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Staging Intermediality and Queerness in Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate*

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In this article, I investigate the employment of formal fluidity and cross-arts experimentation in spoken word theatre using Irina O. Rajewsky's (2005) framework of intermediality along with the concept of 'transgenre' to study the performance of transqueer narratives on stage. To this end, I examine the show *Dancing to Music You Hate* by the former Birmingham Poet Laureate (2022–24) Jasmine Gardosi, using a combination of archival video of the show's premiere at Warwick Arts Centre in October 2021 and my own critical observations of the live performance at Birmingham's Symphony Hall in January 2023 as the focus of my analysis. My research is framed by two central questions: 1) How does Jasmine Gardosi's employment of an intermedial genre-fluid artistic strategy communicate the themes of queerness and gender fluidity? and 2) How does Gardosi stage, perform and express this queering of artistic boundaries to make it visible and audible in their performance? I demonstrate the ways in which Gardosi's genre-bending show incorporates a mix of beatboxing, poetry and collaboration with a music band live on stage to facilitate meaning making. By utilising Stephen Greer's (2012) theory of queer performance and concepts of transgenre put forward by Jay Prosser (1998) and Trish Salah (2021), I analyse the poet's deployment of transgeneric queering strategies in both the poetic text as well as the performance. Finally, I argue that the anxieties of the closet and 'outness' extant in earlier parts of the performance and the concluding celebration of gender euphoria significantly inform transqueer expression in *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

Introduction

> There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics.
>
> — José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (1999)

I attended Jasmine Gardosi's spoken word theatre show *Dancing to Music You Hate* on 24 January 2023 at Symphony Hall in Birmingham, UK. The 'award-winning, debut show about gender identity, coming to terms with queerness, and finding the words' (Gardosi, n.d.) was originally commissioned by and performed at Warwick Arts Centre (henceforth WAC) in October 2021 and won the Saboteur Award for the Best Spoken Word Show in 2023. In its incorporation of dubstep basslines and folk violin, the hour-long show expands our understanding of queer performance and transcends 'the boundaries of gender and musical genre alike' (Gardosi, n.d.). Jasmine Gardosi is an award-winning poet, transqueer activist and the former Birmingham Poet Laureate (2022–24). They have performed their work at Glastonbury Festival, Tate Modern and on BBC radio, and are a prominent voice in the British poetry performance scene.

In this article, I investigate two questions: first, how does Jasmine Gardosi's employment of a genre-fluid cross-arts artistic strategy complement the theme of queerness and gender fluidity in their show? Second, how does Gardosi stage, perform and sound queerness to make it visible and audible in the show? By examining the show's capacity to cross boundaries in terms of sound and words, music and speech, instruments and speakers, I suggest that queerness emerges in both the thematic content and the musical form of the show and is an integral part of its transgenre narrative. For my case study, I analyse the archival recording of *Dancing to Music You Hate*'s performance at WAC[1] in 2021 together with my own critical observations of the live performance of the show at the Symphony Hall, Birmingham in January 2023. While critical work has been carried out independently on queer solo performance (Muñoz, 1999; Dolan, 2010; Greer, 2012), transgenre work (Prosser, 1998; Salah, 2007 and 2021; Jack, 2025), individual practitioners and spoken word theatre in the UK (Ramey, 2009; Osborne, 2011 and 2013; Novak, 2020; Gratzke, 2022), and intermediality in theatre and performance (Chapple and Kattenbelt, 2006; Bay-Cheng et al., 2010; Arfara et al., 2018), attempts to reconcile these vital strands in the context of the UK remain sparse.[2] Moreover, while individual poems by Gardosi have been closely studied (for instance,

[1] The show was filmed professionally by Chris Neophytou and Grant Archer.

[2] An early instance of critical engagement with queer, transgenre spoken word theatre appears, albeit in the Canadian context, in *Canadian Theatre Review's* Spring 2007 issue where Trish Salah analyses Mirha-Soleil Ross's show *Yapping Out Loud*.

in Dürr and Keylin, 2024), there has been no critical engagement with Gardosi's show *Dancing to Music You Hate*, especially using a transqueer analytical framework.

To investigate the workings of intermediality and queerness in Gardosi's show, the article is structured as follows: in the first section, I expand upon the definitions and theoretical frameworks of 'queerness', 'transgenre', 'spoken word theatre' and 'intermediality'. In the second section, I investigate the deployment of intermediality as a crucial artistic strategy in service of the theme and structure of Gardosi's show. In the subsequent sections, I demonstrate the ways in which Gardosi's queering of beatboxing, music and sound crosses generic boundaries and informs the politics of staging and performing queerness in spoken word theatre.

Navigating Queerness, Transgenre, Spoken Word Theatre and Intermediality

The employment of 'queerness' as a critical lens invites expansion on its interpretation and use. The word 'queer', initially used to signify 'oddness', 'strangeness', or 'peculiarity' (Clarke, 2021; Worthen, 2024: 139), has been part of the English language for about 500 years and has possible roots in the German word 'quer'. In the late 19th century, the word's meaning took a pejorative turn 'against those who perform[ed] gender and/or sexuality in ways that … [were] perceived as non-hetero-cis-normative' (139). It was only in the latter half of the 20th century that 'queer' began to be linguistically reclaimed by the LGBT community and repurposed as a political strategy to address 'issues raised by the gay and lesbian civil rights movements, the "sex wars" over pornography and censorship amongst feminists, and the early 1980s AIDS epidemic' (Morland and Willox, 2017: 2). A significant instance of the recontextualising of the word 'queer' is evidenced by American HIV/AIDS activists (formerly known as ACT UP) forming Queer Nation in 1990 (Clarke, 2021). In this article, the terms 'queer' and 'queerness' are deployed in order to register the embedded theme, content and context of the performance; they denote the poet's lived experience as well as their creative methods. In my analysis of Gardosi's show, queerness is seen to have a two-pronged function: that of denoting non-normative sexualities as well as non-normative gender identities. Additionally, queerness is employed as a reading strategy/critical lens that disrupts all forms of normative cisgendered-heteropatriarchal expectations within the performance. As Stephen Greer suggests, queerness may be 'characterised as antiassimilationist, in opposition to the mainstream project of lesbian and gay politics' (2012: 3). Queerness operates as an act of subversion, a challenge to homophobic pasts and 'homonormative' futures (Duggan, 2002), or, as Judith Butler argues, as 'a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings' (1993: 173). In order to deploy queerness as a theoretical

