

With a foreword by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet
Yusef Komunyakaa



Listen Up!

spoken word poetry

edited by
**zoë
anglesey**

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ONE WORLD

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This collection of poems is dedicated to
the named and unnamed mentors
who have given the gifts of inspiration and discipline
to these writers
as well as to the makers of this collection.

May we also acknowledge our dear communities
that, with respect and encouragement, embrace
the aspirations of our future writers
as they generously become more committed
to their tasks at hand.

foreword

necromancy

The voices in *Listen Up!* are personal and public, and they also speak on behalf of others. They share a similarity of aesthetics and concerns, but these poems are not spoken from a privileged position; their agency did not spring from an assumption of freedom based on birthright. These young voices have witnessed the voicelessness of loved ones (family and/or community). The poems have not been honed into overconscious literary designs or literature with a capital L. In fact, some moments in *Listen Up!* seem like eruptions, primal cries, outbursts, and jagged incantations (less tonally and structurally conspicuous than Dada and the Black Arts Movement).

Listen Up! could only have been written by a group of young poets such as these in the 1990s. Likewise, the anthology's editor, Zoë Anglesey, is a risk-taker who happens to be a visionary. It seems that some of these voices were directly transfused from the Black Arts Movement twenty years after Isaac Hayes and Pet Rocks. The aesthetics are similar, almost down to the uncapitalized personal pronoun *i*. But the ideological conceits and transparent rage are less on the surface of this poetry of the 1990s. The fighting dreams of the Civil Rights Movement are just below the surface of these voices that are educated and middle-class. And, in this sense, they are more complicated. In fact, the rage in these voices is a by-product of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement that ushered in the Reagan era. Though there are references to Malcolm X, these poems are not fueled by the back-blast of international moral outrage that sur-

faced during the sixties and influenced the tone and timbre of the Black Arts Movement. These young voices are not driven by a collective agenda, nor are they shadows of some minor phoenix risen from prophetic ashes. At first glance, however, it seems a safe bet to say that they grew out of rap and hip-hop, poetry slams, the industry of colorful tags, Jean-Michel Basquiat, etc.

There is a trickster motif in *Listen Up!* Each poem negotiates at least two territories simultaneously. Like hip-hop, these voices want to *appear* untutored and, at times, they seem to exist at the nucleus of a class war with themselves. The language of this poetry is textured by popular-culture references and multiple levels of diction—erudite and street-smart. The voices seem fully initiated: hip-hoppers dressed in the baggy regalia of Southern sheriffs of yesteryear and Rasta dreadlocks—decked out in disguises. But the reader or listener is obligated to think about what lingers at the center of each poem. In an era when it could be “unhealthy” or “uncool” to appear as nerdy—the maker of poems—perhaps the poem’s attempted disguise is armor for the poet who speaks about things of the heart. Thus, the architecture or appearance fortifies and underlines the trickster-poet’s mask.

But the aesthetics of “styling” can be doubly deceptive. In this sense, some of the poems are more akin to the blues tradition than to hip-hop. They seem to be saying, *What you see is what you get*. Although these voices have been filtered through a complex literary tradition (European-African-Asian-Latin-American), the surface of the poetry appears colloquial. *Listen Up!* is mainly a poetry of statements and pronouncements, seldom venturing into that surreal territory many of the Negritude poets embraced through imagery. And there are even a few moments straight out of the R & B tradition of crooning and swooning on the edge of heartbreak—poems aimed at the seduction of mind and body. But thankfully there are more symbolic references and allusions to (re)quest than conquest in this body of highly provocative work.

Consequently, *Listen Up!* begs for performance. Many of the poems lie on the page with ease, but others can only come alive through the human voice: orality pulsates at the center of this anthology. There is limited space in these poems for contemplation and meditation. This is an urban anthology, with a driven trajectory and urgency whereby many of the poems have been shaped into a vertical velocity—for the most part, each poem descends the page swiftly. The short lines are gutsy; they have muscle. At times they are raw and basic as the disquieting lyricism and needful bravado of Ma Rainey and Big Bill Broonzy.

This is a poetry of engagement and discourse—it celebrates and confronts. Its passion cannot be denied or undermined. It might obliterate one reader's taste, and facilitate another's. The puns might hit the mark or miss the target, but one cannot claim that these poems have been falsified to exact a fiction or illusion or Edwardian elegance.

