



# Mapping Intersections and Genre Crossings in UK Spoken-Word Poetries Since 1965

(11-12 November 2023)

## PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS



**erc FWF**

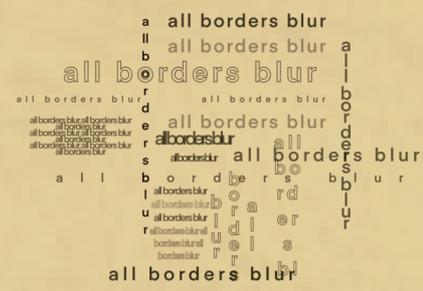
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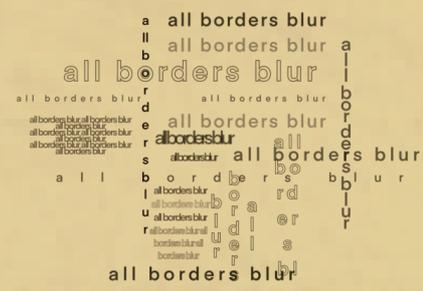
Queen Mary  
University of London



# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

## Day 1: 11 November 2023

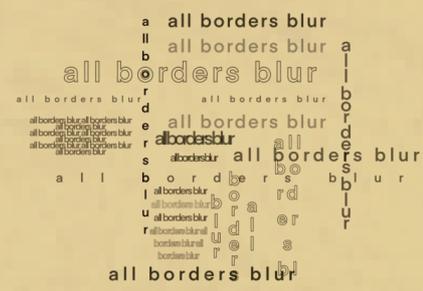
09:30 – 10:00	Welcome and Registration	
10:00 – 10:15	Opening Remarks	
10:20 – 11:20	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 1</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Speaking Back to Power: Spoken Word Poetry and/as Protest</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>(Chair: Martina Pfeiler)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Hanan Issa</b>, “When Language Chimes: Building Bridges with an Ancient Welsh Poetic Metre”</p>
		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Jay Mitra</b>, “Decolonising Punk Poetry: The Politics of Resistance in the Poetry of Salena Godden and Danez Smith”</p>
		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Qudsia Akhtar</b>, “Exploring the Fourth Space: Resistance in the Poetry and Poetics of Hafsah Aneela Bashir and Sascha Akhtar”</p>
11:20 – 11:35	Tea & Coffee Break	
11:40 – 12:40	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 2</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Poetry in the Now, Poetry for Social Justice</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>(Chair: Qudsia Akhtar)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Covadonga Fernández Garcia</b>, “Blurred Boundaries, Blurred Lines: Debris Stevenson and her Multi-Disciplinary Quest for Empowering Neurodiverse Students”</p>
		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Melanie Abrahams</b>, “A Treatment for All Borders Blur 2023: Spoken Worlds”</p>
		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Bhumika Billa</b>, “Art as a Social System: Dismantling Power Lock-Ins, One Poem at a Time”</p>
12:40 – 13:40	Lunch Break	



# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

## Day 1: 11 November 2023 (contd.)

13:45 – 14:45	<p><b>Panel 3</b></p> <p><b>On the Move: Choreopoems and Movement/Dance</b></p> <p><b>(Chair: Bhumika Billa)</b></p>	<p><b>Carol Leeming, "Choreopoelectics: My Choreopoetry, Multi-Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary Praxis of Embodied Orality, Intersectionality and Magic Realism"</b></p>
		<p><b>Abby Oliveira, "A Poet Runs Into Some Acrobats: Abby Oliveira's Poetic Collaborations with Compagnie XY"</b></p>
		<p><b>Liz MacWhirter, Jonathan Kearney &amp; Sander Vloeberghs, "Blue: A Lament for the Sea"</b></p>
14:45 – 15:00	<b>Pastry Break</b>	
15:00 – 16:00	<p><b>Panel 4</b></p> <p><b>Sounds of Resistance: Spoken Word Poetry and Music</b></p> <p><b>(Chair: Ross McFarlane)</b></p>	<p><b>Lence, "Blur the Lines: Process, Practice &amp; Performance"</b></p>
		<p><b>Shefali Banerji, "Beyond Borders and Binaries: Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi's <i>Dancing to Music You Hate</i>"</b></p>
		<p><b>Erin Gannon, "Shooting for the Moon and Missing: Trouble While Combining Poetry and Rock n' Roll"</b></p>
16:10 – 17:10	<p><b>Keynote Lecture I</b></p> <p><b>(Chair: Julia Lajta- Novak)</b></p>	<p><b>Anthony Joseph, "Finding the Frequency at the Center"</b></p>
17:10 – 17:35	<b>Wrap-up for Day One</b>	



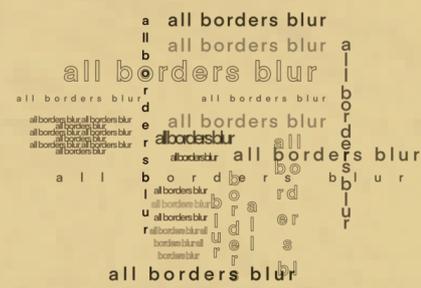
# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

## Day 1: 11 November 2023 (contd.)

18:00 – 21:00	<b>Poetry Party at the Roebuck (now The Court)</b> featuring performances by <b>Carol Leeming, Hannah Silva,</b> <b>and Red Medusa!</b>
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## Day 2: 12 November 2023

09:30 – 10:00	<b>Welcome and Registration</b>	
10:05 – 11:05	<b>Panel 5</b>  <b>Poetry in the Digital Age: On Spoken Word and Technology</b>  <b>(Chair: Shefali Banerji)</b>	<b>Claire Palzer</b> , “All your disembodied heads floating on a screen’: Virtual Performance Practices in Mel Bradley’s <i>Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins</i> ”
		<b>Hannah Silva</b> , “My Child, the Algorithm”
		<b>Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani &amp; Atau Tanaka</b> , “Heart Monologues’: The Cultural, Experimental, and Sensorial Journey of a Multilingual Poetry Performance”
11:10 – 12:10	<b>Panel 6</b>  <b>From Page to Stage: Spoken Word Poetry and Theatre</b>  <b>(Chair: Claire Palzer)</b>	<b>Rupert Smith</b> , “Tract: Between the Root of a Tongue and a Heart”
		<b>Ross McFarlane</b> , “Lessons Learned from Experimental Audio Drama”
		<b>Camellia Choudhuri</b> , “All these lifetimes searching for body’: Examining Joelle Taylor’s Experiments with Gender and Genre”



# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

## Day 2: 12 November 2023 (contd.)

12:15 – 12:30	Pastry Break	
12:30 – 13:30	Keynote Lecture II  (Chair: Shalini Sengupta)	Joelle Taylor, "Transgenre"
13:35 – 13:50	Closing Remarks	

### Conference convenors:

Dr. Shalini Sengupta, Newcastle University

Prof. Andrea Brady, Queen Mary University of London

Prof. Peter Howarth, Queen Mary University of London

### Conference (and website) administrator:

Marie Krebs, B.A., University of Vienna

### Conference artwork and design:

Shefali Banerji, M.A., University of Vienna

With many thanks for the support of the Poetry Off the Page team at the University of Vienna: Dr. Julia Novak; Claire Palzer, M.A.; Prof. Martina Pfeiler; Emily Poulter, B.A., and to conference assistant Thomas Buckingham at Queen Mary University of London.

# Poetry Off the Page

Literary History and the Spoken Word, 1965-2020



“Poetry Off the Page” is a five-year project, launched in September 2021 and directed by Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak (University of Vienna), in collaboration with the British poetry organisations Apples and Snakes and Renaissance One; Goldsmiths University of London; The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama; Queen Mary University of London; University College Dublin; the National Poetry Library UK; and the National Library of Ireland.

Poetry Off the Page investigates the significance of poetry performance to recent British and Irish literary history, taking account of the aesthetic and political potential of oral performance in conjunction with the alternative institutional structures, publication channels, career pathways, presentational formats, styles, and poetic genres that have emerged from its dynamic performance scenes. Drawing on, and contributing to, the recent digital Spoken WordArchive.org.uk, we conduct in-depth studies on the intersections of spoken word with literary and performance traditions, on Black British spoken-word poetry, the British poetry slam, Irish spoken word, and spoken-word theatre.

A core aim of the project is to articulate multifaceted theoretical and methodological approaches to poetry performance analysis and historiography. By revealing the vital role of oral performance in the history of Anglophone British poetry, providing new sources, and cultivating spaces for its study, this project marks a fresh intervention in British and Irish literary history and seeks to establish poetry performance research as a recognised branch of historico-literary enquiry.

For more information about the project and our **final project conference (2025)**, please visit →[www.poetryoffthepage.net](http://www.poetryoffthepage.net), and like us on



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>KEYNOTES</b>	Anthony Joseph, "Finding the Frequency at the Center"	1
	Joelle Taylor, "Transgenre"	2
Panel 1 Speaking Back to Power: Spoken Word Poetry and/as Protest  Chair: Martina Pfeiler	Hanan Issa, "When Language Chimes: Building Bridges with an Ancient Welsh Poetic Metre"	3
	Jay Mitra, "Decolonising Punk Poetry: The Politics of Resistance in the Poetry of Salena Godden and Danez Smith"	3
	Qudsia Akhtar, "Exploring the Fourth Space: Resistance in the Poetry and Poetics of Hafsa Aneela Bashir and Sascha Akhtar"	4-5
Panel 2 Poetry in the Now, Poetry for Social Justice  Chair: Qudsia Akhtar	Covadonga Fernández Garcia, "Blurred Boundaries, Blurred Lines: Debris Stevenson and her Multi-Disciplinary Quest for Empowering Neurodiverse Students"	6
	Melanie Abrahams, "A Treatment for All Borders Blur 2023: Spoken Worlds"	7
	Bhumika Billa, "Art as a Social System: Dismantling Power Lock-Ins, One Poem at a Time"	8
Panel 3 On the Move: Choreopoems and Movement/ Dance  Chair: Bhumika Billa	Carol Leeming, "Choreopoelectics: My Choreopoetry, Multi-Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary Praxis of Embodied Orality, Intersectionality and Magic Realism"	9
	Abby Oliveira, "A Poet Runs Into Some Acrobats: Abby Oliveira's Poetic Collaborations with Compagnie XY"	10
	Liz MacWhirter, Jonathan Kearney & Sander Vloebergs, "Blue: A Lament for the Sea"	10-11



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<p>Panel 4 Sounds of Resistance: Spoken Word Poetry and Music</p> <p>Chair: Ross McFarlane</p>	<p>Lence, "Blur the Lines: Process, Practice &amp; Performance"</p>	12
	<p>Shefali Banerji, "Beyond Borders and Binaries: Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi's Dancing to Music You Hate"</p>	12- 13
	<p>Erin Gannon, "Shooting for the Moon and Missing: Trouble While Combining Poetry and Rock n' Roll"</p>	13
<p>Panel 5 Poetry in the Digital Age: On Spoken Word and Technology</p> <p>Chair: Shefali Banerji</p>	<p>Claire Palzer, "'All your disembodied heads floating on a screen': Virtual Performance Practices in Mel Bradley's Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins"</p>	14
	<p>Hannah Silva, "My Child, the Algorithm"</p>	15
	<p>Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani &amp; Atau Tanaka, "'Heart Monologues': The Cultural, Experimental, and Sensorial Journey of a Multilingual Poetry Performance"</p>	15- 16
<p>Panel 6 From Page to Stage: Spoken Word Poetry and Theatre</p> <p>Chair: Claire Palzer</p>	<p>Rupert Smith, "Tract: Between the Root of a Tongue and a Heart"</p>	17
	<p>Ross McFarlane, "Lessons Learned from Experimental Audio Drama"</p>	17
	<p>Camellia Choudhuri, "'All these lifetimes searching for body': Examining Joelle Taylor's Experiments with Gender and Genre"</p>	18- 19
<p>EVENING PROGRAMME</p>		20



# KEYNOTE

(Chair: Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak)

## DR. ANTHONY JOSEPH Finding the Frequency at the Center

Anthony Joseph's career as a writer commenced amidst the vibrant cultural milieu of postcolonial Trinidad during the 1970s and 80s. But when Joseph relocated to London in 1989, avenues for publication available to Black poets were scarce, primarily limited to live performance, small, independent presses and self-publishing. There seemed to be a vacuum at the heart of black British writing, and an expectation that Black British poetics would serve an arena where the politics of identity and belonging were negotiated. There was neither a tradition nor a community of experimental or speculative writing that Joseph's work occupied. This lecture employs Frantz Fanon's conceptual framework regarding the evolution of the 'native' intellectual to trace the profound transformation of aesthetics within Joseph's poetic and performative oeuvre. Through this critical lens, it delves into the intricate web of influences, experimentation, and evolving tonalities that have shaped Joseph's voice as a poet. By examining how this voice and aesthetic has developed within the dynamic landscape of contemporary British poetry, and drawing upon his 20 years as a an academic and lecturer in creative writing, Joseph's keynote also illuminates a broader narrative of Black poets' experiences in navigating the literary landscape, moving from the periphery to the centre.