framework in the context of performance, I turn to Stephen Greer's (2012) analysis of post-1990 queer performance and modes of practice in Britain. In particular, I utilise Greer's unravelling of manifestations and perceptions of queerness in performance whilst problematising the politics and performance of queerness on stage, exploring the limitations of representational visibility related to concepts of outness and in-ness. By employing Greer's framework, I investigate how *Dancing to Music You Hate* stages queerness and in turn queers poetry performance. I also complicate the content and strategies employed in the process.

In *Second Skins* (1998), Jay Prosser analyses the autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by the US-American butch lesbian trans activist and author, Leslie Feinberg. Prosser defines 'transgenre' as 'a text as between genres as its subject is between genders' (191). He suggests that the textual deployment of hybridity arises out of 'the author's resistance to going home to either side of either boundary' which positions the 'protagonist's gendered subjectivity' and the 'text's generic form' in a liminal transgeneric and transgendered space (192). Trish Salah similarly defines transgenre as 'cross genre writing … that interferes with or intervenes with the classification of gender' (2021: 182). Both of these definitions apply to Gardosi's work, which crosses genre boundaries while performing gender fluidity in the theme and content of the show, and in the poet's embodied creative practice. While I acknowledge the reservations held by scholars and activists against classing trans work and literature into queer-feminist analytical models, Gardosi's cross-arts experimentations aid meaning-making within a queer trans narrative and their 'queerly-inflected trans genre writing' undertakes 'linguistic innovation and generic code switching as both a formal and a social intervention into the classificatory norms of gender' (Salah, 2021: 183). By bringing both transgenre and critical work on queer performance into my analysis, I do not intend to conflate both or subsume one under the other (Salah cautions against the subclassing of transgenre under a queer oeuvre). Instead, I use both lenses to highlight how they work jointly in Gardosi's show, which seeks to address themes of gender fluidity, trans identity and queerness. As the poet rejects heteronormative narratives as much as cisgendered rhetoric in their work, both frameworks are needed to shed light on the transgressive potential of *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

'Spoken word theatre' comprises of long form theatrical performances employing the distinct practice of spoken word poetry.[3] These shows incorporate poems that are performed by the poets themselves, woven together into a narrative using storytelling, and utilise minimal, if any, props and stage design. Emerging from a poetry performance

[3] 'Spoken word poetry' is also referred to as 'poetry performance' and 'performance poetry'. In this article, both 'spoken word poetry' and 'poetry performance' have been employed, given the popularity of both in the UK context.

tradition and boasting a DIY ethos, these shows have become widely popular in the UK since the late 1990s. Early experimentations include Jonzi D's *Aeroplane Man* (1999), Roger Robinson's *Shadow Boxer* (2000) and Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers* (2002). These shows often, if not always, employ several art forms within their poetry performance thereby incorporating a cross-arts aesthetic and embodying intermedial artistic strategies. In the UK, a few examples of this phenomenon include Jonzi D's mixing of hip hop dance and spoken word poetry, a practice the artist popularised as 'hip hop theatre' in *Aeroplane Man* (1999) and *The Letter* (2013) among others; Roger Robinson's employment of puppetry and object manipulation in *Shadow Boxer* (2000); Kae Tempest's collaboration with a live band in *Brand New Ancients* (2013) and *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2016); Malaika Kegode's collaboration with a live band and implementation of animation on stage in *Outlier* (2021). In all of these shows, spoken word poetry and various art forms are performed in continuous dialogue with each other to build the narrative and thereby inform its very meaning.

The concept of 'intermediality' is fraught with tensions; its definition remains perpetually in a state of flux. This is in part due to its arrival in and appropriation by various disciplines ranging across literature, theatre, film, art and communication. Whereas in the realm of art, the term implies the confluence of various art forms, in theatre, it is now used primarily to signal the deployment of digital technologies in performance design. Remy Besson contends that intermediality is to be 'not thought of as the property of specific objects, but as a shift in perspective on the part of scholars' (Besson, 2015: 139). Acknowledging its many disciplinary interpretations and manifestations, in this article I use Irina O. Rajewsky's conception of the subcategory 'intermediality as media combination' (2005: 51), which constitutes 'combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation', where the 'media or medial forms of articulation are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way' (2005: 51–52). The strand of intermediality that I am interested in, therefore, alludes to the cross-arts experimentations within spoken word theatre that blend various art forms with poetry performance, such that each art form, and more importantly their confluence, is essential to the meaning-making process of the performance. As Eric Méchoulan writes: '[E]ven though it should not be understood as a simple determination, the materiality of communication is an integral part of meaning-making and interpretation of content' (2015: 11). Each art form and its material composition employed by Gardosi contributes to the creation and conveyance of meaning. As music, sound and poetry converge through the medium of genre-fluidity to perform queerness and gender fluidity, *Dancing to Music You Hate* employs intermediality with the intent of meaning-making. I am, however, aware of the longstanding history and

potential of queer performance to resist inherited boundaries of genre and medium. By employing intermediality as a critical lens, my objective here is not to reduce or limit Gardosi's work to a definite framework of the intermedial, but to queer the concept of the intermedial through Gardosi's poetics.