Listen Up! arrives on the eve of the twenty-first century, and the jaunty drive and energy in each poem seem to say *Made in America*. This anthology is straightforward. Even with the title's exclamation mark, this is not a scream pouring out of a bullhorn or a cornucopia of evasions through experimentation. These young voices care about human life, and they seem to suggest that anything else is a sham.

—Yusef Komunyakaa
December 1998

introduction

Whenever five-time Apollo-winner Jessica Care Moore entered the Brooklyn Moon Café in the mid-nineties, it was as if the waters parted. Call it charisma, say she had a vibe, but it was Jessica's natural intensity that had the audiences assembled for the Friday night open-mic readings energetically swirling in her wake. Often the young people assembled were so jammed up against each other in this tiny spoken-word digs only four subway stops away from Manhattan that many had to pitch themselves on tiptoe to see Moore in action. Infectious in her enthusiasm, on fire in her delivery, Jessica Care Moore epitomized the spoken word poet. She respected her listeners enough to make every line of her poems pop, and in return some two hundred hands, raised in the air, snapped their fingers in approval.

Even before he starred in *Slam*, the Sundance and Cannes film festivals' award-winning feature, Saul Stacey Williams commanded inordinate attention from his peers. A striking presence, his oratorical style was reminiscent of Paul Robeson. When Williams first appeared before the Brooklyn Moon Café crowds, he was in graduate school at New York University finishing an M.F.A. in drama, with nearly a decade dedicated to his studies in acting. Naturally, this training influenced the way he delivered his poems. Stanza after stanza of his twenty-minute poems cascaded from the scrolls in his head. People seated before him bobbed their heads in time to his musical cadences,

as Williams flailed his limber arms much like a conductor or a preacher. His gestures transmitted the nuances of each passage. Saul Williams's readings were unequivocally memorable and remain so.

In the nineties, Moore and Williams, along with Suheir Hammad, Mariahadessa Tallie, Tish Benson, Carl Hancock Rux, Tracie Morris, Willie Perdomo, and Ava Chin, earned considerable distinction at both the Brooklyn Moon Café and the Nuyorican Poets Café in Manhattan. From these venues, they launched careers that now have them traveling the spoken word circuit nationally and internationally. *Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry* presents these nine scribes and introduces their work to an even wider public.

Youthful and, as they would admit, quite un beholden to literary formalism, they count themselves among the emerging literati of their generation. The poems collected in *Listen Up!* mainly record their New York experiences. This is not the case, however, with Carl Hancock Rux, who at an early age retraced the footsteps of his mentors from the Harlem Renaissance who had found sanctuary in Paris. Quickly realizing that he could not relive their past, he promptly headed off to explore other parts of the world. His poetry reflects his travels and self-discovery.

Regardless of their birthplaces, journeys, or individual literary and cultural influences, these spoken word poets agree that they have much in common. First, they tested the soundness of their nascent writings primarily in the two cafés that were landmark venues for spoken word. In these demanding settings, they developed their unique styles. The *Listen Up!* poets unanimously defy any notion that they represent a fixed, univocal position. They're too young to be set in their ways, and they also take pride in examining the confining orthodoxies of traditional forms. With this in mind, *Listen Up!* readers will enjoy discovering the range of personas that inhabit each exciting poet.

Even after seeing the documentary film *Slam Nation*, or *Slam*, or any of the other recent films showing a version of the current urban poetry scene, it's still difficult to define what spoken word poetry is. It may be helpful to think of this genre as the fulcrum between opposite points. On one end, traditional, mainstream poetry tends to fit nicely on either the page or the stage, often with a great deal of decorum. When read before the public, contemporary poetry needs few props other than an expressive voice. On the opposite end, the performance arts may combine many elements, including voices, dance, music, and visual and media arts, as well as poems or texts that transmute into monologues or fully developed scripts. Hip-hop, or rap, as a predominantly African-American popular and commercial art form, stands between spoken word and the performance arts. Both spoken word and hip-hop derive from the oral tradition, and both forms appeal to overlapping demographics.

