

Poetry off the Page: Intersecting Practices and Traditions in British Poetry Performance Introduction

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The introduction to the Poetry off the Page: Intersecting Practices and Traditions in British Poetry Performance collection.



Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

Freed from the gatekeepers of publishing houses, and liberated from the limitations of the printed page, poetry performance opens up an exciting and vast field of academic enquiry, not just of live poetry events, festivals and online and archival audio-visual recordings, but also poetry performance's 'borderless' intersections with traditional and experimental art forms.¹ *Poetry off the Page: Intersecting Practices and Traditions in British Performance Poetry*, is the first open access, peer-reviewed special collection to explore and promote a wide range of critical perspectives on recent developments in British and Irish poetry performance and spoken word theatre produced between 1960 and the present day.² It explores the dynamic ways in which contemporary live and mediatized poetry performance in Britain has engaged with and transformed established forms of performance practice and traditions such as theatre, music, film, stand-up comedy and dance and produced innovative performance styles and cultures. *Poetry off the Page* considers the importance of sound, space, bodies, performance and audience as constitutive of poetry performance but also addresses a significant gap in publications specialising in the critical analysis of oral poetry performance and the lack of research dedicated to it. It also argues that poetry performance can produce new theoretical approaches and applications.³

Poetry off the Page: Intersecting Practices and Traditions in British Performance Poetry develops and extends previous analysis of poetry performance traditions such as Deirdre Osborne's essay 'The Body of Text Meets the Body as Text: Staging (I)dentify in the Work of SuAndi and Lemn Sissay' (2010); Cornelia Gräbner's chapter on 'Poetry and Performance' in Edward Larrissy's *Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (2011); Corinne Fowler's examination of the pre-slam roots of spoken-word, 'The Poetics and Politics of Spoken Word Poetry' in the *Cambridge Companion to Black and Asian Literature* (2016); Jane Dowson's article 'Poetry on Page and Stage' in *The History of British Women's Writing* (2015); Julia Novak's *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011) and 'Performing Black British Memory: Kat François's Spoken-Word Show *Raising Lazarus* as Embodied Auto/biography' (2020);

¹ This is not to say that poet performers do not work 'on the page' in addition to performing their work.

² 'Poetry off the Page' is a research collaboration project between the University of Vienna, Apples and Snakes, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Goldsmiths University of London, Queen Mary University of London, University College Dublin, and the National Library of Ireland. <https://poetryoffthepage.net/>.

³ See Gräbner C. and Casas, A. 2011: 9.

David Devanny's 'Speaking with Machines and Machines That Speak: Spoken Word and Digital Performance Poetry' (2021); Jessica Bundschuh's 'Poetry in Performance' (2022); Julie Morrissy 'Contemporary Irish Poetry off the Page'; and Peter Howarth's recent study, *The Poetry Circuit: Live Reading 1900–1970* (2024).⁴

For Cornelia Gräbner and Arturo Casas (2011: 9), the experience of witnessing a poet-performer can generate a '*triangular relationship* between performed poem, author or performer, and the audience'.⁵ For Gräbner (2024: 7), the poetry we encounter in a performance enables the poet and the audience alike to exercise what Franco Berardi terms the capacity of '*sensibilità*' (Berardi: 2012): 'The ability of the human being to communicate what cannot be said with words ... the faculty that allows us to enter into relation with entities not composed of our matter, not speaking our language, and not reducible to the communication of discreet, verbal or digital signs'.⁶ Nonetheless these things – the performers' and audience's bodies, the location, the occasion and the gesture – also speak, and it is performance's power to engage this whole *sensibilità* that Gräbner suggests offers a promise of resistance, transformation and reorientation (2024: 12–13).

In particular, performed poetry inevitably draws its location and community into its way of happening, no less than page layouts and book formats do for poetry on the page. When Anglo-American poets began again to read their verse to public audiences in the early decades of the twentieth century, the performances took place in theatres, bookshops, schools and churches, and poets like Robert Frost or Langston Hughes found themselves adapting their set lists and then their poetry to work this new role as entertainers, educators or spiritual guides. After the war, Charles Olson's influential manifesto 'Projective Verse' (1950) not only tended towards 'performance' in its emphasis upon the importance of the poet's body and emotional experience in the process of poetic composition ('the heart, by way of the breath, to the line') but also allied poetic voice to a thoroughgoing countercultural stance of protest and dissent. Whilst Olson's notions of the projective manifested inciting expansions of previous

⁴ Outside the UK, particularly in America, similar demands for critical discussion of the sound and performance of poetry have been articulated. Charles Bernstein (1998) complained that 'while the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry has been negligible, despite the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century'. Wheeler (2008) examines the importance, ambiguities and tensions of the term 'poetic voice' in C20th American poetry and Somers-Willett (2009) traces the history of poetry slams in the U.S. and considers poetry performance, and slam poetry in particular, as social movements, arguing that 'slam's commitment to plurality and diversity has led slam poets to linger on personal and political themes, the most common of them being the expression of marginalised identities'.

⁵ Author's emphasis.