Intermediality as a Strategy for Trans Queer Performance

Gardosi has experimented with different artforms as a conscious artistic strategy throughout their career. When asked about the blending of various art forms in *Dancing to Music You Hate*, their response makes this clear: 'My philosophy when it comes to working with any art form, or even just with poetry itself is that … I want my poem to be impossible without the art form that I am playing with' (Gardosi, 2023b: 0:23:43–0:24:04). This philosophy is demonstrated through the deployment of both poetry and music as central components of performance in the show. While the inherently intermedial design of venues such as Birmingham's Symphony Hall and WAC, institutions that patently stage multidisciplinary work, facilitate with ease the realisation of Gardosi's artistic vision, the framework of intermediality remains intrinsic to *Dancing to Music You Hate* even in smaller venues and festival stages.

Dancing to Music You Hate comprises of nine distinct poetic pieces: 'Dancing to Music You Hate', 'We Lived in Precedented Times', 'Silence Sounds Like', 'B or G', 'How to Beat Your Heart', 'I've Been Given a Platform', 'Say It Anyway', 'Be Poet' and 'Gender Euphoria', which often exhibit a song-like quality (the poet refers to a few of them, such as 'Dancing to Music You Hate' and 'Gender Euphoria', as songs) and mostly revolve around the many facets of a transqueer identity. The pieces are woven together using anecdotal narration by the poet, 'performed palimpsests'[4] (Silva, 2020: 1) which disrupt the supposed linearity of performance and the fourth wall, storytelling, dialogic segments in which the artist engages in conversations with band members and their instruments to further the narrative thread of the performance, and other paratextual elements. The performance proper begins with Gardosi taking a deep breath, then orally producing the beat of a 'closed hi-hat' [t̪s],[5] first in pairs

[4] This term was coined by Hannah Silva 'to describe the introductions, interruptions and splicing together of observation, aside, commentary and self-critique that play a prominent role in [the British poet Lemn] Sissay's poetic practice' (2020: 1). This term can indeed be extended to the work of other poet-performers, who employ similar artistic strategies. In Gardosi's case, the poet makes several asides and comments, disrupting the linearity and flow of the performance, as part of their show.

[5] A 'closed hi-hat' is a drumming technique that is imitated in beatboxing. A YouTube tutorial by beatboxer TylaDubya (2016) demonstrates the sound and technique (see References). The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription in square brackets here and in the subsequent sections is based on the IPA framework used by the 'speech production and articulation knowledge' (SPAN) research group at University of South California to notate their findings on 'Real-time Magnetic Resonance Imaging' of human beatboxing (SPAN (Speech Production and Articulation Knowledge Group), n.d.).

of two and then building up the count. A 'closed hi-hat' in beatboxing is an oral non-linguistic sound named after and mimicking the one produced by two cymbals in a drum kit. On a drum set, the sound is made when two cymbals closely facing each other depress together at the push of a pedal, the pedal being pressed gently yet swiftly by one's foot. The 'closed hi-hat' pattern performed by Gardosi, when repeated, becomes a rhythmic cue, which first leads the drummer and then the other percussionists to join in. This medley of Gardosi's sound poetics and the band's instrumental music segues into Gardosi's articulation of the words 'take a breath, take it back'[6] (2021: 0:01:53) repeatedly, which slowly transitions into the artist beatboxing more prominently. A pause ensues, following which the titular track begins.

A fascinating characteristic of the performance of the song-poem,[7] 'Dancing to Music You Hate', is that the theme of queerness is not made apparent immediately. For the most part of this song-poem, the refrain 'pretending to be / it's like dancing to music you hate'[8] is repeated without clarifying what the object of pretension is. The phrase 'pretending to be' is followed by a short pause, during which Gardosi puts a finger to their lip. This gesture, supplementing the actual verbal silence, establishes that the object of pretension is not yet to be disclosed. It is only in the final refrain of the song-poem, when the climactic moment ensues, that the poet reveals: 'Pretending to be *straight* / is like dancing to music you hate' (0:07:22–0:07:26, my emphasis). Here, in this pivotal revelatory moment, when the music stops and the gesture of finger to lip is replaced by the articulation of the word 'straight', the theme of queerness is emphasised. This is not to say, however, that the audience is unaware of the theme until this point of the show. The promotional material for the show, and the performer's open expression of queerness in their work and their activism, had already set the expectation for the performance. The venue, the stakeholders and the attendees are already primed for a queer performance; the stage had been queered before it was set. Furthermore, the poetic pieces throughout the show consistently touch upon and delve into various aspects of queerness, ranging from gender identity and sexuality to performance of queerness.

The first poetic piece 'Dancing to Music You Hate' concludes with a musical crescendo and flourish, which is juxtaposed by a nonchalant 'Cool' (0:08:22) uttered by Gardosi in order to signal the end, offering space to the audience to respond—which they do with roaring applause and whooping. Live music is a significant element of the show that contributes to meaning making, merging with poetry in varying intensity to articulate the plot. The second piece privileges music over poetry where the poet makes certain

[6] All verbal extracts from *Dancing to Music You Hate* used in this article have been transcribed by me.

[7] I use the label 'song-poem' due to the ambiguousness or liminality of form in this piece.