### Bio

Dr Anthony Joseph is an award winning Trinidad-born poet, novelist, academic and musician. He is the author of five poetry collections and three novels. His 2018 novel *Kitch: A Fictional Biography of a Calypso Icon* was shortlisted for the Republic of Consciousness Prize, the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award, and long listed for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. His most recent fiction is the experimental novel *The Frequency of Magic*. In 2019, he was awarded a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship. As a musician, he has released eight critically acclaimed albums, and in 2020 received a Paul Hamblyn Foundation Composers Award. He is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Kings College, London. His new collection *Sonnets for Albert* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize, and won the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry 2022.



# KEYNOTE

(Chair: Dr. Shalini Sengupta)

## JOELLE TAYLOR

### Transgenre

When is a poem a novel, when is it a play, or an opera, or a film sequence. When is it all these things?

This keynote speech will address the idea of fluidity and mutability within writing, and how the poetics of performance support radical explorations into form and subject. It will think about crossing the borders that divide genres. What happens when a poetry collection becomes memoir, or a long narrative? What happens when half the narrative is told by the body in performance.? It will think about the embodiment of poetry as its own language.

The keynote speech also feature a 15-minute performance from C+NTO & Othered Poems to end, and an opportunity for questions from the audience.

### Bio

Joelle Taylor is the author of 4 collections of poetry and a novel. Her most recent collection C+NTO & Othered Poems won the 2021 T.S Eliot Prize and was the subject of a Radio 4 arts documentary Butch. C+NTO was nominated for the Rathbone Folio Prize, longlisted for the Ondaatje Prize, and won 2022 the Polari Book Prize. It was named by The Telegraph, the New Statesman, The Guardian, The White Review & Times Literary Supplement as one of the best poetry books of the year, as well as DIVA magazine's Book of the Month, and awarded 5 stars by the Morning Star. She has completed a book tour of Australia including Sydney Opera House (March 2022). C+NTO is currently being adapted for theatre with a view to touring. A former UK SLAM Champion, she founded the national youth poetry slams SLAMBassadors through the Poetry Society in 2001, remaining its Artistic Director until 2018. She is a co-curator and host of Out-Spoken Live, resident at the Southbank Centre, and an editor at Out-Spoken Press. She is also completing her memoirs for publication in 2024, and her novel of interconnecting stories The Night Alphabet will be published by Quercus in Spring of that year. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and the 2022 Saboteur Spoken Word Artist of the Year.

[www.joelletaylor.co.uk](http://www.joelletaylor.co.uk)

# ABSTRACTS



## **Panel 1 - Speaking Back to Power: Spoken Word Poetry and/as Protest [chair: Dr. Martina Pfeiler]**

### **Hanan Issa, “When Language Chimes: Building Bridges with an Ancient Welsh Poetic Metre”**

Cynghanedd, roughly translated as harmony in English, is an ancient form of poetic structure that has coexisted and evolved alongside the Welsh language itself. Within its rules of strict metre, form, and syllable count exists a playfulness and rebellion echoing the distinct culture of Wales: a country often dismissed as England’s little, less interesting cousin. I want to explore this ancient practice and how its rules of strict metre have allowed poets to express the anger, frustration and pride that exists in the collective Welsh cultural memory. But also how there is potential through encouraging English language poets to indulge in its complex web of harmony to build a better, more openly curious relationship between the two countries' poetic and literary traditions.

#### **Bio**

Hanan is a Welsh-Iraqi poet, filmmaker, and artist. Her publications include her poetry collection *My Body Can House Two Hearts* and *Welsh Plural: Essays on the Future of Wales*. She is part of the writersroom for Channel 4’s award-winning series *We Are Lady Parts* and is co-founder of the *Where I’m Coming From* open mic series. She is the current National Poet of Wales and 2022-2023 Hay International Fellow.

Twitter/ Instagram: @hananiscreative

### **Jay Mitra, “Decolonising Punk Poetry: The Politics of Resistance in the Poetry of Salena Godden and Danez Smith”**

While poetry and punk have been studied separately, their amalgamation into punk poetry remains largely unexplored. Drawing on Matthew Worley et al.'s four defining points of connection in punk, this paper analyses how Jamaican-Irish poet Salena Godden and African American poet Danez Smith can be considered punk poets. Godden and Smith exemplify punk's tenets by positioning their poetry in opposition to the status quo and defying the elitism of traditional poetry through accessible live performances. As poets of colour and marginalised genders, they confront patriarchal and institutionally racist structures, which adds a heightened element of risk to their radical political expressions. By utilising performance poetry to protest state violence and racism, Godden and Smith embody the rebellious spirit of punk beyond its aesthetic trappings.

# ABSTRACTS



(contd.)

Chapter 1 engages with scholarship around punk poetry’s idiosyncrasies—namely the use of what John Parham calls ‘Bakhtinian forms’—as well as the implications of the ‘punk poet’ label. Chapter 2 explores Salena Godden’s spoken word as a form of resistance and a reflection of racial alienation. Chapter 3 focuses on punk’s etymological roots in queerness and how there is inherent ‘punkness’ to the queer protest that underscores several of Danez Smith’s poems. This paper’s proposition that Smith and Godden are contemporary ‘punk’ poets encourages a decolonisation of punk poetry. It questions why when history speaks of punk poets, it paradoxically erases the role of queerness and race in a mode that purports to amplify marginalised voices.

## Bio

Jay Mitra (they/he) is a British Indian punk poet, multi slam champion, and freelance journalist from Yorkshire, now based in London. They were joint third-place in the Roundhouse Slam 2023 and their poetry has been published in Acumen Poetry, Drawn To The Light Press, Streetcake Magazine and Broken Sleep Books' Queer Icons anthology. Jay has been featured on BBC Radio 6 and has also performed in BBC's Contains Strong Language, Hit the Ode, Leeds Literature Fest, Manchester Pride, and Manchester Punk Festival. Currently, they are pursuing a career in teaching and are working as a freelance writer and facilitator. You can find out more about them on Instagram and Twitter @punkofcolour.

