Transgender Performance Poets and the Queer Digital Aesthetics of Contemporary American Spoken Word

Emily Roach

PhD

University of York

English

September 2021

Abstract

Online performance poetry invites us to think digitally about poetry, performance, space, time and motion. I examine poetry published or performed by American transgender performance poets between 2010 and 2020, a significant period for technological advancement and transgender activism. The multimedia nature of these texts requires an approach connecting contemporary poetry scholarship, media studies and digital humanities. Through a queer theoretical lens, I suggest that marginalised voices are amplified in a networked world, amid the growth of online platforms and infiltration of social media in everyday life. I begin with the topic of space, establishing the architecture for the transgender poet's 'queer virtual stage.' I show how mediated, online texts trouble the binaries between public and private, drawing analogies between dissolution of spatial boundaries and gender deconstruction. In the second chapter, I turn to time, exploring queer temporalities of transgender performance poetry, ruptures between past, present and future, and the ways digital spoken word texts embody the discordant experience of living within queer time. In the third, I explore ideas of motion, from bodily gestures to audio movements, which determine the rhythm and tempo of spoken word. I consider the community-building function of the mobile audience and the ways transition journey narratives associated with transgender experience are resisted and reframed by transgender performance poets. In the final chapter, I focus on affect, and specifically the affective qualities of non-binary experience. I examine how the precarious lives of queer transgender people of colour makes their virtual and physical visibility an act of resistance. This thesis foregrounds the diversity of transgender experience, giving nuanced insight into transgender lives, which are often treated as monolithic. This range of possibility, I argue, makes online spoken word poetry one of the most exciting and important literary spaces for representations of transgender life in contemporary America.

Table of Contents

Author's Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my primary thesis supervisor Dr JT Welsch for the support, enthusiasm, expertise and invaluable guidance throughout the course of this project. I would like to thank my friends and family for constantly uplifting me. I am particularly grateful for the unwavering support of my partner, my parents and all the friends who have taken the time to offer laughter, encouragement, conversation and community.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

Overview

Speech is one of the most powerful tools of protest. Queer speech disrupts historic accounts of silence and shame, vocalising queer experience and making queer lives visible and audible. Spoken word poetry brings together speech, political charge, visible performance and the arts. This thesis interrogates the radical potential of queer spoken word, slam and performance poetry with a focus on twenty-first-century American transgender poets[1] and their performances on video streaming platform YouTube. The etymology of 'slam', 'spoken word' and 'performance poetry' has been complicated by the terms' often interchangeable usage. Like most critics, I use the term slam to denote a competitive form of performance poetry, subject to specific rules and time constraints. I trace the influences on slam and its origins as a grassroots movement born out of Chicago in more depth below. Yet even this common understanding of slam is troubled by the conflation of "poetic *format*", namely time constraints and audience participation, and "*aesthetic*" (Bearder, 58), such as "the genre's ties to the traditionally black art form of hip-hop" (Somers-Willett, 77). In this study where the word slam is used, it refers to poetry written for competitive events or 'slams' where the poets are timed and their work scored, by a panel of judges and an audience "that has permission to talk back" (Smith, Kraynak, 2009). By contrast, spoken word is a more expansive term and it is "not a solid entity" (Bearder, 83) particularly as its usage has become more commonplace. Through the popularity of spoken word online and its frequent appearance in YouTube videos, Instagram stories or TikTok reels, it is "impossible to define [spoken word] by the *medium* of live performance alone" (Bearder, 83). Javon Johnson suggests that spoken word can be distinguished from slam, through the lack of "structured competition or scoring" (2). I find this distinction in format to be a useful one and I adopt this distinction, whilst recognising that in practice such a bright line cannot always be drawn. The slipperiness of the terms used to describe the kind of poetry featured in this study is further challenged by the increasingly inventive array of multimedia strategies used by performance poets which stray into film, music and digital art. In this study I use the term performance

---

[1] I use the word 'transgender' as an umbrella term for people whose gender does not correlate with the gender they were assigned at birth (and 'cisgender' to describe those whose gender does). I include the non-binary poets in this study within that umbrella, with the understanding that some non-binary people will describe themselves as transgender and others will not. The pronouns in this thesis are consistent with the pronouns poets and critics used at the time of writing.

poetry as a broad umbrella term which, on my definition, provides space for both competitive slam and non-competitive spoken word within it, but also extends to the stylised digital art and film shorts where the text comprises multiple, multimedia levels. In keeping with the endeavours of transgender poets to resist categories, boxes and binaries, I too resist the temptation to try to pinpoint a contained definition of performance poetry. Although the performance of poetry has its own specific cultural origins in music halls and theatre, the digital age brings with it a range of accessible opportunities for poets to use technology to think beyond the stage and its traditional associations with performance poetry. I provide space in this study for poetry that thinks beyond traditional influences and pushes against definitional boundaries.

The poetry in this study dates from 2010 to 2020 and these digital, print and audio texts capture a decade of flux in America. Politically, the decade began with Barack Obama in office, the first Black man to be elected U.S. President. It ended with the culmination of Donald Trump's chaotic presidency, the fallout from incendiary claims of ballot manipulation empowering white nationalists to storm the U.S. Capitol, inspired by Trump's rebranding of Ronald Reagan's promise to 'Make America Great Again.' For marginalised communities, the swell of hope that surrounded the early Obama-era was mitigated over two terms by a cautious path to progress, followed by the violent whiplash effect of the Trump administration, which stood in direct opposition to social justice. For LGBTQ+ communities, the decade was one of celebration and grief. The fight for marriage equality succeeded in the Supreme Court, but the shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando marked the largest mass murder of LGBTQ+ people in America's history and hate crimes and transphobic violence have continued to rise.

At the same time, throughout this decade, technological advancements enabled so-called 'Big Tech' to grow exponentially in wealth and reach. Evidence of the extraordinary financial dominance of Big Tech in twenty-first century capitalist America became increasingly apparent, when Apple's historic profit making made it the first US company to be worth US$1 trillion and, later, US$2 trillion (Klebnikov). YouTube, founded just five years prior in 2005, was already an integral part of the Big Tech machine. By the early twenty-tens, popular YouTube video bloggers formed an integral part of a new wave of social media celebrity due to their sizeable online followings. People turned to YouTube to watch media ranging from DIY hacks to videos produced by fledgling communities of gamers, beauty vloggers and pranksters. These numbers grew further, following the discontinuation of

popular video-hosting site Vine in 2016, a pivotal moment when popular Vine users made YouTube their preferred online home (Alexander).

My study of performance poetry produced by transgender poets on YouTube situates this art in a time of rapid change, in an era that further polarised political agendas and saw transgender activism become one of the most prominent battles for LGBTQ+ rights and representation. This research is informed by technological advancement and the undeniable impact of social media on every aspect of our lives, but its primary aim is a deeper understanding of the different preoccupations and vulnerabilities of a diverse range of transgender writers producing poetry in twenty-first century America. Although the focus is on American poets, from the outset of this project it is important to recognise that the digital terrains occupied by these poets enables their sphere of influence to extend beyond contained geographical boundaries. It is with this context that this thesis examines the efforts of American, transgender performance poets to navigate the digital geographies that shape activism and queer community-building in a networked world.

Spoken word, from Harlem to Cyberspace

The poets of this study are part of a contemporary wave of exciting spoken word talent, although performance poetry itself is not a recent phenomenon. Poetry's oral tradition can be traced back centuries. However, to understand the evolution of today's American spoken word poetry scene with reference to pivotal poetry movements that preceded it, the Harlem Renaissance is a logical starting point. This era of Black cultural production by young novelists, poets and playwrights spanned roughly from the 1920s to the 1930s and "occurred against the backdrop of the Great Migration, the mass movement of black people from the rural South to northern cities" (Wall 3). Writing about Langston Hughes, one of the most prominent poets of this period, Lesley Wheeler explains "[t]he negotiation between sound and script is especially urgent for Hughes, because so much African American poetry declares its roots in oral culture" (65). The work of Hughes and his contemporaries, many of whom held variously queer identities, marks a critical moment in American literary history where poetry took on the influences of the sound of jazz and blues music, itself an erstwhile site of gender transgression and queer sexuality through the performances of stars including Gladys Bentley and Bessie Smith. Together with the musical influences at the time, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance saw the "political implications" (65) of spoken word as integral to their work, drawing on a legacy of Black oral tradition.

The aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II saw the emerging countercultural movement of Beat poets, active from the mid-to-late 1940s onwards. Beats poets including Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima and Lawrence Ferlinghetti also favoured oral delivery and experimented with audio techniques and recorded sound. Like the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, these radical poets were preoccupied with themes of sexuality, developing a sound inspired by both Walt Whitman and the rhythms of blues and jazz, performing their work at poetry readings in American cities like San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. Responding in part to the whiteness of the Beat movement, the Black Arts Movement was founded by LeRoi Jones and spanned the 1960s and 1970s, marking a time "of political upheaval…characterized most acutely by the assassinations of Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr." (Somers-Willett 57). As Tyler Hoffman explains, the Black Arts poets "were…insistent on the spoken word and its public effects" (162) and they "sought to unearth…the performance traditions upon which their work is based" (163).

Into the 1980s and 1990s, this investment in the spoken word was also a notable feature of the poetry produced during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Inspired by the poets of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement who preceded them, Black, gay poets including Essex Hemphill, Marlon Dixon, Joseph Beam and Assotto Saint produced work in this period which blended spoken word with mediated visuals. Darius Bost describes how Hemphill's performance group, Cinque, "emphasized the spoken voice as an instrument, and used pitch, inflection and the synchrony of vocal sound and movement to emphasize the musicality of [their poetry]" (41). Like the Beats experimenting with audio recordings, the poets of the HIV/AIDS crisis used audio-visual techniques through experimental documentary films produced by Marlon Riggs – most notably *Tongues Untied* (1989), which became an influential multimedia record of Black, queer existence and resistance.

This non-exhaustive exploration of influential poetry movements illuminates the ways in which poets who favoured the spoken word have foregrounded the meshing together of queer politics and technical innovation used by the twenty-first century poets of this study. These pivotal periods of creative output are critical to the birth of competitive poetry slams in the 1980s and their later evolution. Spoken word has its contemporary roots in Black oral tradition and queer communities, drawing influences from a vast array of performance art, from the music of the blues divas of the 1920s to spoken word features of the Harlem ballroom scene. Many of the contemporary spoken word poets' forebearers held marginalised identities and harnessed the political power of the spoken word to build creative communities around the political urgency of their shared experiences.

Since the 1980s, the poetry slam—a competitive form of performance poetry, where poems are timed and scored by a panel of judges—has grown in reach and scale. Its early origins have been described as "poetic boxing matches that were taking place in Southside Chicago" (Johnson 23) and competitions at Chicago's Green Mill with "clinking tumblers of whiskey and wafts of cigarette smoke" (Somers-Willett 4). Founded by Marc Smith, the first National Poetry Slam (NPS) had its inaugural run in 1990 and the size and interest in these competitions have seen enormous growth since. The delivery style and aesthetics of slam have had an influence on American spoken word more broadly, at times to the point of caricature (Bearder, 65). This is in no small part due to the way aesthetic tropes of slam found a wider audience through the mediums of television and film. At the turn of the twenty-first century, slam poetry found a long-running audio-visual platform through *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*, a television series airing on HBO between 2002 to 2007. The popularity of the series and documentaries like *SlamNation* (1998) brought the use of multimedia, audio-visual techniques to a wider audience than previous live events. A decade after *Def Poetry Jam* premiered, Button Poetry set up a YouTube channel where recordings of one-off events and large competitions including the National Poetry Slam continue to be uploaded. Founded in 2011, Button Poetry is one of the leading names in contemporary spoken word, producing not only poetry in mediated form, but also publishing a variety of print works, from chapbooks to full collections, by poets whose work has garnered significant attention online. The development of competitive slam and the broader spoken word poetry scene is inextricable from a long history of using modern technology to amplify and project performances and politics, using techniques and methods of distribution that have become increasingly streamlined through the rapidly advancing capabilities of online space.

Transgender rights and twenty-first century America

The speed of technological advancement from 2010 to 2020 enhanced the ease of distributing new poems through the sharing functions on social media sites which in turn led to a noticeable uptick in online publications featuring spoken word artists. During the period of my research and writing, several poets in this study published new poems responding to growing tensions in America and anti-queer, anti-Black violence. Transgender performance poet Lee Mokobe is one example. The poems 'The Not Yet Burning Country' and 'Surviving Blackness' roughly date from the start of my research to the final stages of this project. 'The Not Yet Burning Country' was uploaded to the TED YouTube channel on 16 November

2017, in response to the inauguration of Trump. Mokobe's cautionary words to America remain grimly prophetic today: "America, you are not yet burning. But there is plenty of smoke" (0:01:04-9). The video is visually understated, with Mokobe in the centre of the screen and a tattered American flag in the background, a symbol of patriotism, the 'star-spangled banner' with its complicated legacy. The poem recognises the dangers posed by "the stale tradition of exclusion and bigotry" (0:00:58-0:01:02) and Mokobe cautions the nation against making the mistakes they have seen before, drawing on their experience as an immigrant from South Africa: "I've seen a burning country before…I've seen a country break itself apart to make faggots of queer bones" (0:00:35-38). The poem speaks of a "quiet war, the kind that did not announce itself but destroyed everything in its wake to make room for greatness" (0:00:21-28). The quiet war, Mokobe suggests, has been ongoing for some time, finding traction in rising discontent and anxieties around disenfranchisement because of campaigns for equality. Yet despite the volatility of America at the time of Trump's election, Mokobe does not depict the country as a wholly hostile place, but instead frames it as a land of contradiction. They recall an America where they found freedom: "I have found a family here that calls my body mine and my name glorious" (0:01:56-0:02:02). The poem evokes the rich cultural diversity of "Philadelphia summers, punctuated by the aroma of Halal trucks and African aunties braiding Black girl hair at the speed of light and a rainbow of melanated children drenched in the joy of fire hydrant showers" (0:02:02-17). It urges the viewer to follow the actions of indigenous populations who "looked at the faces of visitors before and chose to call them kin" (0:1:45-52). Through this powerful poem, Mokobe highlights the complex relationship marginalised groups have with contemporary America. It is a relationship that requires negotiating the persistent trauma of life on the margins, whilst holding space for joy and finding hope in change.

The final year of Trump's administration brought with it a rise in anti-transgender violence, high-profile incidents of state-sanctioned violence against the Black community, a steep incline in mass shootings and a widening gulf between rich and poor. In keeping with the darkening mood of a nation, Mokobe released a new spoken word poem, 'Surviving Blackness' on 13 July 2020, in response to a new wave of civil rights activism that gathered pace following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in May of the same year. The poem, a collaboration with activist creative studio Fine Acts, takes the form of a black and white kinetic typography video. The poet's words are accompanied by the background sound of an old film projector, with the visuals interspersed with spots and lines, replicating the damage often seen in old black and white movies when film reels were

run through projectors multiple times. As the words fill every inch of screen space, the viewer's senses compete, the eyes and ears engaged in a way that makes the viewer work as they watch the poem (Fig 1). The tone is also markedly different to 'The Not Yet Burning Country.' Mokobe turns the phrase "oh country of mine" into a scathing indictment of America's repeated failure to protect its Black communities. In stark contrast to 'The Not Yet Burning Country', with its warm recollection of America at its best, 'Surviving Blackness' highlights America at its worst: "oh country of mine, you ugly beast, you bother of a breath, you hush of a terror…oh thief of black boy, black girl, black queer, black trans…oh country of 'they all fit the description', oh nation of abuse, oh border to no freedom street" (0:50-57; Fig 1). Mokobe's impassioned delivery marks the intensity of the three years between the two poems, when their urgent message of caution went unheeded, replaced by understandable anger at the neglect of those on the margins of contemporary America.
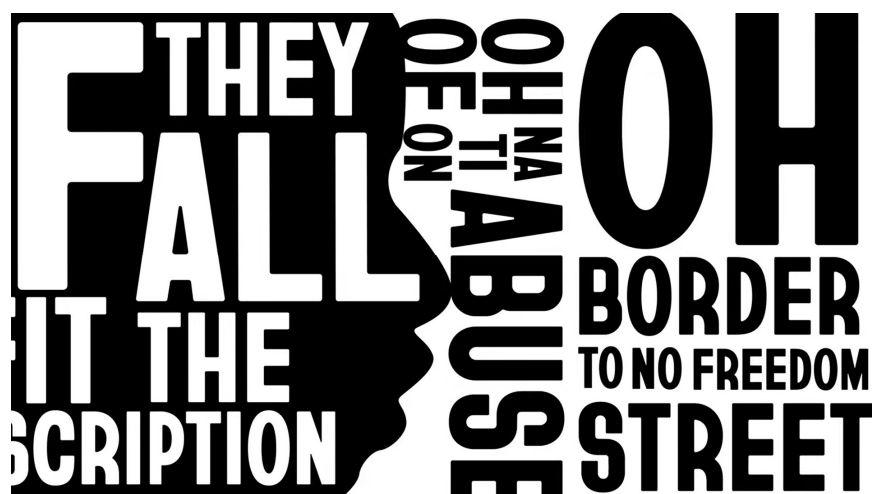
Fig 1

On 13 March 2021, the Human Rights Campaign announced that more anti-transgender bills had been introduced in 2021 than in any other time in American history (Ronan). The rolling back of protective legislation relating to healthcare, access to housing and support for transgender youth in educational settings were part of a growing legislative tide turning against transgender communities in recent years. As a result, transgender people continue to face a disproportionately high risk of violence in America, particularly transgender women of colour. At its conclusion, the Trump administration had resulted in devastating consequences for transgender people, as outlined in a report by The National

Center for Transgender Equality ("**NCTE**"). By August 2020, the "surge of violence against transgender people in the United States…passed a grim milestone", with the total number of transgender people murdered surpassing the total for all of 2019, and with "the violence particularly pronounced for Black and Latina women" (NCTE). This statistic makes transgender women of colour one of the most vulnerable populations in America, who experience the triple oppression of racism, misogyny and transphobia. As discussed below, social media has provided a vital tool for calling attention to this violence, reinforcing the connection between transgender activism and online organisation.

Technology and the Digital Age

Transgender activists have an important connection to the digital world, due to the role the Internet has played in the formation of transgender communities and the contemporary transactivist movement. Transgender historian Susan Stryker and legal researcher Stephen Whittle both describe the mid-1990s as a vital time for a burgeoning online transactivist movement. In *Transgender History* ("**History**" 2008), Stryker cites this moment as pivotal to the "remarkable expansion of the transgender movement" as the Internet "helped connect transgender people who otherwise might not have been in touch with one another" (146). Stryker also explains how technology is "transforming life in unprecedented ways", carving out a space for transgender people who became "harbingers of the strange new world beginning to take shape" ("*History*" 146-7). My own findings indicate that there are critical strides to be made in relation to the literary endeavours of transgender people broadly and online specifically. As Tobias Raun argues, writing about transgender vloggers on YouTube, there is a "less developed [academic] interest in cultural production" by transgender creatives online. Raun advocates for a more expansive critical exploration of the synergies between transgender lives and the Internet, beyond the important interventions made in the social sciences. Like Stryker, Raun observes how "the internet has become…an important part of trans communication and mobilization" and notes "it is crucial to develop analysis of the ways in which trans and social media intersect" (376). My focus on transgender writers contributes to a growing body of research that explores the ways our collective dependency on social media and the ease of accessing online content had fundamentally has altered the ways in which we think about performance. Regarding performance poetry, Javon Johnson notes that "[w]hat was once a specific physical venue in which people shared their most difficult thoughts is now open to millions" (103). As my research demonstrates, this

expansive audience presents new opportunities and challenges for transgender performance poets creating and performing on the virtual stage.

Understanding contemporary immersion in a technological world is a vital component of this research. The past decade has shown how quickly and seamlessly new innovations, social media platforms and developments in existing technology blend seamlessly into daily life. To take just a handful of examples, during this decade the first iPad was released, artificial intelligence (AI) entered our homes through the Amazon Alexa and other similar devices, the Uber app launched, there was a surge in cloud computing usage and a vast number of new social media platforms emerged, including Instagram and TikTok. The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis of the Digital Age, where online platforms provided socially distanced spaces for work, education, socialising, shopping and even travel. Tech-orientated terms like 'doomscrolling' and 'Zoom fatigue' are now part of everyday vernacular and social media and video conferencing services have come to provide a complex form of connection that serves as a mediated veneer for the replication of pre-pandemic life. This immersion in technology extends to activism and the work undertaken by marginalised groups to offer counternarratives to the mainstream media. Writing about George Floyd's death and the related Black Lives Matter movement for *The New Yorker* in 2020, Jane Hu comments that "[e]very historic event has its ideal medium of documentation—the novel, the photograph, the television—and what we're witnessing feels like an exceptionally 'online' moment of social unrest." For transgender communities, the Internet today is a place of rising hostility and backlash, as well as a space for marginalised voices to be amplified. The hashtag #BlackTransLivesMatter morphed into a protest chant and Internet search term, with the phrase searched ten times more in 2020 than the year prior (Chisholm). The movement illuminates both the neglect of transgender communities of colour in America and the contributions of transgender people of colour to queer liberation movements throughout history. Social media is a vital tool to raise visibility and challenge misinformation disseminated by traditional media outlets and it provides a global meeting place where activists can organise, establish safety protocols for protests and foster community.

The Internet is a complicated space, however. The benefits for marginalised groups seeking to organise online are mitigated by the way systemic issues encountered in physical space are replicated in digital terrains. This is observable in criticism of algorithms, or computing instructions, which suggests that structural biases are replicated online through the processing of digital footprints that directs Internet users towards specific content. Analysing these techniques has led to a robust, growing body of scholarship on algorithmic bias and

digital suppression (Benjamin 2019; Florini 2019; Noble 2018; O'Neil 2016). For example, sociologist Ruha Benjamin has written about the myriad ways systemic racism manifests in digital space. She coins the term 'The New Jim Code', explaining that "tech designers encode judgments into technical systems but claim that the racist results of their design are entirely exterior to the encoding process. Racism thus becomes doubled—magnified and buried under layers of digital denial" (12). This use of algorithms to promote content based on individual online activities is exacerbated by bots which 'cleanse' the Internet of material deemed harmful to children. This tactic repeatedly leads to the suppression of LGBTQ+ content, as noted by April Anderson and Andy Lee Roth who explain that "major media platforms are filtering online speech in ways that marginalise and stigmatise LGBTQ communities" and observe that "[t]he same mechanisms that block LGBTQ-themed hashtags on Instagram or demonetise LGBTQ channels on YouTube…also often permit – or even promote – anti-LGBTQ content" (75). These efforts to cleanse the Internet of supposedly harmful content are often framed as a desire to make online spaces suitable for a new generation of tech-savvy children, but the practice is heavily flawed for the reasons Anderson and Roth describe. Queer communities have a long legacy of being silenced and supressed through attempts to protect the mythical 'child', or, as Lee Edelman puts it, "[the] Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). This is no less true of the interventions by behemoth corporations like Apple to make the Internet a safe, sanitised space. There is a significant disconnect between who gets protected by algorithms and who gets suppressed or, in the case of YouTube content, demonitised, where videos are not able to receive advertising revenues due to the nature of the content. Digital censorship often becomes a form of digital silencing for marginalised communities, with vocal activists 'shadow banned', leading to the erasure of vital information archives and resources. On this basis, digital space can quickly become as hostile to those holding marginalised identities as the physical landscape of America.

In the context of performance poetry created by Black, transgender communities, Johnson points out the way the threat of moving through America is replicated by participation in online spaces. Johnson writes about the vulnerabilities that arise when the intimate, confessional medium of spoken word poetry is made available to a potentially substantial online audience with the theoretical global reach of social media platforms. He explains that posting poetry online means that "a room where politically personal and vulnerable poetry could be shared…has been transformed into a space in which the confession and the confessing body can be archived" (114). Johnson observes that for Black,

transgender poets, "gender, race, sexuality and class…collide with a nexus of systemic oppressions, they have always had to develop strategies to navigate unfair and unsafe spaces and regulatory practices" (101). With increased visibility comes a greater risk of violence, as noted by Gossett et al. who focus on the "radical incongruities" of the heightened visibility of transgender individuals through so-called 'positive' transgender representation in visual media that has occurred at "precisely the same political moment when women of color, and trans women of color in particular, are experiencing markedly increased instances of physical violence" (xvi). There is both risk and reward with increased visibility and in the context of this study, it is important to understand the size of YouTube to fully appreciate the implications of being visible on the platform. The American video-sharing website—created by three former PayPal employees, Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim and bought out by Google in 2006—is now the world's second most popular social media site (Oberlo). With 2.3 billion active users worldwide, 1 billion hours of videos watched daily, and five hundred hours of videos uploaded every minute (Moshin) the sheer scale of YouTube shows the potential reach of poets on the platform and its importance to online communities.

Button Poetry, mentioned at the start of this introduction, is YouTube's most popular spoken word channel and (at the time of writing) has 1.34 million subscribers. Neil Hilborn's 'OCD' is the most viewed video, with fifteen million views. Although these figures might seem small when compared to the platform's most popular channels, which have subscriber counts of over one hundred million and videos with several billion views, the context is vital. Button Poetry is a juggernaut of the spoken word scene and compared to the audience at a live poetry reading, even sizeable slam competitions will not have the kind of expansive audience that a YouTube channel of this size can bring. Furthermore, a channel with over a million subscribers is, even in YouTube terms, a popular channel. When 1.34 million subscribers are compared to the subscriber count of popular individual poets including Andrea Gibson, with just over twenty-thousand subscribers, the reach and influence of Button Poetry far exceeds the majority of poets creating content on their own YouTube channels. In this way, Button Poetry makes spoken word more widely accessible to a substantial audience than the capacity of physical auditoriums and the geographical limitations of in-person events allow.

Reading across transmedia poetry

My study of transgender online performance poetry draws on work from several different disciplines. Bringing them together has helped to identify gaps across fast-paced sites of

academic investigation. The poets, their texts and the use of online space to perform, create and community-build involves the continuous collapse of binaries and boundaries; this extends to academic frameworks and the intensely multidisciplinary approach required to investigate the multifaceted layers of online performance poetry. Queer theory provides the theoretical structure to my methodological approach, but my research has necessarily drawn on a broad range of additional scholarship from a variety of disparate and intersecting disciplines and subdisciplines to develop a comprehensive critical toolkit to undertake close readings of the poems analysed in this thesis. Producing this toolkit involves a robust understanding in three main areas: first, key critical interventions on performance poetry, slam and spoken word; second, developments in media, culture and technology studies; and third, working in the developing field of transgender studies, exploring the synergies between transgender studies and queer theory. These core areas of research are then contextualised by the systemic socio-political and economic inequalities in twenty-first century America, which give these works their political potency.

Using four queer theoretical layers of space, time, motion and affect to frame my analysis, I undertake a series of close readings of transmedia poetry. The literary critical endeavour of 'close reading' has a long history rooted in close reading practices used by theologians working with religious texts. Through its development as a mode of scientific enquiry in the early twentieth century, the practice "encouraged the illusion that any piece of language, 'literary' or not, can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation" (Eagleton, 38). When using the term 'close reading', I move away from the practice in its earliest conception and look to more contemporary scholarship to understand the usefulness of the practice to a project of this nature. In particular, I favour the way Elizabeth Freeman conceptualises the term. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities and Queer Histories* (2010), Freeman observes that "[t]o close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm" (xvi-xvii). Freeman's view of close reading as an essentially queer practice aligns closely with my own: "the decision to unfold, slowly, a small number of imaginative texts rather than amass a weighty archive of or around texts" (xvii).

Taking the time to read these texts closely also necessitates a careful consideration of the form, structure, composition, creativity and artistic integrity of performance poetry. In *Spoken Word in the UK* (2021), Katie Ailes discusses the temptation to prioritise "authenticity as an aesthetic quality" in scholarly work on spoken world. Ailes suggests this issue is best observed in critical work that focuses primarily on the "lived experience of the

artist rather than the craft they apply to their work" (143). Lived experience in a rudimentary sense is an essential part of this project which demands close attention to the cultural, historical and social contexts that inform transgender experience and creative practices. However, a methodological text-by-text analysis gives the fullest sense of the range and diversity of both performance poetry and transgender lives. Transgender experiences, and related literary narratives, are sometimes inaccurately framed as monolithic. Critics working in the broad field of transgender studies advocate for a fluid theoretical approach in order to disrupt this incomplete understanding. For example, Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura suggest that researchers in this space should ensure that 'transgender' does not become a "static identity category…a particular way of being with the world" and advocate for a flexible approach to theorising gender-variance which invites "multiple modes of analysis" ("*Studies 2*", 7). The poetry produced by these performance poets frequently challenges tropes that have dominated the literary canon of transgender experience. The practice of close reading enables the exploration of sites of difference. It engages with performance poetry in a way that recognises "a great deal of craft, both in terms of writing and performance" (Ailes, 145) together with the "diversity in trans communities" (Feinberg 98). In doing so this project considers a broad range of gender-variant identities and takes a textual approach to analysing performance poetry that moves within, beyond and around the individual poet's queer identity.

Close reading performance poetry is a transmedia exercise that necessitates reading a poem not only as a *poem* but as a piece of theatre, art, film, a video blog, a digital performance, a site of digital activism and so on, as applicable. Depending on the creative strategies used in each poem, by the relevant poet, producer, director or YouTube channel, my methodology requires working in an interdisciplinary fashion, applying a queer theoretical lens that historicises and contextualises important shifts in queer culture and considers how these developments can be used to better understand both the poetry and preoccupations of transgender creators. My expansive definition of performance poetry as outlined above enables an investigation of the range of artistic and technological strategies used by transgender performance poets and avoids unnecessary self-imposed limitations that a narrow, rigid definition of performance poetry would place on my research. The Internet's popularity as a site of creativity sees poets deploying a wide range of creative methods to convey their messages and it is important to capture how online poetry responds to developing technologies. To highlight the creative breadth of multimedia performance poetry, I have included a small number of print poems, written by poets who originally began in

performance spaces. In allowing space for these print collections, I push against the stage and page dichotomy. As I explain when turning to the relevant collections in this thesis, working with these print poems is an essential part of recognising how online engagement has enabled poets to traverse and trouble boundaries between print and performance. It helps us see how liveness is captured in writing, how a poem *performs* on the page.

Scholarship on spoken word has been outpaced to some extent by the rapid growth and cultural significance of spoken word. Research on spoken word or performance poetry can occur in multiple disciplinary spaces, with the slipperiness of defining precisely what is meant by either term resulting in spoken word receiving more attention in some contexts, including audio-visual art installations, theatre, film and music. By contrast, slam is more clearly defined but has received less critical attention in proportion to its popularity. Despite its origins in the 1980s, it was twenty years before a substantive critical engagement with American slam poetry would appear. Prior to that, Charles Bernstein's edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998) includes a series of essays that approach performance poetry from various angles, including poetry readings and audio-visual methods. Maria Damon's chapter in that collection is an early example of scholarship that grapples with the connections between slam and rap, a frequent site of investigation and a connection that can sometimes be overstated, as I discuss in the third chapter of this thesis. Shortly after, several ethnographic texts also emerged which served the hybrid function of blending 'how to slam' guides with poems and interviews with slammers and spoken word artists, including Gary Glazner's *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (2000) and *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2003), edited by Billy Collins. In the mid-to-late-2000s, several important critical strides were made by researchers working across various disciplines, primarily through journal articles and individual chapters. Within theatre studies, Jill Dolan's 2005 work on utopia and performance contained a chapter on the Broadway production of *Def Poetry Jam*, which marked the wider growth of performance poetry and slam. In 2008, Lesley Wheeler's *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* offered another important intervention, with a chapter devoted to contemporary performance poetry. In the same year, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz published an extensive and lively account of New York slam, *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*. The text offers a history of slam in New York City, focusing on the influence of *Russell Simmon's Def Poetry Jam* and hives of creative energy including the Nuyorican Poets Café.

Scholars of performance poetry frequently point to the fact that the form remains underrepresented in wider poetry scholarship. It was not until 2009 that the first comprehensive text on slam emerged that goes beyond exploring the history of slam. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett's *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* has become a foundational text on slam. Somers-Willett notes that slam poetry in general was only "just beginning to gain scholarly attention" (15) at the time of writing her text, making her a trailblazer in this space. In 2011 Julia Novak published *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* which provides a comprehensive methodological toolkit for analysing live performance poetry. Despite the hope expressed by Somers-Willett's that her text would mark the first of many academic investigations into slam, Novak identifies a repeated tendency to "sideline live poetry as an inconsequential by-product of printed poetry" (18). This absence of critical attention is also addressed by Tyler Hoffman who published *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2013) several years later. In his text, Hoffman notes the absence of critical exploration on "the dialectic of performance and text" (8). Although there have been notable critical additions focusing on spoken word in the UK, as discussed below, Hoffman's comments suggest that this remains a creative space with significant potential for further critical investigation. In any event, Hoffman's work is an essential part of the critical landscape, and he takes an innovative approach to his analysis of performance poetry.

For my research, Hoffman's work is particularly useful for its exploration of "mediatization" of performance poetry, drawing on performance theorist Philip Auslander's work with "electric amplification" through various means and considering how such mediatization "affects in essential ways our reception of performance poetry and its cultural work" (5). Hoffman uses the "four-part taxonomy of oral poetry" set out by John Miles Foley in *Oral Traditions of the Internet* (2012) to focus his thesis around two of Foley's categories, "works written for oral performance ('voiced texts')" and "poetry…that is written to be experienced as oral, although read by literate audiences ('written oral poetry') (5). This need for categorisation speaks to the challenges of defining performance poetry, which can become overly expansive when extended to notions of poetic voice, academic poetry readings, analogue recordings and so on. On the other hand, attempts to precisely define performance poetry in a narrow sense reinforces unhelpful binaries of stage and page, with performance itself a "radically unstable" concept (Taylor 204). I work to resist thinking about performance too narrowly and also work against the stage/page binary in my research by taking an expansive approach to texts produced by the performance poet. This approach

engages with multimedia formats beyond traditional 'open mic' performances, including analysis of independently produced chapbooks, print poetry collections, theatre productions, video blogs (vlogs), short films and spoken word albums. This enables discussion around the way contemporary performance poets use the tools at their disposal to disrupt more commonly understood ideas of spoken word.

Although Bernstein, Somers-Willett and Hoffman are clearly not the only critics to have engaged with performance poetry, they are key researchers in the American spoken word space, together with Novak's important intervention that takes an interdisciplinary approach to developing a comprehensive critical methodology for reading live poetry performances. Writing nearly a decade after Somers-Willett and several years after Hoffman, Javon Johnson points out that slam and spoken word continue to remain flourishing sites of academic investigation with much scope for further critical inquiry. The literature I primarily reference in this thesis, consistent with my interest in American poets, is focused on the spoken word scene in the United States. However, it is important to recognise that although the spoken word scene in the United Kingdom has different influences and structures, there is an established connection between the two scenes as discussed in more depth by Helen Johnson and Jacob Sam-La Rose. They observe a "tangible sense of exchange" (386) and challenge simplistic notions of 'influence' by identifying moments of synergy through competitions including the Transatlantic Poetry Slam. They point to the movement of notable poets around the world and the potential for new ideas and influences to emerge due to this international travel. They also note that "social media has a huge part to play in facilitating movement in both directions" (392). As noted above, even with a project so closely focused on American poets and the specific historical, cultural and social contexts that influence their work, geographical boundaries cannot be too tightly drawn with the ever more expansive reach of spoken word through online platforms. Critically, the relatively recent influx of critical attention on US spoken word, slam and performance poetry is reflected by emerging scholarship in the United Kingdom. Two recent publications, Peter Bearder's *Stage Invasion: Poetry and the Spoken Word Renaissance* (2019) and *Spoken Word in the UK* edited by Lucy English and Jack McGowan (2021) are welcome additions, the latter providing the platform for the discussion between Johnson and Sam-La Rose referenced above. The texts provide a critical foundation for an area of research that is continuously growing and evolving, much like the popularity of the spoken word scene itself.

In his introduction to *Stage Invasion*, Peter Bearder explains that performance poetry "has long been excluded from what we understand 'poetry' to be" (19) and suggests that it is

precisely the troubling of disciplinary boundaries referenced above that caused spoken word to slip through the gaps, together with the popularity in the mid-twentieth century of literary critical approaches that "rejected any consideration of the social milieu" where the "voice and biography of the author, the manner of their performance and the context of their historical moment were judged to be inadmissible evidence" (19). Like the work of Bernstein, Somers-Willet, Hoffman and Johnson on American spoken word, Bearder, English, McGowan and the contributors to *Spoken Word in the UK* have been instrumental in creating an academic bedrock for other scholarship to interrogate and build upon. Through their critical investigations they illuminate and bring together relevant scholars who precede them. It is an exciting moment for academics working with spoken word and the critics mentioned above have been instrumental in enabling me to undertake my own research, offering diverse academic insights to performance poetry and assisting me with identifying areas where my own critical investigation can contribute new interventions.

Johnson's ethnographic research in *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* (2017) is aligned with my own work through its interest in community building, although our methodological approaches are different. As English and McGowan explain, "[t]he complex and dynamic relationships between audience and performer represent a key area of critical interest for performance poetics, engaging far ranging fields of enquiry" (5). This potential range of enquiry is evidenced through my own work which draws a connection between the poet-audience relationship and community building strategies engaged by online performance poets and their mobile audience. Johnson's research, which is similarly interested in community, pays particular attention to the influences of marginalised groups on spoken word, but it also challenges the oft cited notion that spoken word is inherently radical. Johnson explains that existing critical discourse often neglects "the complexities of spoken word communities…the ways in which these highly politicized performance communities are produced and reproduced, maintained and negotiated, or empowered and subverted" (8). Furthermore, Johnson's research works both with the intersections of "race, gender, sexuality, and class in the making of slam and spoken word communities" (8) and advocates for the importance of analysing the virtual stage in current scholarship on performance poetry. In Johnson's final chapter, 'Button Up', he takes strides towards unpacking both the potential and limitations of an online poetry platform like Button Poetry with its dominance in the online spoken word scene. Like Johnson, I place an emphasis on the community-building functions of performance poetry for marginalised groups and Johnson's attention to the virtual stage offers important insight into the workings

of Button Poetry. But while Johnson's chapter focuses on the infrastructure of Button, I address the infrastructure of YouTube itself and the coding and algorithms that support it in order to develop a deeper understanding of the implications of performing and creating online. Furthermore, as much of the critical work in this space spends substantial time on the physical sites of performance, working primarily with the virtual gives comprehensive space for analysing the poems as digital texts, unpacking the layers of mediated, embodied poetics, the function of touch-screen technology and the mobile audience.

The second critical area essential to my research is media and culture studies and the intersections of this discipline with performance studies, specifically digital performance. The nature of online performance poetry troubles boundaries between traditional performance spaces of the theatre and stage through inhabiting technological spaces including computers and mobile phones. The advent of Web 2.0 saw the Internet evolve from a more static site of information archiving to a more interactive space, with a more user-oriented focus, heavy investment in social media and a development of the user from passive to active, engaged in technological dialogue with the rapidly advancing technology that supports the web. The so-called Digital Age has both complicated and transformed the study of performance poetry and the rapid growth in technological capabilities has, to an extent, moved faster than academic approaches to such innovations across all fields of study. This can be observed in scholarship on performance studies which is "continually reinventing itself" (Bial 402) to account for emergent technology. Matthew Causey's *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (2006) demonstrates how critics have been challenged by the pace of digital development, pointing to the ways in which academic theories of performance have been overtaken by the continually "shifting ontologies of performance" (428). Recognising the inescapable impact of technology on the humanities, a Routledge series on New Media and Cyberculture has offered several valuable edited collections that have been useful in my research, including *Mobile Media Practices, Presence and Politics: The Challenges of Being Seamlessly Mobile* (2013) edited by Kathleen M. Cumiskey and Larissa Hjorth and *Theories of the Mobile Internet: Materialities and Imaginaries* (2015) edited by Andrew Herman, Jan Hadlaw and Thom Swiss. The growing attention to digital geographies offers a useful way to think about how these poets move or 'transition' through virtual spaces, and work like *Digital Geographies* (2019) edited by James Ash, Rob Kitchin and Agenieska Leszczynski offers a contribution that, together with older articles including Adriana De Souza e Silva's 'From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Online Spaces' (2006), has been integral to theorising the virtual stage

inhabited by the performance poet, the mobile audience and the blurring of the lines between physical and digital space.

Within media and culture studies, critics working in the growing area of Fan Studies have undertaken substantial work on online community building. This scholarship can be applied more broadly to online community building strategies developed by spoken word poets. Specifically, the work of Henry Jenkins on *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) and the later *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (2013) by Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green are essential contributions on 'convergence culture' or, in broad terms, "how people experience media with which they interact" (Firestone and Clark 8) which can be usefully applied to creators, like spoken word poets, who take media into their own hands. Jenkins also extends the notion of 'participatory culture' to online fan communities in *Textual Poachers: Online Fan Communities and Participatory Culture* (1992) and *Fans, Gamers and Bloggers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2008). Just as Web 2.0 heralded a user-focused shift in technological capabilities, Jenkins and others point to a shift in the activities of fans from consumer to active participants, taking popular culture as a starting point for the creation of their own communities and artistic spaces. Lev Grossman describes this phenomenon best: "They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language" (2011). Developing a theoretical approach to user-focused technology and participatory culture is vital to understanding a variety of YouTube communities, including transgender communities and communities of people who spend time in online spoken word spaces. The connections between YouTube and participatory culture are further drawn out in Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2018), which is an essential text for exploring what it means to participate in and perform on this specific platform and whose writing can be usefully applied to the online poet and their audience.

