting go of the music? The slam poet is, in a way, freer. The absence of an external time scheme – provided by the musical layer in rap music – allows the slam poet to fill in as many syllables as she or he wants in every single verse. It allows her or him to stretch and bend the tempo as she or he wants. It allows her or him to form exactly the syntactical-rhythmic-tonal curves that she or he wants at any given time, while at the same time employing many of the formal features of rap texts, as we shall demonstrate in the following example.

Harry Baker: 'Paper People'

The British slam poet Harry Baker, born 1992, won the world slam championship in 2012 after first becoming London slam champion in 2010 and UK and European slam champion in 2011. How does a typical Harry Baker text and performance work? In the following we will mainly (but not exclusively) focus on the verbal aspects of such a performance, knowing full well that several relevant observations could be made within other performative dimensions. In a close listening, the listener needs to be aware of a range of different aspects which all, together, take part in constituting the sonic phenomenon in question. These can fundamentally be divided into two levels, which cannot be fully separated, though: 1) the text (rhythm, rhyme, rhetoric, syntax etc.) and 2) the audio text (the acoustic articulation of the text, that is the vocal performance [e.g. pitch, phrasing, glissando, agogic variations, dynamic (variations in volume)] and the quality of the voice [its sound, timbre, the degree of articulation, intensity etc.]). However, all these aspects do of course not have the same relevance in every case (e.g. for every poetry slammer), and the interpreter thus has to consider when which aspects should be drawn to attention.

Now let us take a look at – and above all: a listen to – Harry Baker and consider which aspects of his slam poetry are the most prominent. As an example we will choose (the first part of) the poem 'Paper People', which Baker has performed numerous times and which is also, in its written form, included in his 2014 book *The Sunshine Kid*.⁴ Our reason for choosing this work is, on the one hand, that it seems to be a 'Baker classic', and, on the other hand, that its formal construction is of a kind that is suited for demonstrating our analytical points. We highly encourage the reader to follow the link and listen closely: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z94sQNlQge0>. Disclaimer: The following is *not* an interpretation of the poem; it is a couple of observations that can illustrate the general thesis of the article.

Which kind of rhythm characterises Harry Baker's poetry in 'Paper People'? When listening to the performance, the rhythms make a kind of 'organic' impression: They seem to contain a certain 'fluidity', to concentrate in some parts of the poem and loosen up at other points. Also, they seem to have a certain heterogeneity and unpredictability to them – like the waves of the ocean or like the human breath. Free floating, ever shifting metrical sequences. As slam poetry above all is a performative art form, this audible impression can be said to have primacy.

However, there is also a written version of 'Paper People', and looking at this, the rhythmic impression is slightly different. Reading the poem, the rhythms seem less heterogeneous and unpredictable. Instead it becomes clear that all of the verses are saturated with trochaic feet, not as clusters spread across the text, but in almost each and every word. 'Almost', yet, is an important word here, because every now and then one, two or three syllables fall out of the trochaic alternation – either fully or in such

a manner that they can be perceived as anacruses. Also, here and there the trochaic alternation fails a syllable, and in some cases the prosody does not correspond fully to the metre (e.g. verse 10 below: 'blu tack'). There is no strictly constructed metrical pattern that can be unveiled. Instead, the trochee functions as the rhythmic platform.

Looking at the second verse of the written version, it would be possible to identify a trochaic trimetre with anacrusis. In the third a trochaic tetrametre could be identified and in the fourth and fifth trochaic pentametres. However, following this written word-based logic does not seem to be the obvious approach here. The rhythmic sequences are not subordinated to the visual organisation on the page; the rhythms spill over the line breaks, which are very often ignored in the performance – or rather: The line breaks only exist in the written version.

Beneath, different rhythmic aspects in the written version of 'Paper People' are marked. Other formal aspects, such as rhyme and alliteration, which also play a role in the experience of rhythm, are also emphasised.

Coming back to the idea of slam poetry as being placed rhythmically between the contemporary Western poetry reading and rap, the first part should be clear by now: It is obvious that only a few written poems today are as metrically organised as this Baker poem. But how can slam poetry be said to be less rhythmically stylised than rap? Mainly because of two circumstances:

The first one is that the number of stressed syllables per sequence in slam poetry often is extremely varied. In 'Paper People', for example, it varies from two (v. 1) to 13 (v. 7-8). Even though some contemporary rappers also create extremely complex and rhythmically varied sequences, these are very seldom *that* varied. This probably has to do with the time scheme imposed by the music: The (almost always) 4/4 time beat urges the rapper to maintain a certain level of rhythmic consistency.