## **Qudsia Akhtar, “Exploring the Fourth Space: Resistance in the Poetry and Poetics of Hafsa Aneela Bashir and Sascha Akhtar”**

As a British-Pakistani poet, I faced the uncertainty of existing in a literary void where my voice felt misplaced. Caught in constructing an innovative poetic voice that expressed marginalised experiences, I felt it was crucial to create and contribute to the urgent conversation of Race and Poetry in order to offer insight, creative thought, and expression.

In my twenty-minute presentation, I wish to outline and discuss the ways in which the poets, Hafsa Aneela Bashir and Sascha Akhtar, resist preconceived notions of a fixed identity whilst exploring their experiences of gender and race.

I would begin by outlining the fourth space, a term coined by writers Sandeep Parmar, Bhanu Kapil, and Nisha Ramayya in *Threads*, and defining it as a space to interrogate the binaries of self and other. Referring to Bashir’s poetics, I will argue that Bashir’s commitment to humanising voices from her communities is integral when resisting othered notions of the self. I will then focus on Akhtar’s interest in sound poetics and creating a ‘no-voice’ position. Akhtar, an experimental poet whose body of work seeks to blur the boundaries of self/other, performance/page, and linguistic registers, adds further complexity to her creative approach by drawing upon the musicality and mysticism often found in Urdu poetics.



# ABSTRACTS

(contd.)

My aim is to encourage not only British-Pakistanis to engage in conversations about their dual life experiences, but through recognising and addressing British-Pakistani experiences, we may strengthen our shared selves to project the ‘I’ of the British-Pakistani into the future of the literary world.

## Bio

Qudsia Akhtar is in the third year of her Creative Writing PhD at the University of Salford exploring the Fourth Space and British-Pakistani experience. Her poetry has appeared in the Acumen, Tupelo Quarterly, Poetry London and Wildness. Akhtar’s poetry has been commissioned by the New Creatives scheme and was highly commended in the Forward Book of Poetry 2023. Her debut collection of poems Khamoshi is out with Verve Poetry Press.

# ABSTRACTS



## Panel 2 - Poetry in the Now, Poetry for Social Justice [chair: Qudsia Akhtar]

### Covadonga Fernández García (\*online), “Blurred Boundaries, Blurred Lines: Debris Stevenson and her Multi-Disciplinary Quest for Empowering Neurodiverse Students”

Considered a ‘bi-medial’ (Novak, 2011) art form, the quintessence of contemporary spoken word poetry is interdisciplinarity. This paper explores the work of the widely acclaimed grime poet Debris Stevenson, who blends spoken word, dance and grime in her performances. Her innovative play Poet in da Corner (2018-2020) combines live performance, a page-published script and an album, thus bringing together different genres around one piece of work. Within the play there is also cross-pollination between spoken word, grime, and dance. I propose an analysis of Poet in da Corner regarding content and form in order to draw connections with her short film “Over Toast” (2017) and her poems “Stop Dat” (2016) and “S.E.N” (2020). My approach will be based on intersectional feminism and will seek to examine the convergence of neurodiversity, gender, age, and social class in her pieces. One key aspect of Stevenson’s approach to spoken word poetry is the importance given to writing from the body, influenced by her passion for grime and her struggle with dyslexia. This allows for links to be established with other female coetaneous poets Safiya Kamaria Kinsasha and Keisha Thompson, whose works tackle similar topics, formal approaches, and creative methods. She herself rejects labels and her pieces cannot be easily fitted into boxes. Her work thus seems to epitomise the focus of this conference as a celebration of blurred boundaries between genres and a critical approach to major social issues such as diversity in education.

#### Bio

Covadonga Fernández García is a predoctoral fellow of the ‘Severo Ochoa’ Programme for Research and Teaching Training funded by the Principality of Asturias (Spain). She is also doing her PhD in the Gender and Diversity programme at the University of Oviedo. Her research focuses on contemporary spoken word poems written by British women, which she analyses through the lens of Intersectional Feminism.

# ABSTRACTS



## Melanie Abrahams, “A Treatment for All Borders Blur 2023: Spoken Worlds”

The media representations of spoken word have fostered a number of misrepresentations over the time span that the genre has risen and fallen in public taste; from being ‘the new rock and roll’ to descriptions of it lacking in quality and range in relationship to its poetry cousin. This talk sidesteps comparisons to poetry and focuses on the qualities, assets and benefits of spoken word, with themes including: The ‘art of liming’ - ‘liming’ spoken word events as social practice that encourages a carnival mindset, a fluid mash up rather than a forced separation of genres.

- Spoken Word and mental health, cultivating orality for wellbeing. The curative/wellbeing benefits as exemplified by projects such as Showcase Smoothie (a spoken word-mental health project connecting the NHS, leading artists and service users with schizophrenia/bipolar disorders).
- Hybridity and plurality as essential to spoken word. The benefits within an intersectional world that is more recognising of ‘otherness’.
- What we leave out when we focus too heavily on the performative aspects of spoken word. The value and pleasure of oration; spoken word as ‘giving a good account’; an enlivening practice of agency as exemplified by artists such as John Agard.

The talk will draw on my lived experience as a speaker, curator and producer in the genre. The style will be warm, championing of many voices and pluralities, and in a performance lecture style that draws on landmark artists such as Amiri Baraka, Stacy Makishi, Michael Horovitz and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze.

### Bio

Melanie Abrahams has fashioned and nurtured spoken word genres and artists for over twenty years, both independently, and through literature organisation Renaissance One. As well as producing the last two UK tours of Amiri Baraka, she curated tours for Paul Beatty, Bernardine Evaristo, John Agard, Patience Agbabi, Kei Miller, Jason Allen-Paisant, and Something I Said in 2010, a festival of ten spoken word formats (one person, ensemble shows, music and dance, talks etc) with over forty artists at the 80, 350 and 100 capacity Southbank Centre venues.