A growing number of newspapers list spoken word events apart from the literary reading and the performance arts. Spoken word is associated with youthful wordslingers who involve themselves in aural graffiti, verbal combat, slam squads, and roving posses of like-minded masters at wordplay. Spoken word poetry can also mean the recitation or reading of poetry that rides on didactic rails of the irreverent rants and coming-of-age rituals. Understandably, physical motion, expressive body language, stance, or gesture is an indelible part of spoken word performance. Also, this poetry often keeps a beat; it accentuates rhythms to move a narrative, and strikes syllabic accents to accentuate the music of a piece or an outrageous punch line.

Spoken word artists of African-American origins also know the legacy of silence or minimal movement imposed by the shackles of slavery—the stilling of indigenous idioms, sundown laws, and codes for concealed expression. Spoken word gives this generation the means to create exclamatory, free and freeing free verse.

Like their mentors who improvised in the jazz or spiritual mode, these poets are challenged by freestyling à la hip-hop. Spoken word affirms passionate, even shocking expression. Because of the age of its main practitioners, spoken word often lingers on sensual themes, or righteously offers ethical and just insights for solving the most severe problems plaguing society.

Poetry has always been “hot” or “cool” within popular culture, and within each generation. Certainly a case can be made that spoken word is like a new wine in old bottles, and that it is a contemporary kind of urban poetry.

Spoken word poets, like the early Beats before them, practice their art in a democratic manner. Open-mic nights at spoken word venues typically have sign-up sheets for all who want to read their poems. First come, first served decides the order. The good, the bad, and the ugly convene happily and respectfully. Celebrity works in the cafés, however, just as it does in the larger society. If spoken word stars walk in, some accommodation is made to fit them into the lineup. On open-mic nights, initiates to spoken word learn their poetics, not by studying Contemporary American Poetry, but the hard way—through audience approval, or disapproval.

In addition to perusing contemporary poetry, the ambitions of the nine poets included in *Listen Up!* have them honing in on other interests as well. As spoken word gravitates more and more toward the performance arts, the poets are venturing into multiart and multigenre writing. Carl Hancock Rux has had over thirty plays produced. He also has produced and stars in his *Rux Revue*. Like any band that releases a CD and then tours, Rux fronts a quartet complete with a trio of divas as backup singers. He performs reciting, singing, and chanting many of the poems from his *Pagan Operetta*, and to original music that borrows mainly from soul and rock.

Tish Benson has exhibited deconstructed poems as visual sur-

faces; she's also written plays and film scripts. Jessica Care Moore's second play, *There Are No Asylums for the Real Crazy Women*, centers on a dialogue between Vivien Haigh-Wood Eliot, the English wife of renowned poet T. S. Eliot, and Jess, a young poet. This play took its fuller shape from a poem in Moore's book *The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth*. She has recorded with Grammy-nominated jazz altoist Antonio Hart and at this writing is planning a studio recording for the hip-hop market. Saul Williams will see the release of a CD coproduced by Rick Rubin, who launched the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, and LL Cool J. In other words, these are ambitious, multigenre artists who use their prodigious talents in a multitude of ways.

Historically these poets fit squarely within the African-American literary tradition. Langston Hughes (1902–1967) wrote essays, plays, librettos, fiction, and poems. He translated poetry from several languages, and traveled widely as well. Praised and reviled for embracing revolution, Hughes nevertheless remained astute when it came to geopolitical issues. He expressed his own protests against racism in his written works and in public. The founder of African-American theater companies in Harlem and Los Angeles, Hughes was also recorded reciting poetry on LPs. Clearly, the *Listen Up!* poets do not fall far from the tree.

Amiri Baraka has also been a major mentor to the poets of this volume. In fact, he may be one of the original spoken word artists. In the late fifties and early sixties, he and Ted Joans were among the celebrated poets who became known as the Beats. They congregated in Greenwich Village coffeehouses and private lofts to recite their poems, often to the rhythms of congas and bongos. Baraka, known then as LeRoi Jones, published other avant-garde Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Diane Di Prima, and Peter Orlovsky in the literary magazine *Yugen*.