Finally, my research into the digital leans heavily towards scholarship on digital bodies and bodies on screen, moving between theories of media and culture, stage, film and digital technologies in a way that reflects "the convoluted entanglements of gender, queerness and the body" (Lindner 3) that arise when analysing multimedia forms. To this end, an analysis is required that considers not only the poet themselves, but also the spectator. Kata Szita's chapter 'Haptic Cinema: Smartphones and the Spectator's Body' offers insights into queer spectatorship and smartphone technology, in *Body Images in the Post-Cinematic Scenario: The Digitization of Bodies* edited by Alberto Brodesco and Federico Giordano

(2017). Theorising the digital body of poet and spectator therefore slips and shifts, much like the queer digital body itself, between disciplines and fields of academic study.

As I alluded to earlier in this introduction, twenty-first century spoken word builds on the legacy of queer, creative communities. Criticism that focuses solely on twenty-first century queer spoken word poets is limited, however. There is a long critical history exploring queer performance more broadly, in work including *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) by José Esteban Muñoz, but fewer scholars other than those cited above have explored queer performance in the context of spoken word. Chapbooks, print collections and print anthologies have recognised the contributions of transgender poets to spoken word, including *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013) edited by TC Tolbert and Tim Trace Peterson, *Flicker and Spark: A Contemporary Queer Anthology of Spoken Word and Poetry* (2013) edited by Regie Cabico and Brittany Fonte and *Subject to Change: Trans Poetry and Conversation* (2017) edited by H. Melt. However, academic scrutiny of queer spoken word remains negligible in the case of transgender slammers, spoken word and performance poets. While spoken word scholars like Johnson do include transgender and gender nonconforming poets in their research, their work is invariably explored with a relatively light touch. The lack of existing criticism is part of what makes this such an interesting and important area of research, connecting a growing body of research on spoken word with transgender studies—which includes work produced by transgender creatives—itself a burgeoning space of critical investigation.

In an interview with Rhea Rollmann in *Pop Matters*, Gender Studies professor Trish Salah explains that "[t]he late aughts are when we see the emergence of trans literature conferences, poetry readings, symposiums, collections… which take trans people seriously as both writers and readers" (2015). The moment Salah pinpoints also coincides with a period of increased engagement with slam and spoken word communities. With transgender literature specifically, the need for scholarship has a reciprocal relationship with the status of transgender writers in mainstream publishing, in which a lack of representation perpetuates a lack of critical attention. As publishing moves beyond its historical insistence on confining transgender stories to the realms of medical journals, transition journey memoirs and political manifestos, the interdisciplinary field of transgender studies has also expanded significantly in recent decades. *The Transgender Studies Reader* ("**Studies I**" 2006) and *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* ("**Studies 2**" 2013) collate essential critical interventions, offering a vital foundation for further scholarship pertaining to transgender lives. In the introduction to the

first volume, co-editor Stephen Whittle explains that the 1990s saw a decisive move away from the previously medical and psychology orientated research into transgender experience with a burgeoning new academic movement that "enabled trans men and women to reclaim the reality of their bodies, to create with them what they would" (xii). Stryker, who co-edited both volumes, has spent extensive time researching the transgender lives and individuals who have escaped mainstream historical attention in *Transgender History*.

Stryker's work has been invaluable, together with various contributions to the *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* founded in 2014 by Stryker and Paisley Currah, the memoirs and political manifestos of transgender authors and creative, edited collections and interviews curated by transgender writers including Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (2010). Researching historical accounts of gender variance has provided essential context for this project and key work, together with Stryker's multitude of interventions, include the earlier writings of Leslie Feinberg, most notably *Transgender Warriors: From Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996). Jack Halberstam's *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* ("**Trans***" 2018) and studies that identify the connections between colonialism, race and transgender lives, notably C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), have also provided essential context for my own work. Finally, scholarship tackling depictions of transgender people in popular culture has also proved useful in my research, notably *Trap Door: Trans Identity Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017) edited by Reina Gossett et al., and documentary film *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* directed by Sam Feder (2020). I work at the intersections of queer theory and trans studies and despite some specific critical tensions, there are multiple overlapping perspectives.

Chapter Overview

My research is structured through key critical shifts and turns in queer theory which provide the focus for each chapter. The structure is driven by queer theory's spatial turn in the first chapter, the temporal turn in the second, movements through queer space and time in the third and queer theory's affective turn in the fourth. When writing about queer time and queer space, particularly in the context of transgender experience, Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* ("**QTAP**" 2005) is an essential point of reference. Indeed, my research would not be possible without Halberstam's extensive writings on the interrelationship between time, space and transgender lives. Halberstam

suggests that the existence of a queer time and place enables a reconfiguration of linear, normative ideas of space, time and movement. Halberstam's work has been applied extensively in scholarship concerned with subcultural spaces, but there have been few attempts to bring together queer time, space and movement with such comprehensive critical force and broad interdisciplinary application. Therefore, Halberstam remains a definitive critical voice throughout my own research.

That acknowledged, it is important at this juncture to make clear that my research has engaged a broad range of queer theoretical approaches. My research involves working with diverse and at times dissenting voices at each specific critical turn, as more clearly outlined in each chapter. The first chapter dissects the function of space in online performance poetry and opens with Ethan Smith's viral poem 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be', offering an early introduction to the American college slam circuit and Button Poetry. I then move on to consider self-curated content, in particular the interrelationship between performance poetry and 'vlogging' on YouTube, with a close reading of 'Daughters' by Skylar Kergil and 'Letter to My Vagina' by Miles Walser. In this chapter I argue that space functions as a textual, visual layer of the poem, exploring how the different spaces the poets inhabit including the physical stage of college auditoriums, the virtual stage of YouTube and performance spaces of their own design like gardens and rooftops, inform close readings of these poems. Throughout, this chapter considers how the wider virtual stage magnifies recurring themes of absent, forgotten and liminal space.

The second chapter focuses on the function of time in the work of Chrysanthemum Tran. Contextualised by transgender history, the chapter identifies a textual preoccupation with the haunted present and the utopian desire for a better future. In this chapter I argue that, for the online viewer, the poem as recorded performance enhances Tran's uneasy relationship with time. On queer time, I work with Halberstam and the expansive body of literature on queer temporalities, most notably Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2011), together with research that focuses specifically on the relationship between transgender experience and performance, including Jaclyn Pryor's *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance and the Hole of History* (2017).

The third chapter on movement continues to build on the theoretical foundations established in the first two chapters, together with interrogating additional scholarship from film, media and culture studies spaces, including Katharina Lindner's *Film Bodies: Queer*

Feminist Encounters With Gender and Sexuality in Cinema (2017). In this chapter poems by Andrea Gibson with a particularly cinematic quality provide textual examples for my argument that the queer kinetics of performance poetry serve a particular function related to transgender experience, enabling the disruption of notions of linear movement, journey-making and becoming. In this chapter I take the mobile audience as another moving part of these poems, exploring the way community spaces are formed and fostered online through the work of poets including Gibson. This chapter also grapples with audio movement (rhythm, tempo, beat) and the musicality of spoken word poems by Gibson. The chapter concludes with an analysis of a print collection, *Transit* (2015), by Cameron Awkward-Rich and identifies how the transition journey narrative so often associated with transgender memoir is given a fresh, twenty-first century context through Awkward-Rich's poetry.

Finally, in the fourth chapter I examine the affective qualities of transgender performance poetry and the politics of feeling through an analysis of the work of two non-binary poets, Alok Vaid-Menon and Danez Smith. Expanding on ideas of so-called 'positive' and 'negative' affect, this chapter theorises what I term 'non-binary affect' and argues that the structures of feeling that permeate throughout transgender performance poems complicate this binary of 'good' and 'bad' feelings. This analysis works with queer theory's affective turn, with a particular focus on Judith Butler's writing on *Precarious Life* (2004) and Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion and the complexities of 'happiness.' In this chapter I am also indebted to the work of critics who interrogate so-called 'positive' and 'negative' affect, for example, Lauren Berlant on optimism and Heather Love on reclaiming past associations of queerness with so-called 'bad' feelings including shame, grief and loss.

While space, time, motion and affect are interrelated, there are distinct theoretical angles to each that require independent treatment to best illuminate how they intersect. Halberstam is particularly interested in the way time and space relate to one another, the "queer subjects" who might "live…during the hours when others sleep" and occupy "spaces…that others have abandoned" (*"QTAP"* 10). Other theorists lean more heavily on the temporal or the spatial, placing emphasis on one over the other, whilst acknowledging that the two are intertwined. For example, Joanne Tompkins who explores theatre's heterotopias notes: "I have deliberately focused on the spatial aspects of performance over the temporal, not to discount the significant matter of time, but simply to narrow a large project" (178). Tompkins suggests that "although heterotopia almost always incorporates time with space" (178), it is possible—and indeed sometimes necessary—to separate the two components to achieve a more focused critical analysis. By way of contrast, Muñoz considers

spatiality, notably performance space and sites of queer artistic production, performance, sex and so on, but he keeps his critical gaze primarily fixed on time. Carefully critiquing and drawing influence from German philosopher Ernst Bloch's theorising of utopia, Muñoz develops his own theory of "ecstatic time" which disrupts the "stranglehold of straight time" that both Muñoz and Halberstam are so interested in, enabling us to see "queerness as horizon" (32), a radical site of queer possibility and potentiality. Through his work, Muñoz is also preoccupied with the affective and philosophical qualities of 'hope' in building an argument that takes temporal constructs like memory, nostalgia, and futurity to make an argument that "the future is queerness's domain" (1) and to posit the existence of queer, political "utopian longing" (35). Influenced by these differing but complementary approaches, I adopt a methodological approach which separates, as far as possible, each of the four elements of space, time, motion and affect. I interrogate them independently of one another, whilst using the chapters to build layers of similarity and overlap, producing a solid critical foundation that works with key critical turns in queer theory.

The four conceptual frames that structure this thesis—space, time, motion and affect—are essential to all performance texts, I argue. The poets I discuss are those whose work is reflective about the way transgender experience shapes encounters with these physical and emotional dimensions. While recognising the variety, nuance and difference in transgender experience, I also argue that there are shared qualities that make transgender performance poetry distinctive, by virtue of the introspective emphasis these poets place on spatial and temporal encounters, embodied kinetics and the art of feeling queerly. In turn, these preoccupations heighten a uniquely queer and transgender experience of space, time, motion and affect. Focusing on these elements offers an approach to queer reading that has broader critical applications, beyond work created by transgender authors, beyond online performance poetry as a literary mode, and with relevance to queer experience more generally. With this thesis, I hope to illuminate connections and differences among transgender lives in twenty-first-century America, providing a deeper understanding of the ways in which space, time, motion and affect interrelate at the nexus of technology, performance and poetry, during this crucial decade for transgender visibility and political activism.

Chapter One: Space and the Queer Virtual Stage

Introduction

In 2005, queer theory took a spatial turn. Jack Halberstam's *In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* put forward the existence of "queer time" and "queer space" which are "in opposition to the institutions of the family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). Halberstam identifies work on postmodern geographies as having "actively excluded sexuality as a category for analysis" (5). They work with film, art and queer subcultures to fill that critical gap, offering new ways of thinking about queer, subcultural space and queer geographies, with particular reference to transgender bodies moving through and inhabiting those spaces. By examining lived queer experience it is possible to "open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (2). Any project with a focus on queer space is made possible because of Halberstam's work. However, unlike Halberstam's interest in postmodern geographies and Marxist theories of space, I focus on transgender embodiment and to scholarship on digital bodies and their embodied poetics, to establish their transformative queer potential on the space they occupy, both physically and virtually.

There are multiple spatial elements to online performance poetry. In this chapter, I establish the architecture behind what I term the 'queer virtual stage', unpacking these various spatial elements, from the relationship between queer bodies and the physical space they occupy, to reading queerness into the mediated layer that exists between online performance poet and viewer. Just as one might analyse a printed poem with reference to its formatting and occupation of space on a page, the structural analysis of performance poetry is illuminated by thinking of 'shape' in spatial terms, considering how performance poems engage physical and virtual spaces. Julia Novak notes that live poetry in performance "is characterised by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of poet-performer and audience…a specific spatio-temporal situation" (173). Understanding the function of queer space in online transgender performance poetry requires an analysis of the physical "spatio-temporal" space where poet and audience co-exist, the virtual spaces occupied by the poet and viewer and the spaces invoked in the poems themselves, for example through textual references to spaces like the childhood bedroom, a train carriage, a garden. There are four key components to my contention that the architecture of the virtual stage occupied by transgender performance poets is unambiguously queer. First, I examine the way the visual

31

aesthetics of transgender bodies queers the spaces the poets occupy. Second, I identify absent spaces engaged textually by transgender performance poetry and consider how depictions of these spaces resist or subvert gender normative social order, including the hegemonic idealism and whimsical innocence of childhood. Third, I highlight the complex spatial interplay between cyberspace, physical performance space and the spaces occupied by the viewer, specifically drawing on the blurring of binaries public/private and real/virtual. Finally, I consider how heterotopias offer a useful spatial site of investigation that draws out the inherent queerness of the spaces occupied by transgender performance poets.

The performance poem is a "bi-medial art form" (Novak, 49) in bringing together of body and text where the "heart of the performer…is carried on the flow of the poet's breath" (Bearder 194). Through this bi-medial practice, the notion that the body of the poet automatically informs (and, in the case of the transgender poet, queers) the performance space is an "inane truism" (Davidson, 56). In *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre writes that place and space are qualified by the body that inhabits them (174). In *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* Ian Davidson notes that Lefebvre "historicizes the relationship between the body and space" (56) that "links to the idea of the body and gender, which subsequently connects to the ways in which places are both represented and experienced" (57). The interconnections between the body and the space it occupies are as inextricable as ideas of place and space, where one informs the other. The body is a critical component of the performance poem—the literal embodiment of the text—and in the case of transgender poets, the *queer* embodied text. As Pete Bearder puts it in the context of live performance poetry, "the body is material, the media through which the poetry is published" (190). To demonstrate how these theories function in practice, I begin my textual analysis with a comparison between two versions of the same poem, Ethan Smith's 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be', set in different spaces. The second part of this chapter concerns absent, forgotten and imagined spaces. Staying with Smith, I argue that the poem triggers a nostalgic viewing experience by referencing spaces one associates with childhood and/or adolescence. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957) and Georges Perec's *Species of Space and Other Pieces* (1974) are helpful in terms of considering how to conceptualise the poetics of these spaces and their recollective functions. The use of familiar spaces like the childhood bedroom in transgender performance poetry is often non-normative. Unlike many narratives of childhood which evoke whimsy and innocence, the transgender poet's lived experience allows us to envision these spaces more queerly, disrupting the nostalgia embedded in reminiscing about the past and illuminating the transgender child's sometimes uneasy

relationship with memories of their family home. I expand on this theme more fully in Chapter Two, in relation to the function of queer time in the work of Chrysanthemum Tran.

The third part of this chapter identifies the connection between YouTube vloggers and performance poets. Offering an insight into the formation of communities and counterpublics on YouTube itself, this section explains how the poetry produced by a transgender vlogger, singer and poet Skylar Kergil, is an example of the complex interweaving of space involved in self-curated content. I explain how work of this nature captures the continuous negotiation between spatial boundaries, the public/private and physical/virtual. In *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (2003), Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy talk about the "flexible and fractured spatial order" of what they coin "MediaSpace" (1). Theorising the Internet as a series of spaces or as something fragmented is consistent with Lefebvre's understanding of space as "a multitude of intersections" (33). Digital texts do not inhabit one single space, but rather engage multiple spaces simultaneously. Online performance poetry positions the poet, poem and viewer in several spaces at any given time and those spaces can shift and alter for poet and viewer alike throughout the course of the poem. Sedgwick's work on public/private binarisms explains why "the difference between 'public' and 'private' could never be stably or intelligibly represented as a difference between two concrete classes of physical space" ("*Epistemology*" 110). Significant work has been undertaken to examine this instability with reference to, for example, the interplay between queerness and public space through queer subcultural pursuits (Halberstam) and/or private acts occurring in public or semi-public space (Delaney; Warner). In this section, I read Kergil's poem 'Daughters' and vlogging practices on YouTube more broadly, to argue that the transgender poet's continuous troubling of spatial boundaries or binaries disrupts fixed notions of space, which reflects in turn the way transgender stories destabilise gender binaries.

Finally, I consider the virtual space of the transgender performance poet as a heterotopia, a way of thinking about space developed by Michel Foucault. I undertake this analysis first, by exploring the theatre and auditorium as a heterotopia with particular reference to Foucault and Joanne Tompkins's *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* (2014). Tompkins notes that "[h]eterotopia, unlike utopia, holds a more specific spatial context in its capacity to provide the building blocks for creating something different, something better. Part of its appeal is its precariousness and impermanence" (180). The way Tompkins theorises heterotopic space in the theatre is a useful critical lens that can be applied to performance poetry. In the case of transgender poets, this heterotopic space— precarious, liminal and transitory—evokes the specifically

queer experience of being transgender. Although the traditional performance space of the theatre is a useful and necessary setting to introduce this line of critical thinking, it is when transgender performance poets set their own 'stage'—when they curate the spatial setting for their performance themselves—that one begins to understand the importance of liminal and heterotopic space to the text. In this section, I focus on a close textual reading of a self-published performance of Miles Walser's 'A Letter to My Vagina', with specific reference to the recurring image of garden space.

The idea of a queer virtual stage runs throughout this study. Performance poetry has a potent, political energy and Davidson notes "those poets most influenced by spatial turn are also the most socially or politically engaged." Davidson further comments that the "most satisfying responses to spatialization and globalization are from those poets who engage with those processes through both the content of their work and through experimentations in poetic form" (27). Performance poets adopt strategies which make effective use of space and the global reach of digital platforms to reach an ever-expanding audience, using 'spatialization' and 'globalization' to underscore their (often) political messages. This work with space more broadly and the politics of space more specifically foregrounds the later discussions in Chapter Four of this thesis, where I consider non-binary affect and ask how it *feels* to occupy, move through and inhabit these unstable spaces.

The queer body in digital space

Ethan Smith's poem 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be' has been uploaded to several different channels on YouTube. In a 2015 interview with Patrick Strudwick of *Buzzfeed*, Smith indicated that 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be' had been performed on several occasions before "it turned into a piece that I decided to bring to competition." It appears that none of the other performances have been archived online. As a result, the performances I am concerned with are the following two recordings. The more popular version (in terms of redistribution and view counts) is Smith's performance at the 2014 College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUSPI) hosted at the University of Colorado, Boulder, which was uploaded to Button Poetry on 16 May 2014 and has received 1.5 million views. The second can be found on the Raw Word channel, where it was uploaded on 15 December 2013. It has received over 59,000 views.

I do not propose to offer viewing figures for every poem in this study but the fact that Smith's CUSPI performance went 'viral' is pertinent to the function of online space when

poetry is uploaded to YouTube. The disparity between views on the Raw Word channel with only 430 subscribers and the version uploaded to the Button channel demonstrates how Button Poetry occupies a sizeable online space when it comes to the creation and dissemination of spoken word. Channels run by individual poets tend to have a smaller subscriber count. In fact, none of the poets in this study have a YouTube channel which has a comparable reach as Button Poetry. It is only Alok Vaid-Menon whose poetry is discussed in Chapter Four, who has a comparable social media presence with nearly 900,000 followers on Instagram. Other spoken word channels including Get Lit – Words Ignite, Slam Find, Youth Speaks and Poetry Slam Inc are sizeable, but other than Youth Speaks, with nearly 300,000 subscribers, each has just short of 100,000 subscribers. This demonstrates how Button Poetry dominates the space of spoken word on YouTube. A juggernaut site like TED with 19.9 million subscribers might occasionally showcase spoken word, but these channels do not build their following based on performance poetry alone, featuring a range of other content— most notably in TED's case, the talks the brand is synonymous with.

On Button Poetry, at the time of writing, Smith's view count makes 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be' one of the twenty-five most popular videos on the channel. Several events appear to have contributed to the Button Poetry recording of Smith's poem going viral. Shortly after it was uploaded, Mitch Kellaway wrote about Smith's poem for popular American LGBTQ+ publication *Advocate* on 29 May 2014. Kellaway's article was subsequently shared across social media nearly 700 times. The recording was also shared on *Upworthy*, a popular website for viral content with a frequently left-leaning political bent, and the "fastest growing media site of all time" as of 2013. The poem was shared by actor George Takei, who is best known for his role as Hikaru Suluand in *Star Trek*. Takei is an active user of social media and LGBTQ+ advocate, and the connections between geek culture, queer communities and online space gave the performance further traction amongst online users. Smith's poem received another publicity bump in summer 2015, when the poem and an interview with Smith appeared on popular website Buzzfeed, an article which was subsequently picked up by several publications, including teen publication *Seventeen*. Around the start of 2016 the poem received further attention from two places which garnered significant attention. Odyssey included the poem on a list of fifty of spoken word poems on 3 February 2016 and the article amassed nearly 68,000 views. Shortly after, on 20 February 2016, the editors at *Everyday Feminism* shared Smith's poem and the article received 1,600 shares on Facebook and Twitter.

The poem appears to have hit the illustrious one million views in 2017, and on 11 January 2017, Button Poetry retweeted the poem from the 'archives' to their sizeable Twitter following. Although historicising the way a poem like Smith's finds a wider audience might be somewhat formulaic, it highlights an important point about performance poetry in digital space. Unlike widely accessible and generic viral content, performance poetry which goes viral contributes to broader conversations and gains traction with an interested audience who already read the publications (or follow the celebrities) that endorse the poem. In Internet terms, the 2:49 minutes it takes to view Smith's poem is a long period of time for people scrolling and casually reblogging rapidly digestible content. Clicking on a YouTube link embedded in an article requires an active step, unlike Instagram or Facebook stories or TikTok feeds that play consecutively, merging into one another. In this sense, the performance poet is both brought into the wider public consciousness and, in many respects, speaking to the converted, to an audience who is already drawn to the conversations and challenges the poetry poses. Nevertheless, the popularity of Smith's poem gives an indication of the traction spoken word can get when these online performances become part of online conversations and recommended content lists.

To return to the poem itself, the wording is the same in both the Button and Raw Word recordings, but the performance space is very different, and this usefully demonstrates how the space the poet inhabits impacts the text. Neither performance involves particularly complex or unusual spaces. The poet remains stationary throughout both, save for hand gestures, which are relatively consistent; and Smith's appearance is similar in each poem. The delivery of the poem is also broadly similar, with little difference in emphasis or tone between the two recitations. Instead, the primary variable in each case is the setting and stage, as it draws critical attention exclusively to the effects those elements have on the poem. To take the Button Poetry version first, the setting is the instantly recognisable stage and microphone, a spatial setting most associated with spoken word. Through the traditional spatial setting, which is common to much of Button's content, the visual associations of the spoken word poet, the microphone and the live audience are reinforced. The Button Poetry version is also crucially different to other versions in that it is delivered as part of CUSPI, a college-based slam poetry competition, subject to the rules and regulations of competitive slam. The sizeable stage in a college auditorium calls to mind the competition setting in documentary films including Paul Devlin's 1996 *Slamnation: A Poetry Slam Documentary*, which follows the fates of four teams competing in the National Poetry Slam, stage-based performance settings where slam poems become "theatrical events, not listening booths"

(Somers-Willett 16). The theatrical setting emphasises the 'live' quality of the poem and for the online viewer they too can 'clap' or 'applaud' through the 'Like' or 'Subscribe' buttons, through comment functions and shares. Just as the vocal response of a live audience is an integral part of slam, the online audience plays into a feedback loop that exists both in the three-minute moment of live performance and afterwards for an indeterminate period of time, on the Internet.

Before approaching the complexities introduced by the relationship between physical performance space and cyberspace, it is important to understand the impact the physical space inhabited by the poet has on the text. Smith's poem is recited in letter form, beginning "Dear Emily." The first shot (Fig 2) frames Smith's face with spotlight and shadow, offering a close-up of his expressions. Smith addresses his subject, Emily, and the camera angle positions his gaze towards the unseen addressee, as opposed to offering direct eye-contact with the viewer. This framing is effective, as it renders the unknown recipient of the letter simultaneously present and absent from the space in which the poem is performed. However, this headshot is unique to the online audience. For the audience in situ, their encounter with Smith's poem is different as they see the poet on stage without the intervention of camera angles which draw Smith closer to the online audience.

Fig 2

The title of Smith's poem immediately reveals he is a transgender man (0:00:08), something the audience responds to with murmurs and a smattering of applause (0:00:11). The murmurs of surprise seem to suggest that before Smith speaks, the live audience have read him as biologically male. The body is a distinguishing feature of the performance poem

and holds none of "the relatively anonymous transaction of the page" (Bearder, 199). The response to Smith's text is informed by the visual cues presented to the audience and the way in which gender is socially constructed. Halberstam notes that "gender assignations rely…heavily on the visual" (104) and that any "dismantling of gender certainty" leads to a spatial reconfiguration, a "reorientation of the body in space and time" (107). Smith's transgender status is outwardly unreadable through the "logics of visual gender" ("*QTAP*" 106). An assumption of normative gender is made as "body language, like all forms of communication, is inscribed by the settings and styles of our social groups" (Bearder, 199). Through sharing the title of his poem, Smith disrupts the assumption made when he took his place on the stage. The audience experience what Halberstam calls an "aesthetic turbulence" (107) created by the juxtaposition of the queer revelation with Smith's visibly masculine aesthetic. The online viewer already knows the title of the poem—or may have encountered it through the online recommendations explored above—and therefore they do not experience the same moment of revelation. Nevertheless, they are privy to the audience response which is captured by the Button Poetry recording and as a result experience the same aesthetic turbulence second hand.

The online viewer is constantly aware of the live audience through the sounds they make in response to Smith's poem, yet there is an intimacy in the initial address that is experienced only by the viewer online. The live audience are not privy to the close-up headshot, which is a feature only of the recording. In this sense, although Smith is in control of the way he presents himself, the orality, the content of his poem and the way it is performed, the camera person also impacts the way the online viewer receives the poem. It is they who choose where to zoom in on Smith or how to edit the final recording, which adds a subjective level of third-party interpretation to the online text which is outside of Smith's control. For the online viewer the person behind the camera, like the live audience, is present and informing the text (the camera person visually and the live audience aurally) but neither can be seen. Somers-Willet talks of as "performative dialect" between poet and audience, where "poetry slams serve as soapboxes for audience as well as poet" (24), but unlike the live audience, the online viewer is not part of the conversation. They are listening to, and guided by, the collective responses after the fact and they are given visual cues by the person recording the poem which offers them close-ups, eye-contact and framing which all influence the way the text is received. The first shot focuses solely on the poet and there is relative quiet. This prioritises poet over audience and makes sense when understanding that the audience contributes to the scoring in traditional slam and after the fact, their role in that

regard is fulfilled. Through placing the focus on Smith, the recording encourages the online audience to watch and listen to the poet without distraction, offering a more immersive and intimate engagement with Smith's narrative.

Fig 3

After the introductory line of the poem, the camera zooms out to bring the live audience into the periphery of the online viewer (0:00:18). This helps to make the online viewer feel as if they are part of the audience (Fig 3). Jennifer Parker-Starbuck considers the function of the spectator in multimedia performance and notes that "a physical model like theatre might reinvest in the role of the spectator" requiring the spectator to "participate more actively" (61). In the examples she draws upon "spectator bodies are made necessary agents" of the narrative (65). The spectator—in this case the online viewer—is drawn into the performer/spectator relationship as the camera angle makes them part of the front-facing audience, watching Smith's performance in a manner which feels more like observing a traditional theatrical performance than the initial headshot. Sita Popat observes that "[t]heatre has always been a space of virtuality" which "bridges the actual and the imaginary to create a virtual world in which performers and viewers are complicit" (357), and this pulling back of the shot provides a bridge of sorts which enables the viewer to feel part of a 'live' performance space which is no longer 'live' in a true sense. The online viewer is drawn into the physical space occupied by live audience and performance poet and simultaneously pulls them away from their viewing space as they become immersed in the performance text. This kind of shot creates a 'true' theatre experience, and it emphasises the theatrical nature of the physical space.

Smith references the "voice I no longer recognise" (0:16-17), bringing another absent speaker into the dialogue between poet and audience, before the camera zooms out to fully reveal Smith at the moment he states his name, "Ethan" (0:00:18). The full body shot shows Smith dressed in a suit and tie, formal attire traditionally associated with masculinity. Although one must be careful with terminology which suggests that being transgender is performed gender identity, Smith's masculine styling is an important feature of the text's visual aesthetics. Richard Schechner describes one of the basic tenets of performance studies as "embodied action" ("*Schechner Interview*") and Somers-Willett considers the importance of embodied text in the context of slam poetry. She notes that one of the most compelling features for the audience is that the "events performatively embody verse and author" (16) and place "exceptional emphasis on the role of the author and his or her [or their] identity" (17). Despite a specifically masculine coded presentation, and his appearance onstage as a conservatively dressed white man, it is Smith's transgender status that gives the text embodied queer potential. Although the grey suit itself bears all the hallmarks of staid conservatism, when Smith's appearance is read together with the performed text, even the relatively unexciting office suit is given a certain queer possibility. It demands that the viewer question gender binaries through both the adherence of Smith's outfit to stereotypical depictions of presentations of masculinity and the resistance to a narrative where biological gender is absolute.

Jay Prosser writes extensively about the transgender body in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998). Prosser critically unpacks the narrative of transgender experience as being "trapped in the wrong body" and identifies a rupture between "gendered embodiment" and "material body" (69). The transgender performance poet embodies the poetic text but simultaneously invites questions about the notion of embodiment itself. This queerly complex relationship transgender individuals have with bodies and embodiment is intimately present in the performance space and communicated with the audience through the bodily acts of speech, gesture and facial expression. When the camera pans out to a full-length shot of Smith, the entire performance space is revealed to the online viewer whose perspective is guided by the camera. The microphone and the audible audience suggest a live performance, but it is the image of the poet standing on a stage that underscores it. Brian Keith Alexander et al. observe that "[q]ueer performance is constructed in the broadest sense of embodied/engaged activity with the intent to celebrate or illuminate the practices, politics, and polemics of LGBTQ lives" (193). The juxtaposition a revelation of transgender identity with the visual impact of the full body shot capturing Smith's clothing choice is indicative of

the fact that "bodies come with baggage" (Bearder 199). As Bearder explains, the performing poet does not take to the stage without the weight of their experiences: "we wear our background as gait, stance, and even gesture" (199). Smith's clothing choice speaks to a gender normative society that demands gender be performed in a recognisable (and non-threatening) way, through Westernised stereotypically gender-coded dress.

Novak suggests the spoken word is at "the centre of a live poetry performance", adopting Charles Bernstein's use of the term "audiotext" (75). Novak points to the non-verbal features of the audiotext as a site of important critical investigation, explaining how "a poet may shot or whisper, race through a text or drawl each vowel, deliver…'lines' in a sing-song interspersed with rhythmic laughter or recite them in a monotonous drawl like a liturgical incantation" (76). For the transgender performance poet, the orality of spoken word is also a potential marker of gender transgression. A register which does not match the assumed gender "can confuse and even anger an unsuspecting listener who may have already made a confident gender attribution that must now be reversed" ("*QTAP*" 108). In this performance, unlike other transgender poets of this study, Smith adheres to a stereotypically masculine presentation that negates gender ambivalence. Whether this choice of Smith's is strategic or not, the textual implication of the masculine coded visual aesthetics underscores the battle with gender binaries that all, transgender and otherwise, experience throughout their lives. The physical stage may be queered by Smith's presence on it, but it is not a radical queerness in a visual sense. The combination of body and text require the audience to reconsider biologically determinative notions of gender, but in a way that simultaneously conforms to gender normativity as it subverts it.

As the space expands for the online viewer, the poem becomes a dialogue of sorts between Ethan and Emily, the name the poet was given when he was born and the titular 'Girl I Once Was' and recipient of Smith's address. Although ordinarily it would be inappropriate to use a transgender person's deadname, i.e., the name they were assigned at birth, in this instance only I use the name to reflect Smith's own references to it throughout his poem. In the poem, Smith's voice slips between Emily to Ethan, troubling the idea of gender as immutable or static. At the start, Smith takes on Emily's narrative voice: "Ethan, do you remember? When you were going to be the first girl to play in the major league?" (0:00:18-21). Through the spoken word both the poet and their memory of the poem's subject inhabit the space, engaging in dialogue with one another. This enhances the sense of queer space as the audience is invited to view a dialogue between Smith and a person who is simultaneously there and not. This grappling with ideas of body and self is emphasised by the

digital stage. This digital platform introduces a mediated layer between the performer and the viewer. Matthew Causey writes about this "mediated other" and the uncanny nature of the "experience of the self as other in the space of technology" (17). Causey explains how the performer who appears to be live and videated simultaneously" (22) challenges "the most fundamental beliefs concerning performance, including its claims to liveness, immediacy and presence" (30). Together with the disruptive techniques of Smith's poem and performance, the setting itself works against spatial boundaries of real and virtual.

Discussing his own work in a later article, Causey explains: "My argument, drawing on Lacanian theory, was to suggest that the negation of the solidified subject via its separation or transference to the screens made clear the fabrication of the subject, its realness laying in its videated nothingness, its absence" (430). The speed with which technology has advanced poses challenges to critics engaging with digital theory and even relatively recent work on online space can feel dated when viewed through a present-day lens. In 2016, Causey revisited his framing of the mediated double as uncanny. Using the term 'postdigital' with some caution to describe the increased blurring of real and virtual worlds, Causey explains that postdigital culture is "a social system fully familiarized and embedded in electronic communications and virtual representations" (431). As "the ontologies of the performance and media converge" the mediated body is subsequently rendered "more familiar" (430). Causey suggests that postdigital performers "converse in the language and discourse of the digital" (433) and are specifically curating art which uses the many functions of online space and the breakdown of boundaries between these spaces. Causey's movement away from the uncanny towards the postdigital becomes particularly relevant later in this chapter, when I analyse texts where the performance poets wield creative control over the staging of their performances and use their familiarity with digital worlds to introduce additional spatial layers to their texts.

Although Causey's work on digital performance has necessarily advanced with changing technologies, it is worth touching on his earlier 2006 writing here as it remains pertinent in the case of Smith's CUSPI performance. There *is* an uncanniness inherent in watching a recorded live performance which adds a queer spatial layer to the text. As Smith forces us to question the rigid enforcement of gender binaries through his poem, the viewer is simultaneously required to negotiate their own sense of spatial flux as they are at once part of the poet's audience, influenced by the dialect between poet and audience, but they are still absent from that space. As Causey observes, the "ontology of the performance (liveness)" has "been altered within the space of technology" (26). The virtual stage is not only queered by

the presence transgender poet on the physical stage, but the online viewer also experiences a multimedia layering of audio-visuals which creates a discordant relationship with the space they occupy as online audience, and the performance they observe through the screen.

Forgotten places; childhood recalled

Queer experience often involves living on the fringes, particularly for queer people who are part of marginalised groups including sex workers, Black, indigenous and other people of colour who are statistically more likely to live in poverty and others who inhabit "spaces (physical, metaphysical and economic) that others have abandoned" ("*QTAP*" 10). Abandoned space is a feature in Smith's poem, which confronts the spaces that are closed off to Ethan, but which would have been open to Emily. Davidson notes that "the body may be in one place while the mind is in another" (163), and in Smith's online text this flux between body and mind is evoked through the juxtaposition of space, body and the words of the poem. The lens frames Smith's present-day body, yet the text explores the body of someone who might have been and moments that will no longer come to pass. There are several important spaces engaged by the poem which serve to transport the viewer to those places. One example is the reference to a childhood bedroom, a space which has an important recollective function.

Perec describes the bed as "the place of contraries, the space of the solitary body encumbered by its ephemeral harems" (17). With respect to the "resurrected space" (21) of the childhood bedroom, Perec writes of a precise and instantaneous recall of "every detail – the position of the doors and windows, the arrangement of the furniture" which generates "the almost physical sensation of being once again in bed in that room" (20). Perec notes how a reminder of the space of the childhood bedroom brings the memory of that space "back to life" (21). Smith recalls hearing his father's plan for Smith to be "the first girl to play in the major league…like it was someone else's bedtime story" (0:00:29-31). By referencing the bedtime story, Smith engages the space and place of childhood with its fleeting transience. The viewer experiences reactivated memories of their own childhood centred around the "topographical certainty of the bed in the room" (22) and they are subsequently transported to that space irrespective of their location. The childhood bedroom is referenced by Smith later in the poem, but this time it is the site of adolescence and burgeoning sexuality with the reference to "sleepovers" and the "six-inch fatal territory" "between her shoulder and yours" (0:00:42-45). Although the childhood bedroom is a frequent site in literature for

exploration—either explicitly or metaphorically—of sexuality, there is no place for queer desire in Smith's childhood room. Instead, Smith tries to quench the desires which he feels should be suppressed, the "fatal territory" of queer longing jarring with the demands of a heteronormative society and rendering the bedroom of the queer child as a space of shame and fear as opposed to discovery.

As a child and adolescent, Smith's childhood bedroom does not appear to have offered comfort. Lee Edelman explains that although the figure of the 'Child' is often used to further the agenda of conservative politicians, the child used in that way stands in direct opposition to queer youth. The symbolic Child eradicates the possibility of the *queer* child, it "permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness…is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" (19). Davidson notes that "the outer production of space…is matched by an inner space, both physical and a state of consciousness, and this internal space develops from childhood to adulthood" (99). Smith's poem explores how queer inner turmoil impacts on spaces that we are taught to think of as safe or sites for development and challenges the assertion that outer and internal space are always in sync. The outer production of space—the body—does not match the internal development, as the pubescent onslaught of biological signs of womanhood are in deep conflict with the identity and knowledge of self of the transgender man. This conflict and is poignantly alluded to by Smith, who describes the pain of that inner turmoil: "the year you turned eleven was the first time you said out loud that you didn't want to live anymore" (0:00:45-50).

Perec notes that the bed is "one of the rare places we adopt a horizontal posture" and identifies another similar space as "the psychoanalyst's couch" (19). In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard talks of the home as "a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space" (25), another connection between the idea of open, outer space and inner space. The connection between the mental health issues which arise when these supposedly safe sanctums become threatening—an often particularly queer relationship to childhood and the childhood home—is alluded to by Smith, who makes the connection between the childhood bedroom and therapy. Smith moves swiftly from his recollection of bedtime stories to the reference to further thoughts of suicide as he says "in therapy you said you wouldn't make it to twenty-one" (0:00:50-53). At this juncture, Smith explicitly separates the trajectory of Emily and Ethan, continuing "on my twenty-first birthday I thought about you" (0:00:53-56). This fuels the sense of increased separation between Emily and Ethan— the discordant relationship between outer and inner space and the impact it has when mind and body are not aligned. Smith notes how, by the age 19, Emily had already "started to fade"

(0:01:00-03). Through confronting his own past with references to places which evoke childhood nostalgia, Smith reminds the viewer of their own internal space and journey from childhood to adulthood. Smith evokes the sense of a journey stopped and a path altered, by drawing out the image of the bed one last time, with a wistfulness for the bed of the grown children he will not have: "[t]hey will never hold their lover's sleeping figure" (0:01:55-58). The repeated imagery of the bedroom and sites of childhood and adolescence offer a specifically queer perspective on the challenges of growing up when a person is experiencing queer longing.

The key sites of childhood and adolescence are also represented through the earlier reference to baseball games and the later reference Smith makes to "college graduation" (0:01:24-26). If the body informs space however, these spaces are ones that will never exist, as they are, in Ethan's words, occupied by the 'Emily Smith' who no longer exists. The repeated refrain of "will never" increases the tempo of the poem as Smith journeys through an alternative future and details the things that have become unavailable to him through the process of transitioning, specifically the ability to have children. In doing so, Smith is not telling a story not of his own life with its specifically linear points of progression, but of somebody else's life. The lost spaces evoke sharp and specific spatial memories, in which the 'Emily' occupying those spaces is both present and absent. The address is to someone who no longer exists and yet whose presence still permeates the real time and space of the poet: "all you can do is wonder if you ever had a place. You did. You still do" (0:02:25-30).
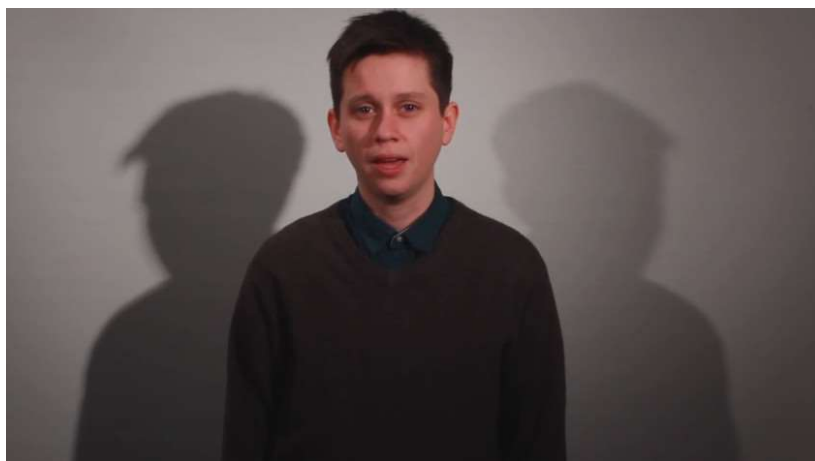

Fig 4

This sense of lost or forgotten people or spaces is emphasised most clearly by the Raw Word version of Smith's poem. Unlike Button Poetry, Raw Word only has five videos uploaded to their YouTube account. Founded by Jonathan Mendoza, who records the performances, Mendoza's mission statement is to share "words that this world simply needs to hear" as through his own experience of spoken word he found "a place where words have saved and are saving lives" and wanted to make those words accessible to a broad audience who might not hear them otherwise if the poems were not uploaded elsewhere. As shown in Fig 4, the Raw Word video is aesthetically very different to the Button Poetry video. As the name of the account suggests, the recording is designed to strip the poem down to the bare bones of the words themselves and creates an alternative viewing experience to the performances on the Button Poetry channel which typically feature recordings of live slam performances. Three of the five videos on the Raw Word channel use the same staging with a blank white wall and double shadows in the background and there is no audience present at the performance, although as with all uploads to YouTube there is an online audience who can offer their critique.