The second and most important reason has to do with the performance of the text. In the audiotext the metricality is subtle, perhaps at times even hidden. Instead of underlining the trochees, Harry Baker at some points does the opposite: makes them sound less rhythmically poignant, less regular – and more natural, closer to everyday speech. To achieve this effect, both tempo, pauses and tonality come into play. Baker constantly shifts the tempo, forming every kind of dynamic arc. Beginning very slowly (v. 1) he speeds up over the following verses until verse 6b, in which he slows completely down again. In verse 7 he starts turning up the pace once more, culminating in verse 10 which he performs so fast that the listener can hardly comprehend the words (and Baker himself may actually also have a few problems articulating the words that fast). This tempo aspect is a distinct indication of the crucial aspect of performative delivering. With the following verse (v. 11) the tempo again drops dramatically – only to rise again with the six following verses (v. 12-17). After the subsequent pause a sequence of four cross-rhyming verses (v. 18-21) are performed in a very calm and idle manner. Close to the end of the first

Red = Nonmetrical passages

Italic = anacrusis

(-) & (U) = metrically missing syllable (stressed or unstressed)

→ = no pause at line break in the audiotext

[xx] = only audible (absent in the written text)

~~Strikethrough~~ = only readable (absent in the audio text)

del>

Underline = p

Bold = rhyme

Paper People

- 1 **I like people.**
- 2 *I'd* like some paper people.
- 3 They'd be purple paper people. →
- 4 Maybe **pop-up** purple paper people. →
- 5 Proper pop-up purple paper people.
- 6 How do you **prop up** (U) **pop-up** purple paper people? (-)
- (6b) [I hear you **cry**. Well **I...**] (U)

- 7 **I'd probably prop up proper pop-up** purple paper people →
- 8 with a **proper pop-up** purple people paperclip, (U)
- 9 but I'd pre-prepare **appropriate adhesives** as **alternatives**, →
- 10 a cheeky **pack** of blu **tack** just in case the paper slipped ['cause].
- 11 I could build a **pop-up** (-) **metropolis**. (-)
- 12 *but I* wouldn't wanna deal with all the →
- 13 paper people politics. (U) →
- 14 paper politicians with their →
- 15 paper-thin (U) **policies**, →
- 16 *broken* **promises** →
- 17 ~~with~~out ~~appropriate~~ **apologies**.

- 18 *There'd* be a little paper **me**, (U)
- 19 And a little paper **you**.
- 20 And we'[coul]d watch paper TV, →
- 21 and it would all be pay-per-**view**.
- 22 we'd ~~watch~~ [see] ~~the~~ [those] poppy paper rappers →
- 23 rap about their paper package, →
- 24 or watch paper people carriers →
- 25 get stuck in paper traffic, →
- 26 **on the A4** [paper].
- ...

Figure 2: Rhythmic aspects of the written version of 'Paper People'.

part of 'Paper People' (v. 22-25) we find the sequence in which Baker marks the metrics of the rhythms most strongly. Interestingly, this sequence deals with (paper) rappers (v. 22-25). Baker imposes a kind of 'rappy' feeling to the rhythms – and in the same manner he begins his TEDx performance with a kind of prototypical or caricatured rap: 'My Name is Harry Baker, Harry Baker is my name / if your name was Harry Baker then our names would be the ... same'.⁵ The word 'same' comes too late, it falls out of the metrical pattern. This creates the feeling that it also falls out of the rap category, breaking with its conventions with a humorous effect. The last verse of the first part of 'Paper People' does exactly the same: The rap sequence (v. 22-25) ends with the non-metrical verse 'on the A4', which is also a funny pun. In other words, when the rhythmic suppleness is replaced with a distinct marking of the metricality of the rhythms, the performance signals 'rap' – which in this Harry Baker performance is deconstructed and connected to humour. With a poker face he states in another performance: 'I used to be rapper – as you can probably tell by my swagger'.⁶ As often as he underlines that he is a former rapper, he underlines that he is a (nerdy) math student. This points to a deliberate marking of the positioning rhetorical aspect of rap, deconstructing and pointing to its stereotypes.