However, in the early sixties, Baraka left the realm of the

Beats because of racism and ideological differences. Baraka not only penned historical statements defining African-American music (*Blues People*, 1963) and poetry (*The Dead Lecturer*, 1964), which critiqued the Eurocentric aesthetic while affirming the values of African-American culture, he also extended his poems into monologues and fully developed plays. By 1965, Baraka had founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School in Harlem, dedicated to African-American nationalist values. Interestingly, both Baraka and Joans were called jazz poets, not only because of their musical loyalties, but because they were often called on by jazz musicians to sit in during concerts or recordings.

In fact, it was Ted Joans who created the media image of a Beat poet—usually wearing a beret and a black turtleneck. But Joans is quick to shift the focus away from this image. He says: “The Beat Generation wasn’t a way of dressing, it was a state of mind, of spirit. If you pick up *How I Became Hettie Jones*, you’ll read how she often saw this guy dressed in black. She asked me once why I wear black this and black that, and I said it was out of necessity. It’s better than going to a laundry every other day. That’s true. That’s it. It’s not original. They did it in France. When France came out of World War II, the existentialists dressed in dark clothes because they didn’t have the money to have clothes cleaned. That’s one of the things that upset people about Allen Ginsberg. Allen said yes, I go to a secondhand store and buy a suit. He never bought anything brand new.” As far as what the Beats accomplished, Joans succinctly notes: “We brought poetry to the public. We took it out of the *salons de poésie* that followed the traditions in Europe, especially in England where it was an elitist type of thing. Our generation brought poetry out in the open and we recited in coffeehouses and some bars. In New York they tried to prevent that; places had to have a cabaret license for us to read a poem, just like with the musicians—they couldn’t play where they didn’t have a cabaret license.” Because Ted Joans

has lived most of his life in Europe, his influence as a mentor has been felt by and large in that part of the world.

Speaking of the connection between spoken word and hip-hop, Amiri Baraka notes: "It's the same continuum; it just depends on where you get on the train." Jessica Care Moore proudly admits to being influenced by hip-hop's thirty-year lineage and acknowledges that it has wielded considerable impact on spoken word poetry. Elaborating on Baraka's view, Moore says: "Hip-hop and poetry stem from the same thing; it's just that the aesthetics are different. Hip-hop requires music." But she adds: "When I do a show, I have no beats, but at the same time, I can go into the studio with the same material and work with a hip-hop producer to create a poetry/hip-hop CD." Moore raises another point when she says, "Nikki Giovanni was influenced by jazz. . . . Amiri Baraka has been influenced by jazz and the blues. It's just that hip-hop is the music of our day, and so, we're influenced by it."

Taking full stock of the impact of spoken word poets, Moore says: "We definitely have breathed life into this art form, like generations haven't in a long time. A lot of it has to do with the influence of hip-hop music. Rakim's lyrics, KRS-ONE's, Blacksid's lyrics show that they twist their poetry a little bit and call it hip-hop and then they put a beat underneath it, and make some money. It's a billion-dollar industry. Maybe we can make a little bit of that. Maybe we will. If not, I think it will help us put a dent in that mainstream audience." S. H. Fernando Jr., who wrote *The New Beats*, would agree with Moore. He writes: "Hip-hop has infiltrated the mainstream because creativity is a commodity. . . . Rap creates not only artists but businessmen." Even if Moore has her own publishing company, no one can make the case that spoken word, published or recorded, has the commercial appeal that rap enjoys.

Most of the *Listen Up!* poets grew up hearing hip-hop; it is the music of their generation. However, Tracie Morris, Jessica Care Moore, Suheir Hammad, and Saul Stacey Williams show the most

influence of hip-hop on their writing and delivery of poetry. Williams rhymed when he was in junior high school, and so he believes it was part of his early development as a poet. Nevertheless, he resents being labeled and categorized. When Williams says he opens for hip-hop acts, he does so assuming it is understood that this merely means he is brought in to do his poetry and that he delivers. Williams turns uncompromising if he notices a pop label coming his way. He doesn't want to be boxed in or confined by the simplicities, and complicities, associated with musical or literary media tags. If he's acting, he's an actor; if he is in front of an audience reciting poetry, he is not performing, nor is he entertaining per se. He wants his art to be perceived as poetry, plain and simple. When Williams improvises center front of a live band, he may relent and use the term of his generation—"freestyling." It's clear, though, that he rejects attempts to fold his art into any easy brand-name category. In response to a caption appearing under a photo promoting *Slam*, Williams said, "I'm not a 'Rapper.'"