The comments on the video suggest that the viewing experience is a different one to watching the Button Poetry recording. YouTube user Purrpussful comments: "this version grips me more [than the Button Poetry recording]…I'm beginning the painful, difficult process toward authenticity that he's embraced…it's SO powerful. I'll always be grateful for this guy." The poem is not being performed as part of a competitive slam process and accordingly there is no audience other than the filmmaker and the online viewer. The different spatial setting and the quietness of the delivery in the absence of a live audience has an impact on the text and provides further illumination of the poem. Although the setting appears to be an aesthetic choice of the filmmaker Mendoza, the blank wall and the two shadows add a fascinating layer to the text when analysed in the context of queerness and transgender experience specifically, which I explore below.

The video is a shot of Smith where the focus is his torso and head, the upper part of his body occupying the entire vertical frame and he is flanked by two shadows on either side (Fig 4). As with the Button Poetry recording, Smith is dressed in a stereotypically masculine fashion, but he appears less formal. The focus on the upper part of Smith's body lends greater impact to the line "I made an appointment to let the doctor remove your breasts so that I could stand up straighter" (0:01:30-36) and the reference to his body as "scarred cosmetic, never C-section" (0:01:43-45). In these moments, Smith draws attention to those parts of his body through gestures. Unlike the Button Poetry video where those moments are both

46

impacted by Smith's slight stumble over the words and the choice of the camera person to move from a full body frame to a half body frame, the shot does not alter in the Raw Word recording. When the pressure of live performance is removed the rhythm and confidence of the delivery feels more assured and this contributes to the immersive experience of viewing the poem. The way the positioning of the body in the screen informs the space is emphasised when Smith says: "even though parts of you still exist, you are not here" (0:1:07-09). When he references parts that still exist, he looks down and gestures to the lower half of his body. Both the hand gestures and the part of the body he references fall out of the frame. The only thing the viewer sees when Smith references physical aspects that he associates with Emily is the movement of his arms and hands downwards and the way his gaze lowers. When Smith focuses on 'loss' in the sense of things he feels he has lost by transitioning, there is a focus throughout on loss of reproductive capabilities—the breasts as nourishment for children he will not have and the references to being "late" as he began to take hormones to supress his menstrual cycle. The way the shot is framed has the impact of emphasising Emily's absence from the space Ethan inhabits and prioritises Smith as he stands today without focus on parts of the body traditionally associated with reproduction. Those parts of Smith's body remain out of focus of the shot for the entirety of the performance, the occupation of space by the upper part of the body erasing all bodily elements of Ethan's past that remind him of Emily's existence.

From the outset, the difference in framing impacts the viewer experience of Smith's initial address. The intimacy between viewer and poet evoked by the introductory head shot in the Button Poetry video is intensified by the direct eye contact Smith maintains with the online viewer and the silent, stripped back space. The online viewer becomes the 'Emily' of the address, and the viewing experience is more intense and immersive without the usual murmurs and rustles of audience who are part and parcel of viewing online slam poetry. Instead of being guided by the layer of visual emphasis at the hands of a camera person choosing when to zoom in and out, or audio emphasis with the cheers and hoots or claps of the live audience who form part of the Button Poetry recording, Mendoza keeps the shot static, and the audio is crisp and clear without any background noise. This emphasises poet and space, allowing the online viewer to respond to the text with reference solely to Smith's delivery, gestures and words, without any additional noise to influence viewer response.
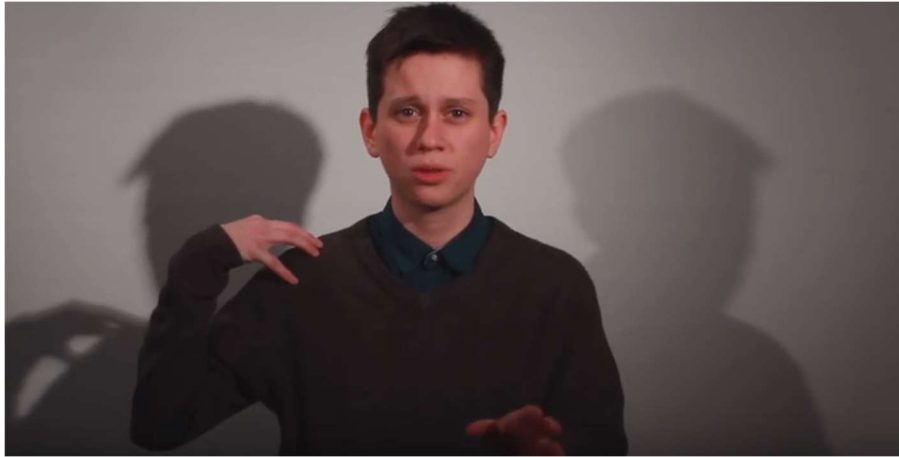
Fig 5

The quietness and blankness of the Raw Word video and the feature of two shadows where one typically expects to see a single shadow offer a certain strangeness to the viewing experience. The two shadows as shown in Fig 5 might be read as emphasising the sense of absent people and imagined places. Although these appear to be a feature favoured by Mendoza, they add a specific layer to a transgender performance poem which furthers the sense of duality of self and Smith's textual focus on the faded parts of one's own life; the past he can't connect with and the imagined future he will no longer have. Unlike the Button Poetry video where the shadows and lighting are created by the general staging in the auditorium, these dual shadows against a blank background are Mendoza's creative choice and one, presumably, that Smith agreed would be appropriate for the recording of his poem. The shadows offer a visual representation of the absence people who appear throughout the poem. The shadows on the blank wall offer a visual sense of two identities, the Ethan of the past who was unable to live as the person he was born to be, and Emily, who no longer exists. Although Smith tries to "cross you [Emily] out like a line in my memoir" (0:00:58-01:02) he ultimately reaches a point where he acknowledges to Emily that "you had a place, you still do" (0:02:20-26), a splitting and subsequent reconciliation of self which is evoked by the dual shadows.

From two very different performances of the same poem, there is a clear indication that together with the spatial, transgender performance poetry has a preoccupation with the temporal, specifically non-linear experiences of time and a gaze towards an unknowable or impossible futures. These are all features I engage with in more depth in the chapter that follows, through the work of Chrysanthemum Tran, but they are present here too in the case of Smith's 'Letter to the Girl I Once Was.' To return to the spatial, however, the spaces both

versions of Smith's poem evoke absence and tension; a negotiation between body and space, addressor and addressee, viewer and viewed. Through his words, Smith evokes locations which have certain recollective qualities and bring the audience/viewers' own private spaces of childhood to the forefront of their minds. Although the traditional stage of the theatre is the one most associated with spoken word and slam, it is just one space that these poets can occupy. As the Raw Word video demonstrates, space has important implications for the text and comparing the two versions of Smith's poem side-by-side offers an indicator of the way transforming the space of the poem can have an impact on the textual analysis.

Counterpublics and public/private space

Chip Delaney's study on "queer subterranean worlds" formulates a definition of counterpublics as "spaces created and altered by subcultures for their own use" ("*QTAP*" 331). Critics including Lackner et al. consider counterpublics specifically in the context of the Internet, identifying "the extent it can break down barriers to communication" (Lackner 196). The community of spoken word poets on YouTube could be said to be one such community, and the thriving community of LGBTQ+ vloggers could be identified as another, with transgender vloggers forming a specific subcommunity under that broader LGBTQ+ umbrella. The two may, of course, overlap and intersect, but they are likely to attract somewhat different audiences. The community of LGBTQ+ video bloggers (vloggers) include some of the earliest YouTube celebrities like Tyler Oakley and Troye Sivan. Transgender vloggers including Kat Blaque and Alex Bertie provide transgender-specific content as part of a fast-growing queer subculture which exists in a freely accessible, online space. The visibility of transgender people speaking about their experiences on YouTube vastly outweighs the position in mainstream media. In 2020, Nikki Tutorials, one of the biggest stars of the YouTube beauty community that has revolutionised the billion-dollar makeup industry, came out as transgender to her huge platform of 13.8 million subscribers, in a video that has amassed over 37 million views. The LGBTQ+ vlogging community on YouTube intersects with a broad range of other vlogging communities in these subsections of YouTube's wider platform, grouped together by interests (pop music, pop culture, gaming, commentary, drama channels) and, in the case of LGBTQ+ vloggers, by identity. Mel Y. Chen writes that "the 'You' in 'YouTube' signals the public-, personal-, and community-based appeal" (150). The emphasis on community practices on YouTube is well established in scholarship, something I address more fully in the third chapter. In a study on the function

of social media in relation to identity-making by young, queer, disabled people, Ryan Miller points to multiple studies that demonstrate that "[s]ocial media may help develop and showcase resilience among LGBTQ youth, enabling them to cope with discrimination and build community (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015)" (512). The subcultural space of the LGBTQ+ vlogging community is a counterpublic with enormous reach, a space that enables vloggers to take control of their own narratives, to raise visibility, correct mainstream perception and engage in dialogue with queer viewers and subscribers, who might be unable to access queer physical communities.

In a chapter from the collection *Spoken Word in the UK*, edited by Lucy English and Jack McGowan, Katy Wareham Morris takes an ethnographic approach to the affective potential of YouTube's counterpublics, specifically in the context of spoken word. Wareham Morris writes about spoken words' "history of existing in opposition to dominant hegemony" (221) and expands upon work begun by Somers-Willett, Hoffman and others, in exploring the "potential of spoken word to create affective socio-political counterpublics" (221). Wareham Morris argues that the "on-going construction of pluralistic and contradictory selves and the blurring of distinct boundaries or orders is perhaps more obvious in virtual spaces created by social media platforms" (224), spaces Somers-Willett and Wareham Morris describe as "virtual counterpublics", a term I adopt in this section. The criticism positions YouTube poets who curate their own content on the platform as engaging in a form of playful and political identity-making, in a counterpublic space where "marginalised, liminal identities who are not afforded space by mainstream culture" (229) can harness social media and disrupt the hegemony. Like Wareham Morris, I also draw this connection and am interested in the disruption of the public/private binary that is engaged by participating in this space. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that "the difference between 'public' and 'private' could never be stably or intelligibly represented as a difference between two concrete classes of physical space" ("*Epistemology*" 110). The Internet further destabilises these oppositional binaries of public and private, real and virtual and this is particularly apparent in these countercultural practices of self-curated performance poetry that exists on the platform. I return to these ideas in the specific context of the participatory, community-building aspects of these communities in Chapter Three.

In relation to space specifically, the poetry I analyse in this section demonstrates how the boundaries of public and private are in constant flux. Through the occupation of liminal, outdoor space, I demonstrate how the visual, spatial setting is a vital textual layer which enhances the performance poem and explain that through the introduction of the mediated,

digital space, the texts do not inhabit one single space, but rather engage multiple spaces simultaneously. I also consider the blurring, the crossing over, the *transness* of vloggers occupying performance poetry spaces and vice versa, the way YouTube is a site for multiple communities of common interest to develop their own counterpublic spaces and the blurring of the lines and the overlap between those categories of community enabled by creative practices like performing poetry. By moving beyond the more traditional idea of a theatre and its stage evident in many of the performances on Button Poetry, I argue that alternative sites are an important spatial component that emphasises the breadth of the queer virtual stage. As Davidson observes, "[t]he Internet redefines relationships between space and place, changes relationships between people and places, breaks down relationships between space and time" (163) and the poems identified in this section offer a sense of this state of spatial flux, both in the content of the poem itself and the way it is filmed and viewed. It is most useful, for the purposes of this analysis, to consider poets who are vloggers first and foremost and whose intermittent performance poems form just a small part of their broader online content. This draws a comparison with Smith, whose work is archived on the Button Poetry channel, specifically attracting subscribers interested in spoken word. In the case of Skylar Kergil, whose poetry I discuss in this section, he is not part of the contemporary poetry scene. His channel is primarily a vlogging platform which charts his experiences as a transgender man.

Kergil, whose user handle is skylarkeleven, is not part of the college slam circuit or online spoken word communities in the same way as Smith and other competitive slam poets like him. Instead, Kergil is part of a community of transgender vloggers on YouTube that document their processes of coming out and, in some cases, transition. Although Kergil posts poetry and music frequently, he established his YouTube channel to vlog about his experiences with transitioning first and foremost. It is important to understand the relationship between performance poetry and video blogging to better understand the potential breadth of the virtual stage. It also resists easy categorisation of 'transgender performance poet' and points to the increased accessibility of spoken word as a mode of creative output that vloggers outside the contemporary poetry space may wish to turn their hands to as part of their digital content. The fact some transgender vloggers have turned to performance poetry suggests it is, as I have already argued, an idealised, politicised art form, which enables the expression of lived experiences in a creative way. It is then the virtual counterpublic space of LGBTQ+ YouTube that enables this artistic production and drives viewers to the channels in a way that typically outnumbers the subscriber count of transgender poets whose sole content is poetry.

Although theoretically the LGBTQ+ vloggers on YouTube are as accessible to anyone as other content on the platform, it is commonly known that the content which generates the highest revenues on YouTube is so-called 'family friendly' content (Maxwell). However, the content that YouTube algorithms deem 'family friendly' often excludes marginalised creators, as highlighted in a 2020 article on Bloomberg where Black creators noticed their channels were being excluded from YouTube Kids (Bergen and Shaw). The initiatives of multiple social media platforms to protect the kids also frequently excludes or demonetises LGBTQ+ content, perpetuating the stigma around teaching young children about LGBTQ+ issues. Due to the algorithmic biases mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the content of LGBTQ+ creators can risk being suppressed, shadow banned or demonetised, as advertisers gravitate towards the family-oriented vlogs in preference to outspoken and often politicised LGBTQ+ vlogs. As a result, YouTube's LGBTQ+ vlogging community, whilst theoretically open to anyone, is most likely to be accessed by queer viewers and allies who actively search for the content on the platform. This has the disadvantage of creating closed communities, "so-called 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers' (the failure of systems to expose users to difference), and the problem of digital inclusion" (Burgess and Green 129). However, despite the fact that LGBTQ+ communities are exposed to violence on account of their own 'difference' there is also resilient potential for communities to grow and form in these spaces. Centred around certain content creators on YouTube lies "a potential enabler and amplifier of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship—a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, [and] engage with the self-representations of others" (Burgess and Green 129). At this juncture it is vital to point out that despite the possibilities engaged by these counterpublics which push against hegemonic binaries, these queer spaces cultivated by queer voices to amplify their stories through online exposure is not wholly utopian or risk free. These creators are vulnerable to digital censorship and the discriminations of a hostile public who have the same, largely unfettered and unregulated, open access to the YouTube platform as the queer viewer seeking to find a support network through LGBTQ+ vlogging channels.

Kergil addresses these complexities in a discussion of the backlash he received from the wider YouTube participants, a site of cyberviolence that occurs when content designed for marginalised communities and allies becomes broadly shared outside of those spaces. In his video 'LGBTQ: Receiving Hateful Comments', Kergil describes how his vlog came to the attention of non-queer users of the platform when he featured in YouTube's '#ProudToBe: Coming Together to Celebrate Identity' video campaign, spotlighting queer YouTube users in

an effort to bring people together to celebrate identity. Released during Pride month on 21 June 2016, the video drew a far higher viewership than Kergil's channel would usually attract independently. Kergil's videos can generate anywhere from roughly 3,000 to 35,000 views, whereas the #ProudToBe video generated over 10 million views. This brought the video, and Kergil himself, to the attention of YouTube users holding anti-queer views. The outpouring of negativity on the #ProudToBe video led to comments eventually being disabled, but not before individual participants, including Kergil, found their own, far smaller channels, receiving an increase in online hate. This demonstrates the tensions between posting on a broadly open and public space like YouTube but operating in a receptive community that builds through the formation of subcultural groups on the same platform. It is moments such as the #ProudToBe campaign which breaks down the virtual bubbles of subcommunity and in these instances largely unprotected YouTube vloggers used to the typically supportive feedback of their subscribers encounter the hostility of other users on the platform.

This incident demonstrates that although thriving LGBTQ+ communities on YouTube are an invaluable part of popular culture today, providing essential visibility for a diverse range of experiences and intersectional identities, there is a risk with being visible. I consider this vulnerability further in Chapter Four of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise in the context of the vlogging community that there is both risk and reward in being so visible in digital space. It is also essential to note that the hostility Kergil describes, as a white, transmasculine person, will be amplified for Black, queer women including transgender vlogger Kat Blaque, who experience the intersectional oppressions of racism, misogyny and transphobia. In his work on Black spoken word communities, Johnson also captures early-stage criticism addressing digital poverty, a topic that has seen significant research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Johnson raises the question of who is able to access the YouTube platform in the first place. Johnson finds from his research "while poor and marginalised communities use the Internet in creative and empowering ways, they have done so primarily in consumer roles" (105) and there are a small but vocal number of poets pushing back against that, with "today's spoken word poets…increasingly focused on producing, building and owning a lasting digital presence on their own terms" (107). These tensions between creative access to the YouTube platform are also important to recognise when exploring the notion of these channels as thriving counterpublics on the one hand and open-access spaces which perpetuate violence against marginalised groups on the other.

These notes of caution aside, the ability of a YouTube vlogger to share their experiences with a wide audience and to take control of their own narrative is something that

has long been a positive feature of the Internet in the context of queer community building. As Stryker observes, "[a]s was true for other groups that experienced high degrees of social isolation, or were spread out over large geographical areas, the Internet helped connect transgender people who otherwise might not have been in touch with one another" ("*History*" 146). It is not uncommon to see comments on the videos of queer vloggers explaining how their stories have helped one of the consumers of their content feel seen and heard, offering a dialogue of sorts between vlogger and viewer, which mainstream television does not. This harnessing of online space by transgender people specifically as a means to develop and grow communities, is an important note to keep in mind when thinking about the way transgender people use the Internet today. Although the political landscape and the drivers behind transgender vlogging channels might differ to the online chat platforms which provided the spaces to organise and socialise in the 1990s, the method of using the Internet as an activist tool by today's YouTube vloggers and transgender activists on other social media sites is an extension of the earlier decades of queer community building strategies, where transgender visibility serves the multifaceted function of providing an archival record through diary-like videos, building and fostering community and offering a counter-narrative to information in the public sphere that is misguided or factually incorrect.

The diary-like nature of vlogging is something that troubles the public/private binary in online space. Early scholarship, including Julie Rak's discussion on weblogs and queer identity, notes the manner in which the "desire of online writers to communicate with others as part of a diary discourse" has moved a practice typically associated with privacy and secrecy into the public sphere (168). This shift from the private chronicling of one's life to the public and frequently boundless space of the Internet also correlates with the way it has made queerness itself more visible. As Rak observes, the "role of the internet as public and private at the same time appears in blogs as the constant crossing between private experiences which can be revealed because the blogger is interacting with online people" (173). Through cultivating a channel on YouTube which makes intimate details public, the vloggers exist in this state of sharing personal information with an audience at large. The public nature of the disclosure of matters that might typically be kept private is something Kergil notes in his video, 'Hey, World. I have an STI.' The title of Kergil's video acknowledges his announcement is one being made—theoretically—to the world at large and he specifically grapples with the idea of public and private in the video. He states that "STIs are left silent…keeping it inside was hurting me" and refers to the experience of learning he had a sexually transmitted infection as "soaked in fear and shame" as a result of the silence and

54

stigma surrounding STIs. Towards the end of the video, he notes "I don't feel as alone anymore", the implication being that the sharing of those personal details of his sexual health had a cathartic impact on his own well-being. The way Kergil talks about discovering he had an STI echoes historic demands for queer experience to be kept private and the activist push to bring queer lives out of private, curtained spaces and conversations about queer sexual health out into the open. This strategy of making queer experience visible has a long history in gay liberation and was a particular concern of the Gay Liberation Front who staged public 'coming out' events, kiss-ins as protest against homophobic legislation and camp and drag aesthetics to disrupt events with homophobic speakers. The HIV/AIDS activists including ACT UP engaged in similar direct action, staging die-ins and political funerals to call wider public attention to their cause.

Many LGBTQ+ vloggers provide a continuation of the public coming out which has been a component of LGBTQ+ activism in the post-Stonewall era, through the popularity of the coming out video which is often a staple of LGBTQ+ vlogging channels. So significant is it, that it is almost a rite of passage that has become a "particularly significant 'social media ritual" (Burgess and Green 128). This is true both of vloggers who started their YouTube careers with explicitly LGBTQ+ vlogs and also YouTube vloggers who have been popular for many years on the platform but have only come out well into their YouTube careers, including Dan Howell and Phil Lester who established their YouTube channels in 2009 and both posted coming out videos a decade later, in 2019, after their relationship had been the source of much speculation and a sizeable online fandom. This approach demonstrates that not all LGBTQ+ vloggers will come out publicly on the channel, but for those who do, the visibility of the coming out video resists the oppressive structures of the closet. For those who choose to come out later in their careers, the reason for privacy is often something that the relevant vloggers discuss in those videos, drawing attention to the challenges that queer people still face. Few things have become as symbolic of queer marginalisation, shame and isolation as the closet, which Sedgwick refers to as "the defining structure for gay oppression" ("*Epistemology*" 71). In *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999), Michael Warner observes that "[t]he more people are isolated or privatized, the more vulnerable they are to the unequal effects of shame" (12). The closet has long been a feature of LGBTQ+ writing and queer literature. At "the beginning of the twentieth century…the closet comes into play in literary production (although it is not named as such for many decades)" (Woods 183). In his spoken word poem 'I Don't Belong Here', a transgender YouTube vlogger Aydian Dowling documents his experiences going to a queer

event with his wife, post-transition, and being confronted with the assumption he is a heterosexual man invading queer space:

> "…even people who have so much to say think identity is something you wear on your sleeve, they think that identity is something you should be able to touch…maybe twenty-two years of living as an out lesbian and being called a fucking dyke throughout high school doesn't qualify me for anything…for twenty-two years I never let myself out because I always closed my door, I always locked myself in and I always turned off the lights…"

The closet has specific complexities which are relevant specifically to transgender identities as it often can be so intimately entwined with bodily presentation to the outside world. The closet is a queer, temporal space, one of sliding doors which many queer people move in and out of and it is useful to note that Dowling's channel, like Kergil's, is built around their first coming out story, the revelation that they are transgender men. Both posted their first videos in 2009 and both immediately come out to their viewers, in videos filmed in the private space of their homes, specifically their bedrooms. The intimacy of this setting is something Wareham Morris writes about, explaining in her own videos that she selected a location that rendered more personal space invisible: "aspects of my personal internal home space, which might be perceived as much more intimate would not be visible on screen" (226). Of all the rooms in a house, the bedroom is the site of individual personhood and evokes those connections discussed earlier on in this chapter yet many YouTube vloggers use their bedrooms as settings for their videos, fostering a deeper sense of connection between viewer and content creator through spatial strategies.

Today's coming out videos are often more polished and edited than Kergil's early video due to the increasing sophistication of available technology to YouTube vloggers, but the intimate, confessional style of video blogging in the late noughties was a popular format at the time and one which blurs the boundaries of their private space with the public forum of the YouTube platform. Through videos like 'Hey, World. I have an STI', channels like Kergil's grapple with the impact that silence, shame and stigma have had on transgender men. The counterpublic and queer subcultural space of the transgender performance poet who is part of the LGBTQ+ vlogging community is making their stories publicly visible, and a refusal to hide away. This is an important concern to keep in mind when analysing the way Kergil uses the space he inhabits during his performance poetry to trouble the boundaries of

public and private and physical and virtual space in multiple ways. There is a distinction too between poets who operate outside of the college slam circuit, whose use of space is a deliberate, creative choice. Unlike college slam performances, these vloggers clearly think about the way the space the poet occupies contributes to their performance. In Kergil's 'Daughters' he chooses an outdoor location which is theoretically public but also isolated, a spatial strategy popular with performance poets too. J Mase III sets several of his poems, including 'The Platypus Poem: Zone of Rarity' in urban space (Fig 6). As Davidson observes, a "place is identified through its relationship to other places and, as a consequence, is unstable" (89). Just as the text and performance of the transgender poet challenges binary readings of gender as stable, static and oppositional, the spaces engaged by the transgender performance poet involve a breaking down of binaries of public and private and physical and virtual space, which are in continuous flux.

Fig 6

Although Kergil does describe himself as a performance artist, he only has a small number of poems on his channel, including 'Daughters.' The poem 'Relapse/Flux' is about his brother's addiction, 'Some Days it Feels Like' is about transgender identity, 'I Will Mean Everything', is a poem to a future lover which Kergil describes as being about bodies, identity and love and his channel also includes a number of music and lyric videos. Like other performance poets in this study, most notably Andrea Gibson, Kergil blends spoken word with acoustic guitar, and they work at the intersections of spoken word and music. In the third chapter of this thesis, I look specifically at the relationship between music and performance poetry and the audio kinetics of Gibson's work, but it is worth noting at this point that it is not uncommon for performance poets on YouTube to have an interest in other

forms of creating, including song-writing. Kergil's channel also includes a video where he recites a poem, 'Rita', that he read at a Transgender Day of Remembrance Vigil in November 2014, about transgender African American woman Rita Hester who was murdered in 1998 in Massachusetts two days before her thirty-fifth birthday and whose vigil in 1999 became what we now know as Transgender Day of Remembrance.

In contrast to the traditional performance space of the slam poet's theatre stage, Kergil does not perform poetry competitively or for the benefit of a live audience. Instead, his intended audience is the subscribers to his channel and any other viewers who may stumble across his content. 'Daughters' was written by Kergil in 2012 and the text of the poem is included in the description of the YouTube video, which was uploaded on 25 August 2015. I have formatted all quotations using the structure set out by Kergil in that video description. The poem has textual similarities to those identified in the Smith poem, specifically the absence of the lost 'Daughters' of the poem, the singular daughter Kergil refers to in the text and, given the use of the plural for the title, the daughter Kergil himself once was. Kergil's poem is a melancholy, bittersweet, affectionate note to the absent daughter of an alternative future as, like Smith's "scars cosmetic, never c-section", Kergil focuses on how the process of transitioning has rendered him unable to bear his own child.

Kergil's video begins with an introduction to himself and his poem, before the shot cuts away and the background sound disappears, bringing slowly into focus the original handwritten poem, in a notebook, placed on a piece of wood (0:00:04-11). The shot then returns to Kergil with his head bowed. He looks up, faces the camera head on and begins to recite the poem. Kergil's head and shoulders are positioned in the centre of the frame. He remains in that position for the duration of the poem, the only shift in his movement coming at the end when he talks about the daughter he will not be able to carry himself. The location appears to be a rooftop and the shot never zooms in or out, always focused on his face and upper torso (Fig 7). The positioning of the shot is similar to that of Smith's Raw Word video. The space has a blankness to it, but Kergil does not perform in an enclosed auditorium like Smith. As Kergil recites the poem, the noise of the traffic and the sound of the breeze provides a soundtrack of sorts. He is isolated, but there is movement in the outdoor space, even though no other people come into the frame. The liminal space selected for the poem appears to be a deliberate strategy to enhance his texts as performance poems are the only videos on Kergil's channel that make use of this precise location, framed with the wooden skylight behind him.

Fig 7

The poem is structured in three stanzas. The first is a conversation with an "acquaintance" who makes the misogynistic and queerphobic observation that "women are attracted to men / because they know men can give them babies" (0:00:14-21) which immediately positions the poem as one which grapples with the impact of transitioning on reproductive capabilities. The second stanza is a conversation with a doctor who demonstrates "with a warm smile" the removal of the "womb" through a "bellybutton" (0:00:28-38). The final stanza is the absent daughter of Kergil's alternative future, who would share his genes "dimpled nose"; "curly brown locks of hair"; "cancerous genes"; "mild manic episodes", a daughter who, he concludes, would have been "magnificent" (0:00:44-58). At this point, Kergil looks away from the camera, turns and walks out of shot, leaving the empty space behind (Fig 8 and Fig 9). Davidson observes that "Lefebvre's account that movement through space is a spatial practice that brings together an embodied process and a conceptual awareness" (37). Kergil's movement out of the space he occupies evokes the sense of absence and loss he conveys in his text.

Fig 8

Fig 9

The poem expressly troubles gender binaries with its references to removed wombs, the ability of women to bear children and of men to give women children. There is a barrenness emphasised by the space and a desolation which underscores the absence of the "magnificent" daughter Kergil believes is lost to him. The semi-public setting, technically open air but also potentially inaccessible (Kergil's other videos suggests that his house has direct access to the roof), evokes the sense of something absent or missing. The loss Smith recounts in 'A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be' and the presence of someone who isn't there is underscored by the quiet, blank space. This acute absence is fuelled by the heteronormative understanding of opposite sex relationships that Kergil experiences in the conversation of his poem's first stanza; a constant reminder of heterosexuality's dominant narrative of procreation. However, Kergil's tone is one of acceptance as opposed to grief. Like Smith's absent Emily, the 'Daughters' of Kergil's text are referenced with bittersweet, affectionate nostalgia. Smith's "I never hated you" is echoed by Kergil's positioning of his own daughter, and perhaps the daughter he once was, as "magnificent", a fierce evocation of love for something lost as Kergil strives forward and pursues the path that was necessary for him to live comfortably in the world. There is no anger in Kergil's delivery, and not even a little frustration. He confronts heteronormativity with a wry smile and bows his head as he thinks of his daughter. The tone is mild and thoughtful, and the quietness of the space informs the reading of the text as nostalgic which suggests that Kergil's poem is one of catharsis as opposed to mourning.

The semi-public space has held long associations with queer experience. The history of queer space being undercover and hidden away from the public eye traces back, in more recent history, to the covering of the windows of gay bars, something San Francisco's Twin Peaks is believed to have been the first to resist in 1972, when owners Mary Ellen Cunha and Peggy Forster uncovered the windows. Samuel Delaney's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) explores the intersections between space and queerness, how queerness informs spaces and vice versa. Delaney writes initially about the porn theatres whose activities were conducted inside the theatre but in full open view, their existence advertised to people on the streets outside. Delaney suggests that when the theatres disappeared through a rezoning of the Times Square area "under a sham concern for AIDS" (91) this resulted in the criminalisation of even safe, consenting sexual acts between homosexuals. He notes that the disappearance of those spaces required leaps to be made "between the acceptable and the unacceptable, between the legal and the illegal" (108) and argues that the erosion of spaces associated with

sex and promiscuity—and queer sex specifically—in the interests of 'safety' led to a dismantling of "interclass communication" (122) and a failure to define the unsafe as anything more than "failure to confirm to the ideal bourgeoise marriage" (122).

Michael Warner also writes of the way a culture of shame and silence has intensified around queer sexual practice through the "zoning of sex" instigated by New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's "new zoning law limiting 'adult establishments', which the city began to enforce in the summer of 1998" (150). Warner discusses how Christopher Street—the site of the Stonewall Inn which holds such significant importance to twentieth century LGBTQ+ activism—has been eroded "by real estate development, by a rise in tourism, and, most of all, by new policing and development on the riverfront" (151). Warner suggests that "a pall hangs over the public life of queers" (153). Warner draws a distinction between exhibitionist public sex and "spaces such as bathhouses and cruising grounds in secluded part areas" where "the assumption of privacy is reasonably grounded and should be respected" (176). Both Delaney and Warner point to how sex has been eroded from public consciousness and even semi-public (yet still theoretically private) spaces are closing down or are being aggressively policed. Although there is a converse argument against the ghettoization of queer space and communities which strives to normalise queerness, the "trouble with normal" (as Warner expands upon) is that it comes from a place of "unequal moralism" which invests in "heterosexual world domination" (6) and creates a "politics of shame" and "the more people are isolated or privatized", the more vulnerable they are to feeling the effects of shame brought about by heteronormative idealism (12).

It is noteworthy then, in the context of this debate about queer space, its erosion and the normalisation versus the assimilation and sanitisation of queerness, that Kergil, J Mase III and other poets in this thesis choose these semi-public, isolated spaces to perform their poems, the settings juxtaposed with the most globally public of all platforms, the Internet. The spaces are literally open in that they are open air, but both offer quiet isolation and privacy that is eradicated from the moment the videos are uploaded to YouTube. This troubling of making private experience public appears to be reinforced by the approach taken by dominant spoken word channels like Button Poetry. Johnson recounts his experience with a poem he had chosen to perform at the Individual World Poetry Slam in 2015, with the fine print explaining that all poetry recorded by Button must be uploaded to YouTube. Although Johnson notes Button were amenable to his request that the poem not be uploaded, Poetry Slam, Inc. refused the request and as a result, Johnson chose an alternative poem. He says of the experience, "I wondered the entire night about what had happened to a space I had once

thought so sacred, a space I had once thought was, above all, about poetry" (114). For YouTube vloggers and performance poets self-curating content, they have the freedom to set their own acceptable boundaries of public and private. In the case of performance poets participating in the competitive slam circuit however, the Internet has presented new challenges around privacy, visibility and ownership over art. Although spoken word has always had this element of public, live performance, the audience is increased in size and geographical location through a platform like YouTube. The risks that come with being visible in online space raise questions of access and self-censorship for the more vulnerable populations creating and performing in cyberspace.

The juxtaposition between public space and isolated, outdoor location is also favoured by poet Andrea Gibson. Their poem, 'Pansies' (2015), offers a further example of a poet situated in outdoor, public space, which affords a quietness, solitude and privacy with nobody else around other than the Gibson and the people behind the camera involved in the making of the video. The setting for Gibson's poem is the beach next to the open ocean and breaking waves. Standing on the rocks, Gibson's body blurs in and out of focus, the camera favouring close-ups of Gibson's hands. This offers a shift from the headshots favoured by Kergil, Smith and J Mase III where instead it is Gibson's surroundings that form the primary visual focus of the poem (Fig 10). Gibson delivers their lines walking, disrupting the more traditional idea of a poet who stands still and uses facial expressions and bodily gestures for emphasis. The location is similar to other isolated, outdoor spaces that Gibson favours in many of their poems. 'Pansies' is similar to an earlier poem 'Jellyfish' where Gibson is captured moving through a field of long grass, the lighting and movement in the air reminiscent of jellyfish in water. The titles of the poems are at odds with the locations with 'Jellyfish' set in a meadow and 'Pansies' set by the sea. This bringing together of land and sea and the repeated use of nature and free-flowing, open space in Gibson's work, captures a sense of freedom and a refusal to be contained by the limitations of biological essentialism or heteronormative expectations. The movements of the natural world and the crashing waves in 'Pansies', reflect the poet's continuous motion and I return to Gibson in the third chapter, to discuss the kinetic layers to their work.

Fig 10

These examples of poems by Kergil, Gibson and J Mase III suggest a pull towards different kinds of liminal space when transgender performance poets stage and film their own content. By creating works for the virtual stage additional spatial layers are also operating from the perspective of the viewer, who is placed in a similarly hybrid space between the physical and virtual. Writing about the influence of a mobile world on the way we theorise online space, Adriana de Souza e Silva defines the space of the mobile user as "hybrid" in her article *Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces* (2006). Souza e Silva explains that the "embedding" of mobile technologies "in outdoor, everyday activities" means "we can no longer address the disconnection between physical and digital spaces" (262). Couldry and McCarthy comment on the "competing definitions of 'situation' that arise when mobile phone users prioritize the multilocal private 'space' of their phone conversation over the unilocal 'public' space of the train carriage" (8). Today's Internet user is frequently presumed to be mobile, moving through a variety of spaces as they surf the Internet. These viral counterpublics, to coin Somers-Willett, are "underpinned by the sharing of multi-layered, personal content publicly" (Wareham Morris qt. Chepp 224) and involve continuous spatial negotiations and the destablisiation of boundaries. The slipperiness of spatial boundaries evidenced in the texts above is replicated in the viewing experience of the mobile user.

Michael Bull observes how "mobile media technologies…have quickly and radically transformed our experience of the boundaries between private and public space" (15). If the public/private binarism was already critically unstable at the time of Sedgwick's writing, it is even more so now in our interconnected world. There is a complex spatial relationship between the situation of the online viewer and the text, where like a reader of a book in a

café, the space where the dialogue between text and reader response occurs is both public and private. Unlike the case of a printed text, the way the viewer might engage with an online text is not necessarily a wholly subjective or private process and on multiple levels the texts and counterpublics explored in this section trouble the boundaries of public and private on a personal, political and spatial level, layering location into the poetic text in a way that mirrors the ontology of transgender experience with its continuous crossings and troubling of gender. The poets themselves choose spaces which are open-air but isolated, combining facets of the natural world and urban structures. They move in and out of those spaces, performing on the public stage of the Internet, favouring direct, intimate, address to the camera lens or removing themselves altogether from the stage, through the techniques of blurring and sharpening used in Gibson's 'Pansies' and 'Jellyfish.' Not only do the spatial layers add emphasis to certain aspects of the texts themselves, but as I have demonstrated, there is something distinctly queer about the sites where the poets locate themselves; sites that invite a blurring of lines and troubling of static and binary notions of space, reflecting the way the transgender body troubles the idea that gender is biologically pre-determined or absolute.

Secret gardens and heterotopias

The use of heterotopic space creates an additional layer of queerness to the stage and space transgender performance poets occupy. The stage of the theatre itself could be said to be a heterotopia of sorts. It is an example given by Michel Foucault who originally formulated the concept in a lecture to architects in 1967. Although Foucault did not submit the piece for publication, the contents of the lecture were later reprinted shortly before his death in a French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, titled 'Des Espace Autres' (1984). The concept of hereotopia has been expanded on in scholarship concerned with analysing space and stage. Joanna Tompkin's text on theatre's heterotopias, is one example, which I draw upon as part of this analysis. Because the college auditorium is so infrequently a deliberate creative spatial choice made by the transgender performance poet, in this section I work with another poet, Miles Walser, who has set their own stage and argue that his spatial choice adds an important visual layer to the poem that speaks to transgender experience. Heterotopic space is not quite utopian or dystopian, but which holds a specifically spatial "precariousness and impermanence" (Tompkins 180). When such spaces are used by the poets in this study, they evoke the queer experience of being transgender which is in constant opposition to

heteronormative notions of biologically pre-determined gender and the stereotypes associated with those binary constructs of 'male' and 'female.'

Miles Walser's performances provide a vivid illustration of the queer virtual stage as a heterotopic space. Walser is a performance poet whose poems on YouTube gain the most traction through channels associated with performance poetry, including Button Poetry and SlamFind. Walser has published a print collection of poetry, *What the Night Demands* (2013), and several of Walser's performance poems have attracted particular attention, including 'Lillian,' 'Nebraska', 'Heirarchy' and 'Letter to My Vagina', the poem I focus on in this section. Walser also has his own YouTube channel which appears to have begun as somewhere to upload his performance poetry and then moved on to more vlog-style posts documenting his transition. Walser hasn't uploaded a new video to that channel since 2015. Although his poetry has garnered far more attention that Kergil's, as a vlogger, Walser never appears to have amassed the same sizeable audience that the other vloggers gained through their diary-style entries and vlogs about transgender experience. Accordingly, Walser sits somewhere between Smith, whose only YouTube presence is on poetry channels, and Kergil, who is an established vlogger first and foremost. Walser has a combination of poetry and vlogs on his channel (KilometersW) and the first video on his channel is the one spoken word poem he appears to have filmed himself, in contrast to the others which are recorded readings filmed by somebody else. For the purposes of this analysis, I have used my own transcript of the text as recited in the YouTube video with reference to the print version in *What the Night Demands*, although that version differs in some respects. Where those differences are worth noting or inform the analysis, I explain which version I am referring to.

Fig 11

The whole video for 'Letter to My Vagina' is shot in one single frame. Like Smith's Raw Word recording of 'A Letter to The Girl I Used to Be' and Kergil's 'Daughters', the frame captures Walser's upper body which occupies the centre of the shot. Unlike Smith, Walser makes no gestures as he talks aside from facial expressions and unlike Kergil, he remains in shot for the duration of the video. The background, as shown in Fig 11, is a garden filled with rubbish from scrap and broken wood to deckchairs left abandoned. The setting appears to be fenced and enclosed, but there is no indication on Walser's channel that this is his garden, or a more public space chosen for the purposes of the video. In form and content, Walser's poem shares the most similarities with Smith's poem. The poem is, like Smith's, a letter. Some of the lines are striking in their similarity. Walser's "I don't think I could hate you if I tried" (0:01:15-17) echoes Smith's final line, "I never hated you." Walser's entire poem is a love letter of sorts, one which exhibits tensions and frustrations with biological aspects associated with womanhood, the "diva" menstrual cycle, a "boozed-up celebrity", "rolling out your own red carpet" with a "periodically" announced presence and the "lipstick stain" that's always a "rotten surprise" (0:00:04-36). Ultimately, however, Walser defends those parts of himself, saying that despite the secrecy and shame, they are "stuck together" (0:00:32) like "a dysfunctional family" (0:01:10-12), concluding: "I know I never say it, but I love you" (0:01:23-27).