# ABSTRACTS



## **Bhumika Billa, “Art as a Social System: Dismantling Power Lock-Ins, One Poem at a Time”**

Recent political economy research has critically examined the structural role of institutions in locking-in power and reinforcing inequality. In extension, I aim to deconstruct ways in which the institution or social system of law reinforces power gaps and deepens existing inequalities. In my ongoing research, I am asking—how has the legal system adapted to the recent shift in cultural understandings of identity? The assumption here being—cultural understanding of a social artefact (gender in this case) is separate from the way law understands it. In the proposed paper, I am particularly interested in inquiring the role of art—in informing, shaping, and reflecting social artefacts. The beginning of this exploration will be through a case study of the dialectical role of performance poetry in shaping ‘identity’ outside the boundaries of institutional language. Using contemporary spoken word poems to mark (if not measure) this shift, the paper will begin comparing ways in which law and spoken word poetry give meaning to our social reality. This inquiry will then help me inform the broader inquiry—how art is a uniquely placed social system, ‘writing or speaking back’ to other power i.e. the social systems or institutions that typically serve the interests of the powerful. I will open my presentation with a spoken-word performance to illustrate a cross-disciplinary attempt to dismantle power, followed by a preliminary analysis of my research question. The objective is to pose more specific questions and brainstorm ways to incorporate both practise-led and practise-based methodologies in critically examining structural power gaps.

### **Bio**

Bhumika Billa is a legal academic, spoken word poet and Kathak dancer from India. Her academic work engages with the themes of law, society, and technology. She is a PhD candidate and Cambridge Trust scholar at the University of Cambridge. Her award-winning and poly-lingual poems combine Indian classical dance with spoken word, and have been performed at and/or featured by the Southbank Centre, Button Poetry, Apples and Snakes and BBC Words First. She currently writes on power, heritage and justice.

# ABSTRACTS



## Panel 3 - On the Move: Choreopoems and Movement/Dance [chair: Bhumika Billa]

### Carol Leeming, “Choreopoelectics: My Choreopoetry, Multi-Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary Praxis of Embodied Orality, Intersectionality and Magic Realism”

As poet, choreopoet, playwright, musician, composer, director, and performer, I express embodied orality, I am a transliterate, multi-disciplinary/interdisciplinary artist. Interweaving, long form poetic prose, music, choreography/physical theatre/, still & moving digital visuals. I have produced two successful solo magic realist, choreopoem theatre shows.

My choreopoetry is highlighted in The Cambridge Companion British Black And Asian Literature (1945-2010) Ed. Deidre Osborne: The Poetics and Politics of Spoken Word Poetry, by Corinne Fowler pg. 185-187. I have devised my own specific methodology choreopoelectics, having successfully created work with my creative production teams. My choreopoelectics praxis, of dialectical exchanges, specific rhythms, to interlink poetic prose with all other artistic elements for productions. Gives authentic, artistic cohesion, for creative production teams, and performances. To effectively entrain diverse audiences. For a wholly, immersive, compelling, and transformative theatrical experiences.

My monologue, choreopoetry play performances, centre devolved narratives of Black Women, LGBTQ, other marginalised people, of Leicester, East Midlands. Highlighting, issues of race, gender, class: intersectionality and cultural memory. Very importantly, my use of language, East Midlands, accents, argot and other dialects, is integral, ie. a very important aspect, of my writing choreopoetry plays.

In 2023 I've been awarded an Arts Council England grant, to R&D Music and Chorus, for Go Where the Songs Are. This, my third final choreopoem play, will complete my trilogy of choreopoem plays. To be a chamber opera set, in Leicester and Jamaica.

### Bio

Carol Leeming MBE FRSA awarded MBE as poet and playwright, and for contribution to Leicester arts and culture. A gifted, multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary artist, Carol is hailed as a polymath by academics, acclaimed as choreopoet by Leicester University. Carol's other roles include, director, dramaturg, singer-songwriter, composer, musician, journalist, mentor, public speaker, Visiting Creative Writing Lecturer MA Creative Writing, Nottingham Trent University, & MA Writing for Performance Derby University. A Writers Mosaic Writer, Lector 2023 Reading Round Royal Literary Fund.

# ABSTRACTS



## **Abby Oliveira, “A Poet Runs Into Some Acrobats: Abby Oliveira’s Poetic Collaborations with Compagnie XY”**

This presentation examines the intersection between spoken-word poetry and acrobatics in poet Abby Oliveira’s collaborations with modern circus company Compagnie XY which took place in 2022 and ‘23 – namely in the 2023 project culminating in the participative street show *After the Rain*. The projects took place in Derry in the North of Ireland, and required poetic collaboration with not only the acrobats, but also musicians, a street artist, a choir, and (crucially) the public. Using documented materials collected during the rehearsal and performance process - such as video clips, journal entries, correspondences with artists, and details of the poetic approaches chosen –as well as performances of some of the poetry devised, it demonstrates a fresh, exciting, and unusual process of moving poetry both off the page and off the conventional stage into the living, participative, public space. It critically considers what it all means for the craft of poetry – written and in performance - of how it is received and utilised both by the public, and the rest of the creative team within the wider context of a show that’s focus is first-and-foremost physical rather than linguistic.

### **Bio**

Abby Oliveira is a writer and performer based in Derry in the North of Ireland. Her work is often cross-discipline and collaborative, comprising poetry, storytelling, music, prose, playwriting, and/or physical performance. Her work has been most recently published in *The 32: An anthology of Irish Working Class voices* (Unbound, 2021), *The New Frontier* (New Island Books, 2021), and *Empty House* (Doire Press, 2021). She has been commissioned as a writer by The MAC (Belfast), BBC Radio 4, RTÉ Radio, and more.

## **Liz MacWhirter, Jonathan Kearney & Sander Vloebergs, “Blue: A Lament for the Sea”**

‘Blue: a lament for the sea’ is a 20-minute intermedial experience devised by award-winning writer Liz MacWhirter in collaboration with digital artist Jonathan Kearney and choreographer Sander Vloebergs. ‘Blue’ comprises a hyperreal long verse narrative spoken live with a dancer and an abstract underwater film and sonic soundtrack. It is a choreopoetic exploration of sacrifice, rebirth and bodily co-creation within Sander’s larger research project into dance and religious ritual. A Scottish Gaelic medieval prophecy proclaimed an apocalyptic sea flood would drown all lands save for the sacred Isle of Iona. In ‘Blue: a lament for the sea’, words that wintered for a thousand years haunt the Anthropocene as the oceans entangle birth with death. A grieving woman swims off Iona as she laments the climate crisis; the landscape responds.