[8] The forward slash symbol '/' is used here and throughout the article to denote a caesura, a pause.

exaggerated demands from members of the band such as: 'Can you [drummer, Damon Wilding] give me raindrops on a summer night falling on a tap dancer in concentrated inspiration?' (0:10:22–0:10:29), and they oblige with spectacular tunes and rhythms, exhibiting their musical prowess. The result is the blurring of music and language, a confluence of sounds and a queering of communication as the poet invites the musical instruments to speak. However, even as music takes precedence, Gardosi remains at the helm with poetic instructions. The musical interlude is immediately followed by a poetic piece inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic, titled 'We Lived in Precedented Times'—a scathing comment on an oft-recurring inference in our everyday discourse that the days before the pandemic were 'normal', which fails to take note of the systemic failures of life pre-pandemic. The poem is delivered in conjunction with music in a song-like fashion, employing simple rhymes such as in the passage cited below:

> We lived in precedented times /[9]
> we lived in precedented times /
> I could sit in a restaurant without fearing for my life /
> I could kiss my mum without thinking I was going to kill her /
> I could touch door handles without having to sanitise /
> we could hug each other at open mic nights /
> we lived in precedented times /
> we lived in precedented times /
> so why was my anxiety still so high? /
> (music)
> Why could my friend not get a job? /
> Why could my sister not get out of bed? /
> Why could my mate not pay their rent? /
> Why were we still just trying to survive? (0:15:45–0:16:55)

Throughout the poem, Gardosi questions and problematises the conditions of 'normality' associated with pre-Covid times and the supposed ease of living that preceded the pandemic. In the course of the show, Gardosi explains how the pandemic made them question several aspects of their life including their gender identity. The poetic piece 'We Lived in Precedented Times' sets the stage for this disclosure, giving us a glimpse of the poet's journey while also suggesting that queerness cannot be isolated from the sociopolitical environment that frames its manifestation. In this confluence of

[9] While the '/' denotes the pause undertaken by the poet, I deploy line breaks here to highlight the poetic structure of the verse.

music, poetry and sound poetics, the piece questions the normative in both the external (as in pre-Covid conditions) and the internal (as in Gardosi's contemplation of their gender identity). This liminal line of the external and internal is traversed using an intermedial strategy; a transgenre approach, that responds to the in-betweenness of the poem's form and theme.

Halfway through the show, Gardosi again engages in dialogue with musical instruments. A piece ensues where the poet converses with the saxophone, played by critically acclaimed musician Xhosa Cole. When the poet asks, 'Should I tell my students that I am gay?' (0:19:40–0:19:44), a tune emerging from the saxophone, rather than words, responds and sustains the interaction. This enactment is clearly intentional, employed to integrate music into the very structure and meaning of the show, as well as to keep the responses ambiguous and open-ended. The audience members, as onlookers, are provided with an opportunity to choose their own words or to make their own meaning in the course of this paratextual performance. This dynamic is later reversed in an interlude piece where Xhosa Cole engages in a verbal dialogue with Gardosi and they respond with beatboxing and guttural, non-verbal sounds. Using sound poetics in this piece, Gardosi subverts the earlier equation with the musicians, while remaining rooted in the approach of keeping the meaning or response open-ended. In the deployment of this strategy, language itself is queered: words are no longer required for meaning making and sounds become vehicles of disrupting all forms of binaries.

Music, however, is not only a part of the conversation but is also a disruptive catalyst in the performance. In a poem on censorship, the poet is strategically interrupted by a musical harmony mimicking jingles used in traditional radio or television adverts every time the poet voices: 'I've been given a platform' (0:39:28–0:39:34). The phrase is repeated over and over, while the poet attempts to perform a verse about the 'uninterrupted time' (0:42:16) afforded to them through Covid-19 lockdowns, which ultimately led to an unprecedented questioning of their gender identity and the 'channelling' of their 'masculinity' over 'femininity' (0:43:08–0:43:16). Over the course of the piece, the tension between words and music heightens where the poet is prevented from completing sentences and is overpowered by sounds from the flute, accordion, drums, and the scratching or scrubbing sound generated by the DJ on the turntable. The dominance of sound, or noise, drowning out the poet's voice suggests the contemporary censorship of trans voices. The message on censorship is delivered by another poem in the show, titled 'Say It Anyway'. In this poem, the verse, and not music, comments on the censorship imposed upon trans identities, highlighting the politics of selective sanction of queer rights, as demonstrated by the excerpt below:

They've made our rights a foreign language /
then chose to lose us in translation /
or they called it vulgar /
not fit for publication /
they asked for our opinion /
and then ignored the consultation /
but they talk about being censored /
after Section 28 /[10]
we say four letters of the alphabet — LGB /
and they take the T away (0:52:44–0:53:30)

The show's theme of queerness and gender identity is thus demonstrated through the cross-arts ethos of Gardosi's artistic strategy. In situating their poetry performance within multiple art forms, blurring generic boundaries, they queer the performance and the concept of intermediality itself. This transgenre artistic strategy is intertwined with a history of situating trans narratives in a liminal generic medium, in-between genres where various art forms cross over and collide, to defamiliarise genre and gendered boundaries. Earlier examples of transgenre include Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) which situates itself in the intermittent space of 'fictionalised autobiography' (Prosser, 1998: 190), and the 2002 show, *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts of an Unrepentant Whore* by Canadian trans activist, videographer, sex worker and performance artist Mirha-Soleil Ross, which 'straddl[es] the genres of spoken word, dramatic monologue, and multi-media performance' (Salah, 2007: 64). In its use of 'video footage of coyotes living in the wild and being hunted, live music and voice recordings of prostitute- and animal-rights activists to create multiple, shifting frames for Ross's monologue in seven acts' (Salah, 2007: 64), *Yapping Out Loud* manifests a powerful example of Canadian transgenre spoken word theatre, a tradition carried forward by Gardosi in the UK in their queering and defamiliarising of generic boundaries and the poetic potential of sound.