⁶ Gräbner is summarising and quoting Christopher Breu (2014) here.

poets' ideas and practices such as that of the nineteenth-century French Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (for example, 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' ['A throw of the dice will never abolish chance'] (1897)) and other modernist American poets and critics including Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, his concept of 'polis' as presented in *The Maximus Poems* (1960, 1968, 1978) was intimately woven with space and place: 'I come back to the geography of it' (Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27).⁷ As the articles in this Special Collection suggest, today's resurgence of poetry performance cultures and poetry slams owe much to the 60s countercultures and the emergent anti-racism of the jazz club, to Liverpool's art / folk / poetry / pop scene, to the Black Arts and movement in the US and Kamau Brathwaite's Caribbean Artists' Movement in the UK, to immigrant communities in makeshift spaces like 'The People's Church' that began the Nuyorican Spoken Word scene, and to festive resistance gatherings, like the London International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World books, to which Linton Kwesi Johnson first invited Jean 'Binta' Breeze to the UK to perform.⁸ But performances continue to show the influence of artistic education and entertainment too. Interviews with poets Marsha Prescod and Anthony Joseph included here reveal the influence of interdisciplinary artistic practices such as Scottish music, Urdu and Punjabi oral traditions and poetic forms, fiction and theatre writing, song-writing, painting, photography, surrealism and the carnivalesque.

As increasingly large audiences 'watch' live-streamed and digital recordings of performances by British and Irish poets such as the late Benjamin Zephaniah, Hollie McNish, Jackie Kay, Malika Booker and Roger Robinson, discussion around the 'space' in which poetry is performed and preserved has also begun to take on greater significance. In a talk presented at the Bowery Poetry Club, New York, on 21 January 2006, the poet, essayist and performance writer Laura Elrick highlighted the importance of the emergence of 'a practice that rejects the separation of our *bodies* from the *spaces we inhabit*' and suggested the possibility of a 'grounding of poetics in spatial practices that challenge the 'nature' of capitalist space' (2006). Elrick draws on the work of the C19th utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, and the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, who argued that as a social product, 'social space'⁹ serves as a tool of thought and of action ... [and] as a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (1991: 26). In doing so, Elrick advocates the ways in which poetic performance can interrogate and redefine 'the space of, by, and for the poietic acts of bodies' (2006). As Zoë Skoulding notes, such a view of poetry and

⁷ With thanks to Simon Everett for this information.

⁸ See Howarth 2024.

⁹ This is referred to as 'the spatial turn' in the humanities and social sciences.

public space ‘owes much to avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, notably the Situationist International, who in the 1950s called for a breakdown between the boundaries of art and life by focusing on situations that would transform the everyday public sphere rather than on the specialized areas of art and literature’ (2011: 247).¹⁰ Skoulding’s analysis examines the performances of Scottish poet Fiona Templeton and the Manchester-located performances by poet Geraldine Monk, and notes guerrilla poetry’s ‘interruptive and interventionary model of poetry rooted in artistic practices that insert poetic language into public space.’¹¹ She reveals the ways in which poetry and performance in cities can act, in Foucault’s terms, as critical ‘counter-sites’, ‘outside of everyday spaces yet related to them’ (2011: 247). Thus the ‘place’ and ‘spaces’ (live and digitised) of interdisciplinary poetry performance become important aspects to consider in terms of (co-) production, dissemination, accessibility and archival preservation.

The performance of a written text unfixes the poem by bringing it into conjunction with lived spaces; the poem at the moment of performance enters into relationships with its surroundings, material and social. However, these relationships are all mediated by the poem; they are changed by a text that is both present, because it is embodied, and absent, because it is contingent, momentary, and never heard in the same way twice. (2011: 247)

Although it would be naïve to suggest that the study of poetry performance exists without difficulties of terminology, parameters, methodology, instability, access, copyright and consent, the excitement of wandering in this ‘wide expanse’ should not be under-estimated.¹² *Poetry off the Page: Intersecting Practices and Traditions in British Performance Poetry* thus aims to make a significant contribution to the study of anglophone poetry performance from a wide range of perspectives. This is clearly evidenced within the articles featured within this volume: Zoë Skoulding’s analysis of the work of the British poet, Bob Cobbing, interrogates translingual sound poetry performance and collaborative pedagogies in the context of poet-war digital and international contexts; Shefali Banerji’s discussion of Jasmine Gardosi’s trans-genre performance *Dancing to Music You Hate* (2021–23) interrogates intermediality, artistic collaboration, queerness and gender fluidity on the British spoken word stage; Claire Palzer’s analysis of Mel Bradley’s *Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins* (2020) examines poetry,

¹⁰ See also Gray 1998: 15–8.

¹¹ Monk is expanding Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand (eds.) 2008 *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space*. Norwalk, Connecticut: Palm Press.

¹² I am referring to John Keats’ sonnet, ‘On first looking into Chapman’s *Homer*’ (1816) here. In *John Keats 1817 Poems* (London: C and J Ollier, 1817) 89.

theatre and digital performance in relation to liveness, spatio-temporal co-presence and mediatisation under the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic; the contemporary UK-based poets, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Anthony Joseph and Marsha Prescod discuss the ways in which their innovative poetry performance and spoken word styles intersect and engage with literary and cultural traditions and art forms such as music, story-telling, carnival, the visual arts, history and politics; Jack McGowan explores nostalgic representations of popular culture in contemporary spoken word performance in the context of community cohesion, re-evaluation and social change; and Conrad Steel examines the origins, developments and influence of 'poet-voice' in contemporary poetry performance.

We hope you enjoy reading these ground-breaking, critically-informed and inspiring discussions of the ways in which British poetry performance has intersected with established forms of literary, artistic and social practice, and dynamically transformed the parameters of sound-body-voice aesthetics and contemporary cultural activism.

Competing Interests

The authors of this introduction are the editors of the Special Collection.

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