# ABSTRACTS



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As in a dream vision, words drift from a hidden time of medieval contemplative spiritual thought, where paradox forms a place for holding loss, layered with contemporary trauma theology from the Christian worldview. In 'Blue: a lament for the sea', the contemplative holding of complexity provides a framework for ecological grief with a lamenting hope that may engender action. In the end, 'Blue' asks, what newness may be birthed?

## Bio

Liz MacWhirter is an award-winning writer completing a creative writing PhD at the University of Glasgow. Her debut novel 'Black Snow Falling' (Scotland Street Press 2018) was nominated for the Carnegie Medal 2019. She performed 'Blue: a lament for the sea' at Yale University, 2023, and Hidden Door Arts Festival 2022. Other poetry has been published by Lucy Writers and 4M netlabel. Creative-critical papers presented in 2023 include Yale Graduate Conference in Religion and Ecology, International Medieval Congress and the International Piers Plowman Society. As a copywriter Liz has won over 20 creative awards.

Jonathan Kearney is a Liverpool based artist, a Teaching Scholar and the Course Leader in MA Fine Art Digital at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. He is fascinated by the intersection of art, theology and the digital.

## Sander Vloebergs

My art explores the relationship between physicality, spirituality and religion from a position as researcher-dancer, based at KU Leuven. After completing my double doctorate in theology and literature, I now focus on dance as a method to investigate the role of the (moving) body within the theology and rituals of the Catholic Church. Ritual (inspired) dances are increasingly performed on artistic stages. Nevertheless, choreographers are reluctant to accept Christian references and dance research remains underexposed within theology. I take this unique opportunity to create hybrid forms of performance that fluctuate between dance art, Christian ritual, and textual exploration. This creative process generates new networks and produces innovative insights into the nature of dance, theology and religion.

# ABSTRACTS



## Panel 4 - Sounds of Resistance: Spoken Word Poetry and Music [chair: Ross McFarlane]

### Lence, “Blur the Lines: Process, Practice & Performance”

I would like to propose a presentation and a performance that details how my practice blurs genre lines between Rap and Poetry exploring the influences of my creative process as well as how this has impacted on my cultural and artistic identity. I will focus on my experiences of founding an event called ‘Blur the Lines’ - which is an interdisciplinary creative showcase of Rappers, Poets, Singers & More. I will draw on this to convey my insight into presenting an event that celebrates the cross-over of Rap and Poetry, questioning where the lines are drawn and blurred as well as challenging what is and isn’t seen as literature. ‘Blur the Lines’ is an event that has appeared at Leeds Literature Festival on 3 occasions as well as 2 sold out shows at Leeds Playhouse Theatre.

All the material that I perform at Spoken Word events are lyrics that I have written to instrumentals, Hip Hop or Grime beats with a specific tempo. Each line I write has a BPM and a flow it belongs to. When I perform these lyrics without music the possibilities expand in how I can experiment with my delivery. I have recently experimented with performing lyrics over instrumentals where the snares and hi-hats have been taken out in order to deliver my words over the intended music but without the constraint of the specific tempo. The presentation will culminate in a performance that demonstrates how my style represents a blurring of both Rap and Poetry.

### Bio

I’m Lence, a Rap & Spoken Word Artist from Leeds. I write, release & perform my own music that reflects my own experiences. I blur genre lines – performing poetry in rap settings & rap in poetry settings. This inspired me to start my own event ‘Blur the Lines’ (est.2019) a collaborative & diverse showcase of 20+ Rappers, Poets, Musicians & Comedians based in Yorkshire, an interdisciplinary show connecting creative scenes, aiming to positively impact the creative landscape of the North.

### Shefali Banerji, “Beyond Borders and Binaries: Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi’s Dancing to Music You Hate”

At the turn of the millennium, long-form one-person shows emerged within the British poetry performance scene, charting out the ambit of British spoken word theatre. The shows are customarily written and performed by poets themselves in their unique styles with theatrical sensibilities yet minimal props and flourish, employing a range of performance traditions. Over the years, spoken word theatre has broadened its scope to incorporate plays/shows which emphasise an intermedial “blurring of generic boundaries, crossover and hybrid performances [...] and a self-conscious reflexivity

# ABSTRACTS



(contd.)

that displays the devices of performance in performance” (Chapple et al. 11), embracing medial transposition and media combination (Rajewsky 51) in their essence. In this paper, I analyse one such show, namely *Dancing to Music You Hate* by Jasmine Gardosi, which was commissioned by and premiered at Warwick Arts Centre in October 2021. This genre-bending performance incorporates a mix of beatboxing, poetry, and Celtic dubstep enhanced by Gardosi’s collaboration with a live band. The show revolves around the themes of gender identity and queerness, and amalgamates various performance traditions as mentioned above, espousing a certain artistic liminality that complements its subject of gender euphoria and fluidity. In my presentation, I will analyse the October 2021 WAC video recording of the show, while also employing phenomenological observations from my attendance of a January 2023 live performance at Birmingham’s Symphony Hall. My aim is to highlight the show's intermedialities using an interdisciplinary approach rooted in literary, poetry performance, and theatre studies to offer a critical reading of its written text and performance aesthetic.

## Bio

Shefali Banerji is a poet-performer and PhD researcher at the University of Vienna working on the ERC project “Poetry Off the Page”. Her research explores the origin and development of Spoken Word Theatre in the UK.

## Erin Gannon, “Shooting for the Moon and Missing: Trouble While Combining Poetry and Rock n’ Roll”

Poet and singer Erin Gannon has been incubating a long-form poem rock opera as part of her doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. Originally conceived as a performance piece, this poetic *Behind the Music* recounts the history of a band that *didn't* make it. When the unexpected international public health crisis of the last few years forced her to reimagine the project, things got interesting. Join her for a performance and discussion of her attempts to marry her old roadhouse country band's music with an epic, poetic narrative, after which she'll lead you through an experiment in rock n' roll ekphrasis.

## Bio

Erin Gannon is a poet and performer whose practice meanders between verse, performance, and music. She has been published in *Honest Ulsterman*, *Gutter Magazine*, and *Rider Magazine*, among others. She holds an MA in Poetry from Queens University, Belfast and is a doctoral Creative Writing candidate at the University of Glasgow. She rides a motorcycle.