Also with regard to other formal aspects, for example rhyming, slam poetry is often placed between the contemporary Western poetry reading and rap: It generally offers more rhyming than the first, but less than most of the latter. The importance of rhyme in rap can, generally speaking, almost not be overestimated. For example, phrasings like 'writing/spitting rhymes' are rap slang for writing rap lyrics. In his publication on rap with the telling title *Book of Rhymes* (the name of the notebooks in which some rappers write their lyrics) Adam Bradley writes: 'Rap celebrates rhyme like nothing else, hearkening back to a time when literary poetry still unabashedly embraced the simple pleasure and musicality of verse. Rap rhymes so much and with such variety that it is now the largest and richest contemporary archive of rhymed words. It has done more than any other art form in recent history to expand rhyme's formal range and expressive possibilities' (2009, p. 51f.). And the other way around: 'rap that does not rhyme at all, is rare, if not non-existent' (Bradley, 2009, p. 50). Concerning the status of rhyme in contemporary literary Western poetry Bradley writes: 'Rap's reliance on rhyme distinguishes it [...] from most contemporary literary poetry' (2009, p. 51). If we leave subtler types of rhymes out of account, rhyming is – just like writing in metre – rather an exception in literary Western poetry today. For example, Henri Meschonnic speaks of 'the disappearance of rhyme that marks modern poetry' (1988, p. 94). It is in this landscape of rhymes, between those two general tendencies, that we see slam poetry occupying a vacant position.

As the rhythms are 'fluid', so are the rhymes. In 'Paper People' there is no strict rhyme scheme and only a few end rhymes. Only in a short phase of this first part

of the poem (v. 15-21) do end rhymes stand out clearly. Alliterations, on the other hand, are much more prominent; the 'p chains' form the spine of the text, which makes the semantic body function.

Speaking of body, let us now leave the verbal aspect of the performance and take a look at other relevant aspects: Watching Harry Baker performing on the stage (a poetry slam is never a sonic experience only) adds another dimension to the impression of his work. In his casual clothes with his casual haircut, he appears very calm, almost 'floppy', and boyish. With his crooked posture, an emotional, 'poetic' gaze and wrinkles on his forehead, almost looking worried, he also radiates fragility – smiling (professionally?) shyly every time a poem is finished and the audience is applauding. He seems to be underacting his role, always with a charming and intelligent twinkle in his eye, clearly on top of the situation. All in all, Baker is miles away from the masculine stereotypes of rap. This gender aspect is explicitly underlined in the poem 'Real Men',⁷ where the main theme is his high frequency of crying: 'I broke down in *Up*. And I wept in *Toy Story 3*'. 'These guns are not the manliest', he says, showing his non-body builder biceps by pulling up his sleeves: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK2D-b8qEKM&t=1m44s>.

Generally, theatrical, expressive gestures like this are a common ingredient for Baker. He makes all kinds of faces, often with a certain amount of pathos, perhaps even bombast, for example in connection with the aforementioned 'poetic', worried gaze – juxtaposing those with strategically well-placed, disarming (seemingly honest) smiles. Also, his arms, his gesticulations, are characterised by a duality of traditional poetry reading gestures and typical gestures of rappers: They seem to move back and forth from fragile and sophisticated to self-confident and 'offensive' or 'extroverted' gestures, from elevated shoulders and bowed arms to low shoulders and arms thrown rhythmically forwards, almost like punches.

Finally, all of this can also be identified in the part of Baker's body which we hear: his voice.⁸ The intelligent playfulness as well as the tongue-in-cheek humour seem to be present in the timbre. Also, the non-stereotypical gender traits seem audible. For example, he frequently slows down the tempo and turns down the volume, simultaneously making his voice highly fragile and crisp and quivering – one could argue that this technique can even be said to be Baker's rhetorical-performative trademark. At other times, for example when he draws on rap's formal characteristics, his voice has a different coolness and edge to it.