The tension between biological aspects of himself and his gender identity is richly conveyed throughout Walser's poem and the complex relationship that Walser has with these aspects of himself are emphasised by the setting. The pieces of scrap in the garden and the almost dystopian nature of the space emphasises the uneasy relationship Walser has with aspects of his body, and the ruined, untidy garden is evocative of Walser's fears of press scrutiny searching for "what sort of monster I am naked" (0:00:28-30) and the women who "recoil" (0:00:43) when seeing his body for the first time. The garden is a site which has connections with both childhood and sexuality, as identified below, and the broken garden with rubbish and abandoned garden furniture represents Walser's conflicted relationship with his biological sex and parts of his own body. Foucault describes the garden, in the context of heterotopias, as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." He suggests that "the garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world…a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity" (6). Tompkins explains how the "experimental zone" of a

heterotopia "provides a means to test out spatial alternatives that might prompt audiences to think (and act) differently" (32). In watching Walser's video, the viewer's gaze is focused on Walser himself, but the background of his setting fills the rest of the frame. The response to the text is heightened by the spatial layer of Walser's garden which forms the backdrop—the stage—of his performance.

Tompkins talks of site-specific performances as being able to "unsettle the familiar to address how the socio-political milieu in which a performance takes place might work differently" (44). The spatial setting of Walser's poem raises questions about the relationship between transgender identity and the body, underscoring a fractious relationship. It is a strained relationship of love on the one hand, and frustration and challenge on the other, as they wage an internal war under the invasive scrutiny of the media spotlight. The sense of being looked upon is deeply embedded in Walser's poem, which speaks of the perilous line between living openly and wanting to keep aspects of himself private, his fear for example of the "loud mouth" of his vagina getting them both "in trouble" (0:01:28-32). Walser's poem suggests that it is the intimate parts of his body which invite the most public exposure, even when covered with the "censor strip" of "boxer briefs." Through the poem he highlights the way that kind of scrutiny impacts upon him, and effectively showcases how transgender people are frequently reduced to a media frenzy demanding intimate knowledge of transgender bodies, in a way that is invasive and distressing.

The garden's associations with sexuality and specifically female sexuality trace back to biblical associations with the forbidden fruits of the Garden of Eden. In more recent times, scholarship on the use of gardens in children's literature has identified similar connections. In her article on Francesca Hodgson Burnett's popular children's book, *The Secret Garden* (1911), Ruth Jenkins observes that: "gendered association of gardens with young girls and the cultivation of desired female conduct dominated the Victorian era" (427) and Ulf Boëthius comments on the garden in the same text as a metaphor for sexuality, which is "strongly present…as a kind of imprint of the forbidden and repressed" (188). Danielle E. Price also considers *The Secret Garden* in her article on the function of the garden in Victorian literature, commenting that "[g]ender politics saturate Victorian theories of gardening" that render the garden symptomatic of something to be nurtured and nurturing, a site of procreation and beautiful blooms, something to be looked upon and pleasing to the male gaze (7). The tendency to feminise nature and the garden itself in literature adds a gendered, spatial, textual layer that further explores Walser's relationship to biological sex and gender and marks the garden as a site of resistance, pushing back against those associations. Unlike

67

the carefully nurtured, cultivated gardens that Victorian literature might imagine, Walser's garden shows no discernible signs of growth and the setting is largely dominated by rubbish and man-made products like the sink in the background.

The poem makes several references to sex and sexuality, in the "ballooning womb under a button-down shirt" (0:00:58-01:00), "the "censor strip" of the "boxer briefs" (0:00:17-21) and the woman "meeting you" for the first time—"meeting" later changed to "kissing" in the printed text of the same poem (64). With these references it captures the darker side of domesticity: "a dinner place purposefully left off the table" (0:01:01-5), the secrecy and shame of absent people and events, linked into sex, or silenced in the pursuit of 'family values.' The lipstick on the collar is a classic motif of infidelity, the hiding of a teenage pregnancy a nod to right-wing Christian conservatism and the empty place at the table a hint of an 'embarrassing' family member disowned. Walser's relationship with his body is described in terms of the dysfunctional family who are "happy" in their "home always catching on fire" (0:01:10-14). Walser's poem is a love letter to the dysfunctional marriage with his body. The site of the broken, flowerless garden with its literary feminine associations appears to explicitly challenge the stereotypes of conservative domesticity with its outward appearance. Just as Walser untangles menstrual cycles and vaginas from gender, the disorderly spatial setting represents the bodily complexities of sex and sexuality.

The garden is a hybrid site of sorts, heterotopic, open but enclosed. The viewer too exists in a kind of hybrid space as identified by Souza e Silva and discussed above. Tompkins observes that with multimedia aspects of contemporary performance, "its spatial reach is multiplied and/or fragmented with the introduction of multimedia technologies" (140). The viewer of Walser's poem in brought into a private space through the public platform of YouTube and the mediated layer of the text will inform the way the text is received. The viewer might be inside a quiet, indoor location and be brought outside of that space through the background noise and outdoor site chosen by Walser. If they are viewing the poem in a highly populated public space, the stillness of the outdoor space in the poem would become more noticeable, the relative silence of the piece, rather than the sounds of things moving in the background, the most striking feature of the space. As a result, the poem does not invite a static reception as the response to Walser's stage is informed by the place the spectator occupies in viewing the poem. This tension between movement and stillness is something I return to in my third chapter on motion, which addresses both the movement of the spectator and the way the poets and poems themselves deal with movement.

Conclusion

The queerness of the online performance poet's virtual stage lies in the multiple spaces they occupy at once and in the complexity of those layered spaces. Not all performance poets gaining traction on YouTube do so in the community spaces, or counterpublics, developing around the popularity of performance poetry and competitive slam. Some find the art form through alternative spaces, such as vlogging communities. However, in both cases, the poets address facets of their experiences of being transgender that contain a synergy of sorts. The vloggers function day-to-day as online diarists but in their performance poetry they, like the performance poets of the college slam competitions, continue to speak to their own identity and draw on things they have observed or experienced to tell their stories in a different, more creative fashion. With transgender literature having so commonly occupied the space of political manifesto and transition journey memoir, it seems that performance poetry offers an alternative approach to depictions of gender-variant life.

In the spatial settings favoured by the poets and the texts of the poems themselves, there are more similarities than there are differences. The notion of a queer virtual stage runs throughout this study, and whether or not the spaces are consciously chosen to engage with elements which encourage a queer reading, they create that sense of something hybrid, in between, a negotiation and deconstruction of boundaries and binaries, and they enhance those features in the texts. In the spaces invoked by the poets some serve a recollective function and many touch upon spaces which feature in a transgender person's life, from the doctor's surgery (Smith; Kergil), to childhood bedrooms (Smith) and spaces associated with heteronormative family structures (Walser; Smith). The poets might use space differently and approach space in their texts from different angles, but it is already possible to see some connecting threads, which highlight some of the vulnerabilities transgender people have as they move through space in a society invested in dominant narratives of gender and sexuality.

The global reach of digital platforms like YouTube adds an additional spatial layer to sites of performance and spaces engaged in the texts themselves, and the viewer encounters a hybrid experience of space as a result. On the one hand, they might be in public and in motion, watching a video which is still and quiet. On the other, they might become part of an audience, responding to a live performance as they watch it in isolation after the fact. The potential and broadly limitless sites where a viewing audience might engage with the poetry, expands the queer stage of the transgender YouTubers and performance poets, expanding its reach on a virtual level, capable of crossing geographical boundaries in a heartbeat. As

demonstrated in this chapter, taking four very different poems and poets with different backgrounds who occupy different subcultural spaces on the broader YouTube platform, it is possible to draw connections between the works as well as noting some early tensions and divergences. One final facet I have alluded to with a number of these poems is the distinctly queer relationship these poets have to time, with many of the poems looking towards an unknowable or impossible future or reflecting nostalgically on the past. In the next chapter, I turn to one poet in particular to consider their non-linear experience of time, exploring these queer temporalities in relation to the function and importance of utopian desire.

Chapter Two: Queer Temporalities in the Work of Chrysanthemum Tran

Introduction

In the world of competitive slam poetry, time is, quite literally, of the essence. Whereas the poet writing for a print publication might consider the form and aesthetics of the words on a page, the competitive slam poet is concerned with the temporal aspects of spoken word, the speed of delivery and the ability to convey a message in the strict three-minute performance time such poets are required to observe. As part of the Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) program at the University of Chicago, transgender poet Chrysanthemum Tran was invited to speak in early 2018 at the PanAsian Solidarity Coalition's Spring Festival on "Queering the Present." Tran, whose work is the subject of this chapter, is a queer, transgender Vietnamese American poet, performer and educator. In 2016, Tran made history by becoming the first transfeminine finalist of the Women of the World Poetry Slam. Tran is also a 2016 Rustbelt Poetry Slam Champion, 2017 FEMS Poetry Slam Champion and was awarded Best Poet at the 2016 National College Slam. During her CRES interview, Tran indicates how, for the transgender performance poet, working with the strict temporal limits of slam can feel like a matter of life or death: "I have three minutes to convince someone that…my life has importance…even if they don't see me as human, I need to figure out how in three minutes I can get someone to humanise me…I'm trying to convince strangers that my life matters" (1:18:44-1:20:22).

This telling excerpt from the CRES interview positions time as a critical starting point for Tran's creative process and indicates a further temporal layer beyond the designated three-minute slot. Although Tran is clear she speaks only to her own experiences and not on behalf of others, those individual experiences are informed and contextualised by time, by a long history of transgender activism, colonialism, racism and anti-queerness. This preoccupation with time is reflected in most, if not all, of Tran's work. In only three minutes—and some of Tran's poems are even shorter—she gives accounts of legislative oppression, intersections between queerness and race, unspoken transgender histories, her own closeted childhood and a forward-looking desire to hold America to account for its atrocities in order to prevent future violence and death. We see the latter in 'Discovery (for Jennifer Laude)', released in 2016: "America, you've got Jennifer's blood on your hands / got

the blood of so many of my sisters on your hands / and I will never let you forget" (1:50-1:52). For Tran, the three-minute time period is a temporal space in which she wants to account for her life and the lives of other trans women of colour, grappling with the complexities of topics that cover a vast temporal space, including colonialism, queer history and her experiences of sexual violence and rejection from the family home.

By virtue of the rules of slam, this kind of competitive poetry has a defined temporality. Through the preoccupations of her poetry and the strategies Tran frequently employs to pull her poems from past to present and back again, Tran's poetry is rich with textual temporalities that move beyond the three-minute timeslot. Queer temporalities can also be identified when considering the poem as performance, its status as a text that expressly contemplates live, onstage delivery. In *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance and the Hole of History* (2017), Jaclyn I. Pryor explains how performance and temporalities are intimately entwined. Pryor notes that "performance can transform the way we think and feel about trauma and memory, time and history" and identifies "live performance's unique relationship to the politics of temporality, or a sense of how time passes" (3). Tran's poetry is primarily concerned, like Pryor's study, with "exposing systems of violence that are so deeply embedded in our society as to appear natural" (6). In this chapter, I identify the ways in which both Tran's performance poetry, and the digital status of the online text, combine with force in a fashion which shares many similarities with the performances Pryor investigates that highlight the queer temporalities of survivorship and trauma. Much of Tran's poetry includes forms of temporal ruptures which give the audience in situ "recourse to feel the violence of linear time…moments in live performance in which normative conceptions of time fail, or fall away, and the spectator or artist experiences an alternative, or queer, temporality" (6). Here I argue that these digital texts, even absent the critical feature of 'live' performance, afford space for similar recourse, allowing the online viewer to experience a kind of temporal rupture or flux.

Queer time is queer space's counterpart, a crucial element of understanding multifaceted components that combine to make these texts diversely queer on various levels. I argue that spatial qualities identified in the first chapter—liminal space, heterotopias, childhood bedrooms—are inextricably informed by the temporal. Introducing the spaces evoked by Tran's work with my critical eye on time evidences the way time and space relate to one another, building on the foundations laid by the first chapter to place emphasis on the queer temporal aesthetics of online transgender performance poetry. To connect the temporal features of a mediated online performance space with the specific temporal queerness of

transgender experience, it is necessary to understand foundational theories of queer time. Time permeates every aspect of queer theory, from debates around finding queerness in a history of affect or the optimism (and resistance to it) in discussions around queer futurity, to the manner in which queer people experience a constant temporal flux, at odds with normative constructs of time of heteronormative linearity.

José Esteban Muñoz suggests that "we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (1). Scholarship that works with queer time, including the approach taken by Muñoz, provides an important theoretical framework for analysing Chrysanthemum Tran's work. Halberstam defines "queer time" as "a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety and inheritance" ("*QTAP*" 6). Critical work with queer time considers how its existence has a disruptive impact on hegemonic narratives of time and the "notions of normal" ("*QTAP*") they depend upon. Straight time, as queer time's counterpart, is "upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" ("*QTAP*" 4) and the artificial construct of a linear progression through time which positions the "emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation" ("*QTAP*" 4). Throughout Tran's poetry, temporal shifts unsettle and subvert such linear narratives of experience, as she employs tense and point of view shifts, calling on oppressions tracing back to the origins of language, the long reach of history in which Tran immerses herself before bringing the viewer ricocheting back to the present with the force of her defiance. In his writing on the queer temporalities of television, Gary Needham observes that "[q]ueerness is something that is literally out-of-time in the sense of being urgent, immediate and on the outside" (152). As I demonstrate, through her performances Tran's texts display not only the fast-paced urgency of a slam poet feeling the pressure of time, but the queerly temporal urgency of a transgender woman who has a discordant experience of time as she fights for survival in a world dominated by heteronormative linearity. Her intricate interweaving of past and present demands that the viewer pay attention to her message. It is only through understanding the violence levelled at transgender people through discordant and complex historical references and twists in language, that the viewer can appreciate Tran's poetry as being time critical in more ways than one.

The transgender poet's identity is itself a queer temporal feature of the embodied text of the performance poem. As Pryor observes: "Bound breasts. Revised childhoods. New names. When it comes to temporality, trans is about as queer as you can get" (72). For

transgender people, the coming out process has been likened to a rebirth and many will mark anniversaries of coming out, official name changes or other similarly defining moments of transgender experience as alternative birthdays. As noted in the previous chapter, the name assigned to the transgender person at birth becomes a 'deadname' and both family members close to transgender people and, sometimes, transgender people themselves describe experiencing emotions akin to grief as they mourn for the person 'lost' as part of the process of coming out and, in some cases, transition. Tran addresses this sense of loss in her poem 'An Acceptance': "I shouldn't be surprised that my ex-lover is afraid of me starting hormones / says it's like watching a loved one die / how my skeleton will carefully inch its way out of this body / crawling into a new woman's softness" (0:10-0:28). For those who seek medical intervention and gender reassignment, the process can often involve halting puberty or undergoing treatments which begin a process akin to puberty much later in life, encouraging (by way of rudimentary example) the growth of breasts or facial hair. Pryor explains how "trans bodies are already in a 'queer time and place' because their very ontology invites a rejection of historical truth, a reconstruction of bodily and material archives, and a radical reimagining of future possibilities" (72).

The final temporal aspect that requires careful unpacking is the status of the text as mediated performance, occupying a digital space. The online viewer can stop, start, rewind and alter their first perceptions of the poem and poet through multiple re-watches in a way the live audience cannot. This creates a "temporal rupture" (Halberstam) for the audio-visual audience and alters the temporal experience of the text in a manner expanded upon more fully, below. Needham suggests that amongst all forms of mediated text, it is television that offers the most compelling space for engaging with queer temporalities due to the way it is positioned as part of domestic family life and can, as a result, subvert those normative temporal structures. Needham suggests that this capacity to engage with queer temporalities lies specifically in the fact that "television's ontology is temporal" (153). If the television represents a focal point of domestic family life, the computer and the mobile phone, devices on which YouTube is primarily viewed, represent the disintegration of those normative familial spaces. If the television is the mediated site that, ostensibly, brings a family together, the computer is the mediated site that tears it apart. The computer—and the mobile phone— have associations with media-driven and politicised narratives of moral harm, with the availability of privately consumed pornography, the illicit hook-up apps which offer extra-marital affairs and anonymous sex at the click of a button and the perceived dangers of violent worlds created by immersive and hyper-realistic gaming franchises or the boom in

social media usage that draws children away from participating in family activities to spend increasingly more time in virtual worlds. These are just a small handful of often cited examples of the power of the Internet to corrupt, endanger and influence, and those narratives are frequently connected to the breakdown of the family unit with their focus on the corruptibility of children and the disintegration of marriages. The opportunity for greater, more global connectivity is at direct odds with the way time spent on the Internet can isolate. In that sense, there is a temporal queerness inherent in the digital nature of the text. Together with the temporal rupture caused by the way these poems can be viewed (paused, stopped, replayed etc.) they are typically viewed on devices that form part of the narrative of a post-millennium breakdown of temporal logics of family and procreation that are dominant features of 'straight' time.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on the breaks with the past that create what Halberstam terms a "temporal rupture", identifying instances of "aesthetic turbulence" in Tran's work that speak to the way being transgender "inscribes abrupt shifts in time and space directly onto the gender-ambiguous body" ("*QTAP*" 107). Through adopting and extending the notion of a "temporal rupture" I argue they operate on multiple levels in Tran's work, enabling the viewer to experience the volatile and uneasy nature of queer time. Drawing on Muñoz, I provide context for Tran's thematic preoccupation with positioning herself as the daughter of history that amplifies the lost voices of transgender people of colour. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to the haunted present and argue that themes of ghostliness emphasise the temporal incoherence Tran experiences due to racism and transphobia. I further suggest that the uncanniness of repeated imagery in Tran's poetry is reinforced for the online viewer who experiences a form of temporal incoherence watching a 'live' performance as recording, a digital echo in time. Working with Derrida's notion of hauntology, I conclude the second section by exploring the ways childhood haunts the transgender poet's present. The final part of this chapter is concerned with queer futurity. Exploring tensions in theoretical approaches to queer time, I argue that for Tran, the past and haunted present combine with an urgent focus on what Muñoz would call "queer utopian desire" (35), illuminating the radical potential of futurity in the context of transgender womanhood and the recurring image of "a woman who refuses to die" ('Vampires') that embodies Tran's poetry.

Transgender performance and temporal ruptures

Tran's poem, 'Cognates' was performed as part of the Women of the World Poetry Slam and uploaded by Button Poetry to YouTube on 16 March 2016. In this poem, Tran uses linguistics, the "French cognates" that "stain the Vietnamese language" (0:00:34-36) to explore the history of the French colonisation of Vietnam and to reclaim her own language, "stealing back the camera / to expose all of white history's lies" (Cognates). The entire poem is deeply concerned with history and, more specifically, with the voices and languages that control the telling of history. Through the poem, Tran references the history lessons that only taught self-hatred—"Everything I learned about hating myself I learned in classrooms" (0:00:05-11)—and the falseness of the history she was taught, the characterisation of colonialization as "a mission from God…modernising a backward society" (0:00:20-22). In offering a scathing introduction to the false history that taught her to feel isolation and self-loathing, she gives her own account of the way the Vietnamese people saw colonialization. Where the history books taught of God, missionaries and saviours, she denounces those lessons, saying: "My people called it rice fields burning down / white folks moving in, taking what's not theirs" (0:00:24-30). Tran uses the 'cognate', relating to the linguistic derivation of words, to explain the "stain" French language leaves on Vietnamese words, identifying how languages "have memories that last lifetimes" (0:02:10-12). She reframes words with French origin, linking directly back to colonial oppression and the characterisation of Vietnamese people as something foreign, something 'other', something to be feared: "the Vietnamese càphê is derived from the French le café / as in brown bodies bent over colonial cash crop"; "ciné derived from le cinema / as in armed with cameras they capture / the jungles of these darker colonies / Haiti, Senegal, Cambodia, Vietnam / all our faces like wild animals" (0:00:30-57). Linguistics are an incredibly powerful focus for the spoken word poet, as Tran's deft movements from Vietnamese to French demonstrate. In a compressed timeframe the bitter legacy of colonialism permeates her language, infiltrates her lessons and presents a view of Vietnamese people to the outside world as something to be feared.

Tran also uses language to explore queerness, closeting and homophobia, again drawing connections between the French and the Vietnamese language: "pêđê derived from le pedegrast / as in queer, faggot, ladyboy, paedophile" (0:00:58-0:01:00). Tran's experiences with race and homophobia offer an explicitly intersectional perspective on queerness, through the juxtaposition of the 'stained' language to the language of homophobia.

Sometimes when I use my mother tongue,
I can still hear the coloniser speaking for me:

'Homosexuality is a distinctly Vietnamese affliction,
disease of heathens. Frenchmen, you must resist your urges
when approaching the populations of Vietnam.
They are a godless species.'

(0:01:19-36)

The oppressions of racism and homophobia overwhelm Tran at this point during the poem. Her voice is taken over by the voice of the coloniser, the textual embodiment of an invaded country. She is not simply quoting the coloniser: he is "speaking for me", invading her voice and stripping her of both her language and words. When the coloniser speaks, her tone shifts to cold, crisp tones, in direct contrast to the impassioned delivery of the rest of her poem. The inextricable connection between racial oppression and queer oppression is emphasised by repeated references to Tran's mother, a relationship I return to in more depth in the next section. These references are both explicit and the product of deft linguistic choices. The reference to "mother tongue" in the quoted section above picks up directly on the violence Tran experiences at her mother's hands, the homophobia and rejection she experiences. When recounting her mother's response to being outed without her consent, Tran quotes her mother using the language adopted from the French colonisation: "Last April someone outed me to my mother / She called me pêđê, pêđê, pêđê / The word peeled my skin inside out" (0:01:43-51). The long reach of French colonising of Vietnam between 1874 and 1954 becomes part of the homophobic violence experienced by Tran in the family home. The word cognate itself has a duel meaning, connected to maternal lineage, and Tran deftly juxtaposes a vast and brutal swathe of Vietnamese history with an intimately personal account of the breakdown of her relationship with her mother, suggesting that one cannot be divorced from the other.

This connection between the language of invasion and a personal account of the breaking apart of her family is further emphasised when Tran references "a history repeating itself" as a way to describe her feelings when rejected by her mother. The colonial invasion becomes an invasion of Tran's own body: "I could feel the French moving back in / hollowing out my sinful blood" (0:01:55-0:02:00). The moment creates another temporal shift as it brings the history directly to bear on Tran's present-day experience and the viewer/audience feels the ominous presence of the colonists tangled up in Tran's use of language, trespassing in her body and taking over her tongue. It is difficult to imagine the poem being quite so effective without Tran's performance and delivery, the spoken word so entwined with language and linguistic tricks and twists which end with her reclamation of language as her own. During that moment of impassioned defiance Tran moves from the

passive voice "you can call me" (0:02:20) to the active "you will call me" (0:02:30) with the forward-looking demand: "You will call me a language back from the dead" (0:02:48-50). She not only finds her own language, she becomes it, the spoken word poet finding defiance in the embodied nature of her text. Tran uses religious imagery, the "split-tongues hidden beneath etymology" (0:02:24-26) juxtaposed with the phrase "reach in" to find her own "rebel tongue" (0:02:28) in a way that reads like an exorcism, where she fights the demons of colonial oppression and homophobic violence to find her own resistant, activist voice. Instead of passively consuming the lessons of "Sodom and Gomorrah" taught by missionaries at her "bilingual Catholic bible study" she not only reclaims language, but rewrites "white" history, and makes it her own.

Tran uses possessive pronouns at multiple points in the poem. In the plural, she talks of "our nimble fingers"; "our faces like wild animals"; "hating ourselves" and in the singular, she makes multiple mentions of "my people". The poem's impact is not only enhanced by its delivery as spoken word, but the visual image of Tran onstage serves another powerful, queerly temporal function. Pryor suggests that queer history can be re-constructed through the making the queer visible through live performance. Referencing a production of *Must: The Inside Story*, directed by Suzy Wilson, Pryor comments on the importance of the visibility of an older butch icon, Peggy Shaw, in the performance. Although Pryor is careful not to conflate 'butch' and 'transgender' and they take time to addresses the complexities of the interrelationship between lesbian butch identities and transmasculine queerness, they point out that a visible, older example of gender difference had a transformative impact on the younger, queer audience. Pryor observes that the "emergent trans identities are in want of a queer past and a clear future to which they might lay claim" (68). Pryor highlights the importance of the "[e]mbodied forms of pedagogy" and "[a]cts of trans/fer" which allows historical gender non-conformity onstage visibility, whilst simultaneously commenting on the absence of transfeminine histories from the performance which represents the "broader trends of exclusion of trans women from various institutions, educational and otherwise, including and sometimes especially those with ostensibly feminist missions" (69). Through her presence onstage and the use of the possessive pronouns, Tran's poem has queerly transformative potential as she creates space for herself—and other transgender women of colour—in a history that would seek to erase her.

Through the act of standing onstage and claiming history with deft linguistics Tran not only queers the space she currently occupies, but she creates a temporal shift through performance, a reconstruction of history which positions transgender women of colour

directly into the fabric of Vietnamese history. Although Tran begins by observing that "[d]espite our words, history was never written in our favour" (0:00:31-33), by the time the poem concludes the temporal complexities have served the function of not only bringing history to bear on the present, but also of making queer people visible in historical accounts of colonial oppression. Tran's interview with *The Chicago Maroon* in 2018 indicates that the visibility of the performance poet is important to her—to be seen, as opposed to simply being words on a page. By standing on stage as a transgender woman of colour, Tran opens up not only present-day space to those like her who might feel similarly displaced on account of race and gender identity, but, in 'Cognates', explicitly makes space for them in history by retelling the past in a way that intimately entwines with her own story.

Although Pryor's work specifically considers live performance, in the case of 'Cognates' in particular, the experience of live performance is replicated for the viewer listening and watching on their computer screen or mobile device. As shown in Fig 12, below, the entire poem is filmed in a single frame close-up of Tran that draws the viewer immediately in to the poem. The framing is in some respects a curious one as it cuts off many of Tran's physical motions. Hand gestures, for example, disappear off screen, removed from the shot by the close-up perspective. In terms of captivating the attention of the viewer however, it is a successful choice. It keeps the attention on the poet's words, as opposed to her physical movements or other textual layers, such as the performance space. It is an apt way to frame a poem which is, primarily, about language and words, as it makes those elements of the text the primary focus. It fosters an intimacy between poet and viewer that enhances Tran's urgency that mitigates the loss of the poem's 'liveness.' The camera angle creates a level of intensity that, without the distractions of the moving audience, makes the poem particularly visceral. Unlike other poems available on the Button Poetry website, which show the poet from a number of angles, or which use full-body shots or incorporate the audience into the frame, 'Cognates' only makes the viewer aware of the audience through sound. There is no other feature which distracts from Tran's delivery, or which reminds the viewer that they are watching a recorded performance.

Fig 12

This immersion into the text leads to a series of temporal jumps in the viewing experience. Sarah Bay-Cheng writes that "digital culture turns the world into alternating experiences of documenting and performing" (516). The digital copy of Tran's live performance may evoke the immersive potential of live performance, but it is also historical archive. Tran's digital performance therefore becomes a historical account in digital form as well as content. It exists as part of the Button Poetry digital archive which documents the various stages of large poetry slam competitions, searchable chronologically on the account. The viewer experiences a queerly temporal flux; immersed in a poem from the past, about the past, but experiencing it in a sensory fashion which makes it feel as though they are part of the moment, an immersive three-minute experience which is broken as the video stops and segues into another. If the viewer has YouTube's autoplay function turned on and allows the video to play to its conclusion, the site will automatically play another archived video, selected by algorithms based around previous content viewed as the digital platform considers what the online might want to see next. This creates another temporal jump, a series of possible jumps from video to video. The extent to which those temporal jumps specifically might be correctly termed as 'queer' should be critically investigated, with an understanding of the "corporate-owned social networks […] solidifying their hold on the distribution of ideas" (Haber 153) that underpin the pre-determined loop of videos the viewer is shown by YouTube. As Benjamin Haber writes:

> The same data that makes visible the complex entanglements that make up a human can be mobilized to sell products and services and to police and brutalize marginalized bodies. It is critical that queer theorists do not leave this landscape to

those who wish to exceed the capacities of subjectivity in order to exploit the acute vulnerabilities of networked life (156).

The function of data capitalism is intrinsic in the way YouTube operates and it is relevant to issues discussed in the first chapter, around the de-monetisation of LGBTQ+ content and Johnson's observation that some slam competitions stipulate that recordings taken by Button Poetry must be made available online. In terms of queer temporalities, Haber's analysis makes it clear that not *all* or *any* temporal jumps experienced by the online viewer are necessarily queer, simply because they exist and serve to subvert linear trajectories of time. In one sense, with respect to data mining, the advertisements which are viewer-targeted to appear before the video begins and the automatic and strategic selection of the content that is most visible on the screen at any given time, it might be argued that the temporal jumps created by an autoplay function are anything but queer. The queerly temporal experience is as finite as the text itself and the end of the text another reset or reorientation, which brings the viewer out of the queer space and time cultivated by Tran's onscreen presence. As Tran physically leaves the stage, the video ends and like the audience in situ, the digital viewer is left to ruminate on her words. Unlike the audience in situ, the online viewer can return to the poem again, replay elements of the poem they missed on first delivery and spend longer than the first, energetic three minutes with the text if they so choose. Ultimately, however, the temporal flux created by watching a recorded live performance isn't in and of itself enough for the viewer to feel the violence of hegemonic modes of time. Feeling the full impact of queer temporalities requires experiencing the text in the round—its staging, the words of the poem and the visibility of transgender bodies onscreen/onstage. It is those textual layers combined with the online viewing experience that provide the viewer with a queer moment of temporal incoherence.

To return to Tran's 'Cognates', the performance aspect of the poem serves another important function in terms of the temporal rupture transgender visibility creates. The term "temporal rupture" is one I adopt from Halberstam, who writes about the "paradox made up in equal parts of visibility and temporality" in the context of transgender film, specifically *Boys Don't Cry*, *The Crying Game* and *By Hook or By Crook*. Halberstam explains that the point at which a transgender character is seen as transgender, it exposes "a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present and future" ("*QTAP*" 77). This is something I alluded to in the prior chapter, in relation to the audience response when Ethan Smith delivers the title of his poem, 'A Letter to the Girl I Used To Be.' The murmurs from the audience are

an example of viewer response to experiencing the paradox of time, a temporal rupture which arises at the point at which "a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female, causes the audience to reorient themselves" ("*QTAP*" 78). Although Halberstam is specifically concerned with "cinematic sleight of hand", the notion of a temporal rupture is relevant to the transgender performance poet who, like Smith, is read a particular way when they come onstage and then reveal a transgender identity which requires audience reorientation. The audience participates in the temporal ruptures of being transgender and in order to enable them to do so, the critical component of the text is the onstage/onscreen visibility.

In cinema, transgender characters have been used as site of narrative disruption, their biological sex a moment of 'revelation' or 'rupture.' This unfortunate trope has used transgender experience for sensational impact and has led to a cinematic legacy of trans villainy, perpetuated by the Motion Picture Association's controversial code for filmmaking that was released in 1934 and remained in place until 1968. In these cases, the 'shock' reveal perpetuates transphobic ideas of the untrustworthy nature of being transgender. The exploration of temporal ruptures and "the unravelling of cinematic time" ("*QTAP*" 78) has a kinship with the audio visual nature of these poems, but it is vital to recognise that film, and Hollywood specifically, has its own specific cultural context. The application of theoretical approaches to film to this study can only be taken so far. Slam poetry is intimately concerned with and driven by identity, a form of poetry that can "performatively embody verse and its author" with "exceptional emphasis on the role of the author and his or her [or their] identity" (Somers-Willett 16-17). Javron Johnson writes about the "complexities in the various performances of blackness" (22) and his research is focused on the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender in the creative communities who formed around slam and the related barriers to entry. It is, in the context of this thesis, transgender identity, and in the case of Tran specifically, queerness and race, that underpin the queerly embodied politics of her slam poetry.

The concern of the transgender performance poet is not about playing into media tropes that can perpetuate transphobic violence or to provide a temporal narrative unravel through the sensational reveal, but rather to account for their own experiences from the outset, as unapologetically, unambiguously queer. Yet it is precisely this visibility and affirmative early claiming of transgender identity that is, by its very ontology, part of a temporal rupture before the performance has even begun. Lived transgender experience is full of temporal ruptures which stop biological adolescent processes, or restart processes akin to

adolescence at a later stage in life, the adoption of new names for those who do not pursue medical intervention and so on. Pryor describes this as a "construction of alteritist histories" and notes that transition is framed in the language of 'correction' which seeks to realign transgender people "with a straight and narrow sense of time…illustrating the myriad ways in which dominant culture continues to use temporal mechanics to manage subaltern subjects" (73). Medical interventions have been steeped in the language or 'resetting' or 'realigning' a transgender person on a linear temporal path. The presence of the transgender performance poet onstage/onscreen is an immediate reminder to the audience that queer time frequently subverts and interrogates normative temporal linearity, in a way that "challenges the conventional binary of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood" ("*QTAP*" 173).

The hole in transgender history, loss and reimagined families

History contextualises present day experience, and the reclaiming of history is a frequent theme of Tran's poetry, as she draws empowerment from an affective past. Through her poetry, Tran gives spaces to unheard voices, both by exploring her own experiences with transphobic violence and sexual assault. In 'Biologically Woman (Before Maya Angelou)' (2018), Tran urges the audience to remember transgender women who have lost their lives, the "constellations" that represent, for Tran, "clusters of women who have lived before me" (0:02:54-57). This emphasis on amplifying marginalised gender and racial identities is a particular concern of Tran's. In an article 'Chrysanthemum Tran Reclaims Her Roots Through Poetry' with *The Chicago Maroon* published 21 May 2018, Tran is quoted: "I have to lean into the exotic novelty of who I am because people are interested in what they have not seen." It is unsurprising that Tran is eager to remind her audience of the wider history of transgender women of colour, as opposed to simply telling her own story. By casting the historical net beyond the circumstances of her biological family and individual upbringing, she amplifies voices silenced by historical accounts which would seek to erase them. Pryor notes a critical gap, a "slip from history", whereby historical accounts of 'queer' history have erased or forgotten those stories of particularly marginalised groups, including transgender women of colour: "the marginalized lives of queer and trans folk slip from history because there are few institutions devoted to collecting, protecting and committing their history to collective memory" (68).

Having a faithfully documented history is a privilege which transgender women of colour often lack. To take two defining moments of queer American history as brief examples—the AIDS pandemic and the 1969 Stonewall Riots—this absence can be clearly observed. Halberstam states that "queer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly, at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic", citing writing by poets Mark Doty and Thom Gunn to point to both the "compression and annihilation" of time during the AIDS crisis and "the potentiality of a life unscripted" by heteronormative conventions ("*QTAP*" 2). This temporal incoherence is further explored in David Bergman's *The Violet Hour* (2004), which focuses on a group of gay male writers whose works have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape that emerged from the crisis. Bergman writes that the "person with his hands on the pulse of the times is reading the heartbeat of a madman" (222). Yet attempts to bring narrative coherence to accounts of HIV/AIDS have fostered a dominant understanding of the crisis as predominantly gay and white. This excludes wider queer experience and the impact of the crisis on people of colour from accounts of collective trauma. As Marita Sturken explains, "the AIDS crisis has served less as a catalyst to bridge-building than as an example of the profound divisions of race and privilege that exist in [America]" (157).Through narratives of HIV/AIDS, transgender individuals experience another slip through time and are left to account for their place in queer history, often without the benefit of official records and carefully curated archives.

The Stonewall Riots offer another example of the way accounts of pivotal events can perpetuate a legacy of erasure through efforts to construct a linear understanding of queer history. Stryker comments that "[t]he 'Stonewall Riots' have been mythologized as the origin of the gay liberation movement, and there is a great deal of truth in that characterization, but…gay, transgender and gender-variant people had been engaging in violent protest and direct actions against social oppression for at least a decade by that time." Stryker further points out that although Stonewall is the most commonly cited uprising, and the one with the farthest-reaching consequences, such events were "increasingly common" rather than a "unique occurrence" by the time the riots at The Stonewall Inn in Manhattan's Greenwich Village occurred ("*History*" 82). There are systemic flaws which leave transgender people of colour on the margins of society and as a result, on the margins of accounts of their own history. These issues permeate all aspects of academic discipline, from holes in history to queer theory itself, with its "privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms and an antipathy (or at least an unthinking blindness) towards other modes of queer

difference" ("*Studies I*" 7). It is against this backdrop of erasure, whitewashing and misrepresentation, the "slip in history" that Tran's relationship to her past must be contextualised.

Tran is both intensely preoccupied with the past and seeks to break away from the societal influences which led to her experiences of rejection and displacement in her own family. This leads to a further series of temporal ruptures, reflecting the temporal ontology of being transgender through the power of recollection: "performative flashes of history that interrupt the flow of time" (Pryor 92). Tran consciously evokes the spectres of her own history and a broader, queer, cultural and political history. She brings those to bear on the present as she simultaneously attempts to negotiate a distance from the biological family she grew up with. The rupture is always incomplete however, heightening her sense of present-day displacement and her discordant relationship with time. This indicates that history cannot always be consigned to the past, and subverts the idea of history as something whimsical or nostalgic. Tran experiences the weight of personal relationships and bears the burden of filling the gaps in history left by whitewashed, hetero scholarly perspectives, the compressed time of the slam poem her finite opportunity to account for the experiences of herself, and others like her. It is hardly surprising given the intensely personal and emotional relationships Tran addresses, in conjunction with her desire to educate and account for forgotten history, that her poems are frequently temporally complex, even setting aside the additional layer of complexity brought about by status of her texts as performance pieces, archived in virtual space.

The 2016 poem, 'On (Not) Forgiving My Mother' explores Tran's relationship with her mother, from her forced outing to leaving the family home, going back to the past of her childhood and looking into a future moment when she might be called back to her mother's bedside at the end of her life. The poem begins with time: "January 2009, Vietnam legally recognises its first transgender woman. Four years later it revokes its recognition, her body stuck in limbo" (0:00:06-18). This offers what Muñoz describes as a "temporally situated picture of social experience" (42). It gives a broader political and cultural context to Tran's experiences of feeling like an outsider, a recurring theme of the poem that is emphasised by themes of absence and erasure, and it involves a temporal jump that compresses time, covering four years in the poem's opening sentence.

> I've never been to Vietnam, my Motherland,
> but I imagine what it's like to not be a minority,
> to share my face with everyone around me.

My mother said it is my voice that would give me away
each shaking syllable exposing me as *vietgue*—foreign born.
But I've always felt foreign in America too.
I guess my body always belongs nowhere,
And there is no word for that.
                          (0:00:26-54)

Tran equates displacement from her 'Motherland', Vietnam, with displacement from the family home, and, later, America. The excerpt above indicates that Tran can find no place of belonging—no stability in notions of home, on a national level or in the context of her own family. In Vietnam, her mother tells her she will be read as "foreign born", her opening sentence indicating that she would find no legal recognition as a transgender woman. In America too, Tran feels "foreign", alluding to the racial anxieties and transphobia in today's America that enhance her sense of displacement. Unlike Tran's poem 'Cognates', analysed in depth above, this poem does not focus on broader historical context, but offers present-day concerns which have been influenced by a deep history of minority oppression in both America, and Vietnam. Tran is literally ousted from the family home after being forcibly outed without her consent, and this leads to the breakdown in the relationship between Tran and her mother which is the primary focus of the text. Despite the fact this poem shares similarities with 'Cognates' in addressing and juxtaposing intimate, personal details with broader socio-political contexts, the poems are distinguished by their exploration of language. Whilst 'Cognates' employs linguistics and etymology to heighten feelings of displacement, 'On (Not) Forgiving My Mother' uses the absence of words, the uncertainty of language. The language in 'On (Not) Forgiving My Mother' is inadequate, the words cannot be found, evoking the sense of something absent, that cannot find a place. Erasure is a key aspect of the poem, with reference to the "body stuck in limbo"; the fact there is no place for "bodies and genders like mine" that are "illegible, unseen" (0:00:16-27). In the poem Tran grapples with feelings of not belonging, "my body always belongs nowhere" (0:00:48-52) and becomes "a child that has no words for it" (0:01:16-18), a "fleeting body" (0:01:23-4), "a child gutted of language" (0:02:36-8).

In a sense, Tran's history with her mother comes to represent both a personal loss and a broader one, as Tran attempts to fill the gaps left by a history that inadequately captures experiences like her own. Muñoz observes that "[w]hen the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present, who will labor to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives—past, present and future" (65). For Tran both the biological mother and the 'Motherland' of Vietnam take on the roles of

gatekeeper, robbing Tran of the words required to articulate both a broader story and her personal one, rendering the written word illegible and erasing transgender identities from the word of law. The frustration Tran encounters by being robbed of the terminology necessary to encapsulate her experiences, leads to "shaking" syllables, words "forgotten" and her taking a vow "not to speak." Although Tran tries to find the words and is "uncontainable by language" (0:01:26), she also dependent on it as the inadequacies of an incomplete language and thwarted storytelling, become representative of the inadequacies of historical accounts and the frustration encountered when trying to correct such accounts, or compensate for omissions left by an incomplete history. This ambiguity of language is further emphasised by the placing of the 'Not' in the title in parentheses—something the online viewer can see from the title of the video. The ambiguity of the title renders the status of the forgiveness uncertain, the possibility, perhaps, for future forgiveness left open.