# ABSTRACTS



## Panel 5 - Poetry in the Digital Age: On Spoken Word and Technology [chair: Shefali Banerji]

### Claire Palzer, “‘All your disembodied heads floating on a screen’: Virtual Performance Practices in Mel Bradley’s Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person events at the heart of the spoken word community across the UK were cancelled and spoken word practices largely moved online. There, they adapted to the challenges of that particular moment in time and explored the potentials of digital space in a variety of ways. Spoken word theatre, like other genres of performance, found hybridized forms of existence during this time (cf. Simou; Fiorato).

An example of spoken word theatre adapting to the circumstances of the pandemic in terms of aesthetics, mediation, and audience engagement is Ms. Noir Presents: Seven Deadly Sins by Northern Irish spoken word artist Mel Bradley. The show was marketed as “a fusion of spoken word, poetry, storytelling, burlesque and theatre” (Bradley), in which Ms. Noir, hell’s receptionist, uses spoken word poetry to tell stories about hell’s residents to a group of visitors. Developed from previous live performances, this show was produced during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Northern Ireland and was live streamed as part of the annual Derry Halloween festival and, unlike other iterations, included pre-recorded interludes with a new character. I draw on performance, literary, and media studies to analyse the video recording of the performance, focusing on how it explored the potential of its mediation for aesthetic as well as practical purposes. I posit that this show succeeds in creating a sense of immersion and liveness for the viewers, despite its non-participatory setting, and that it demonstrates adaptive creative practices employed by spoken word poets in virtual performance.

### Bio

Claire Palzer is a PhD researcher at the University of Vienna in the Poetry Off the Page project led by Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak. Her work focuses on spoken word poetry in Ireland from the 1990s to the present day and the particularities of this performative and situated art form. She is also interested in Irish studies more broadly, as well as historical fiction, cultural memory, feminist and queer studies.

# ABSTRACTS



## Hannah Silva, “My Child, the Algorithm”

This paper/performance interrogates and demonstrates ways in which writers might use GPT algorithms to generate material, as collaborators. Silva presents their collaboration with a text-generating algorithm, GPT, using a loop station, sound poetry, and an algorithm. They will perform narrative and sound poetry drawn from their memoir on love and queer single parenting, *My Child, the Algorithm* (Footnote Press). Silva will question ways in which algorithms are being creatively limited by the companies that control them, such as OpenAI. Their parameters are being adjusted and we are losing opportunities for poetry. They are becoming more normative, and to use OpenAI’s adjective, ‘safe’. This kind of controlled algorithm will never evolve a new genre, or tell us anything surprising about love.

Jeanette Winterson says, ‘let’s not call it artificial intelligence, alternative intelligence is more accurate, and we need alternatives.’ (12 Bytes) How might we queer the algorithm? As algorithms become better at following the ‘rules’ of writing, writers must re-write those rules. We must question who is controlling algorithms, what they are learning from, and how they are being used. AI imitates patterns created by humans. We need to change these patterns. We do not need algorithms to imitate humans, to write like us or to think like us. Rather than viewing algorithms such as GPT-4 as a threat, how can writers respond by identifying what it is that humans can do and algorithms cannot, and by using algorithms to open up new modes of creativity? How can poets collaborate with AI to find alternative ways of thinking, and writing?

### Bio

Dr. Hannah Silva is an award-winning writer and performer. They have written eight plays for BBC Radio 3 and 4 and have released a sound poetry album *Talk in a bit*. Silva holds a PhD from Stirling University on the analysis of poetry in performance. They created an archive of interviews with Black British poets for the British Library. Silva is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Queen Mary University of London. Their memoir *My Child, the Algorithm* is published by Footnote Press.

## Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani & Atau Tanaka, “‘Heart Monologues’: The Cultural, Experimental, and Sensorial Journey of a Multilingual Poetry Performance”

Part of the collaborative poetry project “Unbound” exploring the interrelationship between contemporary multilingual poetry practice and multimedia technologies (funded by the Language Acts and Worldmaking Small grants programme 2018 and 2019).

# ABSTRACTS



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Multilingual poetry is, by nature, an interdisciplinary art form that invites experimentation and play with language(s), whether it occurs at the level of the written and spoken word or across the borders of the different art forms.

Addressing the conference questions of spoken-word poetry and its relationship with the visual arts/music/dance/theatre, and its relationship to digital media, this talk will present the multifaced journey of the multilingual poetry performance “Heart monologues” by poet and author Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani. "Heart monologues" is a 35 mins long multi-sensory recital based on a poem sequence containing thirteen poems in French, English and Croatian. It combines words of poetry with recorded and live voices, and music by the composer Atau Tanaka who performs live using heart and muscle sensors connected to a modular synthesizer. It includes the sonic multivocal piece “HeartCoeurSrce” (1m19s) by artistic co-director Delphine Salkin. Bolfek-Radovani will trace and discuss the creative trajectory of “Heart monologues” (premiered in London in March 2022) across the European cultural spaces of London, Paris and Pula using the critical perspectives ranging from philosophy, theatre and voice theory and cultural studies to poetry studies in the work of Adriana Cavarero, Konstantinos Thomaidis, Lucia Farinati, Claudia Firth, Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin. Composer and academic Atau Tanaka will say a few words about setting music to text and will briefly explain the principles of using heart and muscle sensors in the performance “Heart monologues”.

## Bio

Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani is a London-based multilingual poet (Croatian/Algerian heritage) born in Zagreb. Her poetry has been published in the UK, Croatia, and Canada. She has (co-)directed multilingual poetry performances and has given talks and published essays on multilingual poetry practice since 2018. Her poetry collection *Knitting drum machines for exiled tongues* was published in 2022 (Dorset: Tears in the Fence). Member Centre for Poetry, Queen Mary. Poet-in-residence, Centre 4 Digital Music, Queen Mary. Visiting Research Fellow, University of Westminster.

Atau Tanaka studied with Ivan Tcherepnin at Harvard, and John Chowning at CCRMA/Stanford. He has carried out research at IRCAM Centre Pompidou, Apple France, and Sony Computer Science Laboratory (CSL) Paris. He has performed at NTT-ICC, ArsElectronica, WOMAD, Sonar, Eyebeam and SFMOMA. He was artistic co-director of STEIM and Edgard-Varèse Guest Professor at TU Berlin. He works at Goldsmiths, Bristol Interaction Group, and MSH Paris Nord.