In 'Rhetorical Work: Genre Fluidity as a Queer Rhetorical Practice of Activists', Ruby K. Nancy defines '*genre fluidity* as a queered approach to the act of writing genres' and examines the 'shifts between and among genre conventions constructed to transgress genre boundaries in varied ways' (2022: 346; emphasis in the original). Nancy's term 'genre fluidity' is helpful in understanding not only Gardosi's work in *Dancing to Music You Hate* but also queer spoken word theatre that employs different performance strategies. In Gardosi's show, the embedded genre fluidity, where a poem transcends into song,

[10] Section 28 was 'a law passed in 1988 by a Conservative government that stopped councils and schools "promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship"' (Day, 2019: n.p.).

which in turn transcends into sound poetics and beatboxing, embodies the theme of gender fluidity. In choosing not to limit the artistic rendition to a singular art form, the queering of performance is made apparent. The show's transgenre aspect also allows it to adopt a DIY aesthetic and spatial adaptability, defining characteristics not only of spoken word theatre but also of queer subcultures. This affords the show the potential to stage across various sites of performance. *Dancing to Music You Hate* has been performed in a wide variety of venues ranging from cultural institutions to music festivals.

Queering Poetry Performance Through Beatboxing

The performed poetry of *Dancing to Music You Hate* is enhanced by experimentations with vocal percussion. Beatboxing merges with language effortlessly to create a fluid sonic experience that reflects the queer trans subjectivity of the show. Beatboxing's queering potential has been explored by beatboxer and scholar Shanté Paradigm Smalls, who argues that 'sounding and resounding bodies and audiences can generate or reform the stability of racial, gender, and sexual identities, highlighting how these social positions are informed by tone, tenor, timbre, accent, inflection, rhythm, melody, and cadence' (2014: n.p.). Smalls elaborates that 'sonic subjectivity also plays with the subjectivity of identity', noting 'how its fluctuations are thrown into audible relief through sound' (n.p.). By providing 'a sonic pause' and relief from heteronormatively coded language, beatboxing has the potential to destabilise and expose the limitations of these sonically informed social positions.

In 2019, Gardosi was awarded the Jerwood Arts Bursary. This enabled the poet to 'receive one-to-one beatbox coaching as well as funded time to rehearse, write and experiment with combining poetry and beatboxing' (Jerwood Arts Archive, 2019). Since then, beatboxing has become an important attribute of their artistic practice. It is imperative here to acknowledge the cultural context of beatboxing as an art form. Modern beatboxing first appeared in the emerging hip hop culture of 1980s New York, pioneered by rappers and performers such as Doug E. Fresh (Douglas Davis), Darren Robinson, Biz Markie, and others (Thompson, 2011: 173; Goldsmith and Fonseca, 2019: 42–43). As Smalls suggests, however, the form also draws inspiration from several oral percussion traditions around the world:

> Beatboxing, like the other elements of hip hop, is an art form influenced by multiple sound genealogies, including French troubadours, North Indian 'vocal bols', West African ritual music, jazz, blues, barbershop quartets, and Japanese technology (Roland drum machines) … Beatboxing combines phatic, imitative, emotive, sonorous, and musical elements using throat, tongue, teeth, breath, stomach, mouth, lungs, cheeks, neck, fingers, and other embodied elements to create a sonic relational feedback loop with the listener. (n.p.)

The combination of 'emotive', 'sonorous' and 'musical elements' features distinctly in Gardosi's performance throughout the show. The personal, the autobiographical is emphasised through the medium of beatboxing, where one hears not only the sounds of a drum kit mimicked by the poet but also, owing to the microphone being held close to the mouth, the internal smacking of lips and teeth as well as the poet's inhalation and exhalation. These sounds, tied intimately to the poet's body, bring the audience closer to the poet aurally. The skilful amalgamation of beats, words and the sonic workings of the poet's mouth enrich the cadence of the performed poems. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in the performance of 'Be Poet'. This poem incorporates the simultaneous performance of verse alongside beatboxing by the poet: a technique typically called 'beatrhyming'. Beatrhyming is 'a type of multi-vocalism in which an individual beatboxes and speaks (i.e., sings or raps) at the same time by interweaving beatboxing sounds and speech sounds within words and phrases' (Blaylock et al., 2023). Here, the vocal agility with which Gardosi captures every beat while performing the verse and emphasising words with broadly the 'kick drum' [p'] and 'hi-hat' [ts][11] sounds to perform a beat, makes this poem an experiment in intermediality by itself. On this deployment of beatboxing in 'Be Poet', Rebecka Dürr and Vadim Keylin observe:

> Gardosi alternates between producing sound on exhalation, on inhalation or in either way. In this respect, her goal is not to merge speech and beatbox into a song-like performance, but to use both elements alongside each other in a way that foregrounds their similarities, resulting in a playful interaction with sound. Furthermore, her mixture of beatbox and speech serves as sonic illustration of the poem's content, reflecting the dynamic changes in the emotional state of the lyric subject. (2024: 245)[12]

Indeed, as noted by Dürr and Keylin, Gardosi's distinct deployment of poetry/speech and beatboxing defamiliarises the generic boundaries of both forms while also emphasising the thematic and emotional trajectory of the verse. In the opening beatboxing segment of the piece, the beat mimics a heartbeat, symbolising the nervousness experienced by 'anyone who has to / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ][13] / stand up and speak / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ] / for the first time / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ] / and then every time after that / [p'ʊ][p'ʊ]' (2021: 0:55:55–0:56:12). The mimicking of the beat soon transmutes into the word 'beat' itself and is followed by

[11] The IPA transcription in square brackets here is based broadly on SPAN's (see note 5) notations of kick drums and hi-hats.