A major home base for some of the *Listen Up!* poets in the mid-nineties was at the Brooklyn Moon Café in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. The café's proprietor, Michael Thompson, admits that he didn't know much about poetry at first, but he thought poets would bring people into the café, which was what he needed when he first opened.

And bring in the people they did. Soon thereafter, paying five-dollar covers, a host of talented young people converged at the café on Friday nights for the open-mic readings. In summer, the air conditioner couldn't keep the temperature down; winter-time, the steamy windows gave testimony to the heat inside. As the temperature rose, so did the level of excitement. Emcees laid down the ground rules: People were to snap their fingers and not clap out of respect for the tenants living above the café. As for stepping up to the mic, the obligatory conventions included: Keep it short and sweet. "Sweet" meant poets had to be sexy.

Jessica Care Moore, Saul Stacey Williams, Suheir Hammad, and Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie fit the bill, but not at the expense of their multithemed poems. Aspiring initiates—mostly from Brooklyn narrators, orators, lyricists, and rappers—followed suit. They lingered over enjambments that brought together sexual and sensual imagery. After all, the hours from ten until two were prime time for the dating game. Most of the young women in braids, twists, locks, and afros dressed stylishly. Mariahadessa Tallie says, “The guys smelled good (from all those oils); they looked good, with teeth and eyes flashing, and they were charming, too.” A whole lot of introducing went on during intermission. Dancing was reserved for Saturday nights. On Fridays, drinking soft drinks or coffee, eating muffins, salmon burgers, or desserts (prepared by Thompson, his brother, and cousins), spoken word fans packed in close to listen to the poets who were their peers.

The grapevine eventually brought in “poetry tourists” and spoken word luminaries from afar—New Jersey, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and Boston. In fact, the founders of Boston’s Afrocentrics, a spoken word club, made several trips to the Moon to scout out contacts before they opened. By 1996 representatives from the press were frequently showing up for the Friday open-mic readings or the “Meet the Author” series on Sundays. Reporters were from New York; even Japanese newspapers and video crews from City Arts aired segments from readings more than once on Channel 13, the local New York PBS TV station. Even more attention was paid to Brooklyn’s poetry “Renaissance” when Jessica Care Moore’s photograph appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*.

But the open mic at the Brooklyn Moon Café served another purpose as well. It provided freedom of speech on safe ground. Community organizers, political candidates, senior mentors who either reminisced or preached in between poems, Park Slope gadabouts, Manhattanites on a mission, women telling it like it is,

and gay poets all came together every Friday night. Tallie says, "It was like a family." One of the headliners at the Brooklyn Moon Café, Saul Williams, said: "We were on the same page," referring to the spirit of community and keen state of awareness of the issues of the day.

But the core group of spoken word poets also debated the merits of the message in their poems. Maybe they could not explain the origins of the spiritual charge in their works, but they knew it was something the crowds wanted to hear. Jessica Care Moore was known for her follow-through. She enthusiastically did as she said. Outlining the "politics versus art debate," Moore says: "I think writing is a form of activism. It's the most seductive sort of activism that I've been able to do. I've tried to get involved with as many support organizations as I can." Then, returning to her talent and her task, Moore adds, "But I think I do a lot more work on my writing. I want to do more theater and film. I really enjoy publishing." And off she goes with a list of projects she is working on.

Writing poetry involves thinking in solitude, dreaming of images, meditating on meanings, and writing down what comes to mind. Thinking gets its fuel from reading literature, history, the sciences, philosophy, and reading the works deemed to be essential within the culture. Ted Joans says, "I grew up with my face stuck in a book. There's the key. Miles Davis said, 'Gonna get an education, on Forty-Second Street there's a big university called the New York Public Library. Spend some time.' It's true."

The poets, whose works have been sampled here, report that the reading they did in their youth provided the connective tissue between the past and future. Joans points out that the Beats were educated and had gone to "expensive" colleges, and those who had missed the train got there another way. For example, Gregory Corso used to sit in on classes at Harvard, or whatever he could get in. Reading definitely provided the point of departure for writ-