This poem is delivered as spoken word, yet Tran cannot find words that neatly encapsulate her experiences. The slam poem is by definition concerned with orality and communicating ideas in a strict timeframe, and it is a particularly powerful medium to articulately express the pressures of existing in a compressed timeframe. This sense of compressed time is enhanced as Tran fast-forwards to the end of her mother's life, the vast chasm between them full of unresolved tensions and calls never made. By creating this tension between the text's exploration of the inadequacies of language and the fast-paced nature of slam poetry's delivery, Tran's fear of time running out is captured most explicitly when she looks ahead to a future meeting that sends her mother "directly to the grave" (0:01:49) before any of their issues can be resolved. In this "recurring dream" Tran is summoned to the "death bed" (0:01:32-34), the visual impact of Tran's appearance becoming for her mother "a truth so frightening" it causes her death (0:01:48-50). Tran's confusion, guilt, loss and anger are emphasised by contradictory sentences delivered with particular passion as the poem gathers momentum: "Even though I still blame her / Even though I still love her" (0:02:08-2:10). The repetition of the words in this section demonstrates the difficulty Tran experiences when severing her ties with her biological family, finding herself unable to do so.

The relationship between mother and child in the poem inhabits an ambiguous temporal place of past ills and future possibility, where Tran's bleak vision of the future is of course just one option, the figment of her recurring dreams. However, a more optimistic outlook seems impossible, in the absence of either party being able to find the right words to engage with the other, both limited by language. Tran's mother knows only language that

"sets the skin on fire", "the deadliest words to call a child" and "words that most closely resemble 'transgender' in English" (0:01:10-22). She is positioned as knowing nothing of the language of queerness in a way that could encourage empathy and understanding. Muñoz talks of queer history as "ephemera", "the remains of things that are left, hanging in the air like rumor" as old accounts of history have tended to lead to erasure or the positioning queerness as abhorrent or amoral "used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections and acts" (45). The confusion, the ambiguity and the conflicted feelings heightened by the poem enhance the temporal ephemera of queer history. The mother becomes history archiving queerness only through the language of penalty and discipline and through the repeated phrase "there is no word for that" Tran represents the struggles queer people face to find language that isn't available to them, the history unspoken.

A recurring theme in Tran's poetry is her found family, the queer, non-binary and transfemmes of colour to whom she dedicated her poem 'After Maya Angelou' in 2018. As 'On (Not) Forgiving My Mother' progresses past experiences with Tran's mother become more explicitly articulate. The hurt resulting from love delivered by a "fist, and a tongue dipped in poison" (0:02:21-23) takes hold and Tran rejects biological motherhood to become the "daughter of diaspora and dysphoria" (0:02:33-35). She finds sisterhood and motherly love with the "brown queers I name family" (0:02:19) in her mother's absence. The love that is frequently positioned as the most universally relatable—between a mother and a child—is a love that Tran "will never be able to understand", the idea of the sanctity of the family home and 'unconditional love' interrogated and subverted accordingly. For Tran it is her queer family, her found family, who provide the safety akin to home. It is through this found family that Tran is able to find not only her place, but also visibility and a firm sense of self. Even with that extended family however, Tran explains how she strives to find definition, the persistent language of erasure, illegibility and error suggesting the process of being able to comprehensively correct past hurt and erasure is not, and may never be, fully complete.

> Nothing about this Vietnamese transfeminine body
> Ever stops feeling illegible
> Like bad handwriting on a birth certificate
> And my name, my skin, my gender
> all feel like human error, and still—
> I try to give this body definition. Meaning.
> A means to transcend gender beyond blood.
> And every day I try to forgive my mother,
> even if it really means forgiving myself.

And I'm certain there is no word for that.

The word "illegible" is, Muñoz argues, part of the ontology of queerness. Muñoz states that "[q]ueerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight mind's mapping of time….queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes and laws" (73). The illegibility Tran experiences is connected to writing on a birth certificate, which serves a twofold function. This speaks to the assigned birth gender and the dead name of the poet, but it also recalls the lack of legal recognition for transgender people in Vietnam that Tran identified from the outset of the poem. The choice of the phrase "human error" in the context of the legislative aspects of identity suggests that the error is not, perhaps, Tran's own, but the broader human error of a society—both American and Vietnamese—that fails to recognise and protect its own minorities, homelands rejecting their children on account of racial anxieties and queer oppression. The bad writing on the birth certificate becomes a metaphor for Tran's broader feelings of rejection and displacement from both the states that should provide sanctuary and citizenship, as well as the family home.

Whether or not Tran can forgive her mother continues to occupy her thoughts "every day" and yet this struggle for forgiveness is also equated to the desire to forgive herself, on the one hand for the continued estrangement with her mother, on the other for the possible "betrayal" of her found family that she feels would come with a false apology. Tran strives to "transcend gender beyond blood" a curious sentence in that the two are not scientifically entwined, and yet, by marrying the two, Tran suggests that for her the two things are inextricable. In order to "transcend gender" she must sever blood ties, both the links with her biological family and her own biology, the absence of the blood of pubescent female adolescence, a preoccupation of Tran's that I highlight in more depth below. The break from her past that Tran strives for is always incomplete, one that she desires and conceptualises on the one hand, but not one that can be fulfilled in actuality. In this poem, Tran is far less reliant on gestures and physical movement than she is in other poems. The poem 'On (Not) Forgiving My Mother' evokes the sense of being somewhat lost and, as Muñoz explains, "[b]eing lost…is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order" (73). Tran feels lost in a world where her experiences of time are more confused and present certain challenges that her non-queer, white counterparts experience. As a spoken word poet capturing the anxieties of being unable to find the right words, Tran embodies the loss of queer history, her own loss of security in heteronormative family conventions that are

part of the narrative of the American Dream, and evokes the struggles of a transgender, Vietnamese American woman, in a world which privileges languages and experiences that are not her own.

A haunted present and the queer hauntology of transgender childhood

In his article 'Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position', Muñoz comments that "[q]ueerness…never fully disappears; instead, it haunts the present" (684). The term queer in and of itself is one haunted by affective histories of queer experience which sit alongside the forward-looking gaze of queer futurity, inviting theorists working in the realm of queer studies to constantly look back and forwards. This positions the present as, in Judith Butler's terms, something which is "never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" ("*Bodies That Matter*" 13). The term continues to be reworked and redeployed, in a fashion which, as Kadji Amin argues, might render the present day understanding of 'queer' "unsuited for the aspiration with which history, in the U.S. moment of the early 1990s, had freighted it" (177). This evokes a temporal instability inherent in queerness itself, tensions between rigorous debate around investments in affect or optimism, the past and the future, the politics of assimilation and a desire for a radicalized new understanding of the term. To understand and resituate queer in the present we must, as Amin argues, understand its "affective histories" and the "transgression and political potencies" of the past (184).

Carolyn Dinshaw explains that the present has a "strangely evanescent, vanishing quality", arguing that "[t]ime is lived; it is full of attachments and desires, histories and futures; it is not a hollow form" (3). Talking about the writings of Douglas Crimp on 'Mournings and Militancy' (1989), Muñoz explains that memory, operating like ghosts, transmits "its vision of utopia across generational divides" in a manner that "still fuels and propels our political and erotic lives: it still nourishes the possibility of our current, actually existing gay lifeworld" (34). The context of these specific musings—gay and bisexual men and the impact of the AIDS epidemic—do not precisely correlate with the position of transgender people at the time, who, although hugely impacted by the AIDS epidemic, do not have the same subcultural experiences of gay liberation. Muñoz (citing Leo Bersani) notes, an "elitist, exclusionary and savagely hierarchized libidinal economies" associated with the "pre-AIDS days of glory" (34). However, although Fire Island beaches, "backrooms, movie

theatres, bathhouses" (34) so synonymous with a particular period of gay and bisexual male sexual liberation of 1970s America and urban mass migration, the *function* of memory as described by Muñoz—the notion of a haunted present—still translates in a more broadly queer context. Understanding the function of these subcultural experiences and the impact of HIV/AIDS enables a more broadly queer application beyond 'gay' of the theoretical perspectives developed by Muñoz that grapple with the intersections between memory and futurity, the political memory that enhances a political desire in the form of "utopian longing" (35). I return to the idea of queer futurity later, but for the purposes of this section, scholarship on the haunted nature of the queer present is of primary relevance.

Tran demonstrates an interest in a resurrected childhood, an exploration of the boy her family saw and the displacement she felt as a result of this mis-gendering during her childhood. This is something she explores particularly in her poem 'Transplant', which I discuss below. This channelling of the ghosts of childhood is not peculiar to Tran's poetry. Transgender performance poet Cameron Awkward-Rich, whose work I consider in the next chapter, describes "a girl haunting his own body" in the poem 'Obligatory'. Similarly, in the first chapter of this thesis I showed how a number of transgender poets are preoccupied with the absent places of childhood (Ethan Smith) or sites associated with adolescence and sexual awakening (Miles Walser). Tran's poetry conveys a similar sense of the poet haunted by the ghosts of childhood, her past inextricably part of her queer identity in the present. The childhood history of the transgender performance poet contextualises their queerness and just as the ontology of being transgender creates a series of temporal ruptures for the audience as discussed earlier in this chapter, in this instance the temporal ruptures evoked by the performance text mirror those experienced by the poet. The texts capture the poet's own queer disruption of temporal logics through the spectres of childhood, an affirmation of queer status which challenges the idea of gender as static, fixed or biologically pre-determined.

Of course, this idea of a haunted self is not a new critical intervention. It is worth pausing to consider Jacques Derrida's term "hauntology", developed in *Spectres of Marx* (1993). Hauntology is something which does not, Derrida suggests, belong to the "discourse of the Being of beings" (i.e., ontology), nor to "the essence of life or death" (63). Derrida explains the concept of hauntology with reference to the "frontier between the public and private" which is "constantly being displaced", theorising that this constantly displaced element "is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes" (63). It is, in essence, "the sense of something that is undeniably present without being part of the official, rational "being" […] of a thing" (Fathallah citing Laclau 492). Muñoz applies Derrida's work on

91

hauntology to his chapter in *Cruising Utopia* on the ghosts of public sex, through examining how a 1994 photography exhibition by Tony Just captures the ghosts of public sex, "the queer spectres" that Muñoz reads as having a "ghosted materiality…a primary relation to emotions, queer memories and structures of feeling that haunt gay men on both sides of a generational divide that is formed by and through the catastrophe of AIDS" (41). Muñoz argues that to see ghosts it is necessary to "bring to life a lost experience" (42) and through explorations of childhood, transgender performance consciously bring to the forefront those lost experiences, with some nostalgia in the case of Ethan Smith's 'A Letter to the Girl I Used To Be' (2014), or, like Tran, through recollective accounts of her response to photographs of herself in the childhood home. In 'Transplant' (2016) the transgender child is simultaneously present and absent, the text describing "the boy in photographs" (0:01:29-33) and the performance poet onstage ontologically woman, the poet simultaneously haunting and haunted: "If I'm not real, if I will never pass, then I must be fiction, must be a ghost caught on camera." (0:02:48-56).

In 'Transplant', Tran creates a sense of something both real and absent, and although the ghosts and artistic medium that evokes queer spectres in Muñoz's case differ from those haunting Tran's performance poetry, the two examples serve analogous functions. In the case of Muñoz, he notes that the absent bodies of Just's pictures "instil in the spectator a sense of gathering emptiness" a "familiar yet otherworldly affective function that leaves a certain ephemeral trace" or, put more simplistically, "the production of ghosts" (42). By contrast, in the case of Tran's poetry it is the presence of a body, rather than the absence of it, that produces queer ghosts of the past. The visual impact of Tran's body onstage—or on screen— evokes in the viewer/spectator the sense of emptiness that Muñoz references, the ambiguous figure of the transgender child outside of the visual scope of the text but explicitly part of the spoken word and intimately connected to the poet. The audience experiences the absence of the child Tran refers to in her text, but the poem creates a further temporal disruption, suggesting that as a child Tran is haunted by the possibility of a the future she goes on to embrace, the child in the photographs someone she is wholly disconnected from: "it's haunting to walk in your front door and every family portrait hanging on your wall is of strangers" (0:01:15-22). Halberstam argues that for "the mechanism of haunting as an articulate discourse" and states that "to tell a ghost story means being willing to be haunted" ("*QTAP*" 60). In Tran's case in telling the story of the ghosts of her past, she consciously allows herself to be haunted by them in the present to elucidate something of her lived experience as a transgender woman for the audience watching her perform.

Tran's exploration of what it means to be haunted, as a closeted transgender child yearning for the future, or an out transgender woman exploring the ghosts of her past, leaves that "ephemeral trace" that Muñoz refers to that allows the audience to experience a little of Tran's complex relationship with time. Unlike the nostalgic recollective function that a boyhood to manhood tale might evoke, by bringing the ghosts of childhood to bear on her present-day performance poetry, Tran allows the viewer to experience a specifically queer haunting—the queer hauntology of being transgender. This is brought about through Tran's deconstruction of the childhood-adolescent-adulthood narrative, and a subversion of gender that invites a more queerly diverse and complex understanding of coming-of-age experience and gender identity. The presence of the child ghost is underscored by Tran's blurring of the boundaries between past and present, of child and adult self, and a renegotiation and repositioning of the line between life and death, between real and abstract. This troubling of boundaries and binaries, the reworking of linear models of temporal experience, are emphasised by the text's primary subject matter, the "craft of transplant" which involves retouching and enhancing photographic images.

> I'm a child when she guides me to her computer,
> teaches me this craft of transplant,
> says: 'it's so easy to undo the flaws,
> to colour correct our skin lighter
> and splice the foreign from our bodies
>
> (0:01:00-14)

Tran embodies her child self through the use of present tense as her mother "guides" her to the computer. She becomes the child, learning how to alter the image of herself to make her more palatable to a society that would seek to marginalise her. The use of present tense serves a twofold function as the altering of the photographs in the present tense might also allude to the process of transitioning, the changes she continues to make and observe in her physical form. It is through photoshop techniques that Tran attempts to "rewrite my boyhood with long hair or ruby mouth, slit eyes stretched wide, a real woman moulded from the pages of magazines" (0:01:40-51). This artificiality of the photoshopped image of womanhood is emphasised by the descriptions of exaggerated features, the "stretched wide" eyes and the "ruby mouth" which suggest that from those images too, Tran is disconnected, the photoshopped images having little real-life impact, becoming cartoonish, stereotypical and garish. She notes: "if only transitioning this flesh were so simple" (0:01:51-55). As previously mentioned in the context of other poems analysed in this chapter, Tran returns to

the theme of the hole in history and the absence of voices like her own in a number of her poems. In 'Transplant', the absence is specifically concentrated on the visual—the affirmation one can feel in seeing an image of someone like themselves and the displacement one feels in the absence of them.

In 'Transplant', the world of pop culture and glossy magazines aimed at female readers are used to comment on the absence of certain kinds of bodies from Westernised standards of beauty and womanhood. Taking one of the most high-profile coming out stories in American popular culture, Tran refers to Caitlyn Jenner who famously came out as transgender in 2015 through a *Vanity Fair* cover. Tran describes the hostile gaze of "hungry eyes eager to spot the photoshop" (0:02:00-02) and adopts the voices of the gazing with scathing contempt: "silly boy, don't you know that real women don't have secrets tucked between their legs?" (0:02:02-09). Although Tran demonstrates an understanding of Jenner's transgender status, it is only in that which they are aligned. Tran comments on the white, economic privilege that makes Jenner's "blue eyes" the "acceptable kind of feminine" (0:02:20-23). In a text which uses the tools of photoshop and doctored images to explore Tran's gender dysphoria, referencing Jenner underscores the artificiality of the images of womanhood presented not only by airbrushed glossy magazines, but also the artificiality of social media driven contemporary society. Highly curated social media accounts and filters which lighten skin and slim faces created space for celebrities like the Kardashians—the family Jenner married into—to become one of the most well-known families in America. The reference to Jenner also invites commentary on race relations in America, as the family is frequently in the spotlight for their investment in raunch aesthetics, the appropriation of Black culture used to bolster their individual brands and global corporate brands.

Through the language of surgery, Tran describes the process of photoshopping and the heavily airbrushed world of fashion magazines. In doing so she explores her individual experiences with medical intervention as a transgender woman who began the transition process a year prior to the performance of her poem. Tran also makes a broader comment on representation, or the absence of it, the repetition of the words "real woman" juxtaposed with references which call to mind the hollow artificiality of celebrity image. In a time of heavily curated immersion in online worlds, the poem addresses a climate of hyper consumerism through the language of surgery and photoshop, drawing a connection between splicing, filtering and correction and Tran's relationship with her mother. The erasure of "flaws" and the surgical removal of "the foreign" is directly analogous to the hole in history observed by Pryor, as discussed above. Tran again juxtaposes personal history with wider social context,

the reworking of the photographs calling to mind the whitewashing of history, the books which contain no images of people like Tran. Just as the glossy magazines airbrush and the photographs in the family home contain images Tran feels no connection to, the surgical removal of anything "foreign" or "genderfucked" from images serve as a metaphor for histories absent voices, the stories of the transgender women of colour that were never told.

In her poetry Tran is both haunted and haunting, frequently positioning herself as the ghost, whether it is the ghost of childhood, or her sense of ghostliness in the present day. In her poem 'Maybe All Transgender People Are Really Vampires', analysed below, Tran comments: "I'm always comparing myself to ghosts to prove / I deserve an average lifespan over thirty-two" (0:02:00-08). She concludes 'Transplant' by saying "there's nothing scarier than a woman who refuses to die" (0:02:58-0:03:03) drawing a connection between herself and ghosts caught on camera, like the pictures in the family home that led to her feelings of displacement and disconnect. The use of this kind of imagery enhances Tran's experiences of time, juxtaposing high statistics of transgender violence and a far lower life expectancy than the national average, with images of the undead. There is a defiance in this position, a refusal to allow societal oppressions to silence her voice. With this defiance comes a determination to speak for those who do not have access to the same kind of platform or audience Tran can command through the popularity of her poetry online and at educational institutions she attends. The movement between spaces of life and death evoke the queer temporalities of lived transgender experience. By straddling the realms of the living and the dead her texts frequently play with the notion of a haunted present and experiences of ghostliness. This in turn exhibits a sense of something both present and absent, breaking down the linearity of time, to demonstrate how the transgender woman in today's America can feel out of sync with time.

Queer futurity and utopian longing

"Queer is not yet here," Muñoz writes in his opening to *Cruising Utopia*, which positions queerness as on the horizon, "imbued with potentiality" (1). The future, for Muñoz, is not a site of hopeless and naïve failed promise to be disregarded and resisted, but rather a place which holds radical queer potential beyond the constraints of assimilation, neo-liberalism and the institutions and social norms that have suppressed and oppressed truly queer potential. For critics working with futurity, the process does not involve a disregard of the past and present, but rather an exercise in understanding how the past and the present inform what the

future is, and what it could be. Ana-Maurie Lara notes "the future is constantly in battle with the present, primarily because of precarious life circumstances, making life out of death is what one does" (355). These precarious life circumstances are something transgender people feel keenly, particularly transgender women of colour, who remain one of the most at-risk minority groups in America. As I have explained in introducing this thesis, transgender people, particularly trans femmes of colour, are at disproportionate risk of violence (NCTE; HRC). Much of Tran's poetry clearly demonstrates that she feels the threat of this transmisogyny and the statistics of high trans murder and suicide rates, something she addresses across multiple texts, in connection with her own life and the lives of others. In writing about performance, Muñoz states that "[p]erformance is imbued with a sense of potentiality", arguing that "the real force of performance is its ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging" (99). Raising visibility of experiences like her own is something Tran has indicated she is concerned with in her performance poetry, embodying what Muñoz terms "utopian performativity" (99).

Tran not only offers a visible representation of a marginalised identity, but also the content of her texts explores themes of life and death in both real and fantastical ways, which are instantly recognisable and relatable not only to the queer viewer, but also the non-queer spectator, who learns something of the very real issues that confront transgender people in America today. Tran draws on the full force of her affective history, both personal and the broader queer historical landscape of transactivism, in a way which galvanises a viewer to action, the compressed timeframe of slam evoking the urgency of the issues she raises in her poetry. Even when Tran employs supernatural imagery—vampires and ghosts—she always pulls the poem back to real life experience, the question of life and death firmly positioned as one of reality, as opposed to one of fantasy. In the final section of this chapter, I identify those strategies in the context of Tran's 2016 poem, 'Maybe All Transgender People Are Really Vampires', after explaining how a close analysis of poems of this form and nature can contribute to the critical debates around queer futurity that are such an essential bedrock to understanding the preoccupations of queer theory's temporal turn. Futurity—and queer theory's investment in futurity—is a site of critical contention, and one that merits careful unpacking to argue that temporal features resonate throughout Tran's work and, more specifically, *queerly* temporal features, arguing that they illuminate transgender performance poetry's future-oriented gaze.

The starting point for identifying competing research into queer futurity is Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* as it is the most notable text that advocates for a resistance of the future entirely. Edelman's radical text explains how forward-looking narratives requiring investment in the "fantasmatic Child" (11) and the "logic of reproductive futurism" (17) are the antithesis of *queer* in their positioning of the child as a symbol of hope, playing into conservative narratives of family and the innocence of the child, often used to instigate violence against gay men who destabilise the heteronormative status quo. Drawing on Lacanian thinking on the Symbolic, Edelman suggests that positioning the child as the symbol of innocence in the present and the adult beneficiary of a more queerly diverse future requires a conformity to compulsory heterosexuality and the modes of time which have typically cast queer people as outsiders. He subjects the idea of future change to rigorous scrutiny, finding that political motivations driven by forward-looking optimism are assimilationist, benefiting hegemonic family structures and the hetero/homo normative pursuit of marriage and children. Edelman suggests that we must "refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation" (4), challenging the notion of a "promissory identity" on the basis that it leaves queer people in the present in a perpetual state of Otherness, "deferred perpetually, of itself" conforming to "the temporality of desire…the historicity of desire" (9). Edelman's exploration of the illusory and imagined spaces inhabited in the pursuit of temporal hopefulness that invests ultimately in linear movement through time, emphasises the displacement of the queer figure in the present, both in the perpetual divide from self but also in the "inescapable failure" that exists when queerness has a future oriented gaze, when queerness is "held in thrall by a future continually deferred by time itself, constrained to pursue the dream of a day when today and tomorrow are as one" (30).

Alison Reed critiques Edelman, challenging "his conception of queerness as the undoing of identity" on the grounds that it "negates both hope and history, ending in a bleak place where only the most privileged of queers would thrive" (58). Reed advocates for resisting theoretical approaches that might on the one hand embrace "radical negativity" but on the other hand fails take seriously "the fact that aggrieved communities strategically negotiate oppressive structures without becoming trapped inside them" (59). Both Halberstam and Muñoz offer alternatives to Edelman that resist the eradication of hope in its entirety. Halberstam agrees with Edelman's desire to resist a "reproductive futurism" which positions the child as a symbol of hope but disagrees with the suggestion that the queer approach to futurity should be to resist it entirely. Instead, Halberstam contemplates a non-normative future—queer temporalities which open the possibility of "new life narratives and

alternative relations to time and space" ("*QTAP*" 2). Halberstam finds utility and necessity in envisioning a transgressive future which rejects the linearity of heteronormativity with its investment in a progression from childhood to adulthood, defined by marriage and child-bearing and asks us to resist binary categories of age, challenging the notions of childhood, adolescence and adulthood themselves.

Muñoz offers a further alternative to Edelman, suggesting that the very notion of futurity is inherently queer – that queerness exists on the cusp of present and future in an imagined, but unrealised, queer utopia. Muñoz situates what he terms "utopian longing" very much in the present, arguing that it does not lead to a present state of deferral, but rather that it of the now. He suggests that queer utopia "understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated" (37), that the combination of both politicised queer memory and queer utopian desire together allow room for what "can" as well as what "perhaps will be" (35). Muñoz supports Edelman's resistance of positioning the "culture of the child" (22), itself a symbol of heteronormative social structures as the idealised emblem of hopefulness, but does not subscribe to the thinking that follows, which requires rejecting futurity as a potential site of queerness altogether. When exploring debates around queer futurity, the 'haunted present' I referenced in the prior section is not only haunted by an affective history, or the absence of something past. Although the past can undoubtedly come to bear on the present through performance in what Pryor terms a "mode of historical excavation" (127) and a series of temporal ruptures, it is not just the past that haunts the present, but the possibility of an alternative—or better—future.

For Edelman, this pursuit of an unattainable future becomes a futile investment in the then and the when, as opposed to the now. Edelman refers to this as the "haunting excess…[of]…nothingness" (31), a point at which queerness exists precariously in the present where affective histories serve as a constant reminder of difference and the pursuit of a hypothetical future, never to be realised and overinvestment in both requires a constant positioning of oneself as outside temporalities to which queerness should never seek to subscribe. Muñoz points out, however, that Edelman's child "accepts and reproduces the monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white" (96). Muñoz advances the same criticisms as Reed who identifies that Edelman works through "this theoretical lens reproduces whiteness as an unmarked and universally applicable framework for interpretation" (58). Muñoz disagrees with Edelman's resistance of the future but agrees that futurity should not be handed over to "normative white reproductive futurity", explaining

how his notion of the future is one which requires a "call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a 'not-yet' where queer youths of colour actually get to grow up" (96). Tran's poetry exhibits a future-oriented defiance and refusal to accept the status quo that accords with the kind of utopian longing Muñoz contemplates:

> The way to deal with the asymmetries and violent frenzies that mark the present is not to forget the future. The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough (96).

There are several lines across Tran's poetry that capture the sentiment of refusal to accept the violence meted out against transgender women of colour in America. As explored above, 'Transplant' ends on a note of defiance, the "refusal" to die. The poem 'Biologically Woman (After Maya Angelou), concludes with a defiant Tran facing the audience and, with a smile, saying: "*You* are threatened by *me*? Good" (0:03:30-40). Finally, 'Cognates' also ends on a note of defiance, the rising up of a language, "back from the dead", having found her language and her voice through the spoken word. A number of Tran's poems that explicitly address her race and gender identity exhibit this kind of defiance. In her poem 'Maybe All Transgender People Are Really Vampires', Tran calls attention explicitly to the problem of transphobic violence and the fear for her life: "I am an undying thing refusing to rot, even when this world wants me burned for a body so foreign not even I recognise it some mornings" (0:01:25-27). Unlike the defiant conclusion to other poems in Tran's collection however, 'Maybe All Transgender People Are Really Vampires' concludes on a more sombre note:

> Maybe all transgender people really are all vampires
> Maybe my reflection belongs to everyone but me
> And maybe the next time I leave home, I won't come back.
>
> (0:02:40-55)

The poem's conclusion represents Tran's desire to see the future and confronting the very real prospect she may not, based on the dire statistics and disproportionate violence meted out against transgender women of colour. The intersections of race and queerness are a vital

component of Tran's work, and this poem captures both the "diaspora" and "dysphoria" that Tran reflects on in much of her writing, both her poetry and other pieces of non-fiction writing she undertakes for mainstream queer publications. The vampire is an apt image due to its long association with otherness, and specifically with racial anxieties. Shannon Winnabst notes how the racial tensions inherent in U.S. power structures, "gender and race as the scene of sex and violence, instilling fear in all gendered and raced…bodies" (2), find purchase in vampire imagery, which becomes symbolic of those anxieties. Franco Moretti in his 'Dialects of Fear' draws connections between Bram Stoker's vampire, 'Dracula', and capitalism, positioning Dracula as the "foreign threat" in economic terms, the "monopolist" who must be defeated (75). In an article on the postmodern vampire and 'post-race' America, Michelle J. Smith points to various readings of the vampire, including Moretti's, and like Winnabst, Smith notes how the vampire has come to exemplify racial anxieties in America (Malchow [1996], Arata [1990]), noting that "the vampire…has been read as trading on an anxiety of conversion by suggesting that race is fluid, not fixed" (201).

Queerness itself exists in a continuous "multiplicitous state suggesting transgression, dissent, desire and self-identification" (King 5) and the vampire has become not only a metaphor for racial transgression, but also for queerness, with scholarship pointing to the links that can be drawn between vampire lore and the dissent of non-normative sexuality and gender, a site where sexuality and violence are inextricably entwined, where the draining of bodily fluids through the often thinly veiled phallocentric nature of the vampire's bite has been read in different contexts as metaphor for queer sexual awakening, non-normative sexual desires and fear of AIDS. In using the image of the vampire, Tran is able to explore the intersections of queer and racial identity, invoking America's racial anxieties and the threat of transphobic violence through the imagery of the monstrous other: "when was the last time you saw a face like mine without the glow of a mob's torch? A pitchfork's thrust? In times of crisis, is it not my head they swing on a stick?" (0:00:50-0:01:02). Moving rapidly between the real and the fictitious, Tran becomes the embodiment of racial anxieties and the threat associated with it, in a world where "safety is more fiction than monster" where the future is by no means guaranteed.

In the opening to her poem, Tran immediately distances herself from the sanitised and romanticised vampire of contemporary pop culture, the sparkling vampire a direct reference to Stephanie Meyer's conservative vampire romance series, *Twilight* (2005-2008), where the vampires sparkle in the sunlight and the eroticism of the vampire bite is stripped away from the stories entirely. In the films the whiteness of the vampires, particularly the 'good' family

the Cullens and the romantic lead, Edward, are played primarily by white actors, their whiteness emphasised and exaggerated in their exposure to sunlight. She also rejects the romanticised notion of the vampire, craving "a fair maiden's neck", a trope based in Gothic convention and immortalised in popular culture. The vampire of Tran's poem has all the features associated with folklore, the inability to see one's own reflection and bloodlust, yet it's an image whose more sanitised and romanticised depiction remains unrelatable to Tran. In her article on black queer aesthetics in performance art, Ana-Maurine Lara points to "invisibility" as a facet of black, queer experience, "invisibility and temporality … simultaneous conceptual structures" which drive the desire to create space for the silenced and invisible "embodied erotic or social experiences" in a fashion which leads to "the creation and re-creation of self and of worlds that will sustain the self" (349). Although Lara is specifically concerned with black queer aesthetics and points to influences which are not directly relevant in the context of Tran's work, it is useful to consider how some of Lara's thinking can be extended to Tran's poetry.

Invisibility, for example, manifests through the absent reflection of the vampire—"we cannot see our own reflections"—a feature of the vampire myth which becomes analogous to the whitewashing and 'straightening out' of history which erases people like Tran. Through her performance Tran provides much needed visibility for transgender women of colour, whilst simultaneously highlighting the absence of people like herself from dominant historical accounts. The observation that "whatever stares back at me from the mirrors is made of smoke and myth" takes her absence from history a step further, commenting, as she did in 'Cognates', on the revisionist histories that marginalise or vilify racial minorities and queer people and feed anxieties around non-whiteness, sexual and gender deviance. Tran's position onstage involves a reclamation of her own history yet in her role as a poet onstage, she remains "a reflection that belongs to everybody but me", an embodiment of "utopian performativity" (Muñoz) that offers those transfeminine women of colour who Tran hopes to reach a sense of belonging.

Tran says "I've always been a pair of thirsty fangs" simultaneously craving blood and its associations with menstrual cycles and womanhood, and fearing it, as exemplified by the stark image of her blood that "might puddle across the pavement." She describes herself as "womb-less and wounded, born bloodthirsty for whatever would make me more of a woman" and ends her poem with a series of "maybes." Both the craving for blood and the fear of it occupy the temporal space of futurity—the bloodlust a form of utopian longing, and the spilled blood a feature of a present-day threat that heightens Tran's fear of future violence. I

intend to consider the function of affect and activism in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Exploring how a desire for the future manifests in Tran's work undertakes the initial theoretical and analytical groundwork for considering specifically how many of the poets of this study find resistance in hope and positive affect. For Tran, the vision of the future is not wholly optimistic, but it is certainly defiant. The repeated refusal to die positions Tran's very survival, as a transgender woman of colour, as a radical act. Her work echoes back to the way she sees spoken word poetry, the interview I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, where Tran takes her three minutes as an opportunity to disrupt and challenge the status quo and to convince the audience of the value of trans life whilst drawing attention to the specific transphobic, misogynistic and racist acts of violence that transgender women of colour are often subject to in today's America.

Conclusion

Pryor notes on queer temporalities and performance that "performance has the capacity to rewind time; bind people and places across disparate geographies, identities, and temporalities; repeat the serialized logics of normativity, with a queer difference; and ultimately revise and repair trauma through a performative "claiming" of experience" (126). Through an analysis of the poetry of Chrysanthemum Tran I have demonstrated how these temporal features of performance are present in Tran's spoken word poetry. I have further demonstrated how a queer relationship to time occupies much of her work and how repeated tense switches highlight a temporal discordance that speaks to the oppressive force of living in straight time. The queer temporalities of Tran's poetry are frequently evoked by images that have a synergy with the spatial settings referenced in the first chapter, such as the childhood bedroom, in the first chapter. Unruly time manifests acutely when childhood is referenced and for Tran, it is her uneasy relationship with her mother and those unsmiling photographs that bring about these moments of temporal flux between childhood to adulthood and back again. Although tensions between parent and child are not the exclusive domain of queerness, it is Tran's queer relationship with her child self that speaks particularly to transgender experience, the haunting of the present, queer body with the past body of the closeted child. Tran captures this in her work with the slicing and dicing of the photographs and a continued return to the language of the supernatural. From the outset of this chapter, I explained that space and time are entwined. There is a clear connection between absent and forgotten space and the hole in history and the haunted present. Like Smith's fear of

sleepovers during adolescence, Tran has a relationship with childhood space that speaks to the anxieties of the queer child, embodied in poetry through the nightmarish visions of wildly altered features and the unrecognisable person in the family photographs. As an adult, Tran undertakes an exercise of reclaiming and excavating those lost histories and making them public through her spoken word. For her the history of transgender people is a site of discovery and the more intimate, personal history of her own childhood resurges uninvited. Thus, Tran is occupying multiple temporal spaces and they manifest through her spoken word as she takes on the voices of her oppressors, from Vietnam's colonisers to the voice of her mother.

To take another connection with space, Foucault's work on heterotopias is not, of course, the sole purview of spatial theory, and time too can have heterotopic features. Foucault himself describes heterotopias as "most often linked to slices in time" or "heterochronies" operating "at full capacity" when there is an "absolute break with…traditional time" (6). In a spatial context, heterotopias might "unsettle the familiar to address…the socio-political milieu in which a performance takes place" (Tompkins, 44). As previously argued in the first chapter in the context of being transgender, heterotopic space invites questions about the relationship between transgender identities and bodies, the spaces selected by performance poets underscoring the fractious relationship transgender people might have with aspects of themselves. In a temporal context, Foucault describes adolescence as a perpetual state of temporal flux, a "crisis heterotopia" where individuals are in a state of calamity "in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live" (24). Transgender performance poetry occupies this temporal state of crisis and flux, where a disconnect with dominant narratives of the passage of time is at odds with the poet's discordant relationship with time. Queer people experience time differently, as "the heteronormative imperative of family and home…the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold" ("*QTAP*" 328). In other words, living in 'straight' time with its rites of passage as a queer person requires a continuous temporal troubling, a jarring of being at odds with the hegemonic narrative of coming-of-age. For Tran, these temporal fractures arise most acutely in her poetry through references to the puberty process, both the changes her body actually undergoes and the ones she longs to undergo. There is no monolithic path for transgender people and the transition journey is simply the best-known narrative of becoming that is presented to a non-transgender audience. For transgender youth, the biological shift from child to adolescent can represent a time of significant upheaval and distress.

All temporal features identified in Tran's poetry—past, present and future—are intimately entwined with the politics of transgender performance poetry and trans activism more broadly. Tran's focus on time creates poems which are in constant motion, through temporal fluctuations. With changes in tense and address, rapid movements between languages and journeys back and forth in time, Tran's poetry resists a narrative of linearity on all levels and demonstrates how lively and energetic spoken word can be. For Tran, community is also essential, both her community of Asian Americans and her transfemme sisters of colour, who she often describes either implicitly or explicitly as found family. The motion of Tran's poetry and the community she writes towards are aspects that I discuss extensively in the next chapter, through the work of other poets, to identify specific online community building strategies and to construct an argument that the poems and poets move in in various ways through the queer space and queer time explored in the first two chapters. Through the forthcoming exploration of the multiple moving parts to transgender performance poetry, similar disruption and destabilising of linear temporal narratives can be established, marking a continued refusal to tell a 'transition story narrative' to make intimate stories understandable to the non-queer audience, reader or viewer.

Chapter Three: Poetry in Motion in a Networked Era

Introduction

Performance poetry is a moving medium. Moving mouths, gestures and speech are all layers of motion that arise from the poet's physicality. Every spoken word performance discussed in this thesis involves movement of some kind, discernible through the visual nature of the art form and the presence of a performing poet on stage and evidenced metaphorically by textual journeys through different spaces (college auditoriums, childhood bedrooms, gardens) and time (past, present and future). In a more abstract fashion, spoken word can move its audience in an emotional, affective sense, it may invoke pathos or laughter, depending on the nature of the poem. It can respond to and be part of political movements, demanding action and greater momentum around the issues that confront marginalised people. Because movement saturates every aspect of spoken word, defining and analysing moving components is a crucial part of this thesis. Movement is also both spatial and temporal, bringing together my earlier analysis on queer space and queer time through considerations of how transgender people might *move* through space and time. In most of the poetry analysed in prior chapters, the performance poet is the visual centre of the text. In this chapter, my concern with movement is both literal and metaphorical, and homes in on poems where the motions involved when a poet performs on stage are no longer the focal point. As a result, the nature of the texts in this section differs to those in the earlier chapters, expanding to include short films, poetry on the page and other techniques poets deploy to capture the body in motion as an essential part performance poetry.

The digital nature of these poems introduces further moving parts. Liz Solo observes that "theatre creators have always been engaged with technological innovation" seeking ways to "create an opportunity for transcending the ordinary" (12). Like theatre creators, today's performance poets demonstrate an interest in the ways in which technology can enhance the spoken word. It is therefore necessary to establish the kinetic layers engaged by digital texts, from the mobile audience to the poet themselves, explaining how the "ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital technologies" and their role in "the production of space, spatiality and mobilities" (Ash et al. 2) has transformed spoken word. Analysing how movement operates in a digital context requires thinking about the function of the body in motion in a digital sense, from the way film can be used to enhance the poem, to the different types of movements undertaken by the audience/spectator in negotiating their way around online

space and in the text itself. Critical interventions made by scholars working with media and culture in the age of the Internet are useful in this context, particularly the notion of participatory culture, a term originating from Henry Jenkins, whose work on media and popular culture is frequently adopted across disciplines to explore mediated texts and the way audiences participate in them. This concept can be applied to poetry in motion in a networked era, and movements undertaken by poet and audience alike.

In the case of transgender poets, themes of motion and journeys also have an important literary legacy, due to the preoccupation with metaphorical movement—transition and boundary crossing—found in transgender literature. This is something I have referenced at several points, and at this juncture it is appropriate to explain the point more fully. The transition journey memoir has been a staple of transgender literature, from Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974), one of the earliest examples of a trans-authored account of gender reassignment, to more recent examples like Juliet Jacques' *Trans: A Memoir* (2016). As a Lambda Literary reviewer commented in the context of the latter, "mainstream publishers were only interested in a transition memoir…[we] are only allowed to express ourselves in the form of apology, explanation, titillation or challenge directed at cis people" (Fitzpatrick, 2016). Transgender performance poets reframe these traditional memoirs of gender reassignment, employing creative strategies that depict queer journeys in a less formulaic and linear fashion, benefiting from the fact they operate outside of mainstream publishing channels, curating and controlling their own content. By making a name for themselves online, transgender performance poets can make their own crossing into different mediums, creating short, independently produced films, audio-only albums hosted on music streaming sites or publishing print collections through slam-friendly, independent publishers including Los Angeles based Write Bloody Publishing and Minneapolis based Exploding Pinecone Press, the imprint of Button Poetry. They blur and defy the stage/page dichotomy and for this reason, amongst others, this chapter takes a more expansive approach to spoken word, moving beyond the body onstage to examine spoken word across three specific mediums: film, audio and print.