[12] In this article, I have used 'they/them' pronouns for Gardosi as they conveyed their preference to me in our interview. Their contemplation of preferred pronouns is also performed through a dialogic piece with Xhosa Cole in their show *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

[13] The transcription here is based on SPAN's IPA notation of a kick drum sound called "808' kick'.

beatrhyming in the refrain ‘be poet’. Similarly, in the introductory segment to ‘Dancing to Music You Hate’ (song-poem) discussed previously, beatboxing not only features in the performance of the closed hi-hat in the beginning, but it also merges with words in the refrain ‘take a breath, take it back’. For instance, the closed hi-hat beat morphs into the ‘t’ sound in ‘take’ whereas an ‘outward K’ morphs into the ‘k’ sound in ‘take’. The ‘b’ sound in ‘breath’ and ‘back’ morph into the sound of a kick drum, such that beatrhyming within the refrain is performed as: ‘[t][K] [pˈʚ] reath / [t][K] [pˈʚ] ack’ (0:01:52–0:02:14). This is one of the first instances in *Dancing to Music You Hate* wherein sound and subject, beat and speech are merged in order to defy artistic and conceptual categories. The sound does not merely accompany sense, language and speech but blends with it: language and acoustic create meaning together. The confluence of beatboxing and poetry creates and aurally communicates the project of dismantling gender and genre boundaries in *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

Queering Poetry Performance Through Music and Sound

Through the deployment of beatboxing and the use of musical eccentricities, the show explores the potential to queer music and sound. ‘Music can be queer. It can speak of that which is beyond the normal and signify that which is often invisible’, observes Jodie Taylor, and adds that

> [M]usic allows us to explore and circulate emotions and pleasures, to immerse ourselves in the ecstatic, to let go, to speed up, to slow down, to be overcome and to climax. Moreover, music may be considered particularly accommodating to queer expressions of gender and sexuality because of its theatrical and fanciful qualities (2012: 45).

Nowhere does the ‘theatrical quality’ of music aid and ‘accommodate’ the expression of trans and queerness in *Dancing to Music You Hate* more than in the short piece ‘B or G’ (2021: 0:26:26–0:28:53). The piece begins with musician Jobe Baker-Sullivan sounding the B4 note on his keyboard, followed by Gardosi declaring and then swiftly enquiring in an uncharacteristic, parodic, high-pitched nasal voice: ‘that’s a B / you’re a B, ya?’ (0:26:28–0:26:33). This is followed by Baker-Sullivan sounding the G4 note, prompting Gardosi to ask in the same nasal voice: ‘oh / are you a G?’ (0:26:35–0:26:38). This back-and-forth conversation between the B-G notes and Gardosi goes on for a short while where the poet consistently questions whether it is a B or a G. While initially seeming like a piece about two musical notes, it soon becomes apparent that there is a broader theme at play. The addressee remains ambiguous. Is Gardosi talking to the

musical notes? Is Gardosi probing Baker-Sullivan, who is responding through music? As the piece progresses, the answer becomes more and more indefinite, once again leaving the response open-ended. There is fluidity in the conversation, a simultaneous merging and transgression of boundaries that is deployed by the use of musical notes. The poet continues the probing with 'which one are you?' (0:26:44–0:26:46), crossing their arms, demonstrating through this gesture an embodiment of defiance as well as a relentless insistence to know whether the object is a B or a G. The poet then declaims, 'it's one or the other' (0:26:55–0:26:57), while pointing a raised finger at Baker-Sullivan as if to object to or challenge any other notions. There subsequently follows a duel of sorts between the poet and the music, where musicality is juxtaposed against the speaker's insistence on binaries. Baker-Sullivan skilfully deploys chords that employ multiple notes framed around B and G, demonstrating musical spectrum, scale and progression, while Gardosi verbally contradicts the music through extracts such as:

> There's no in-between / *(music)*[14] /
> no no, there is no spectrum / *(music)* /
> no, there is no scale / *(music)* /
> there is no progression (0:26:58–0:27:11)

The poet asserts a final 'you are a B or a G'. Following this section, Baker-Sullivan plays a gentle, soothing tune, upon which the poet loudly proclaims: 'all other notes disgust me!' (0:27:37–0:27:40). This outburst leads to an abrupt end to the music. The next section of the performance is comprised solely of Gardosi's declamation, and the intermittent playing of the B and G notes by Baker-Sullivan, whenever the poet utters them verbally. All the Bs and Gs marked in italics in the following section are both iterated by the poet and played out by Baker-Sullivan simultaneously:

> It's simple science /
> the world is made up of *B* and *G* /
> all we have is *B* and *G* /
> and a *B* is a *B* /
> and a *G* is a *G* /
> and let's be real /
> you can always tell /
> a B from a G (0:27:42–0:27:59)

[14] As I am unsure of the notation for this section and lack the musical education to transcribe it, I have simply annotated the interludes as '*(music)*'.