Poetry slam revisited

Concluding this discussion on the similarities and differences of poetry slam and rap battles linked to the concept of performativity, it seems that both genres are highly rhetorical and competitive, but that the boasting element seems more evi-

dent in the rap battle, both considering the performance of gender and the offensive attitude. Playing the dozens in a poetry slam and in a rap battle, respectively, is linked to quite different quality agendas. Skills are important to both, but they differ in terms of which skills are rated the highest. In rap battles the fight element obviously is the crucial factor, whereas the poetic workmanship of the poem itself is ranked higher in poetry slam. Both practices are genuinely performative when it comes to the delivery aspect. In both cases the performative quality of rhythm, tempo, phrasing, pausing, attitude and voice quality are crucial and closely connected to the poetic quality of language – it affects the rhetorical statement.

Returning to the concept of performativity, one may both turn to Austin's performative utterance that instead of being true versus false is either successful or unsuccessful. The performativity of identity, as it is developed within a gender perspective in writings by Butler, can be studied both in the performing of masculinity in rap and, in Harry Baker's case, as an ironic posture towards the same attitudes. The delivering in both cultures is grounded in a live aspect, celebrating the presence of the now. Following the performativity aspect of Fischer-Lichte, poetry slam does not necessarily celebrate the *meaning* of the acts, the semiotic aspects, but rather the rhetorical *effects* of the performance. The rhetorical attitude, the immanent aspiration towards being the one with the best skills, is shared by rap battles and poetry slam, but acts on very different cultural skills and values. In both practices, however, the winner takes it all.

Placed between the written and the spoken word, poetry slam seems to mediate and renegotiate both written poetry and the rap battle, borrowing from both, hereby creating an autonomous, genuinely performative practice. Language has a written as well as an oral dimension, and literature can therefore be – and is being – perceived with both the eye and the ear. But this double-sidedness of literature is not reflected on a scholarly level: The written part receives by far the most academic attention. It is reasonable to understand this one-sided treatment on the basis of the fundamental light, sight and writing paradigm – a paradigm, however, that scholars from several academic disciplines regard as being challenged these years (cf. e.g. Meyer, 2008). It has been argued that a shift towards a new kind of oral culture is taking place: a shift into an audio-visual culture in which reading, in its traditional form, is becoming an increasingly less important part of everyday life (cf. e.g. Gioia, 2003; Hayles, 2008). Though being more than just audible, the phenomenon of poetry slam indicates that such a development leaves its traces on literature: It too seems to be undergoing an acoustic turn, which academic studies should recognise and reflect.

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Notes

- 1 However, the intention here is not to seek answers regarding genre questions which is the reason why we will not be diving into genre theory.
- 2 This is our definition – there is no consensus regarding the precise definition of the rap concept of ‘flow’. However, most would agree that it is fundamentally about the rhythmic relationship between the rap voice and the pulse of the music – a relationship that both practitioners, reviewers and rap scholars consider absolutely pivotal for rap, but which has nevertheless received very little scholarly attention (this has to do with a more general issue concerning rap as an academic field of study: the circumstance that, all things considered, the aesthetic part of rap does not occupy much scholarly space). However, writings on rap flows do exist: e.g. Adams (2008, 2009a and 2009b) (and a response to Adams [2008] in Williams [2009]), Krims (2000), Kautny (2009), Elflein (2009), Stougaard Pedersen (2009), Walser (1995). Also, the concept of flow plays a role in publications with a broader scope such as Rose (1994) and in particular Bradley (2009).
- 3 More comprehensive writings on poetry reading include Nyberg (2013), Middleton (2005b and 2008), Lazer (1996), Novak (2011) and Robinson (2002).
- 4 The performance used here is from a 2014 TEDxExeter show. With reference to the above-mentioned world championship, the poem is, Baker jokes, ‘technically the best poem in the world’ – a good reason for scrutinising it.
- 5 In fact, Baker does also rap at other occasions, for example at the Don’t Flop Rap Battles.
- 6 YouTube: “Dinosaur love | Harry Baker | TEDxYouth@Hounslow” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdjNw8SZc5U>).
- 7 YouTube: “Real Men || Spoken Word || by Harry Baker || RTB” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK2D-b8qEKM>).
- 8 See, for instance, Neumark et al. (2010), Ihde (2007), Frith (1998), Dolar (2012) and Kolesch & Krämer (2006).