To start with an example of a single poem that employs multimedia techniques and works as performance poem, art and film, Abode Project 1324 is a collaboration between performance poet Lee Mokobe and artist, photographer, rapper and DJ, Andy Mkosi. Mokobe, whose work was discussed in the Introduction, has gained attention throughout America for his work as TED Fellow, and founded Vocal Revolutionaries, a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2011 to teach young people living in Cape Town how to tell stories

from their own perspective. Vocal Revolutionaries was born out of Mokobe's interest in the ways spoken word might be used to by young people in South Africa to lobby for change in their communities. 'Tuner of Silence: An Ode To Poetry' (2017), is a metatextual poem about slam poetry in which Mokobe performs in front of a series of digital projections, designed by Mkosi. At several points during the poem, Mokobe uses expansive gestures to emphasise his words, making particular lines more impactful. The text is deeply immersed in the technological, both in terms of the visuals and audio. Mkosi's digital projections create fluidity and movement through strobe lighting, flashing images, scene transitions away from the speaking poet and the layering of words on screen, flowing from Mokobe's mouth (Fig 13). The audio alters the momentum of the poem through static interference, tuning techniques and 'glitches' which cause Mokobe's words to vibrate or staccato at points during his delivery.
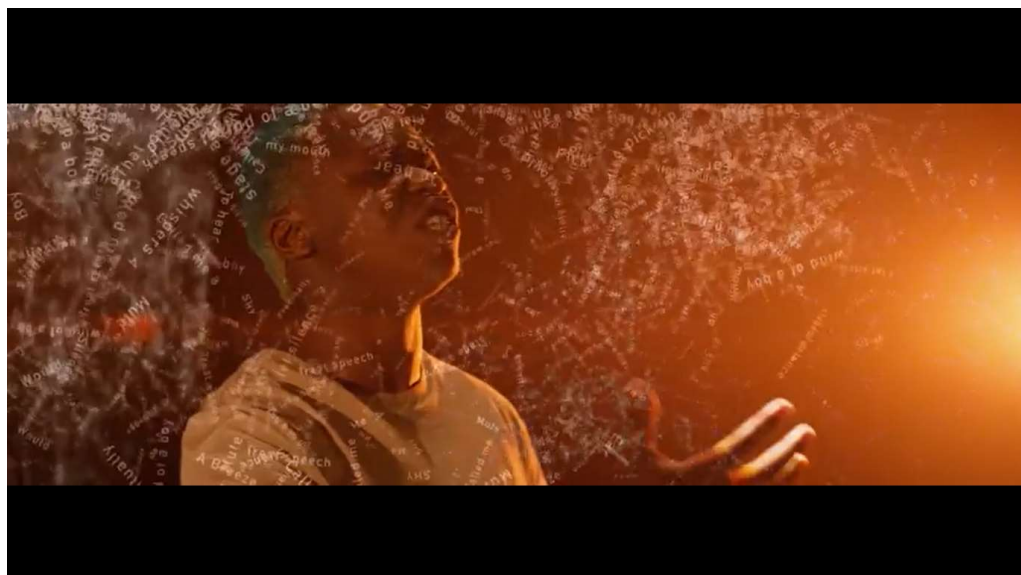

Fig 13

The poem's focus is the liberating and political power of spoken word, exploring the societal influences that can render marginalised groups of people silent. Mokobe talks about his struggle to find his voice when he was young, when "the sound of my voice used to catch me off-guard" and "I trained my teeth to become barricades, how to keep words out" (0:00:14-19). He describes how he fought against the impulse that he shouldn't speak about certain things, before reaching a point where "my voice does something miraculous, something it was never built for" (0:03:08-12). The audio techniques underscore the fact that this is a poem that centres on sound and speech but moving visuals and expansive bodily

gestures are pivotal parts of the complete viewing experience, emphasising the freedom Mokobe finds in spoken word. His poem is one of transition, of growing up and learning how to use his voice as a weapon. The poem references Maya Angelou's caged bird, likening freedom of speech with birds taking flight. Together with the digital projections and audio effects, the poet uses his body to emphasise particular words. One such example occurs on the line "I too could teach the eardrums how to dance" (0:00:46-8). The word "dance" is punctuated by a loud, single hand clap as Mokobe stretches his arms wide, a movement repeated when he delivers the line "wings heavy with the weight of grief" (0:01:17-19, Fig 14), his body centred on screen and his movement mirroring the speed and motion of birds taking flight.

Fig 14

Focusing on movement also necessitates thinking about the impact of the absence of movement. In a poem so saturated with multiple moving parts and audio techniques that vary the momentum of Mokobe's delivery, the absence of motion is used to compelling effect. When Mokobe explores the impact of being unable to speak, his static image is projected on screen to accompany the line "I was so afraid of people" (0:01:02-4, Fig 15). Shrouded in darkness, the person is recognisable as Mokobe, yet his body becomes a series of incomplete images, his face almost entirely obscured by the shadowing. The image is particularly stark because it is one of the few instances where Mokobe does not move at all, his mouth as well as his body completely still, an unusual and dramatic moment achieved by the motionless of the poet on screen. The weirdness of the absence of movement on screen, while the poet can

still be heard speaking off screen, gives Mokobe's voice a disembodied quality, emphasised by the partially obscured nature of the stationary figures. These digital effects evoke the oppression of being rendered silent and invisible, and the incompleteness of a performance poem without movement, or visible speech.

Fig 15

As Mokobe's poem shows, spoken word poets approach audio and visuals in a multitude of different ways. In Mokobe's case, digital, artistic techniques add an exciting dimension to the poem while other poets use cinematic techniques or music to enhance their texts. Through different creative strategies these digital texts enable a geographically disparate audience with mobile technology to access the poetry across mediums, as performance poetry, poets and audience alike cross, traverse and troubles definitional and geographical boundaries. Through increasingly sophisticated digital technologies we enter "new virtual spaces of performance, we experience ways of performing that step outside the boundaries of the physical world" (Corts 113). Understanding the possibilities that exist at this pivotal moment when performance poetry is experiencing something of a boom thanks to mobile technologies and the continued popularity of platforms like YouTube requires, as Matt Adams puts it, working at the interface of digital culture and performance in order to explore how "the performer, the audience member, at this particular place and at this particular time—are all challenged in a world that is networked" (Adams qt. Blake ix). It requires understanding how spoken word as an art form which has no particular rules outside

the world of competitive slam, has been shaped by the Internet, which offers a new kind of creative potential for performance poets.

In all poems discussed in preceding chapters, the speaking poet has been centred on screen, although the spaces they occupy vary from rooftop to coffee shop, from outdoor space to indoor stage. This chapter is all about poems, like Mokobe's, where an enhanced sense of motion is created through visual and/or audio techniques or embedded in the texts themselves through allusions to metaphorical journeys. From the outset of this study, I have referenced 'turns' and critical shifts, from queer theory's spatial turn in the first chapter, to its temporal turn in the second. In this chapter, my focus is on the turn being made across disciplines to home in on the ways in which online connectivity and accessibility has rejuvenated certain art forms, created new ones and has demanded thinking digitally in a world where "almost no area…remains untouched by digital techniques, logics or devices" (Ash, et al. 1). I take my own critical turn in this chapter, working at the intersections of queer theory, film and media / communication studies to grapple with the different ways motion can theorised in the context of online performance poetry and transgender experience. In order to bring some cogency and structure to what might otherwise become an unwieldy topic, I am focusing on four specific kinds of motion: first, the physical movements undertaken by the transgender body on screen; second, the movements and migrations undertaken by the mobile audience; third, the movement of sound; and finally, the way movements and journeys often associated with transgender literature are reimagined by these poets. The first three types of movement are literal and bodily. They involve the moving poet/actor(s), audience and voice. The last is a metaphorical sense of movement: the queer journeys undertaken by transgender people. The transgender body in motion remains an integral part of exploring the use of journeys as a metaphor for gender crossing.

Queer kinetics and cinematic bodies

Poets use hand gestures and facial expressions to emphasise certain features of the poem or to direct the audience towards a particular response, such as laughter. Film and Television studies scholar Marta Boni, comments on the paradox that arises when considering the function of the body in "an era marked by digitalization and disembodied nature of content" but suggests that rather than eradicate bodies from texts, virtual spaces "emphasize the interesting effect that media paratexts create with regards to the very notion of performance and, consequently, to the body" (102). Boni suggests that rather than becoming abstract or

disembodied, the virtual performer's body "is more present than ever, it can better circulate in networks, and it is displayed through both old and novel strategies that simultaneously require and encourage particular physical reactions from the viewers" (102). Nonbinary poet Andrea Gibson's short film 'Your Life' (2017) which appears on Gibson's audio-only album *Hey Galaxy* (2018) and print collection *Lord of the Butterflies* (2018) was first published as a voiceover to a short film on YouTube in September 2017. Directed and filmed by Sarah Megyesy, 'Your Life' was produced in collaboration with Jordan Beyer and Ali Bibbo. The transgender body in motion is centred, yet unlike the poems analysed in the first chapter, actors and other contributors are the visual focus, with Gibson appearing only fleetingly. This makes the text more film than performance, deviating from more recognisable examples of performance poetry, yet still situated firmly in the realm of spoken word.

Gibson is a celebrated American nonbinary poet and songwriter who rose to prominence with a break-up poem performed at an open mic night in Boulder, Colorado, in 1999. Gibson became a regular feature on the slam circuit and their national visibility increased when they won the first ever Women of the World Poetry Slam competition in 2008. Gibson has been a finalist in many other slam competitions including the National Poetry Slam, and their live performances can be found on channels including Button Poetry and Sofar Sounds. However, Gibson also curates their own YouTube channel with a mixture of music, films and recordings of more traditional spoken word events. They have multiple albums available in physical and digital formats, which I discuss in more depth later in this chapter. Gibson frequently uses bodies in motion as part of their visual work. As with much of Gibson's work, 'Your Life' is set to music, a point I discuss in more detail below.

'Your Life' uses a young actor to depict Gibson themselves. Although the poem is in second person, Gibson appears to be recounting details of their own childhood with specific references to people, David, Malcolm, Chris and Mary Levine, and recollections of their experience as a young teen: "You're in the seventh grade. You don't even know you want a girlfriend. / You still believe in the people who believe in Jesus" (0:00:49-57). This causes a temporal rupture akin to that described in the second chapter of this thesis, with the adult Gibson addressing the child "you" on the screen, who is both Gibson and not. This creates a non-linear temporal flux, a movement between past and present, where the image on screen represents childhood experiences which are narrated by the adult poet. In the text of the poem Gibson looks forward, explaining there are things the child does not yet know, foreshadowing what the child will come to learn about society's expectations and gender more broadly, "boys / building their confidence on stolen land" and girls "occupied / with things you might

never understand" (0:01:17-24), and themselves specifically, with pronouns that "haven't been invented yet" (0:02:37-40). As the film progresses to feature multiple people, the second person address becomes more collective, the call to live "your life" a direct address at the many faces appearing in the film and the audience themselves. Bringing a multiplicity of gender-variant bodies into the visual text is a form of community building, a device to represent intersectional queer experience.

This attention to a broader queer community is something Gibson often demonstrates in their work as shown in 'Angels of the Get-Through' which I analyse in more depth in the next section. They include their own image amongst a montage of others but do not identify themselves as the poet. They are only recognisable if the viewer already knows what Gibson looks like. 'Your Life' ends with Gibson (seen only from the back) carrying a basketball, something the child actor was playing with at the beginning of the film. The jump between childhood to adulthood takes place over the 3 minutes and 37 seconds of the film, ending with adult Gibson walking towards a house. The house appears different to the one captured in the first scenes with the child actor, and it is not clear if, as an adult, Gibson is returning to the home of their biological family, or if the new house represents a home of Gibson's own, a place that includes the family "you learn to build…out of scratch" (0:01:58-0:02:02). In any event, the reference back to the basketball at the start of the film demonstrates that as an adult, Gibson has resisted attempts to categorise, box or gender them or the activities they enjoy.

'Your Life' opens with a shot that pans over books on shelves, teddy bears and baseball caps, denoting the childhood bedroom as the spatial setting for the first scenes of the film. As I have already identified in the first and second chapters of this thesis, the childhood bedroom has a specifically queer spatial and temporal quality, in a transgender context. Textual references made by poets including Ethan Smith to their childhood bedroom, position it as a space where his anxieties as a queer child manifested, as he entered adolescence grappling with gender identity and queer desire. For Chrysanthemum Tran, textual references to the childhood home position it as part of a haunted past, a place that feels at odds with her gender and a reminder of her queerness and isolation in the family home. These textual recollections of the transgender child speak to the "very ontology" of being transgender, inviting "a rejection of historical truth, a reconstruction of bodily and material archives, and a radical reimagining of future possibilities" (Pryor 72).

The spatial setting of the childhood bedroom instantly evokes the queer anxieties of adolescence, yet unlike the previous examples, the childhood bedroom and the transgender

child are explicitly situated in the text through a child actor who is the visual focus. In earlier examples the adult poets—the dominant onscreen visual—talked of their childhood in a way that both disclosed their transgender identity but also served the recollective function of causing the audience members to picture spaces they inhabited in their own childhood. In this example, because the poet remains offscreen, the ethereal, ghostly quality of childhood past is altered, and the childhood bedroom captured on screen. It is the child's body the viewer sees, the adult poet's voice that is disembodied. The spoken word immediately positions the child as a specifically queer child: "It isn't that you don't like boys. It's that you only like boys you want to be" (0:00:04-10). The child is read as gender nonconforming from the outset, keeping the moving transgender body as the visual heart of the work. There remains a temporal rupture of sorts too, a snapping between past, present and future through shifting tenses and the adult voice of the poet narrating the life of the child actor.

This visual centring of a child juxtaposed with the adult poet's voice troubles not only time, but also the notion of the body as something fixed or static. Tremlett argues that "the Internet and social media…provide us with a platform to extend *and* transcend the body" (134) and in Gibson's poem gender variant, queer bodies shift and alter throughout the text while the poet's voice remains constant. Boni writes of pop culture character The Joker who has existed in many iterations, with "multiple, heterogeneous incarnations" through which his body becomes "the trace of the negotiation with new spaces, new cultures, new viewers" (110). Boni continues to explain that in all iterations, The Joker is recognisable as such. Within the diegesis of Gibson's film, the poet undertakes similar visual incarnations, the voice pulling the visual strands together as a "floating signifier" that connects Gibson with the images onscreen (110). Boni notes that when confronted with multiple incarnations where each is recognisable as one and the same, it invites us to "think of bodies and identities not as binary, fixed, defined from the outside, but as constantly reforming, reshaping and adapting to new conditions of the text" (106). The adult poet's voice and the visual of the child, together with fleeting images of the adult poet and the multiple other people featured in the text serve to similarly interrogate the static nature of gender, bodies and time. Combined with the second person address, the audience both observes and becomes Gibson, empathy heightened by the universality of both the second person address and the scenes that move from the image of one child to a series of gender nonconforming adults. By not showing Gibson's face at the end of the poem, the audience can imagine themselves in their shoes, walking back towards a house that can represent found family, a return to childhood or whatever spatial setting the film best evokes relevant to the lives of individual viewers.

113

This kind of audience empathy, the ability to move the viewer, is something that Katharina Lindner considers in *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters With Gender and Sexuality in Cinema* (2018). It is important not to situate Gibson's work so firmly in the field of film studies that the medium of spoken word poetry is lost, but it is useful to consider how some elements of film studies become applicable when considering the cinematic strategies at play, together with the gendering of cinematic bodies and the sensory impact of watching bodily movement on screen. Although I do not wish to dwell too long in the realm of film phenomenology and the philosophical underpinnings of Lindner's thesis, it does not require too much of a critical swerve to extrapolate how Lindner's work relates to Gibson's 'Your Life.' In her text, Lindner offers a comprehensive study which draws on film phenomenology to consider cinematic embodiments and their kinaesthetic qualities, exploring the "variously corporeal entanglements" of "socio-cultural situatedness, embeddedness and relationality of embodiment" (4). Lindner pays particular attention to exploring the various ways the queer, feminist body can be found in the films she analyses, illuminating how audience response to the moving body might be altered when "the specificity of embodiment and lived experience" entwine, specifically with regard to "those [lived] experiences that are routinely marginalised" (42). Very broadly, film phenomenology considers the relationship between film and the audience experience of film. Quoting Adriano D'Alio's work on cinematic empathy and the body in motion, Lindner observes that the "human body in motion has been central to cinema from its very inception" (50). In this sense, cinema and performance poetry share a connection, the human body an important feature of both art forms.

In exploring the kinaesthetic nature of the way an audience might respond to moving bodies on screen, Lindner comments on the "distance between spectator and film, even in the context of phenomenological approaches that foreground proximity and contact" (55). Lindner interrogates these foundational principles of film phenomenology, to explore the various ways in which the queer, raced and/or female cinematic body might generate a heightened empathy with the queer, raced and/or female spectator. Although Lindner explicitly rejects an approach which becomes too invested in autobiographical scholarship or explicit identity-driven responses that "foreground the embodied, sensuous and visceral dimensions of the film experience" (71), she suggests that considering marginalised identities, particularly the non-normative body in motion, can bring a new dimension to theorising embodied cinematics and audience affect, contributing to film phenomenology by recognising and carefully elucidating "the potential of the gendered body to trouble both cinema's sensory experience and film theory's critical categories" (Galt). Lindner does not

seek distance from phenomenological film criticism, but rather to situate her work within, and expand upon, core philosophies that focus on the cinematic body and audience response to it, with the specific agenda of discovering the queer feminist body on screen. Her thesis seeks to elucidate "[w]hat happens when we allow, or enable, bodies, ideas, forms and politics to encounter each other in a manner that resists the linear, teleological logics of beneath, behind and beyond" (5).

Lindner notes that "[t]he 'situations with the most potential for empathy,' according to D'Aloia, tend to be those 'in which a strong kinaesthetic intensification is invited (for instance acrobatics, falling, sports, performance, dance, etc.)'" (50). There are some movements, the theory suggests, that invite a particularly strong sensory connection between audience and the body on screen, certain kinds of motion that are "capable of eliciting" heightened "sensory responses" (53). Lindner also notes the specifically gendered nature such movements, with two chapters of her thesis dedicated to dance (feminine) and sport (masculine) respectively, describing each as a "highly gendered bodily practice" (Lindner: 73). Both dance and sport feature in Gibson's text from the outset, with the visuals of the baseball cap and books on soccer in the bedroom to the outside shots, where the child actor is seen playing basketball and then lacrosse (Fig 16 and Fig 17).
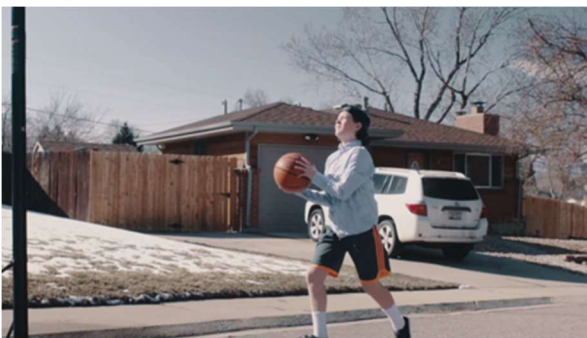

Fig 16   **Fig 17**

In these scenes, the camera zooms in to emphasise certain parts of the body in motion. The basketball scene begins with the actor bouncing the basketball between their legs, the close-up on hands, legs and feet alone. The close-up of the hands show that the actor is wearing red nail polish, the juxtaposition of makeup products and its feminine associations and sport and its masculine associations captured onscreen in a way that interrogates gendered depictions on screen. This scene is accompanied by the part of the poem where Gibson encourages the "you" of the poem to live freely, to "cut your hair and spit out

whatever you don't want in your own mouth / your own name even" (0:01:05-11). In one shot, the actor steps forwards and the camera zooms in on their feet in motion as Gibson refers to taking "one pretty step." There is a queering of gender stereotypes at this point as the close-up of the sports trainer combines with the feminine connotations of "pretty." From the child playing sports, the film opens up to feature other people and the first few shots capture people involved in sporting activity. The first scene is of an archer and the second, a person practicing martial arts. In both cases, the camera focuses on moving hands (of the archer) and feet (of the boxer), emphasising the kind of movements that Lindner has observed elicit heightened sensory responses from spectators.

Although some of Lindner's work on the "broad sets of sports film conventions" (141) does not apply to Gibson's poem, there are elements of the analysis that demonstrate precisely how Gibson's sporting movements undertaken by non-normative gendered bodies serve a specifically queer and kinaesthetic function. Lindner notes for example that one of the conflicts frequently associated with the sports film is "the problems of a 'masculinity in crisis'…played out through, on and around the spectacularly displayed male body." She also notes how "female athleticism causes all kinds of gender and genre trouble" through its "incompatibility with generic conventions" (142) and comments on the trope of female athleticism as a feature of lesbian and queer cinema, with "sport as one of the few social and media contexts that continue to provide a certain public lesbian and queer female visibility" through "associations of female athleticism with tomboyism [and] gender transgression" (143-4). Gibson's 'Your Life' expressly resists situating itself in either a typically masculine or feminine space. It includes a number of different sports undertaken by various gender nonconforming actors. The child actor wears masculine clothing and red nail polish to play basketball, the archer wears lipstick and nail polish, appearing on screen in conjunction with lines about throwing away high heels worn to prom, "realizing you are the only boy you ever want to tear your dress off for" (0:01:43).

There is also a pleasure in the physical activity undertaken in Gibson's film, a freedom that cannot easily be recognised in a narrow sports narrative trope. Most importantly, the sports are not contextualised with references to team, nation or competition that frequently become a focus of the sports film. All of the sports in Gibson's film are undertaken in isolation, underscored by the final sporting visual which accompanies a reference to "the first Christmas you spend alone. / The years you learn / to build your family from scratch" (0:01:56). The fact the activity in this scene is martial arts seems to be no accident, the fighter undertaking an isolated and individual battle with grit and determination,

116

contextualised by their queer lived experience as opposed to the sport. Despite the isolated nature of the different sports engaged in by individual actors, the combination of the visuals together with spoken word brings each of them together, highlighting both the difference of queer experience and the broadness and depth of queer community.

Lindner notes how sporting cinematic movement frequently troubles time with "explicit visual and aural markers…out of sync with the normative rhythms of objective, measured time…[t]ime becomes 'sticky'…and takes on a palpably distorted consistency" (156). This is a strategy used by Gibson too. The archer, the martial artist and the child playing lacrosse and basketball all have their actions slowed down as the camera focuses on their feet and hands, their motions literally out of time. This strategy is also used in the scene shown in Fig 18 below, where a person dances on the side of the train tracks. Lindner notes that dance is an "embodied social practice" (78) and one which, like sport, has a specific relationship to class, gender, race and sexuality (78-9) with frequent associations between dance on film and "heterosexual romance and/or normative gender roles" (78). Once again, Gibson's short film subverts the tropes of the gendered cinematic body. The person dances alone and the end pose echoes a rudimentary ballet point, but the actor's feet are clad in sports trainers (Fig 19). There's a joyfulness in the dance that is enhanced by the spatial setting where the trains remain stationary, yet the body moves through the space, keeping the viewer's attention on the body in motion and the kinaesthetic qualities of the movement.

Fig 18   **Fig 19**

As I explained in the first chapter, one of the ways people are often directed towards performance poetry is through social media and online journalism that seeks to highlight LGBTQ+ spoken word poets in clickable listicles—such as KitschMix's 2017 article, '17 Queer Spoken Word Poets That Will Leave You Speechless'. These articles drive traffic to sites like Button Poetry or the poet's individual channel. Because of this, the way the viewer

interacts with a film like 'Your Life' is likely to be foregrounded in the knowledge that Gibson is a nonbinary poet, something also discoverable on their website and YouTube profile. This differs to the films of Lindner's analysis and she is keen not to stray too far into the kind of spectator empathy generated through identification with the spectator's own lived experience, whilst accepting our identities and our response to texts are two are difficult things to separate. It is on this point I diverge from Lindner to restate the scholarship (Sommers-Willet 2009; Johnson 2017) that notes that identity, community and performance poetry are inextricably entwined. The way the work of these poets might be written about online emphasises the link between identity and the poetry, frequently taking an angle similar to the KitschMix article. This drives an audience towards the text with a knowledge of the poet's queer identity already in mind, and the expectation that they will be viewing broadly queer content. In the case of 'Your Life', even if a viewer with no knowledge of the poet was to stumble across Gibson's work through other means, the text positions itself as so unambiguously queer from the first lines of the poem, it invites the viewer to read certain scenes through that lens. This undoubtedly influences the response that certain onscreen movements generate. For example, an image of short fingernails being painted reads as an act of gender nonconformance, despite the fact we only see a close-up of the hand. This reading is supported by the spoken word as Gibson says, "Your life every time airport security screams, *Pink or blue? Pink or blue?* trying to figure out / which machine setting to run you through" (0:02:09-12). The green polish that is neither pink nor blue becomes a resistant choice, a refusal to conform to gendered expectations.

An identity-focused critical approach has another important function when it comes to audience affect. Together with focusing on hands and feet, the short film also focuses on eyes. From the beginning there are multiple close-ups of eyes and the actor blinking (Fig 20) and as other faces appear on the screen, the focus there too—outside of the active dance and sports shots—is on more intimate facial movements, eyes and smiling in particular. On the surface, the focus on eyes is simply a feature of the embodied text, the close-ups accompanied by lines about the "hours blinking in a mirror…pretending you're a star" (0:00:28-31), a reference Gibson recalls at the end of the poem: "You holy blinking star, you highway streak of light" (0:03:13-18). However, the focus on eyes also serves the less explicit function of drawing attention to the part of the body associated with sight and visibility. In the case of queer identities that exist outside binary understandings of gender (nonbinary) and sexuality (bisexuality and others) it is commonly recognised that invisibility is a contributing factor to some of the issues people in those groups encounter, see for

example, Maria San Filippo's work *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (2013) which identifies how fluid sexualities are often erased from media narratives, queer theory and film and media criticism, subsumed in other identities and rendered invisible. The same is true of nonbinary gender identity, which has received little attention in media narratives to date. It can be subsumed into the subtext of narratives of gender trouble, including the tomboy trope and the gender presentation and performance found in drag, as opposed finding a place in narratives that specifically see and articulate what it means to be nonbinary.

Fig 20

The focus on eyes therefore serves the function of allowing the nonbinary viewer and other trans identities to experience a heightened sense of being seen. The gaze of the actors is intimately focused on the viewer and contextualised by Gibson's words which explicitly explore nonbinary identity in a way that gives both visual and audio space to actors who embody an underrepresented form of gender non-normativity. The focus on the smile too is important, taking the viewer on a journey from initial struggles of childhood to a point of becoming, an understanding of oneself and an embrace of "your hard life, your perfect life, your sweet and beautiful life" (0:03:20-26). The kinaesthetic quality of such an unambiguously queer film has further connotations when it comes to the digital nature of the text, the surface haptics of touch-driven technology used to scroll and select the text and the empathetic, bodily reactions evoked in the viewer. For the queer viewer watching 'Your Life', the comments section emphasises what Boni describes comments as "techniques of the body" when digital works "convey physical reactions, like love, awe, disgust" (106).

In the case of Gibson's poem, many of the responses indicate that the audience is experiencing the kind of transference of bodily motion that Boni describes, from screen to viewer, the emotional reactions observable in the comment section. Acid Roof Productions

comments: "Every human in this video is so damn beautiful. I could cry an ocean of tears and it still wouldn't be enough to express how touching this video is" (2015). Several comments indicate that viewers have been literally moved to tears, experiencing their own bodily responses to the queer body moving on screen. The affective nature of queer visibility of and the intense identity-affirming empathy invoked by this kind of text with its insistence on living fearlessly can have deeply transformative consequences. Commenter Camila Stefani says "this saved a life today. thank you."

Movements of the mobile audience and queer online community building

Media, culture and communications scholars Andrew Herman, Jan Hadlow and Thom Swiss edited a series of essays in 2019 as part of the Routledge New Media and Cyberculture Series, on *Theories of the Mobile Internet: Materialities and Imaginaries*. In the introduction to this text, they note that "one of the most important aspects of [the Internet's] evolution has been the transformation of the digital way of life from a state of being 'wired' to that of being 'wireless' and 'mobile'" further commenting that "Internet users—particularly those accessing video and gaming content—are increasingly consuming the vast majority of wireless bandwidth" (1). In 2019, YouTube released statistics identifying that more than 70% of watch time comes from mobile devices. By 2017 YouTube was second only to Google in terms of the most visited global websites (Burgess and Green 5). Although there were early hybrid versions of the so-called smartphone, which functions as both a mobile and computer device, the smartphone became more viable for a larger market of consumers with the introduction of Apple's iPhone (2007) and tablets such as the iPad (2010) and other Android devices. The ability to stream content from a mobile device in most locations is now a primary feature of a networked life in the Western world, where "digital networks…communicate at speeds faster than humans can directly perceive" (Ash, et al. 1). YouTube is one of the most notable success stories of this networked era, in which social media sites have come and gone, but the popularity of the website for video streaming has only increased. Acknowledging the importance of this platform to the poets—and poetry channels—that have made use of it, necessitates thinking about the audience in a digital sense. Writing about film, Kata Szita comments on the innate physicality of viewing movies on hand-held devices where "the touch sensitive screen connects the sense organs with the movie" and comments on the "desire to touch and interact with the objects of the diegetic space" (118). In the context of performance poetry, the audience interaction with online

content involves the same touch-screen technology. The audience is literally mobile, undertaking their own journeys on trains, buses or on foot and they simultaneously travel around the Internet in a way that involves distinct, bodily motions, surfing, clicking, browsing, tapping and swiping.

Gibson clearly recognises the importance of the mobile user to their fan base and the reception of their work online. In 'Angels of the Get-Through', they adopt a similar strategy to 'Your Life' by featuring multiple people in the film, instead of focusing on themselves. However, unlike the more slickly produced 'Your Life', 'Angels of the Get-Through' is presented as the creation of audience and poet alike. The video is comprised of a series of montages submitted by subscribers to Gibson's YouTube channel that emphasises an interest in queer, online community building, what Lisa Brawley terms "a poetics of virtual proximity" (165). The poem involves a voiceover and background music as a short film plays a series of video images submitted by fans of Gibson's work that show snippets of their own queer lives and loves. The YouTube video is described as "Edited by: Sarah Megyesy / Music by: Chris Pureka / Filmed by: you" positioning it from the outset as a collaborative project between poet and audience. Gibson demonstrates an investment in enabling the audience to participate in their work and breaking down barriers between poet and audience/reader is something Gibson pursues across multiple mediums. In their pocket-sized print collection of quotable excerpts from their poetry, *Take Me With You* (2018), Gibson playfully caters to readers who are on the move with a small printed collection of quotable excerpts. The poems and statements themselves are much smaller in scale than those in audio or video form, and each one is accompanied by illustrations (Fig 21). With the sketch of a bicycle on the front, the title and design demand the text be carried with the reader, much like the digital texts might be carried in pockets on a hand-held device. The dedication on the first page to "family, which includes you, dear reader" and the acknowledgment of a "devoted fan base" in the introduction, are further examples of the way Gibson frames their work as a collaborative, community-oriented project.
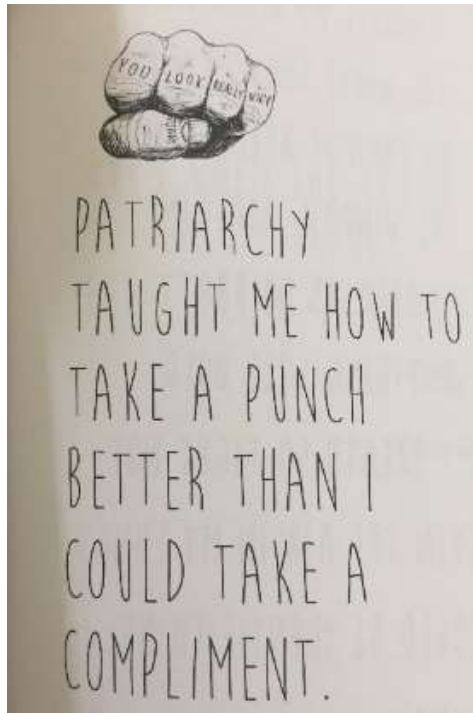
Fig 21

Through the 'spoken' nature of the poetry, there have been long associations between the specifically oral nature of spoken word and community building, long before the advent of the Internet. Tyler Hoffman quotes Gary Snyder on the impact of a poem "experienced in the company of others" and the way it becomes "communal, it's community spirit, it's convivial" (127). He further notes poet David Meltzer has a similar perspective, quoting Meltzer's observation on the Beat generation that "In the Fifties a poetry reading was a cultural event, a gathering of people in increasing numbers ready to receive the word of poets" (127). In analysing these statements, Hoffman also considers the way in which the "recorded word" enabled the Beats to disseminate the words of earlier poets including Whitman to a wider audience, together with the way those poets used recordings of their own work and live performance in their quest to revolutionalise poetry, recognising, as Snyder puts it, "there is a communal aspect to the evolution of the art", what Hoffman terms a "call for a renewed public poetry" (127).

These discussions about the community-oriented nature of spoken word have a foothold not only in scholarship assessing the way the Beats viewed the orality of poetry as key to community building, but they also provide examples of pre-Internet poets using technologies available to them at the time, such as recording devices, to broaden their potential audiences and by extension, the communities who might form around spoken word.

The poets of the HIV/AIDS crisis did this through documentary film, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance through music and television and the poets of the Black Arts movement through performances rooted in Black oral tradition. Although this kind of community building through spoken word is therefore not new in and of itself, the Digital Age has brought with it new possibilities for direct audience participation in the texts that extends beyond simply disseminating recorded work to a wider audience. Gibson's politically motivated fan base is one such example of an audience that becomes part of the visual layer of Gibson's work and as such are best analysed through the lens of scholarship that specifically engages with fans and the impact digital platforms have had on community building. For example, it is useful to think of Gibson's community building strategies, and the role of the audience in them, as a form of participatory culture, where the online audience members are not passive listeners. They are actively engaging with the poet and the poet's work, participating in a visible level through comments and in the texts themselves, undertaking their own dissemination and critique through personal social media platforms.

A leading theorist of participatory culture is Henry Jenkins, whose studies focus primarily on the activities of fan communities, or fandoms. Jenkins positions the way fans rework, revise, interrogate and analyse media through transformative works and other fan-led strategies as a form of active participation in popular culture whereby communities build around these shared endeavours. Although not directly analogous, there are synergies between fan studies scholarship and the spoken word scene. As poetry scholar and poet Stephanie Burt notes, watching "the history of the poetry world and where poetry is now…feels like a set of fandoms" ("Fansplaining Episode 67"). Jenkins has frequently updated and revised his notion of participatory culture most notably in his 2006 texts *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* and *Convergence Culture: Where Old And New Media Collide* and again, a decade later, in an open piece of scholarly discourse, *Participatory Culture in A Networked Era* (2016). This text—essentially a conversation between Jenkins, anthropologist Mizuko (Mimi) Ito and sociologist danah boyd—considers how scholarly dialogue around participatory culture has developed since the publication of *Textual Poachers* in the early nineties. It explores the tensions between scholars working with the concept across different disciplines, and the work that remains to be done to properly interrogate early usage of the term, and to bring it up to date in a networked age. Jenkins et al. note how participatory culture has applications beyond fan communities to broader online modes of participation, observing the "pedagogical potentials"

of such engagement and its growth in "an era when the public, at least in the developed world, would have access to much greater communicative capacity than ever before" (3).

Andrea Gibson is an example of a performance poet who has grown an online fan base by inviting audience participation through modern technology. It is not unusual for Gibson to ask their YouTube subscribers—currently over 21,000—to contribute to their content, or to acknowledge their fan base explicitly in public bios. The inclusion of user-submitted montages in 'Angels of the Get-Through' allows a different kind of participation, inviting the audience into the text of the poem itself. This kind of participation is a form of what Jenkins means by participatory culture, where the viewers of spoken word poetry are not simply passively consuming content. Instead, they are becoming part of the work created by poets like Gibson. Although participation in performance poetry isn't a new concept— slam in particular has always encouraged audience participation with scoring systems designed to factor in audience reactions—this specifically digital mode of participation operates somewhat differently. Through online networks, the accessibility of digital platforms and the proliferation of mobile devices, Gibson makes the audience, whose function is typically as silent spectators or discernible only through audio, the visual centre of their text. This extended mode of digital participation reimagines both the ways audience can directly engage with—or become part of—the text on the one hand, and queer online community building potential on the other. These strategies employed by Gibson are not static, fixed or universally adopted by all poets, but they are reflective of a broader creative process undertaken by performance poets today who demonstrate an interest in, and understand the importance of, burgeoning online communities interested in spoken word as an art form.

This participation isn't simply a visual facet of the poem but continues in the comment section long after the video has posted. As Szita notes in the context of the viewer streaming films on touchscreen devices, comment functions immerse the audience into the text: "interaction with the footage facilitates the adaptation to the features of the viewing space and immersion into the diegetic world" (119). For example, the following comment was left by YouTube user Katarina Radojev on 'Angels of the Get-Through':

> thank you so so so much for featuring me and my best friend in the
> video! the poem made us cry so hard,we realized how much we love
> eachother. Thank you,Andrea,for making me,US, happy :)

Another comment from a user named Heather reads:

I spent 6 years with my person. We used to listen to your poetry all the time. She passed away last November. This poem breaks my heart into pieces, it's unbearable it's suffocating how much I love and miss her.

These examples demonstrate how the mobile audience can become immersed in the diegesis of the poem, the positioning of queer angels as those who help people get through some of the hardest moments of their lives. In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), Ann Cvetkovitch explains that "trauma can be a foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them" (15). With the mobile audience this process is undertaken through the comments section, where users are moved to share personal experiences with the poet. This fosters textual intimacy and the responses to such comments often elicit communal support from other people viewing the poem. One example is YouTube user henry otto responds to Heather's comment on Gibson's 'Angels of the Get-Through': "Heather um, its going to be okay, okay? No one is ever gone." The "intense intimacy and personal story-telling" that forms "part of…YouTube's DNA" (Burgess and Green 128) is a hallmark of performance poetry, where poets frequently share deeply personal and sometimes traumatic experiences, speaking about matters deeply entwined with their own identities. This in turn drives mobile users who feel intimately part of the poem's diegesis to share their own experiences.

A form of community building can flow from this interaction in the YouTube comment sections which allow users to engage "the practices of cultural citizenship…that create spaces for engagement and community formation" (Burgess and Green 126). This is intensified in the case Gibson, who explicitly produces work focused on bringing people together, documenting diverse queer experience and invites the audience to participate in several ways, through requesting material that can be used in Gibson's films, and by leaving comment sections open. It is of little surprise therefore that the mobile technology that makes this kind of public, online community possible features explicitly in 'Angels of the Get-Through' with several of the pieces selected in the montage depicting people on tablets and mobile phones (Fig 22) or using funny filters associated with mobile platforms including Snapchat and Instagram to change their onscreen appearance (Fig 23).

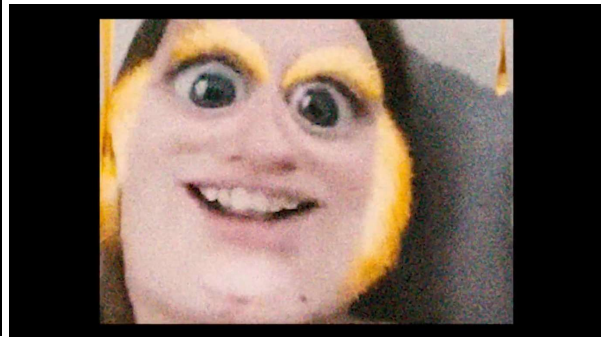**Fig 22**   **Fig 23**

The poem explicitly links queer community formation and the bonds of love and friendship to enabling queer people—both poet and audience—to undertake a personal journey, from a time of hardship to a place of comfort. Therefore every aspect of 'Angels of the Get-Through' is saturated with movement. Gibson's words are used to evoke a sense of shared movement through the idea of undertaking a journey through life and the multiple references to vast, open spaces the Milky Way. They open the poem at a point when "the pain is bigger than anything else, takes up the whole horizon" (0:00:36-39). The use of the word "horizon" captures the sense of a journey towards a far-off point, a working through times of grief and pain, the struggle to keep moving forward. The audience is drawn further into the text by Gibson's use of second person. "You", the viewer, undertakes Gibson's journey alongside them, travelling on an open road with no fixed destination. Through interweaving the second person with facets of their own personal journey—"Remember when I told you I was going to be a fulltime poet and you paid my rent for three years?" (0:01:13-19)—Gibson enhances the sense of community building, making their queer journey just one part of a wider, collective one.

This sense of movement and life's journeys are further underscored by the temporal features of the language used by Gibson, their reference to a "past so present you can feel your baby teeth" (0:00:45-48). This manifestation of the past in the present evokes the queer temporality of a haunted present used with such great impact in the work of Chrysanthemum Tran, the legacy of affective histories, carried by queer people into their present. Gibson's poem makes clear that the journey won't always be a straightforward or easy one, subverting the temporal linearity that preoccupies "middle-class logic" with all its "reproductive temporality" that invests in a linear journey from childhood, to youth, to adulthood ("*QTAP*" 4). For Gibson it is the pain of existing out of place and time, that "made…you, an open, open, open road" (0:02:00-03). With this reference the queer audience both travel along and

become the open road, a site associated with freedom, unimpeded travel and vast, exploratory potential. The open road has long been a visual feature in films, including queer cinema such as *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and poetry, the freedom of the open road inspiring American poet Walt Whitman to write 'The Open Road.' Gibson is clearly familiar with Whitman's work, his 'I Sing The Body Electric' (1855) providing inspiration for Gibson's 'I Sing The Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out' (2011). In 'Angels of the Get-Through', Gibson fuses film and poetry together with the digital, drawing on an image which is instantly recognisable to an American audience in an online space that subverts the temporal logics of television and other forms of visual media, as online "[v]iewers experience media when, where and how they want, against the homogeneity and linearity of television flow, or against the organizing constraints of the movie theatre" (Boni 104).