To conclude the piece, Baker-Sullivan plays a harmony involving B and G notes together in a chord, thereby signifying the victory for 'other notes', for the fluidity of harmony, for the dismantling of boundaries and binaries. The piece, though short, is rather powerful in the message it intends to convey. In the playful banter between musical notes and Gardosi's verbal performance, the thematic implication of gender fluidity is expressed through sound as a medium. Within the first few seconds of the performance, it becomes clear that B and G do not merely denote musical notes but also the gendered identities of 'Boy' and 'Girl'. Over the course of the performance, this metaphorical play becomes explicitly clear, when the poet, in a satirical move, asserts the existence of only two notes in music: B and G. This statement, the poet suggests, is a truth steeped in 'simple science' where one can always tell the difference between the two. The switch in tone and pitch employed by the poet, their deployment of a parodic nasal voice throughout the piece, adds a comic undertone to the performance and highlights the absurdity of the assumption of there being only two musical notes; hence, allegorically, only two genders. The arguments posed by the poet imitate and satirise the bigoted assertions often made in transphobic rhetoric's adherence to simplistic, restrictive binary understandings of gender identity. Further, it is also commonplace in such reductive discourse to equate sex, gender and sexuality, painting them all with the same brush; where being a man is linked to masculinity, is linked to maleness, is linked to heterosexuality, leading once again to the oversimplified claim that one can 'always tell', which is a flawed premise. In 'B or G', music, in the fluid playing out of the notes of B and G, and everything in-between; sound, through the clashing and merging of music and oration; and voice, through the uncharacteristic, nasal, absurdist queering of natural speech, alter and transform themselves in order to perform transgenre, transqueerness. Ironically, the piece ends with the poet uttering an unceremonious, anti-climactic 'Nice' (0:28:54) in their low-pitched 'normal' voice. This utterance of 'Nice' at the end of Baker-Sullivan's musical performance serves as a breaking point for the heightened drama and tension. Although the 2023 performance of this part of the show was less emphatic in the deployment of nasal voice and exaggerated body communication, the reception and impact of the performance's hyperbolic conceptualisation remained the same (Gardosi, 2023a). This piece, along with the one in dialogue with the saxophone discussed earlier, epitomise the transgenre framework of the show. By defamiliarising rhetoric and sound, by keeping answers to questions ambiguous and open-ended, and by juxtaposing verbal and sonic media, the two poems queer the cis-heteronormative inscriptions of language.

Conversely, in the poem on lockdown and gender identity which employs the medium of advertisement jingles as disruption, silence acts as a queering agent. The implied silencing act deployed by musical instruments powerfully conveys the

performance of queerness. By subverting the interruptions to convey the very subject matter they try to interrupt—that of trans subjectivity and finding the time to discover one's gender identity—Gardosi performatively queers the censorship and silencing that threatens trans and queer bodies and publicly audible trans and queer presence. The juxtaposition of musical production against the poet's words and vocal performance speak to the transqueer art and sound of performance, where the very presence of the poet-performer on stage, being sonically interrupted again and again, is not merely an act of representing but also of politicising trans subjectivity and queerness, especially in its silencing and un-sounding. This transgeneric medley of music, sound, speech, pause and silence thus reveals an emphatic performance of transness and queerness on stage in *Dancing to Music You Hate*.

Staging and Performing Trans Queer Subjectivity

Queerness does not merely arrive as an aurally induced incursion; it also manifests as a strategy for stage design. But how does this queering of the stage happen? Alluding to the Muñoz passage cited in the introduction to this article, 'There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language' (1999: 1), I must draw attention to the significance of a queer and trans poet taking centre stage in a mainstream cultural institution to explicitly perform poems about their lived experience. Certainly, Gardosi was not alone on stage in both their 2021 and 2023 performances; they were accompanied by a five-member band. Yet the spotlight rarely left the poet. In the archival recording, it can be observed that they are positioned centre-stage throughout the performance, and when they are not, their position becomes the point of focus in the space. The show is conceptualised around Gardosi's coming to terms with queerness and their trans identity; hence, in this centrality, their presence and performance becomes the show. The music is crucial; the presence of musicians, less so. This is not to undermine the talent, craft and importance of the accompanying live band and individual musicians—all of them skilfully contribute to the performance of the show—however, their characteristic presence is not necessitated by the show's design.

Gardosi's interactions with band members are pivotal, but each band member's persona is not crucial to the meaning-making process. In November 2023, Gardosi's performance of selected poems from *Dancing to Music You Hate* at the Poetic Intuition Festival by Queer Writers Circle Vienna took place with recorded music instead of a live band. This importance of music over individual musicians is further substantiated by the change in the composition of the band, from the show's first performance at WAC in 2021 to the performance I attended at Symphony Hall in 2023. As I observed

during my attendance, Noemi La Barbera replaced drummer Damon Wilding in the 2023 performance and has continued to accompany Gardosi in subsequent versions of the show. The same cannot be said about Gardosi's presence and visibility in the show. *Dancing to Music You Hate* revolves around Gardosi's autobiographical journey of exploring their gender identity and 'coming to terms with queerness' (n.d.). The premise of the show and its performance demands Gardosi's persona and presence for its realisation. In this sense, Gardosi is indeed alone on the stage as the central figure holding together the various elements of the show. Woven into Gardosi's performance is the performance of trans subjectivity and queerness. Further, the poems emerge from Gardosi's lived experience: their linguistic properties emerge from Gardosi's customary oratory style; their language distinctly embodies the voice of the poet. The performance text cannot, therefore, be detached from the poet's presence on stage as the performer. In this way, the show itself embodies a queer trans manifestation, and the theme cannot be separated from its structure or performance strategy. In the poet's performance lies the disruption of cis-heteronormativity. As Elizabeth Whitney asserts in 'The Dangerous Real: Queer Solo Performance in/as Active Disruption': '[Q]ueer solo performers occupy a specific place of protest performance by their very act of being, and of making and staging their work' (2016: 251). By being present on stage as a transqueer subject performing poems about their transqueer self, Gardosi embodies a public protest performance that defies cis-heteronormative expectations.