# ABSTRACTS



## Panel 6 - From Page to Stage: Spoken Word Poetry and Theatre [chair: Claire Palzer]

### Rupert Smith, “Tract: Between the Root of a Tongue and a Heart”

‘Nothing, now. Words slide when I suspend myself in the highest abyss.... Words are exhausted...I won’t speak until I speak again about where the dark light lives...’ Shakespeare’s King Lear is fascinated by the ‘glib and oily art’ of language, and this performative strand to Rupert Smith’s research project - a hybrid novel, Tract - is a complex and nuanced response to the possibility and impossibility of speech for those ‘vanished’ by power. It takes its cue from the conjoined disappearance into exile of two young fugitives in Act One - that of the banished learned mute Cordelia, and lovesick gadfly, acrobat and quack: the Fool. Set over forty-eight hours in a storm-battered wilderness, the hollow of a felled magnolia becomes an operating table for the resolving of Cordelia’s crisis: her yearning for a cure for her ‘ponderousness’ affliction - the heaving of her heart into her mouth (1.i).

Mediating between theatre and digital film, this spoken word piece agitates to subvert the nihilistic negation at the heart of the Lear universe by ‘carving out a non-preexistent language within a language’ (Gilles Deleuze). The rebooting of the play’s diminishing poetic pulse illuminates the paradox of the protagonists’ marriage of nothings by making the latter manifest, ‘exploding it in signs, in words, in fantastical gestures’ (Michel Foucault), while the Fool ‘executes the dreamwork in a state of vigilance’, and Cordelia asks: ‘Who are you who are so strangely me?’ (Helène Cixous)

### Bio

Rupert Smith is an AHRC funded Creative Writing PhD student at Lancaster University. His research project is an experimental hybrid novel, Tract, written within the cracks of Shakespeare’s King Lear. An actor and poet, his remit extends to orality and performance. Tract will be staged at The Storey, Lancaster in October 2023. His solo spoken word lament, ‘The Pit Ponies’ Penultimate Life Drawing Class’, was short-listed for a creative sustainability award at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2017.

### Ross McFarlane, “Lessons Learned from Experimental Audio Drama”

Queer horror audio drama 'Folxlore' began with a simple aim of bringing Scottish spoken word theatre to a wider audience via the accessible mediums of radio and podcasting; 5 years on and its poetics, narratives and sound design have all been lauded with one term in particular – "experimental". Folxlore grew over its 25 episodes into a collaborative symphony of poetic scripts and innovative sound design, developed and produced to create an effect that could not be replicated without the medium of audio drama.

# ABSTRACTS

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In this talk, I will break down that "experimental" description, describing how the conventions of performance poetry and theatre were adjusted, adapted and developed through working in an audio only medium.

Secondly, I will discuss how audio drama offers poets a space for approaching imagery in an entirely unique manner. Active and passive sound design are essential parts of describing scenes in audio drama and whether in-situ or in monologue, a traditional approach to poetic imagery will overpower or render redundant the sonic elements of audio drama which make it unique – therefore poets working in audio must approach their language very differently.

Finally, I will discuss how the 'Voice of God' phenomenon in radio and the authenticity problem in poetry can interact to create both interesting effects for audiences of poetry, but also a potentially dangerous breeding ground for exacerbated parasocial feelings between audiences and poets – a problem specific to this specific interaction between poetry and audio drama.

## Bio

Ross McFarlane (he/him) is a Glaswegian poet, producer and co-founder of spoken word theatre company In The Works. He has written for multiple poetry-based theatre productions including 'The 900 Club' and 'Make/Shift', produced and wrote on award-winning queer horror audio drama 'Folxlore', and co-wrote (with Bibi June) the chapter "Searching for Consistency: Reflective Equilibrium for Performance Poetry Criticism" for the 'Spoken Word in the UK' anthology.

## Camellia Choudhuri, “All these lifetimes searching for body’: Examining Joelle Taylor’s Experiments with Gender and Genre”

This study examines the correspondences between Joelle Taylor’s early experiments with physical theatre in the 1990s and the representational strategies underlying her “creative memoir” *C+nto* and *Othered Poems* (2021). Taylor formed the Spin/Stir women’s physical theatre collective with Vanessa Lee in 1993. The venture, though short-lived, was a rebellion against the realist and heteronormative essentialisms of mainstream dramaturgy. Drawing inspiration from Artaud, Monique Wittig, Sande Zeig, and Angela Carter, Taylor’s theatrical pieces *Naming* and *Whorror Stories* foregrounded the strategic political significance of the female body as a performative act. Characterised by the interpenetration of poetry with physical theatre, these pieces exemplify Taylor’s “social surrealism” - a mode of transmuting social issues via the imaginative extension of metaphor to absurdist lengths.



# ABSTRACTS

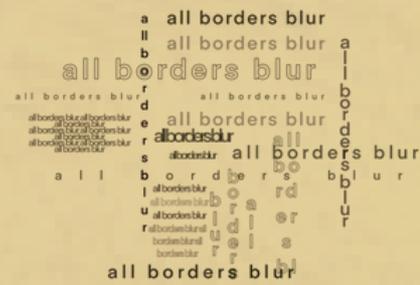


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Most importantly, Spin/Stir's graphic depictions of the violently erotic and sexual compelled audiences to actively engage with the plays' emotional tenor. Against this backdrop, I argue that Taylor revives similar compositional strategies in *C+nto* to structure individual and collective memories riddled by trauma and systemic violence. Her project to historicise and memorialise London's working-class butch counterculture of the 1980s and 90s integrates dramatic teleology with lyric openness to replicate an intensely psychological mnemonic journey. This study highlights the potentiality of embodied intermedial arts in documenting marginalised queer histories. Specifically, it focuses upon Taylor's surreal remapping of lesbian London in the 'Vitrine' poems, and her depiction of the butch body in the quasi-dramatic sequences 'O, Maryville' and 'C+nto.' Ultimately, it traces how Taylor's genre-bending experiments exemplify her redefinition of the "lesbian playwright" into a progenitor of disruptive and radical poetics.

## Bio

Camellia Choudhuri has recently completed her MA in English Literature from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, India. Her research interests include lesbian poetics, female masculinities, and performance studies.



# **EVENING PROGRAMME**

## **POETRY PARTY AT THE ROEBUCK (NOW THE COURT)**

**11 November 2023, 18:00 – 21:00**

**Performances by**

**CAROL LEEMING  
HANNAH SILVA  
RED MEDUSA**