The importance of the open road is marked from the outset of the poem, even before the poet begins speaking. The video starts with music and a scene shot through a car window, as the landscape blurs as the car moves forward, capturing the sky just before the sun sets (Fig 24). The way that scene is shot is an instantly recognisable one, the blurring of the land, water and sky captured by the unseen holder of the camera evocative of countless films that begin or end with journeys. It also serves the function of placing the viewer behind the camera, as if they too are in the moving car, looking out of the window as the sun sets. They are travelling along an unknown road together with the poet. The scene changes to one of Gibson themselves, being pulled along by their partner on an open highway towards the setting sun (Fig 25) before cutting once more to an image of the horizon, this time captured through the windscreen of a moving car. The final shot before the poet starts speaking is one of birds taking flight. The visuals are centred around movement, travelling along an open road and shots of a distant horizon. The setting is broadly recognisable as American, but it is otherwise unspecified, with limited road signage and a half-obscured image of a theatre sign caught to the left of the screen when the birds take flight. In both instances where identifying markers appear that situate the landscape geographically, motion—Gibson and their partner in the first scene and the birds in the second—draw the viewer's eye away from the static signage and heighten the sense of a place unknown, the open road being one of many.
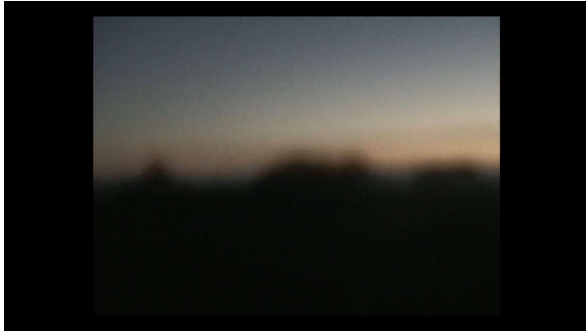
Fig 24

Fig 25

The non-specific location and the first shot shown in Fig 24 immediately immerses the viewer into the setting Gibson occupies. They too are part of the journey, moving with Gibson along the open road. This audience participation in Gibson's journey becomes more explicit when they begin speaking, the first line of the poem opening the series of montages that continue until the poem reaches its conclusion. The clips provided by mobile users and edited into Gibson's video are an example of the poet's use of a mediated platform to take their performance poetry from the traditional stage, to reflect America's vastly disparate geographies. Intentionally or otherwise, this serves to subvert the notion that there are static, urban, geographical spaces in which queerness dominates. What does dominate every single clip is the feeling of freedom and happiness, the joyful scenes juxtaposed with the dreamy opening view of the sunset through an open window and the liberating potential offered by the visual of the open road. In some cases the submissions represent actual journeys or travel, from a ride in a hot air balloon (Fig 26) to dancing at the top of a mountain (Fig 27), and in other cases the movement involved is more understated, as couples and friends dance, kiss, read in bed, use their mobile phones, play cards or cook together. The different kinds of relationships featured—some platonic, some romantic—and the varying forms of transit used, bikes, cars, hot air balloons and walking or running on foot, all indicate there are many different ways to undertake a journey, many different ways to move through life. This reflects Gibson's fluid identity and changing sense of self, an individual who struggles to find a place in a world obsessed with labels, boxes and living within clearly defined parameters. Through using such different clips, Gibson captures the idea that one experience cannot always be used to define another, emphasising that we are all on journeys, and that no one journey is the same.

Fig 26   **Fig 27**

Many of Gibson's poems include places like railway tracks ('I Sing The Body
Electric, Especially When The Power's Out'), roads ('Radio feat. Jesse Thomas') and people
in motion, driving, running, stepping forwards, dancing ('Angels of the Get-Through') that
are consistent with transgender literature's preoccupation with journeys, transition and
boundary crossing. What Gibson accomplishes with the use of visuals like sunsets and an
open road with no obvious destination is to capture something of non-binary identity
specifically, taking liminal space and making it a metaphor for the way non-binary people
can sometimes feel displaced or in-between, in a world that invests in binaries; male and
female, straight and gay, beginning and end. Much of Gibson's poetry features this idea that
they are in a state of motion, a permanent point of flux. By way of example, their poem
'Andrew', published in their collection *The Madness Vase* (2011) states:

> Like drumbeats forever changing their rhythm
> I am living today as someone
> I had not become yesterday,
> and tonight I will borrow only pieces
> of who I am right now
> to carry with me to tomorrow

<div align="center">(58)</div>

In this poem Gibson compares their lived transgender experience to the beating of drums.
Most pertinently they also describe the motion that is part of queer temporalities, the moving
parts of their own life and identity, separated into pieces that are discarded, picked up again,
found and carried with them. This excerpt also describes a journey from yesterday, to today,
to tomorrow, exploring how fragmented being transgender can make someone feel as they
move through time and space, towards an uncertain point that is never stable, or fixed.
Through their words and the use of the audience in their videos, Gibson both emphasises how
important collective queer experience and community can be, whilst also homing in on a

deeply personal and individual journey, which has no clear place or timeline, their own life a montage of moving pieces, much like the films they create.

Music, audio and the sounds of spoken word

Speech—and by extension, sound—is one of spoken word's defining features. Sound is both moving and bodily, formed by vibrations travelling through wave patterns and received through the ear. Sound and motion are intimately entwined, what lyric writing scholar Pat Pattison refers to as "ear-directed" motion as opposed to "eye-directed." In a piece which attempts to differentiate between song lyrics and poetry, Pattison elaborates on this, explaining how "the 'phrases' build the flow…with rhythm and syncopation" identifying "tone of voice, stopping and starting, extending syllables, modulating pitches" as temporal, ear-directed movements that bring to spoken word what music brings to song lyrics (308). Although this kind of tempo can of course be achieved through dialect, punctuation and form in the written word in ways, in audio poetry the unique facet is the function of poet as both author and reader, in absolute control of the way the text moves and the tone of the poem when spoken out loud. For many years, listeners have engaged with the various sounds spoken word artists have used in audio performances, from particularly vibrant or impassioned speech, so called 'slam voice', to musical accompaniments. Performance poets have a unique ability to score the sound of their poems through the recorded voice, which can modulate tone and delivery in a way that can only be partially achieved through written strategies which guide the rhythm of the poem.

So far in this chapter, I have focused on the visual nature of the queer cinematic body and the movements of the online audience, both digital and physical, outside and inside the text. This section adds a further dimension to some of the theories outlined in the earlier part of this chapter, from the way sound impacts the audience's bodily response to a text, to the way sound moves, and the auditory sensory layer it brings to a text that might be difficult to replicate through reading alone. It is useful to spend a little time thinking about the way sound moves in performance poetry, both in terms of specific examples of the poet's delivery and the way the mobile audience listens to performance poetry. The increased use of online streaming platforms to continue the tradition of spoken word artists making their work more accessible to a wider audience by creating audio-only versions of their work. Poetry is, as Susan Stewart notes in Charles Bernstein's edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, often described using musical terms: "counterpoint, harmony, syncopation,

stress, duration and timbre as if the ways in which sound is measured in music and lyric were analogous" (29). Stewart points out the two are, of course, not the same, but it is fair to say that music and poetry are complementary art forms. Spoken word lends itself well to musical accompaniment; and just as music can add rhythm and cadence to a performance poem, poetry can bring a different dimension to music. Several contemporary pop artists have used poetry in their music. Multi-Grammy winner Lorde whose successful song-writing career began with poetry, something she paid homage to by featuring a spoken word poem in her *Melodrama* tour at Sydney Opera House in 2017. In 2016, Somali-British poet Warsan Shire's verse featuring prominently in Beyoncé's critically acclaimed visual album, *Lemonade*.

Connections are also frequently drawn between hip hop and spoken word, the two art forms having multiple crossovers. Johnson notes that "hip-hop was created in the 1970s" and it fits "into the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement" which together played "particular roles in shaping cultural imaginaries as they pertain to the contemporary black performance poets" (17). Spoken word performers employ similar beats and rhythms to hip hop artists on the one hand and rappers deliver words in a style that could be considered spoken word on the other. However, as Birgit M. Bauridl points out, to treat rap and spoken word as one—or music and poetry interchangeably—does neither proper critical justice. Bauridl argues that although performance poetry and rap "are linked in stylistic fusions and intertextual references…and in analogies such as socio-political agendas and 'grassroots' beginnings" any "[p]erceptions of performance poetry as rap are…simplifications and misinterpretations" (720). Johnson also draws distinctions, noting that "many black spoken word poets often say that their work responds to the perceived failings of rap" (17). Although Johnson criticises the way discourse around hip-hop makes exaggerated claims of "materialism, sexism and homophobia" he does note that "slam and spoken word poetry communities" tend to be seen as more "progressive" and as such receive critical treatment which causes slam and spoken word to pull away from hip-hop as two distinct art forms, although the former undoubtedly proved influential in terms of the latter.

Musical genres and spoken word clearly aren't the same, but they are complimentary art forms and performance poets, much like artists across musical genres, have appreciated the ways audio technologies can enable their work to reach wider audiences. They have also experimented with musical features or collaborations that add a different dimension to their texts. These techniques have taken speech-only elements of live performance and recorded them to capture something of the delivery and tone of the original performance for those who

131

might not have been able to attend. In some cases, music accompanies the poetry readings. Composer and pianist Philip Glass's 1988 collaboration with poet Allen Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' is one example, a poem written (and recorded) by Ginsberg in 1966. Indeed, the Beat poets, like Ginsberg, often recorded readings and live performances on tape recorders and for these spoken word poets the availability of this audio technology meant "the mediatized voice…became a powerful trope" (Hoffman 160). As Tyler Hoffman, observes the "embodied and disembodied voices of the beats…" would become "central to the tradition of an American performance poetry" (160). With this context it is therefore of little surprise that today's twenty-first century performance poets appreciate the importance of sound and are using platforms typically designed for music and podcasts as another channel through which they can disseminate their poetry.

Music and poetry overlap at times, and music and spoken word can coexist well together, but as Pattison observes, when "combining works of art, say music and poetry, one or the other must always be in a position of servitude" (311). This kind of servitude can be observed in Andrea Gibson's seventh audio album *Hey Galaxy* which features 'Your Life' and 'Angels of the Get-Through' along with fourteen other tracks. Released in 2018 and available on various streaming sites, MP3, CD and vinyl, the album makes strategic use of music. Much of Gibson's work includes music, both in the videos on YouTube and the multiple audio albums they have produced. The poet has attributed this to their enjoyment of collaboration as opposed to producing art in isolation, an extension of Gibson's noted interest in queer community building. The text that most exemplifies Gibson's interest in combining music and poetry is the collaboration with Jesse Thomas, 'Radio', where Thomas's vocals introduce the spoken word. This differs to the other pieces on the album where there is no song, simply backing music that enhances Gibson's speech.

In an interview with Gibson in *Apt613*, Shannon Ing questions Gibson's strategy of including "soothing" music with the "radical topics" confronted in the album, like the poem 'Orlando' which addresses the shooting at Pulse nightclub, a poem I return to in the fourth chapter of this thesis, together with Gibson's 'America, Reloaded.' Gibson explains: "I don't think of the music as soothing as much as I do hopeful. It's important to me to keep a ray of light shining through everything I create. Even my darkest poems. Music helps me do that." Again, this demonstrates the ways in which Gibson thinks about their listener. They are keen to provide a hopeful angle to someone possibly struggling with queer identity, juxtaposed with political message and queer visibility. If music for Gibson provides hope in the darkness, then the absence of music appears designed to emphasise a call for action. Save for

the final two tracks, 'To The Men Cat-Calling My Girlfriend When I'm Walking Beside Her' and 'Fight For Love', which are recordings of live performances, the track 'Letter To White Queers' is the only piece on the album without any musical accompaniment and as the sounds of the audience—the familiar claps and cheers associated with live performance—can be heard in the final two recorded tracks, 'Letter To White Queers' is the only poem delivered with a completely silent background.

As the sixth track on the album, the absence of sound on 'Letter To White Queers' after the previous poems with musical accompaniments, sets it apart. The lack of music and the centring of Gibson's speech suits the topic of the poem, which addresses racism in queer communities and deaths including the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay American student at the University of Wyoming who was beaten, tortured, and left for dead near Laramie on 6 October 1998. When listened to in the context of the album as a whole, the silent background—the audio without music—enables Gibson to use their "vocal arrangements" to "serve up a trenchant political critique in ways unavailable to a printed poem" (Hoffman, 181). Had the poems appeared side-by-side in a printed collection, the absence of sound and the impact that has on the impassioned and urgent temporal rhythms of the spoken word itself would be difficult to capture.

Such strategies enable the poet to exercise a form of control over the text that might be harder to replicate in the written word. Hoffman comments on this, writing about the way a poet concerned with ear-directed movement (to borrow Pattison's terminology) might "score" their written word, something Hoffman describes, quoting Hyde on *The Poetry of Alan Ginsberg* as "notat[ing] the thought-stops, breath-stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, startings and stoppings of the car" (Hyde 217, qtd Hoffman 140) with a view to the poetry being recorded and subsequently made available in audio format. However, he explains with reference to a review of Ginsberg's performance of 'Howl', that "the poet cannot score pitch, even if he can score time" (139). This distinction is best appreciated by considering one of Gibson's poems in writing, alongside the audio version. Gibson's distinctive, impassioned delivery and the tone of the performance is tricky to replicate and as explained in the analysis of 'Boomerang Valentine' below, the audio accomplishes things in terms of the poem's momentum specifically, that the written text does not.

'Boomerang Valentine' appears in print in Gibson's poetry collection *Lord of the Butterflies* (2018) together with several other poems on the *Hey Galaxy* album. The poem is written as a series of couplets and in a handful of places italics are used to place emphasis on certain words. However, in the audio version the slow background music picks up tempo at

0:1:45, a shift in momentum that the printed text does not reflect. Together with minor differences there are some moments where Gibson's spoken word differs to the written word in a way that achieves a better audio cadence and more impassioned, lively speech, giving a certain lyrical beat to the spoken word through rapidly delivered half-rhymes. One such example is the line "*I am still clearing the smoke from burning the post I wrote for my own wedding day",* included in the audio text at 0:03:05 and omitted from the printed copy in *Lord of the Butterflies.* At the end of the audio poem too, Gibson states "and my whole life y'all, my whole life, is just a boomerang valentine / coming right back at me" (0:04:01). In the printed version, this simply appears as "my whole life / is a boomerang valentine / coming right back at me" (32). The repetition of "my whole life" in the audio version and the use of "y'all" seem specifically designed for the audience; a direct address to the collective listeners that would be superfluous text in the written version yet add something for the listening audience and build to the climactic moment of the poem reaching its end.

I have already noted that Gibson has developed a fan base and seeks to make their poetry, together with t-shirts, tote bags and other merchandise featuring quotes from their poems, available in multiple formats. Their content is available for free on YouTube and sites like Spotify and for those with the means to purchase the books and audio formats, there are several physical or downloadable options available. With their audio audience specifically, the visual community building strategies are stripped away, and Gibson is focused entirely on sound and tone, the rhythmic appeal of certain sounds that work better when delivered orally than in writing. Similar to other spoken word artists like Ginsberg whose spoken word differs to the texts he produced Gibson's recorded work does not stick to the precise letter of their written word. Their work is performance driven, not a poetry reading or recitation, and the musical accompaniment and tone of delivery is intended to enhance the sense of performance. The music is background—with the exception of Jesse Thomas's vocals on 'Radio'—yet it is not redundant. It is complimentary whilst remaining, as Pattison puts it, in "servitude" to the spoken word. The strategy of including music for the majority of the album enables certain poems such as 'A Letter To White Queers' to stand out from the others as a more stripped back, political poem with a particularly stark and unapologetic message.

In other poems, music heightens the sense of momentum. In the audio of 'Ode To The Public Panic Attack' for example, the upbeat tempo of the accompanying guitar is one of the most lively of the musical accompaniments. The momentum of the music goes in tandem with the speed of Gibson's delivery, the poem less contemplative than others, the speed evoking the sensation of a panic attack, with the guitar strumming sounding at times like a

quickly beating heart. With music, Gibson captures something of what Bauridl refers to as slam's "highly rhythmic and ritualistic structure and the interplay between…performer and audience" (717). However, Gibson works outside the typical modes of competitive slam and finds different ways to bring rhythm to the spoken word outside of live performance. On *Hey Galaxy* 'Ode To The Public Panic Attack' is directly followed by 'The Day You Died Because You Wanted To', where the melancholy, pared back piano chords reflect Gibson's slower, more considered delivery reflective of the sadness in the poem's theme: "In something like our mothers we grew / until red was again the colour of the water / and pain wasn't something we could point to / because it was what was." The slowness of the music echoes the softness of church organ chords, giving an almost dirge-like quality to the piece which references god, death, hearses and funeral processions.

The segue from 'Ode To The Public Panic Attack' into the far slower 'The Day You Died Because You Wanted To' is an example, together with the placement of 'A Letter To White Queers', that demonstrates how Gibson has thought carefully about the order of the tracks. The impact of the music on the spoken word in *Hey Galaxy* becomes clear on listening to the album as a whole. The poet's focus is on what Pattison refers to as "ear-directed" movement, where the ear, as Pattison puts it, becomes the "roadmap" as opposed to the eye. This engagement of specifically auditory senses and the mapping of works is particularly apparent when the placement of the poems is considered, the response from a shift between tempos that varies and heightens the listening experience, keeping the listener engaged. Performance poetry so often engages multiple senses as it is typically audio-visual in nature, yet Gibson's albums provide an alternative format that is all about the listening experience, emphasising the musical quality and lyricism of their poetry when spoken out loud, what Hoffman might call the "performative utterances" (142).

Despite the lack of visuals however, for the audience familiar with Gibson's live performances, the voice of the poet is not disembodied. Writing about reception to poetry written for performance when first encountered on the page, Peter Middleton observes the reader with a knowledge of performance poetry can "immediately summon up a picture of the poet herself performing the poetry aloud…the author's vocal performance in now inscribed within the text" (287). Many of the poems on *Hey Galaxy* have been recorded as live performances, and it is easy to picture Gibson onstage when listening to them. The final two recorded performances lend both an element of 'liveness' to the album and offer another example of Gibson including the audience directly within the text, recreating the applause,

whoops and cheers associated with slam and making audience reception a feature of the audio album.

With regard to the audience, it may seem as though there is a bright line between sound and the kinaesthetic qualities of watching the cinematic body discussed earlier in this chapter. However, as Peter Middleton puts it, "[s]ound itself is a bodily experience" (288). Sound is an innately physical, auditory sensation heightened by the way vibrations move through speakers, headphones, air. In a particularly noisy club or concert the reverberations of the music can be felt through a person's feet, increased volume levels can result in a physical shock when sound is turned too high for comfort. For the mobile audience listening through sophisticated headsets, external noise is frequently cancelled out by high-quality listening devices. Audiences can therefore experience a heightened aural experience, something identified by Matt Adams in the context of plays downloaded by computer uses at home. Adams notes that those online audiences experienced "even higher levels of emotional engagement with the production than audiences at the theatre" (Blake, qt. Bakhshi, Mateos-Garcia and Throsby). Contemporary poets are thinking about the mobile user and the ways in which they engage with music through streaming sites. Just as these poets have considered new and innovative ways to harness the digital trend towards watching media on YouTube and other video sharing sites, some, like Gibson, just like the Beats before them, are considering ways to make their poetry accessible in multiple formats to today's digital user, the mobile audience in transit listening to podcasts, radio, music—and spoken word—through music streaming sites.

Just as I have argued that it is necessary to think more expansively about the notions of 'performance' and 'stage' in today's networked era, it is also important to consider the other ways poets might create across several online platforms or mediums, seeking to target as broad an audience as possible. With performance poets including Lee Mokobe using digital art to enhance the audio-visual experience of his work, and poets including Gibson producing films and audio-only albums, the idea of the contemporary spoken word does not need to be defined by either liveness or the centring of the poet's body. Sound, even in the visual absence of the poet, evokes a sensory experience in the audience that is a critical component of the spoken—and listened—word. The voice is not an abstract stranger reciting the work of another poet. Audio albums like Gibson's represent performance through a different medium to the examples of performance discussed so far, a transformative engagement by the poet with their own work. This audio poetry, much like the poetry uploaded to YouTube, is designed for the digital generation of mobile users, utilising twenty-

first century online platforms to give the mobile audience a variety of ways to access a performance poet's work.

Transition journey narratives and Cameron Awkward-Rich in *Transit*

Linguistically the 'trans' prefix to 'transgender' derives from the Latin meaning 'across.' Ontologically, transgender experience is frequently framed as involving a form of gender crossing or a refusal to situate oneself in any one particularly gendered 'place' in the context of nonbinary individuals. The process, for those that choose it, of changing biological sex through medical intervention is framed in the language of movement, a 'transition' or 'becoming.' Given the connection between the language of movement and journeys with transgender experience, it is unsurprising that all poets referenced in this chapter explore those thematic preoccupations in one way or another. What does differ is the way these poets bring movement and migration into their texts, something I argue is evidenced in the work of Cameron Awkward-Rich. Since his beginnings on the college slam circuit, Awkward-Rich has amassed a notable collection of published work. His poetry and nonfiction prose has appeared in literary journals, including *Hobart*, *Nepantla*, *The Seattle Review* and *The Rumpus*. His poems on YouTube channels like Button Poetry—he does not have a YouTube channel of his own—are popular with subscribers. In 2015, Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press published his first chapbook, *Transit* which is the focus of this section. His first full poetry collection *Sympathetic Little Monster* was published by Ricochet Editions in 2016 and his second collection of poetry, *Dispatch*, is forthcoming from Persea Books in December 2019. Several of Awkward-Rich's poems are on YouTube and a number of poems that in *Transit* were published elsewhere online but only one—'Theory Of Motion (6), Nocturne'—is available on YouTube, uploaded on the Pillowfort Sessions channel in 2014.

In an interview with H. Melt, Awkward-Rich explains that *Transit* was born out of a desire to rewrite the "travel narrative-as-transition narrative", resisting the suggestion there is "a fixed point, gender as a knowable destination" and challenging the "neo-colonial" tendencies of the trope ("*Lambda Literary*" 2016). I take a series of poems in the collection— the 'Once' poems—as the basis of my textual analysis, explaining how this desire to refuse to subscribe to the linearity of the mainstream transgender stories is accomplished by structuring his collection in a way that resists chronological storytelling and creates a sense of motion in the reader, of being pulled back and forth within the text. Together with a desire to subvert the tropes of transgender literature by writing about his experiences of movement as

something far less linear and fixed than point-to-point travel, Awkward-Rich has discussed the various layers to the idea of being in transit and the way his own movements at inspired the collection. At the time of writing, he was both transitioning—"taking testosterone during the years in which I had just begun living in Oakland"—and literally in transit, undertaking "a two hour public transit commute away from where I [went] to school." In the same interview, Awkward-Rich explains how his work was influenced by the tension between his locations—Oakland and Palo Alto—and the very different class and racial landscapes he observed. This created, he says, a sense of "perpetually moving back and forth across some imaginary line." The multitude of bodily references are specifically concerned with the Black bodies, from the violence against such bodies to movement as metaphor for queer awakening.

The moving body is juxtaposed with the author's relationship to language, a sense of inertia he describes at times when he is unable to speak or the name he chooses for himself is stripped away by those close to him. The mouth as the site where speech becomes embodied serves an important function throughout the text, something which takes on both sexual connotations in the context of Awkward-Rich's poems, and one that also shares similarities with the preoccupation of a poet like Mokobe ('Tuner of Silence') or Chrysanthemum Tran ('Cognates') both of whom having a particular interest in exploring how language intersects with explorations of race and queerness. Analysing the movements undertaken in the text adds introduces another medium to the prior examples of film and audio-only poetry, that illuminates how a performance poet—and a transgender poet—thinks about movement, in the context of the written word. Awkward-Rich's rise to prominence was largely due to the popularity of his work online. Together with performance poetry and his work in college slams, Awkward-Rich credits online message boards with providing an early home for his poetry: "the faceless strangers of the Internet were entirely responsible for my early feelings that writing was not only something I needed to do for myself, but also something I could do that other people might appreciate" ("*Lambda Literary*"). Through the production of a print collection published by Button Poetry, Awkward-Rich is an example of the ways performance poets are offered new possibilities for producing and disseminating their work, leveraging online popularity to make a move from performance to print.

The focus on motion is apparent from the moment the reader picks up *Transit*, before they reach the poems themselves. Through Awkward-Rich's own words, I have already explained how the title functions on multiple levels, with its queer and specifically trans connotations to the notion of being physically in transit, crossing between places. The chapbook cover is an image of an open road with a map on the back, the open road a repeated

image in Gibson's films and one with specific connotations for an American audience. On the first page of the chapbook, Awkward-Rich's interest in teasing out how transgender people experience movement through time and space is emphasised by the acknowledgments, featuring a quote from Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993): "I felt as though I'd left myself behind. I didn't know what lay ahead but the train was hurtling towards the darkness toward that destination." This quote from one of the most prominent transmasculine American writers, draws an immediate connection between queer narrative and journey-making.

This early indication of the thematic concerns of the collection is reflected in a common recurring strategy throughout the collection, in the repetition of the same title across Awkward-Rich's work. Seven of the poems include 'Theory of Motion' in the title. There are also two poems titled 'The Invisible Girl' ('The Invisible Girl, 1996' [12]; 'The Invisible Girl, 2014' [22]). Several freeverse poems written in poetic prose appear in the collection, aptly titled as 'Essays' ('Essay on The Theory of Motion' [4]; 'Essay on Waiting in Line' [14]; 'Essay on Crying in Public' [25]). As a result of these poems the chapbook invites moments of recall in the reader, who undertakes similar bodily movements to the mobile user who taps and clicks through cyberspace. There is a physicality in reading, holding a book in one's hands and turning the pages to progress through the collection. The repetition in the titles of various sets of poems encourages the careful reader to return to earlier work, stopping and starting the reading process and moving around in the chapbook in a way that disrupts the linearity of reading a book cover-to-cover.

Many of the poems also encourage this kind of movement in the individual poems. To take the 'Theory of Motion' poems as an example, 'Essay on the Theory of Motion', the first in the series, opens as follows: "You remember reading a poem about a boy driving his grandmother to the library across town" (4). The poem shifts perspectives from second person to first, the opening stanza using second person to describe a boy driving his grandmother to the library across town. A temporal motion is evoked by the opening "You remember reading a poem", a self-referential quality where the "you" can be both poet and reader simultaneously. The reader is invited to remember a poem they haven't yet read, creating a temporal disruption which subverts the linearity of a typical reading experience, situating the memory of the poem at the beginning, as opposed to the end. At the end of the poem, Awkward-Rich notes: "Eventually the flower wilts & you can pick another, or burn the field, or turn & run back across the tracks" (5). The disparate nature of the locations, from the car that begins the story to the disused railway tracks that end it, are juxtaposed with tongue-

in-cheek references to defining movement as a series of puns and queer theory's fascination with transitory locations such as airports. There is a metatextual playfulness in the poem, and it is an early indicator that there will be no clearly demarcated chronological mapping of the text for the reader. The poem ends with the physical movement of running "back" along railway tracks the reader hasn't yet encountered. Because there is no reference to moving forward along the tracks, there is an uncanniness to the idea of making a return journey, when the arrival has not been explored. The introduction of the railway tracks and a return journey creates both a spatial and temporal strangeness that recalls the opening, the invitation to remember a poem one hasn't yet read. The combination of these two features compels the reader to conduct their own form of running back along the tracks, to return to the start of the poem where their memory of reading a poem about a boy driving his grandmother across town has now become a tangible statement of fact: "You remember reading a poem..." (4).

This first 'Theory of Motion' poem also introduces moving vehicles—specifically the car—in the first stanza. Like the other metatextual qualities of the poem, the self-conscious sense of the poem's own status is reiterated here. Instead of using the car as a metaphor for the reader to decipher, Awkward-Rich is blunt about its purpose in the text: "Someone said that the car is a perfect device for giving a poem the feeling of motion" (4). This foreshadows the recurring use of the car in other 'Theory of Motion' poems. In 'Theory of Motion (1)' the poet watches their sister kill a deer and as the perspectives shift the narrator is both the driver and the driven: "my sister drives me through the / winter at night" (10); "I / still don't know who was driving, or / what kind of animal we became" (10). The deer straddles a space between living and dead, living in the narrator's imagination: "she watches us drive away & I want to / believe the doe still stands" (11). By the end of that poem the car has broken, and it has taken on human qualities, "All that matters now is / the car, how to rehabilitate that / wreckage" (11). The reference to rehabilitation suggests that the car represents more than just the vehicle's wreckage, but also the poet's own journey and relationship to his family members. When this image of a car that needs rehabilitation is juxtaposed with the image of a vanishing night and an "animal wailing through our / silence" (11), there is a strangeness to the imagery the poem evokes, the suggestion of something lost and haunted as the sounds of the dying deer permeate the family home. Through this poem, the lines between poet, brother, sister and animal blur and the tempo of the piece underscores the kind of movement that cannot be stopped, the futility of trying to undo things that are already in motion.

The car appears again in 'Theory of Motion (4): Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries to Name It' (30-31) with the poet's father pulling over onto the side of the road, and in

'Theory of Motion (5)' where the poet and his lover "drove down the coast to swelter in a rented room" (35). The poems in the middle of the series find other ways to capture movement, the references to automobiles, trains and other forms of transportation giving way to dance and other specifically bodily movements. 'Theory of Motion (2): The Sex Question' echoes the blurring of lines between human and animal observed in 'Theory of Motion (1)' as the poet likens themselves to a bird taking flight: "I want you to train me / to fly" (21). Sound saturates 'Theory of Motion (3): MDMA' with the "housemate, swaying in the static air" and the "throbs" of music (28), the travelling of sound through airwaves and the bodily response to the kind of loud music that can be felt through vibrations in the body. The music takes on a human quality, the radio "crying a song" (30) as people become "limbs writing beneath the strobe lights" (28). The way music permeates in this poem and the movement of sound through the body echoes the distance travelled by the wailing of the dying deer in 'Theory of Motion (1)'. There are countless references throughout the 'Theory of Motion' poems to movements of all forms, from the physical acts of sex, walking, running, to the motion involved with journeys taken by car and trains. Bodily movements are emphasised through the troubling of lines between human and animal, with frantic, beating wings, birds in flight and wild horses and migration. The poet's sympathy with the movement of animals heightens the perpetual sense of both bodily motion and journey-making that occupies each of the 'Theory of Motion' texts.

Another feature the 'Theory of Motion' poems have in common is the juxtaposition of movement with inertia. As I noted earlier in the context of Mokobe's 'Tuner of Silence', the absence of motion can be as important to explore as the presence of it, in order to fully consider how these poems reflect the way transgender people in America might experience, or think about, movement. In 'Essay on The Theory of Motion' the poet begs "each thing to answer" (4) and there is a sense of wanting to move but being unable to do so. He searches for the truth but his body refuses to talk: "You can't get your body to tell the secret. Can't get it to tell you anything at all" (5). Awkward-Rich's text is occupied with multiple references to concealed things, particularly those hidden on or in the body, as the poet searches for the truth of things and finds language to be constantly out of reach as speech is frustrated. This sense of inertia returns in 'Theory of Motion (1)', with the poet's image of the stationary deer standing in the middle of the road after the crash has already happened. Further moments of suspended animation appear in the poem, "I freeze her image in my mind" (10); "all I can do is stand over her like a / house, like an older brother & worry / about her leaving too soon" (11). Inertia is a recurring feature of the other 'Theory of Motion' poems, too. Together with

the moving, swaying bodies in 'Theory of Motion (3): MDMA', the poet is "pinned to a boy" (28). Again, this sense of inertia is coupled with the loss of speech, the inability to articulate "the widening gap between desire & my / fevered lust for quiet, forever quiet" (28). The poet both wants to speak and yearns for quiet with a "fevered lust" that overwhelms him until he becomes "that red, red child huddled in / the corner, clutching her mother's / one good kitchen knife" (29). In 'Theory of Motion (4): Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries to Name It', a woman, revealed to be the poet's grandmother, is "trapped inside / a burning house" and a girl is "pinned…to the wall" (30). The woman trapped in a burning house is an image that reoccurs in 'Theory of Motion (5)': "there's someone on fire in the attic & no one / knows how she got there or where she came from" (36). These moments of inertia represent risk and frustration, the language that refuses to come or people trapped in a dangerous situation. For the poet in these moments, the lack of movement is as powerful as the presence of it, the stasis something he wishes either he—or others in his poems—could escape from.

In 'Theory of Motion (2): The Sex Question' there is a return to the blurring of human and animal, opening with a "*headless chicken*", "*a puppet / made of meat*" (20). There is a passivity in the way that the poet describes sex, the repeated use of the endearment "darling" combined with stark images of "*wet ruins*", plucked birds and "*the meat's idiot dance*" (21). The poem is immersed in strange physical movements that draw together human and bird: "pull feathers / from your teeth" (20). There are several oxymorons, "the dumb singing / animal" (20) and the "*woodpecker in a room / made of glass*" (20) and the poem culminates with "*a feathered head in my mouth*" (21). This image has multifaceted connotations, from sexual acts (in which the word "mouth" might operate on several bodily layers) to the stifling of speech and sound. In 'Theory of Motion (5)', the image of the bird creates a sense of things moving with unstoppable force. The poet observes "a bird / thrash the glass surface of a lake, like it was trying / to break back before dark" (35), the movement both futile and ceaseless. The poem takes on a surreal quality as "childhood slams shut" and the poet finds themselves "sprawled in your kitchen / the animals moving through the blood in my / hands" (36). This poem is the culmination of the blurred lines between human and animal, as it ends with the poet questioning who the object of the text is supposed to be: "I / keep rewriting this story—who are you? A bird? / Or a boy? Or an image of a boy with frantic wings, / trying to outrun my changing weather" (36). The early suggestion that the poet is writing about a former lover becomes less clear as the poem segues into a narrative of the poet's own journey and his relationship with movement, both constantly in motion and simultaneously unable to

progress at all. The poet becomes both the runner and the pursued, evoking the sense of the past catching up with him no matter how hard he tries to escape.

Awkward-Rich's chapbook is so saturated with movement—reflected in the 'Theory of Motion' poems—it would be possible to take any number of individual texts to identify how the poet is specifically occupied with the body in motion. The 'Theory of Motion' poems might seem like the most obvious focus through which to analyse the function of movement in the chapbook as a whole, but in several cases the poems are so explicitly focused on movement that they need no critical analysis to discover the various ways the poems move or deal with motion. Each of the 'Theory of Motion' poems are also somewhat disparate. Although they share recurring imagery, metaphors and motifs, they have different structures and narrative journeys that makes analysing them side-by-side unwieldy and does the individual poems something of a disservice. When it comes to the physical movements undertaken by the reader—the requirement to flick back and forth through a text full of echoes—those movements are best captured by another series of poems, which I refer to as the 'Once' poems.

The chapbook includes five different poems, each titled 'Once', interspersed throughout the collection. It is through these short, sometimes abstract poems, that the discordant rhythms of the collection and the notion of constantly moving is best observed. The 'Once' poems are just one of the multiple series of poems that appear throughout the collection, as I have identified above. However, unlike the other series poems, they are structurally and thematically the most consistent. They not only share identical titles (which none of the other series poems do) but they are the most obviously connected in form and structure. They serve the broader narrative function of operating as beats or section breaks, with a faded print title in light grey that differentiates them from the other poems whose titles are all in black type consistent with the poems themselves. The 'Once' poems are each no more than ten lines, with the lines separated into couplets. They never occupy more than half a page, making them visually the shortest poems of the collection. It is these poems that enhance not only the sense of motion and rhythm to the chapbook as a whole—by offering a break or beat—but they also are the most effective when it comes to explaining how Awkward-Rich disrupts the chronology of the collection.

By interspersing the other work with the 'Once' poems and so explicitly marking them as different, reading them invites a looping back to the 'Once' poems that appear earlier in the collection. The 'Once' poems reflect the collection's drive to capture the sense of growing, changing, unstoppable movement and bodies in motion, embedding those features

in the core structure of the text and simultaneously resisting linearity. It is not clear, for example, that the 'Once' poems chart a linear temporal journey for Awkward-Rich, or if the 'Once' moments are, like some of the texts, temporally scattered, moving back and forth through time. The experience of reading the collection and the 'Once' poems heightens the sense of movement back and forth. The 'Once' poems embody the strategy I identified earlier of pulling the reader back and forth in the text, inviting a looping back and jumping forward. When they appear, the reader recalls the earlier 'Once' poems and experiences a desire to see how they fit together, if they offer a cohesive narrative when read as a set. This is a clever way of highlighting not only transgender literature's preoccupation with linear narratives but perhaps our own subconscious desires as readers for narrative cohesion, for chronology in a story. By resisting this, Awkward-Rich does not attempt to present movement in an easy to grasp linear fashion, but he invites the reader to linger over his work, which is saturated with bodily imagery that frequently evokes a visceral response from the reader. The first of the 'Once' poems that opens the collection reads as follows:

Once

   you wanted to be beautiful
so rooted in your wet

dropped the seeds down
there & waited

to become a forest of sun-
flowers grown huge

as your mother
until you opened

your jaw & a tiny stone
spilled out

               (Once, 3)

The poem uses the imagery of growing seedlings as a metaphor for the young transgender child. As previously identified in the first chapter in connection with Miles Walser's 'A Letter To My Vagina', the visuals of the garden and flowers serve as a metaphor for burgeoning adolescence. The line "so rooted in your wet" has connotations both of a seed

being nourished and female sexuality. In this poem, the poet longs to become the "forest of sun-flowers" but the seeds do not grow as expected. This subverts the trajectory of following a linear path from childhood to adolescence, a function of the work of other poets in this study, living outside Halberstam's notion of "straight time." Just as Gibson's 'Your Life' opens with the childhood bedroom, Awkward-Rich's collection also opens with the child. The reference to the open jaw has sexual connotations and connects to the orality of childhood, fertility and nourishment taking on an abstract quality as the "tiny stone" spills, rather than drops out of an open mouth, an open "jaw". The image of the feminine body haunts this text through these references to roots and the mother, "huge" in pregnancy, giving the metaphor of seedlings bodily, human features.

The bodily imagery and the use of the mouth in particular is one that is repeated in the first four of the 'Once' poems. In the first, there is the reference to "your jaw" (3) in the second "your lips   drank" (13) and in the third the subject of the poem "laid in bed for years / mouthing   *lawnmower* / *lawnmower*" (24). The fourth 'Once' poem begins with eating and ends with a reference to forgotten language that "couldn't stand the thought of moving / through so many / spoiled mouths" (34). The repeated imagery of the mouth echoes the fixation on the mouth in poems such as Lee Mokobe's 'Tuner of Silence', where the mouth is the focus of close-ups, the site of embodied speech. Mokobe uses the image of the mouth in his poem to represent speech and lack thereof, the losing and finding of his voice, the early fear of letting truths spill out like Awkward-Rich's unexpected "tiny stone." The textual references to mouths in the 'Once' poems represent a similar kind of inertia to the "barricades" Mokobe makes of his teeth. Awkward-Rich focuses on teeth as a barrier too, with wolf-like imagery, "I smile / I show her all my teeth" ('Theory of Motion [3]: MDMA', 28). From the tiny stone that falls out of an open jaw instead of words to the prone body in bed mouthing *lawnmower* and the forgotten language and spoiled mouths, the emphasis in the first four 'Once' poems is on thwarted speech, reflected in other poems in the collection: "You make mouths for the answers to crawl through" ('Essay on the Theory of Motion', 4). In the final poem of the 'Once' poem series, the reference is not to mouths, but to speech. "I admit you may have gone / too far, wanting / words to mean what they mean" (41). The last line of the final 'Once' poem simply reads, "you were given a name" (41). This poem serves the function of drawing the reader back to the other 'Once' poems, the ones that search for sound, language and meaning in words. Although there is speech at last in this poem, the poet is passive, the unspoken voice seemingly belonging to someone else as he is "given a name" (41). The passivity of the moment suggests that the name is not the one the poet chose for

himself, but rather one given to him that denoted an incorrect gender—or perhaps a wider extended metaphor for the labels that accompany identity.

The absence of language to describe oneself or the presence of language that is harmful has specifically queer connotations, but also for Mokobe, Tran and Awkward-Rich, raced connotations. The formation of language and the way it can be used both to liberate and marginalise is something a number of spoken word poets spend time considering. It is little surprise therefore that for a poet whose work has gained such traction specifically as spoken word, that language, speech and mouths are frequently referenced throughout the collected poems in *Transit*. Even the titles of the poems reflect a search for elusive words, 'Theory of Motion (4): Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries To Name It' (30). In no one text is the complicated relationship between lived transgender experience and language more acutely rendered than in the poem 'The Child Formerly Known As____' (32-3). The words are scattered on the page and blank spaces are left both for the name Awkward-Rich's father will not use: "each time he will not name you" (32) and for the deadname Awkward-Rich will not put on the page. The haphazard distribution of the words on the page emphasise the poet's internal conflict "with the father standing at the edge, calling & calling / for her & never you" (33). The poem ends:

    & in the end, isn't that what we all want?

    To not feel so
    split?   To carry an image of ourselves
              Inside ourselves & know exactly what we mean
      When we say I—   .   I—   .

    I—?

            (The Child Formerly Known As____, 33)

In this poem, the feeling of being split is emphasised by the structure of the poem with its incomplete sentences and scattered words. The words aren't placed entirely at random, rather they form disjointed lines, evoking the idea of redacted text. The dashes and the spaces between punctuation emphasise the lack of words. By ending on a question mark, the poet emphasises the impact having one's identity doubted or refused can have on a person's sense of self. In the absence of the name to be spoken and *not* spoken out loud, the movement of the poem becomes jagged, impacted by the frustration of sound, the abrupt end to speech, unanswered questions and the incompleteness of sentences that leave the reader to

fill in the blanks. The frustration experienced by Awkward-Rich is evoked by the reading experience, the absence of words that might be used to complete the sentences. It also serves to highlight the sense of something lost, reflective of Awkward-Rich's relationship with his father something he returns to in other poems, particularly 'Bridge': "The wet tar smell / the city carried, scraped & empty & you hate it— / your body. Or your father. Often / you cannot understand that difference" (9).

Together with the length of the poems and the title, there are further structural similarities shared by the 'Once' poems. The first line is indented, and the reader is encouraged to read the 'Once' in the title as part of the first line which flows directly from it. In the case of the first of the poems "you wanted to be beautiful" (3) reads as "Once / you wanted to be beautiful." This indentation is continued in the next two 'Once' poems where the title flows directly into the indented first sentence: "you wanted to be a boy" (13); "you wanted to be dead" (24). The first lines of first three 'Once' poems taken together trouble gender stereotypes, the feminine associations with wanting to be "beautiful" and the later desire to be a boy. The third of the poems, illuminating a desire to die, illustrates how quickly life can be cut short and the statistically higher risk of violence experienced by transgender people and black people in America. The sharpness of the 'Once' poems and their function as offering a beat of sorts captures this idea of something being cut short, of an abrupt ending.