The centrality of Gardosi's experience of and engagement with transqueerness also brings forth the question of visibility inherent in a transqueer performance. The themes of being markedly trans and queer—on stage and in life, of the closet, and of the act of coming out are prevalent throughout the show. When the poet asks their fellow musicians if they should come out to their students (Gardosi, 2021: 0:19:33–0:19:45), we are made aware of the crucial role the closet plays in the show. Writing on the tensions inherent within the concept of the closet, Greer remarks: 'In the terms of the closet, not-telling resembles the presumption that one is closeted until proven innocent, that the closet is always damaging to oneself (self-oppression) and a betrayal of others (a failure of solidarity)' (2012: 25–26). Not narrativising one's outness can often lead to presumptions about one's closeted-ness or closedness, presumptions regarding one's unfamiliarity with, or worse, denial of their queer self, creating harmful associations between telling and queer selfhood. Simultaneously, antithetical to the queer project of dismantling binaries, the closet reaffirms the in/out dichotomy that delineates queer experiences and lives into two categories (25). Anxieties around 'coming out' explicitly inform two of Gardosi's pieces (one about coming out to their students and the other exploring the idea of coming out to their father), and the show

as a whole implicitly discloses the tensions of the closet, thereby outlining the politics of outness, markedness and visibility. The essentiality of coming out to one's students appears to be linked to the impulse of coming clean, of revealing a secret, which returns us back to the titular piece of the show and its assertions of 'pretending to be [...]', where '[...]' that denotes silence signifies one's pretence and appropriation of cis-heteronormativity. Coming out is also tied to gestures of solidarity. This is evidenced by an excerpt later in the show during which Gardosi exclaims that coming out to their students helped them create a safe space, suggesting that the vulnerable act of coming out facilitated the building of mutual trust, and in return, a few trans students came out to them (2021: 0:45:00–0:45:50). The process of coming out to others then becomes cyclical and reveals the inherent tensions of the process itself.

Interestingly, the final piece of the show, a rendition on gender euphoria, celebrates the process of coming to terms with the self, of engaging with trans-ness as a process. Here, Gardosi focuses on the exploration of one's gender identity and in turn, finding joy in gender self-determination. Ruby Grant et al. explain: 'Gender euphoria is a term used to describe the feelings of happiness and contentment that some transgender ... people experience as a result of living in a way that is congruent with their gender identity' (2024: 1). Gardosi's rendition of gender euphoria affirms this contentment and joy in content and performance. The song-poem begins by posing a question: 'Have you ever felt the beat of your own drum / but didn't let yourself dance to it?' (2021: 1:02:49–1:02:59). The segment contrasts the litany of the first song-poem, the titular track, where the poet dances to the music (of straightness) that they hate. This is a full circle moment: the closing chapter, the culmination of a narrative of transqueer assertion.

The song-poem progresses with a series of questions such as: 'What if you don't have to be gender questioning in order to question gender? / What if you don't have to be transitioning / in order to transcend / into more than what they wanted of you?' (1:04:21–1:04:39), 'What if you are everything that you are supposed to be?' (1:05:37–1:05:44), and 'What if there are as many genders in this world as there are people? What if we are all / just a little bit / transitioning into a wholer understanding of ourselves?' (1:05:55–1:06:11). These rhetorical questions, posed simultaneously with the constantly amplifying synth bass verve in the background, change the energy and effect of the performance as Gardosi remains in the spotlight. The anticipation builds with each question until the moment of release arrives, with the climactic declaration: 'Trans / or not / questioning / or not / I wish you gender euphoria' (1:06:19–1:06:36). The flute and other instruments join the synth bass more emphatically to create an ecstatic background score as Gardosi passionately exclaims: 'I wish you permission to explore / to trust yourself / to look your shame in the face / and say, I see you for what you are'

(1:07:33–1:07:46) (here shame can be read as being associated with gender dysphoria) and concludes with the statement: 'You too deserve / to feel your body / as the home / that it is' (1:07:55–1:08:02). The notion of body as home evokes Prosser's reading of home as the 'transgendered space' which sustains the 'ambivalence between passing and being read' (1998: 189). The disconnect between one's gender identity and their bodily anatomy may often cause a sense of unbelonging, while the transgendered space is the liminal home for belonging. As the poet wishes the audience a sense of home and belonging in their bodies, the song-poem returns to the refrain of gender euphoria. At this moment, the warm yellow-red overhead lights on stage shift to cooler blue and purple tones then alternate between yellow-red-blue-green-purple-pink hues as an approximation of the rainbow, used to symbolise LGBTQ+ pride and community. This shift in stage design sets the mood for a hopeful, joyous, affirmative end to the show. The anxieties associated with the closet are replaced by the self-deterministic contentment and solidarity of gender euphoria. One leaves with Gardosi's message of gender euphoric existence etched in their memory. I certainly did. I recall feeling euphoric in the moment and feeling part of the space's exultation as the performance at Symphony Hall concluded with rapturous applause.

Conclusion

The performance of transqueerness and the process and politics of queering sound and stage is incorporated in Jasmine Gardosi's *Dancing to Music You Hate* through the deployment of intermediality and an implementation of a transgenre genre-fluid artistic strategy. By queering the performed poetry as well as the performance design, Gardosi advances a distinct form of spoken word theatre—a queered transgeneric spoken word theatre. Gardosi's show stages and makes audible and visible themes of trans-ness, queerness and gender euphoria through an artistic blending of music, sound, poetry and beatboxing, where the theme of gender fluidity is created and communicated through the genre-fluidity of the performance. However, in the poetic performance of transqueerness, the politics of visibility also comes into play. While Gardosi's performance serves as an affirmation of trans identity and queerness in an increasingly hostile political environment, especially in the wake of anti-trans movements and legislation, it also reveals the anxieties of 'outness' and the tensions of the closet. Ultimately, Gardosi's show paves new ways to queer poetry performance, employing an intermedial, transgenre approach, while also unmasking the complications inherent in the tools and strategies afforded to practitioners to undertake such an endeavour.

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