The fourth poem differs a little by depicting an action as opposed to a desire: "you ate a field of snow / with a teaspoon" (34). The surreal image evokes the sensation of language being lost to the poet, the absurdity emphasised when the poet *becomes* the language that refuses to move through "so many spoiled mouths" (34). Although Awkward-Rich's chapbook deals with traumatic events including sexual abuse, racism, grief and the struggles faced by transgender people, he also has a light touch of humour that occupies many of his poems, even those with the most serious subject matters. The image of eating a field of snow with a teaspoon is typical of one of Awkward-Rich's quirky, observational methods that works so well in conjunction with the serious and stifling nature of frustration and stymied speech. The final 'Once' poem is structurally different to the others, with the last sentence rather than the first indented.

Once

I admit you may have gone
too far, wanting

147

words to mean what they mean
but who can blame you?

you were given a name

(Once, 34)

The poem is the only one of the 'Once' series that does not end on a couplet and the indentation occurs in the final line, instead of the first. The now familiar structure of the 'Once' poems is subverted. Because the indentation of the first line in the other poems invites the reader to imagine the word 'Once' slotting into the first sentence, in this poem the indentation leads the reader to slot the word 'Once' into the final, indented fifth line: "[Once] you were given a name" (34). The final 'Once' poem also differs from the others as it does not contain the image of the moving mouth, but it is concerned with speech, language and the giving of names. The requirement to go back to the title to achieve a sense of completion when reading the final line emphasises in one single text the temporal function of the 'Once' poems collectively. Just as this series of poems causes a beat or narrative break between the sections, it serves a recollective function of reminding the reader of the earlier poems in the series as they read the full collection. Through the subversion of the indentation structure in the final of the group, the reader is required to do a double loop-back with the final 'Once' poem, back to the other poems of the series and in the text itself, to go back to the title to finish the final sentence. Both the title of the poems—denoting a fixed moment in time—and the structure of each evoke the transitory nature of the text, the moving back and forth in the collection and the works themselves, with no specific point or destination.

The collection is saturated with movement. There are brutal, invasive lines like "music that throbs like a fist" ('Theory of Motion [3]: MDMA, 28'), references to the poet's grandmother whose "city moved / inside her like a drunk man's fist" (Theory of Motion [4]: Another Middle-Class Black Kid Tries To Name It, 30) and the "pretty / girl, doe-eyed beneath her first boy's / heaving engine" (Theory of Motion [1], 11). The most violent movements often have sexual connotations or relate to racially motivated violence. Other movements are much more ethereal but no less powerful, particularly in texts like the 'Invisible Girl' poems that evoke a sense of loss and haunting: "She makes it / all the way unseen, then drifts back / to her parents' doorway, such a lucky little girl / to be so unharmed, even they don't notice / she had gone" ('The Invisible Girl, 1996', 12). Softer movements like floating and drifting contribute to the fragility and intangibility of aspects of Awkward-

148

Rich's childhood, occupying texts which reference bodies haunted and ghostliness, something I described in the second chapter as the queer hauntology of transgender childhood. There are also explicit and abstract references to the movements involved with transition, "You moved into a boy / & the girl moved into misplaced language, into / photographs" ('Essay on the Theory of Motion,' 5) and multiple references to journey taking, vehicles and spaces associated with travel including bridges, roads and railway tracks.

These movements are captured in the repetition in the text, the grouping of poems into series' that share similar titles and/or similar structures and references that recall earlier imagery, pulling the reader between childhood, adolescence and adulthood as they read. In 'Theory of Motion (6) and Nocturne' (39), Awkward-Rich explicitly invites the reader to take a journey through the text:

> If I have to tell you, well, here's a gate
> opening in the poem. Here's an exit.
>
> Walk through.
>
> (Theory of Motion [6], Nocturn)

The bodily movements in the text are felt by the reader who experiences temporal disruption and searches for words and chronology when reading the collection. There is innate physicality in the texts, both in the bodily imagery and also in the structure that elicits a bodily response from the reader, taking them back and forth through the collection as they read, triggering memories, recollection and inviting engagement with the sentences are incomplete. Despite the lack of visual and audio features so inherent in performance poetry, Cameron Awkward-Rich's collection shares more similarities with the other work in this chapter than differences. He pays similar attention to the reading experience of the text in the round, similar to the way Gibson clearly considered the placement and structure of their songs in their audio album. *Transit* embodies transgender experience through temporal disruptions and bodily imagery in a way that cinematic visuals accomplish in Gibson and Mokobe's films. Despite the absence of visuals and audio, the reader has a sensory response to the text. Like a kinaesthetic response to movement on film and the senses engaged by audio, the written word of the performance poet is capable of eliciting its own sensory response. Through the structure of his text, Awkward-Rich enables the reader to understand

149

something of crossing and re-crossing of boundaries that he seeks to highlight, to offer a less linear, chronologically clear account of journey making and boundary crossing in a transgender context than much of the published memoir currently acknowledges.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the many ways in which movement is a fundamental part of transgender performance poetry online. To consider space and time in the fullest sense, I argue, it is necessary to consider how the poet moves through both, and how, in today's networked world, the mobile audience is itself constantly in motion. There is an innate physicality to all of the work I have analysed in this section: the moving mouth as embodied speech, the motions of the body on screen and on pages and the movements of the audience, the tactile nature of holding a mobile phone or a book and the way the viewer, listener or reader negotiates their way into, out of and around the poems. To hold a book of poetry and to read it is a physical act, one that requires the reader to turn the pages, to pause, stop, start and return to the book again as they wish. In critique of the Kindle and other e-readers, Jeff Staiger notes "[o]ne wants to handle a book…wants to take it in, grasp it with eyes and mind." (345). There is a physicality in reading, the sensory experience of the smell and texture of a book, turning the pages and navigating through a text. However, I would argue that mobiles offer a similarly tactile experience, as users navigate digital space through swipes of their fingers and touchscreens or location-sensitive smartphone capabilities. The physical acts undertaken by the audience are frequently enhanced in the ways I have demonstrated, by contemporary spoken word poets' methods for exploring movement from a variety of multimedia perspectives, offering different options for their audience to interact physically with their work.

Those kinds of movement in performance poetry demand more expansive development than analysing the body in motion on stage. The poet has the ability to emotionally move their audience, as discussed with regard to the affective nature of watching transgender narratives onscreen. These poets recognise how a viewer might be moved by connecting with characters and narratives onscreen, as demonstrated by the filmic strategies employed by poets including Mokobe and Gibson, and the kinaesthetic responses an audience can feel when watching a film with particular personal resonance. I have shown how the mobile audience becomes part of these media texts and in some cases part of the poems themselves, through films like Gibson's 'Angels of the Get-Through' and recordings of live

performance. Even in print, Awkward-Rich makes the audience or reader part of his journey, structuring his chapbook in a way that enables the reader to physically experience something of the movement back and forth, the non-linear path from start to finish that mirrors Awkward-Rich's experiences of moving through space and time. Across a variety of media, from digital art to film to recording to page, I have highlighted the many ways bodies move in the work of transgender performance poets and how the audience too is constantly moving, the sensory experience this work elicits, whether aural, visual, through community building and participatory engagement or in the physicality of reading a book of poetry that requires a turning back and forth of the pages.

Digital movement and the mobile audience invite new perspectives on sociality and community formation that challenge pre-Internet spatial logics. In his text *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (2007), Michael Bull who works with sound studies and technology, comments on the way handheld listening devices such as the iPod represent "a Western narrative of increasing mobility and privatisation" (2). The mobile, networked nature of our digital world both creates greater opportunities for movement than ever before, and simultaneously presents solutions that leave mobile users more disconnected from the public spaces they move through as they curate their own private, audio space. Bull describes how users experience a sense of magic and power by holding "the whole digital world in your hand" and the potential that offers for "unfettered auditory freedom" as people move "from home to street to automobile to office" (4). This enables mobile users to effectively soundtrack their lives, as Bull puts it, moving through the streets to their own curated playlists or preferred audio content. This ability to "dramatically reduce the wearer's perception of ambient sound" (Hagood 573) has been intensified with the popularity of noise-cancelling headphones that "use passive noise reduction, which blocks or muffles the passage of sound waves into the ear canal" adding "tiny microphones and signal processing to produce an out-of-phase copy of the aural environment in an attempt to negate its phenomenological existence" (Hagood 573). Putting on headphones whilst in transit is a part of daily public life, on transport, in the workplace, coffee shops and elsewhere. Noise-cancelling headphones allows the user to create their own personal space in public locations and whilst in transit, offering a "technological fabrication of physical and psychological space through the aural" or in Hagood's words, "soundscaping" (575)

These audio features—combined with the ability to watch a performance on screen through wireless connections to YouTube—enable the poems themselves to exist in transitory spaces that are both localised and privatised for the listener/viewer, and

simultaneously part of public space. The affective experience of being able to listen or view something which is in some cases deeply personal to the audience, represents one of the ways digital capabilities have transformed the performance poem, both in terms of the way the performance poet thinks about presenting their work and the experience of the mobile audience who encounter it. However, the ability to curate a private space in public locations through audio-visual mediums, or through reading a book which effectively shuts out other people, is something Hagood refers to as a spatial setting designed to appeal to "the rational neoliberal self" (586). No matter the cultural background of the wearer or the content of the media being listened to, Hagood argues that headphones, particularly noise-cancelling technology, casts "people who culturally value talk as noisemakers, discouraging sociality" creating a "technological way of being in the world that separates us from things - and people - before we have a chance to know whether or not we want them" (587). In my final chapter, I expand on some of the movements identified in this chapter—the mobile audience and the platforms the poets operate on, specifically YouTube—to consider some of these socio-political factors that warrant further investigation in an increasingly mobile, networked world.

This connects with the type of movement I discussed most briefly in this chapter: the connection between spoken word and political movement, or poetry's ability to *move* in an affective sense. In the final chapter, I bring these two components together, to consider the politics of transgender affect. These poets are not only thinking about movement in a literal sense, I argue—about the movement involved with travel and disrupting the transition journey narrative so intimately entwined with transgender literature, or the bodily movements of sound, speech, read a book, holding a mobile phone or the cinematic body—they are also thinking about movement in a political and affective sense.

Chapter Four: Non-Binary Affect and Precarious Lives

Introduction

Affect occupies a liminal place between the more commonly understood *feeling* and *emotion*. Studies of affect can often turn on everyday words, such as envy, irritation, anxiety (Ngai), paranoia, shame (Sedgwick), happiness, fear, disgust (Ahmed), depression, melancholy (Munoz), grief, mourning (Butler, Love), yet attempts to define affect remain a site of theoretical contradiction. For Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, affect is "integral to a body's perpetual *becoming*", it opens "the body to its indeterminacy" (Clough, 4), it troubles boundaries of space and time with a critical slipperiness that defies categorisation. The study of affect is approached in a multitude of ways across academic disciplines and sub-disciplines. As Marta Figlerowicz points out in her 'Affect Theory Dossier' (2012), "[t]there is of course no single definition of affect theory…[it] can be a sociology of accidental encounters…a psychoanalysis without end….[it] can also refuse psychoanalysis…it has encouraged intensely personal scholarship as well as scholarship that tries to do away with personality altogether" (3). This refusal to be boxed in by reductive definitions is akin to transgender experience, which, as I have already demonstrated, challenges fixed notions of space, time and linear motion. Affect "arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*" (Seigworth and Gregg, 1), it is "*cross-temporal*" (Belsten and Murphie, 146), and it is felt in those "intensities that pass body to body…visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing…persistent proof of a body's…immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms" (Seigworth and Gregg, 1). Studying the affective qualities of poetry written and performed by transgender poets allows for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of transgender people in twenty-first-century America. Understanding transgender affect and its relationship to performance poet enables us to see how these "visceral forces" manifest textually, and to see how these poets are affected through their daily encounters with the particular "obstinacies and rhythms" of the society they inhabit.

These encounters are not just limited to the way the poets experience America's physical landscapes. I have already shown how digital space informs the poems discussed in earlier chapters. In this chapter, I focus on several performance poems by non-binary poet Alok Vaid-Menon, who performs under the moniker ALOK, and a performance by non-binary poet Danez Smith of their 2018 poem 'i'm waiting on you to die so i can be myself',

uploaded to YouTube in 2021. Both poets have work which addresses movement through digital terrains including 'Funeral' (2019) by ALOK and 'a note on the phone app that tells me how far i am from other men's mouths' (2017) by Smith. Whether they are walking along the street, on a stage, immersed in online space or elsewhere, both poets frequently confront the affective experience of encountering and existing in the world around them. The approach of ALOK and Smith to affect demands the reader/viewer push beyond a surface understanding of what it means to be 'happy' or 'sad.' As ALOK puts it, "[t]he critics can write about fatigue, but a yawn makes the body more real. Performance makes life real" (2021). ALOK encourages us to think beyond the obvious, instead of signalling tiredness, the yawn is breathing, waking up, the radical act of being alive. The abstraction of affect with all its theoretical permeations cannot lessen the force of feeling that manifests in a person belonging to marginalised groups in a political, collective sense and on an individual, personal level. When discussing affect as concept, it is vital not to lose sight of the fact that the very nature of who a person is, and the communities they belong to, are essential to understanding the ways in which they are affected. Again, the physical components of a performance poem form an important part of this analysis, because the way the body expresses itself does not occur in a vacuum. As Sara Ahmed explains, "we may walk into the room and 'feel the atmosphere,' but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point" ("*Happiness*" 41). To yawn, to laugh, to weep—the physical responses to the way a transgender person encounters the world and the feelings those encounters bring to the forefront are not without context.

Exploring affect through the specific context of transgender performance poetry marks specific affective experiences. Although this creates a broader affective position, which could be thought of as 'trans affect', in this chapter I am focused on the experiences of non-binary poets and the 'non-binary affect' that arises through their encounters with physical and digital geographies. This final chapter also contextualises and brings together strands from earlier parts of this thesis. Having analysed how transgender performance poetry highlights queer experience of space, time and motion, this culminating chapter turns to how it *feels* to occupy these liminal spaces, to encounter time in a way that is fractured and discordant and to move through and be moved by America's geographies and digital spaces. This chapter also closes a critical loop through its focus on queer theory's affective turn. The first chapter dealt with queer theory's spatial turn, the second with the temporal turn and the third considered queer movement, noting throughout that space, time and motion are

inherently entwined. The context of queer theory's affective turn in this chapter demonstrates a further entanglement and overlap of these spatial, temporal and affective turns frequently. Despite the close relationship between these critical shifts, the affective turn also has its own critical history. In the mid-nineties, prominent queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick became increasingly preoccupied by explorations of human emotion. Sedgwick was drawn to the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins and co-edited a collection of Tomkins' writings in *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, published in 1995. Sedgwick felt the writings of Tomkins offered great potential, enabling queer theory to move away from deconstructive linguistics and "antiessentialist projects" (5) towards a deeper understanding of body and mind.

In working with affect, queer theory often "returned to the subject, the subject of emotion" as opposed to thinking of affect as "pre-individual bodily forces" (Clough 15). In queer theory some, although not all, of the most important contributions to studies of affect, including Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2014) and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) use the terms affect and emotion fairly interchangeably. This has led to debates regarding the specific kind of affect under investigation, often leading to attempts to categorise those individual affects as either 'positive' (happiness, joy, optimism) or 'negative' (grief, pain, paranoia, shame). In its earlier phases especially, queer theory has had a tendency to focus on so-called negative affect. Given the socio-political context of the 1980s and early 90s and the battles queer communities were fighting, this is perhaps of little surprise. Writing about queer theory's "affective histories", Kadji Amin comments that queer theory developed as an independent area of critical thinking in a time of specific "cultural contests…the genocidal Reagan administration's nonresponse to the AIDS crisis; the associated resurgence of violent homophobia; a newly performative, in-your-face, and media savvy form of activism" (178). This legacy of queer theory's preoccupation with negative affect has been a persistent point of academic debate, and one which has become important to studies of queer temporality. Optimism, for example, is both affective and forward-looking, training hopeful eyes on better times ahead. By contrast, explorations of the affective force of queer grief frequently demand an adherence to an affective past, involving an excavation of stigma and shame from the archives of history. Yet that idea of optimism as 'positive' and grief as 'negative' requires further unpacking. Grief has been harnessed to create some of the most prominent moments of queer activism in recent times. For HIV/AIDS activistst and the Black Trans Lives Matter movement, looking to the past isn't always a site of mourning, it can also signify "nostalgia

for a previously radical queer community" (Hilderbrand qtd. Amin, 182, 2016). By contrast, optimism is not always an unambiguous site of hope. As Lauren Berlant explains, "cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). In either case, it seems "[t]he here and now is a prison house" (Muñoz, 1). This position of the queer subject in a hostile world, with all their hopes, dreams and history, renders explorations of queer affect sufficiently complex that 'happiness' does not always equivocate to positivity and 'sadness' does not always have a wholly negative force.

Throughout this chapter, I use the terminology of positive and negative affect deliberately, in order to trouble that simplistic binary. Affect cannot be neatly categorised as wholly positive or wholly negative because the feelings, emotions and structures that influence affects are complex and multi-faceted. As Sedgwick puts it, "[a]ffects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions and any number of things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy" (19). The poetry by ALOK and Smith analysed in this chapter has been chosen because both poets grapple with queer, non-binary, non-white encounters with the world, and because their work encapsulates the complexity of affects evoked by those encounters and extends the community building discussed in the previous chapter. Whether the poet speaks about death, as in ALOK's 'Funeral' (2017; 2019) or Smith's 'fall poem' (2020), or returning to their hometown, as in ALOK's 'Bible Belt' (2019) and Smith's 'i'm going back to Minnesota where sadness makes sense' (2020), the feelings that arise during those moments are not easily compartmentalised. As I argued in previous chapters, experiences of space, time and movement as a transgender person are specifically queer. In this chapter, I show how ALOK's and Smith's poetry speaks to the affective and political force of these queer experiences. Affect is inherently political and interpersonal. As Brian Massumi points out, "to affect and to be affective is to be open in the world, to be active in it…It is the cutting edge of change. It is through it that things-in-the-making cut their transformational teeth" (ix). Poetry that is performed on public stages, physical and virtual, is by definition a way in which the transgender poet is open to the world with all its hostilities and the texts grapple with the affective nature of those encounters. It is precisely this vulnerability and openness that marks transgender performance poetry as a site of change, one with "transformational teeth", through the way it makes visible transgender art, creativity, experience, stories and feeling.

These poems *feel* queerly. They are written and performed in a way that evidences a deep exploration and recognition of self but simultaneously pays close attention to the

collective position and experiences of marginalised groups that are inherently shaped by a shared history and the present-day political landscape. In this chapter, I draw on the wide range of critical material on queer affect to investigate the theoretical and artistic complexities of trans and non-binary affect, the politics of queer feeling and the affective desire to reach, build, sustain and participate in community. Throughout this thesis, I have foregrounded the transformative potential of the queer visual aesthetics of transgender spoken word. I have argued that this kind of transmedia poetry represents a shift in how we consume and understand poetry; and I have highlighted the political urgency embodied by queer performance poets online. I have demonstrated the unique potential of these performance poets to cross, trouble and challenge not only binary and fixed understandings of gender, but also the notions of liveness and performance, spatiality, time and motion. Establishing queer theory's affective turn and the politics of feeling as useful sites of enquiry brings together the work undertaken in earlier chapters. As this chapter demonstrates, ALOK and Smith are prime examples of poets that live in a moment of heightened vulnerability and political charge. Their textual encounters document a deeply fractured America; and the nuances of transgender affect found there mark the crucial final step in this thesis. By interrogating the way transgender performance poetry is both affective and affects, I argue that this poetry of the digital age has a deep political relevance and offers an acute insight into transgender experience.

ALOK and the "dark, tender thrills" of negative affect

When asked about social change in an interview with Chelsea Ross in *Sixty Inches From Center*, ALOK says, "I actually don't know if it's going to be one cataclysmic event. I think that it's about cracks" (2018). ALOK goes on to describe their art as a way of creating "beautiful cracks", of disrupting the status quo and highlighting the instability of rigid social constructs including gender and time. ALOK's multimedia work captures how queer bodies move through the world and have a series of encounters in relatively nondescript spaces, a train, a doctor's office, a family home, in a way that brings visceral emotions to the surface, the "underground economy of rage" that ALOK references in their poem Trans/Generation (2019). These poems capture the *experience* of queer affect and explore the way feelings are shaped by individual identity, community and culture, hopes and history. With the family home in particular, the way ALOK speaks about that space is reminiscent of Tran's poetry, particularly 'Transplant' where the family photograph represents a particular site of violence.

For ALOK these spaces that might seem innocuous have the capacity to become places where "routine acts of violence" are "rendered invisible" as in the case of the family home. In a train carriage in the same poem, the hatred experienced by queer people manifests in an intensely public way. Despite this preoccupation with pain, death and violence however, the idea of leaving beautiful cracks in an ugly world is something that persists in an evocative way throughout ALOK's poetry. It is exhibited first in the way ALOK's work complicates negative affect, specifically grief and pain, and second, through the ephemeral quality of queer performance.

To take the first point, Heather Love's research offers a useful critical angle to understand the multitude of ways negative affect can become a site of resistance. Love's *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), which I discussed earlier, marks an important intervention in scholarship on queer affect and works primarily with negative affect. The ability to find liveness in pain and beauty in grief troubles ordinary, simplistic understandings of these feelings. This idea resonates throughout Love's work. In an interview several years after the publication of *Feeling Backwards*, Love referenced the "dark, tender thrills" (126) of negative affect. She explained how "shared experiences of exclusion" can provide something "profoundly consoling" (127) and suggests that rather than keeping us stuck in the past, understanding and working with negative affect is vital to the "politics of refusal" (129). The ability to refuse or resist assimilation in favour of a queer politics with more radical and intersectional potential is a necessity and can be achieved, Love argues, through a focus on negative affect. It gives people permission to recognise and vocalise the violence that perpetuates today, as well as encouraging them to question bland narratives of queer acceptance in favour of more complex engagement with the politics of assimilation that privileges only certain members of queer communities. The 'negative' descriptor that precedes certain affects carries its own connotations and can fail to capture the political potential of those dark, tender thrills which are present in much of ALOK's work with grief and pain.

My primary example in this section is the poem 'Funeral', printed in 2017 and uploaded to the Button Poetry YouTube channel in 2019. Through a close reading of this poem and reference to the wider body of ALOK's work, I explain how narratively the text is full of moments where instinctively oppositional kinds of affect coexist and are felt simultaneously, challenging any simplistic reading of queer feeling. The poem begins with death and a date. The poet, travelling to meet "a boy I like because his smile makes me feel a little less lonely" (0:00:04-8), is stuck on a stationary commuter train that has been delayed

by the suicide of a nameless man who jumped onto the tracks. The intertwining of death and dating marks queer love as a site of potential grief and ALOK's future encounter with the boy with the nice smile is an apathetic "working definition of love…in a city where it's possible to be surrounded by the warmth of over a million apartment lights and still feel cold" (0:00:09-18). This framing of a potential new relationship as something ambivalent is represented in the monotony of travelling through crowded city spaces segmented into compartmentalised, rigid, boxes, such as train carriages, handheld devices and identikit apartment blocks. As the poet moves through the nameless American city, the man's death causes everything to stop and the group of individuals on the train are "forced to look up from our screens" (0:00:20-24). As Michael Bull puts it, drawing on Sennett, "we have become increasingly immersed in our own concerns, passively moving in silence, looking but neither understanding nor recognising the 'differences' that confront us" (278). It takes death to jolt people out of their digital worlds and back to reality: "the lights turn off and it's one of those rare moments where we're forced to look up from our screens and remember we exist outside of them." Bull describes people on mobile phones in public spaces as engaging "the right to be left alone in silence" (276) and the individuals on the train exercise that right. They become reflective of a society that is 'shocked' or 'stopped' by something that tears them away from their own interiority, but that initial pause is only fleeting for those who have the privilege to turn away.

In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler writes about the way experiences of grief and mourning are intrinsically shaped by identity and resulting marginalisation and oppression. Butler explains that belonging to a marginalised group fundamentally alters experiences of grief, arguing that for a person belonging to a marginalised group, grief becomes a collective act of public mourning, a politicised, shared affective response to the vulnerability of marginalised identities and their greater proximity to death and violence. Butler explains how this experience of grief can forge a greater sense of community, writing "when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us" (22). Such moments, Butler says, form "the basis of a profound affinity" (33). In 'Funeral' however, there is no such affinity for the poet because there is no tie between them and the other passengers. This is the poem of an outsider who exists in the same space as people that they do not have the capacity to reach: "[t]o live in America is to live in a constant state of illusion, is to be thirty people underground on a train unable to hold one another and weep" (0:02:10-19). The poet's gender, race and visible

159

queerness enables them to find transformative potential in shared grief that the other passengers on the train do not recognise. For them, the man's death quickly becomes an inconvenience: a woman "complains" and the poet comments with no small amount of sarcasm "how selfish he was to delay others with his death" (0:01:02-5). The poet, by contrast, can identify with the man's death: "we've been taught to apologise for our pain, to erase our hurt, to numb our violence, to deny that we may have difficulty waking up in the morning that we may see a pill coming in the place of the train" (0:03:51-04:04). This kind of identification captures something Butler explores in *Precarious Life*, the understanding that "my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours" (22). The poet experiences that moment of understanding, whereas the other passengers are unable to do so: "to live in America is to blame the dead for their own death not the country who created the condition" (0:02:55-03:02). Nobody in the train carriage expresses any empathy for the man, and nobody exhibits any understanding of the circumstances that might have led him to his untimely death. To loosely paraphrase the quote from Ahmed that I cited in the introduction to this chapter, the poet and the other passengers approach the event from different angles. They all have the same encounter, but their affective responses are different because of their relationship to the world.

For ALOK, the fact that the human cost is dismissed so easily by the passengers on the train speaks to the state of America: "[t]his is America where pain is a ritual we are required to conduct in private, an elaborate symphony on mute" (0:01:40-47). It is America that silences the pain of the marginalised, that demands mourning be undertaken in silence, "this is America where bodies fall on streets like discarded leaves only touching accidentally as we all tumble onto these cities we grew up with" (0:01:16-25). The violence of silence and the ability to forget and discard is interwoven throughout ALOK's poetry, appearing most specifically in 'Trans/Generation' where they point to their own cultural heritage as complicit in silencing voices from groups that experience oppression. In 'Trans/Generation' the poet explains "you see in my culture we have learned that there is no difference between 'silence' and 'violence.' We inherit both from our men" (0:01:26-32). The poem also echoes the line quoted above from 'Funeral', that marks grief as a private ritual, through a reference to the family photograph as "a ritual we do in public" (0:00:13-16). This highlights the stifling nature of those parts of life society deems acceptable for public consumption and those parts that must be silenced, buried, closeted. ALOK extends the oppression of silence beyond the silenced individuals from marginalised groups who are unable to express their grief. The narrator in 'Funeral' wonders if they must "sit there in silence until we can forget just how

much death is required in the soil to birth such beautiful denial" (0:02:20-9) and asks "[h]ow many ghosts does it take before a cemetery can call itself a country?" (0:02:51-3). These lines demonstrate how there is also violence in the refusal to see that grief exists. The ability to look away from grief is explicitly evoked in the poem on a more subtle level by the fact the victim of suicide remains unnamed. The reader/viewer never learns his story and as such, he becomes another death unnoticed by the majority in a sprawling American city.

The silencing of grief is also captured through the poet's futile attempt to find human connection. The poet tries to "text the boy above ground" (0:02:31-2) as they remain in their casket-like train carriage, the site for an apathetic funeral of strangers. Touch eludes the poet, who wants to reach out to their fellow passengers but is unable to do so. In the case of the woman who becomes frustrated by the inconvenience of the delay, ALOK responds: "I want to hug her, say 'remind me the purpose of arm.' I want to love her, say 'remind me the purpose of heart'" (0:01:07-15). These bodily references evoke a moment of humanity, the sense that it is the ability to use arms to hold and hearts to feel love, compassion, grief that makes us human. The woman's cold reaction to the man's death carries dehumanising force which renders the man what Butler would call an "unmarkable" or "ungrievable" life (35). We can compare this to another poem by ALOK, 'Bible Belt', which also grapples with the idea of people striving for a human connection. Much like 'Funeral', the poem takes place in a room full of strangers, only in the case of 'Bible Belt' the setting is a doctor's surgery. As the poet waits to see somebody about their back pain, they take an observational role and comment: "I remember that the chiropractor is simply a place to be touched…to go through the ritual of allowing a man to caress you again as if he cares" (0:00:34-43). This apathy is an echo of the boy with the nice smile in 'Funeral', where the poet simultaneously searches for human connection and disavows it as something that can only bring temporary respite from the hostile realities of moving through the world.

The importance of touch is something Ahmed writes about in connection with the affective nature of pain in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). Ahmed explains that "experiences of dysfunction (such as pain) become lived as a return to the body, or a rendering present to consciousness of what became absent" (26). Pain can be an embodied form of grief, the way the body *feels* when grief is particularly acute. This physical embodiment of grief is often depicted on screen, through retching, screaming, bodily curls and contortions. In several of their poems, ALOK describes physiological and psychological encounters with pain in a way that is intrinsically connected with the body itself: "this is the first time in a long time I have been forced to publicly mourn death and there is something

161

beautiful about that…what if we allowed the pain to fill us a little bit less empty?" ('Funeral', 0:04:27-38). This image of filling a body with pain recurs in 'Bible Belt', where the poet comments "[m]y grandmother tells me that young boys like me aren't supposed to carry so much pain in our bodies" (0:01:08-15) and "it would appear my doctor regards pain as an exception…not the only thing that reminds you that you have a body" (0:02:27-44). Ahmed explains this by saying "[t]he affectivity of pain is crucial to the forming of the body as both a material and lived entity" ("*Cultural Politics*" 24). Ahmed uses the example of stubbing one's toe as a moment of sharp pain that reminds the person of that specific part of their body. For the transgender performance poet, gender dysphoria occupies the body in its entirety, which is why ALOK's poetry so often articulates pain as something that fills the body to capacity.

Of course, the direct cause of this pain is the society the transgender poet inhabits; and the second part of this chapter deals more explicitly with the affective impact of spatial settings as opposed to encounters with people. Although there may be intimate, personal, bodily components to that pain, it is the body's encounter with a hostile world that seeks to box in and compartmentalise that brings the pain most acutely to the forefront. Ahmed writes that it is "through…painful encounters between this body and other objects, including other bodies, that 'surfaces' are felt as 'being there' in the first place" (24). It is people who become those objects intensifying ALOK's pain. From close family to strangers, the people ALOK encounters in their poetry have the capacity to cause pain through silence, implicit condemnation, and direct violence. Ahmed challenges the notion that pain is a solitary experience. She criticises the "over-investment in the loneliness of pain" and suggests that "while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private" (29). Whilst ALOK's pain is personally, individually experienced, it is the people who surround the poet who come to represent the hostile forces of hegemonic structures that renders ALOK's pain public. In 'Funeral' the poet must hide their grief, yearning for something more from the people surrounding them, captured by the frequent repetition of "I want to." In 'Trans/Generation' the poet's pain is memoralised by the "public ritual" of the family photograph and the poet captures the bodily impact of that pain by asking "can I show you what it means to wear a body as a wound?" (0:02:32-5). In 'Bible Belt', pain operates on a physical and psychological level and the doctor demands answers, questioning "how it's possible for something to feel so irrevocably broken and yet still be working" (0:02:19-26). This poem is a vehicle for exposing how those who live in normative bodies experience pain differently and the disconnect between queer and non-queer experience.

It is in 'Bible Belt' that ALOK articulates the bodily persistence of transgender pain most acutely, saying "[i]t never stops. Most of the time it is dull, quiet and normal. It sinks into us so deeply that we can no longer tell the difference between our depression and our oppression…between our sin and our skin" (0:04:22-43). In writing about pain, Ahmed frames it as something that makes us consciously aware of the body. For ALOK pain is always present. It always between conscious and unconscious, muddled with other affects that arise through their daily encounters with the world. It is, as they say in 'Bible Belt', 'the norm'. To *feel* pain, when pain is always present, requires an encounter of particular potency. The placid delivery of 'Bible Belt' and 'Funeral' exhibits the poet's weariness with a world where pain is constant. The understated performance captures the fatigue of endless battle, of continuous working against a hostile system. It takes extreme moments for the poet to experience pain, when so much pain is already present: the death of a transgender woman who walks in front of a truck; the man who jumps in front of an oncoming train; a body described as "broken." Yet somehow, amidst the pain and grief, those beautiful cracks appear. ALOK takes the reader/viewer on a defiant journey that finds something "beautiful" (Funeral) in moments of grieving. As they put it in 'Trans/Generation' they are on an endless journey to "reclaim our bodies" where "transgender is not just an identity it is a tactic of survival" (0:03:38-42). Those dark, tender thrills can be found amidst and in the explorations of negative affect and it is through the performance of the poems that ALOK makes those moments stick.

ALOK describes performance as "moments of episodic art that are ephemeral…you go to my show for an hour and it sticks with you for life" ("*Sixty Inches From Centre*"). José Esteban Muñoz produced influential research into the ephemera of performance, the "traces, glimmers, residues and specks of things" (2008, 10). This work draws on the "structures of feeling", an idea first coined by Raymond Williams in 1954 that is frequently deployed by theorists working with affect. Muñoz explains that, for Williams, "art conveys, translates and engenders structures of feelings—tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being 'solid'…a *process* of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art" (10). It is these structures of feeling that Muñoz returns to time and again in his scholarship, as inextricably entwined with investigations of queer performance, space, time, history and futurity. Muñoz argues that "[e]phemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored within the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have

been lived" (10). This is how ALOK approaches their performances, thinking about the ways in which those ephemeral traces of lived, queer experience can resonate with the viewer and stay with them long after the performance has concluded. For ALOK and Muñoz, queer performance is evidence. It leaves its traces and glimmers, indelible marks that evidence the existence of queer lives that have been pushed into the shadows.

These traces are of course even more apparent when working with digital space as well as physical performance. The digital poem is effectively archived, available for repeat viewings until it is removed either by the platform, the poet or the channel hosting the poetry. The affective response of the audience is captured in the 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' often expanded upon in the comment section. The performance poem and its viewers leave digital footprints. The poem it is searchable, traceable and theoretically accessible to those who wish to find it. Micha Cárdenas explains that algorithmic bias is felt through the regulation of content online, suggesting that "[w]hile visibility is managed by the algorithms of social media…affect is the excess that seeps through these attempts at management. The affects of outrage and melancholy travel through social networks today in the stories about the murder of black and trans people of colour" (169). The way information travels online that captures—at times in graphic detail—the trauma of queer and/or racially motivated violence creates further vulnerability for creators and activists like ALOK, who encounter multiple hostilities, both direct and indirect, as a consequence of travelling through social networks.

This connection between visibility, vulnerability and trauma, is something Ann Cvetkovich explores, making a compelling case for "the presence and promise of cultural formations that bring traumatic histories into the public sphere" (16). ALOK addresses the implications of being visibly gender variant in physical and online performance spaces in a video interview on 'The Complicated Reality of Being Trans and Indian-American.' In the segment, ALOK recalls performing poetry in Kerala, India, and describes the nerves they felt standing on stage in a dress for the first time in front of their family. ALOK says, "there's this myth in the West that performance is where we go to pretend to be something we're not, but what I've learned in my life is that performance is actually one of the only spaces we can be honest anymore" (*HuffPost* 2018). For ALOK, the visibility that comes with performance has the potential to instigate change, it is a vital space for authenticity and sharing queer experience, but it can also lead to hostile encounters with a world that is ill-prepared for change. As they put it in their poem 'Bible Belt', "[t]he thing about this body is you will use words like anxiety and depression to diagnose this pressure instead of race and gender"

(2019). Although ALOK undoubtedly recognises the political potential in making gender transgression publicly visible, their work keeps "trauma…unrelentingly in view" and "falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics" (Cvetkovitch, 16-17). Through performing in online and physical space, the transgender poet consistently encounters what Butler describes as "the social vulnerability" (20) of their bodies. The titular idea of "precarious life" that drives Butler's thesis captures the degree to which immigrants, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, Indigenous populations, Black and other people of colour live in greater proximity to violence. This, in turn, speaks to trauma which "digs itself in at the level of the everyday" (Cvetkovitch, 20), a precarity and vulnerability that manifests in the fabric of American society and is felt in the most innocuous moments.

There is much at stake when a person who experiences greater proximity to violence moves through the world, as their encounters with the people they share space with and the places they inhabit will be shaped by the risks posed to them. Love explains that "if you are trying to understand and address situations of injustice, it's important to be able to describe the ways that everyday experience is structured by inequality" (126). Furthermore, she highlights that the hostilities queer people experience are not a thing of the past. In responding to the critique of queer theory's over-investment in negative affect, Love says: "[t]here's a deep desire to see a lot of the old, bad feelings…disappear…but I think they are very much with us" (127). ALOK's work explores this present-day fear that confronts transgender femmes of colour arising from transphobic, gender-based and racially motivated violence. In their chapbook *Femme in Public* (2017), they question: "what would it look like to leave the house and not be afraid of being bashed?" (3) and plead "[p]romise me you won't bury me a man" (19). These statements in their poetry demonstrate that ALOK is fully aware of the vulnerability of the performance poet during physical poetry readings, but they have also spoken publicly about the challenges with being openly gender non-conforming on a virtual stage. As I argued in earlier chapters, audio-visual performances by transgender poets hosted on platforms such as YouTube occupy a complicated space. On the one hand, they are spaces of catharsis, community building and organising, and on the other, they provide a largely unregulated platform for those seeking to express hate-fuelled disgust at the sight of visibly queer, gender nonconforming bodies.

The way people from marginalised groups are routinely attacked online is something ALOK frequently calls attention to on their Instagram account, with selected insights into the kind of messages they receive daily, both via direct message and in the comments on their posts. To one such comment, ALOK responded "each insult is an invitation to quicksand and

i refuse to take the bite. i would rather soar than sink. i would rather thrive than self-sabotage. here on this unruly earth in my unruly body in our unruly beauty" (2020). These hostile online encounters are used by ALOK as an opportunity to raise awareness of the constant scrutiny and policing of Black, brown and queer bodies, a critique of the need to regulate, categorise and define gender and a reminder of the "unruly beauty" that comes with a refusal to be boxed in by normative systems and structures and colonial definitions of gender. Stylistically, ALOK's fashion is often at odds with the muted notes of their delivery. Bright, bold colours, gaudy, statement jewellery and high, neon boots are joyful expressions of self that can often jar with the stories ALOK's poetry tells and the experiences they share (Fig 28). Their flamboyant and arresting fashion keeps the eye on the poet and the fact that the poet can make that visual connection with the audience has enormous transformative potential. At the conclusion of their poem 'Funeral', ALOK demonstrates an intense yearning for those on the train to acknowledge that they have witnessed a death and to share their grief. They say, "we might wonder what it would finally feel like to have someone empathise with our struggle…what it might feel like to hold the captive attention of a funeral of strangers" (0:04:09-17). Performance provides precisely that "captive attention…of strangers" and it is through the performance of the poem and their attention to visual details that ALOK can articulate the grief that has been stifled in the narrative of the poem itself.

Fig 28

Through sharing their poem and the use of the collective address, the poet is afforded a space to communicate grief to an audience of captivated strangers, a community who can retrospectively mourn with the poet. The 'Funeral' in question takes place during the delivery

166

of the poem itself: the live audience are the funeral attendees and ALOK's poem is the eulogy. Although the audience is silent throughout the poem, the applause at the end offers something of the empathy missing from the individuals on the train and as such the performance poem holds space for remembering and grieving "precarious" and "unmarkable" lives. The function of the poem as eulogy and the live and online viewers as gathered in collective mourning at the titular 'Funeral' is accomplished through ALOK's use of the collective address, and it is in the moment of performance that communal mourning can take place. It is no accident that it is also at this moment that the mode of ALOK's delivery changes. As I mentioned above, both 'Funeral' and 'Bible Belt' have an unusually quiet, measured delivery, in contrast to other poems of ALOK's including 'Daddy Issues' and 'Trans/Generation' which are more frenetic. Because of the slow pace of the rest of the poem, the increase in tempo and volume is particularly noticeable when it occurs in 'Funeral': "sometimes silence feels like the highest pitch of screaming" (0:04:23-26). The increased tone becomes explicit resistance to the demand that queer grief and pain remain silent. While on the train the poet must "remain silent" (0:04:44) unable to fully articulate their grief amongst the strangers that inhabit that space—"I will not have a word for the type of loss so distant that it is intimate" (0:04:54-05:03)—but in the performance of the poem, ALOK can express their grief and pain openly, through their words and the fluctuation in their tone. It is here that the status of the spoken word poem is so important as it is the act of delivering the poem itself that enables ALOK to disrupt America's demand for silence.

In the context of their access to an audience of captivated strangers, the way in which the performance poet captures wider, political preoccupations whilst not purporting to speak for all transgender experiences can be challenging. Butler questions how "a collective" deals with "its vulnerability to violence" (42) and notes that "[a]lthough we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own" (26). When addressing proximity to violence there is a tension between a desire to seek personal safety and security on the one hand and endangering more marginalised identities, on the other. Even in a collective—the very broad umbrella of LGBTQ+ being a good example— there will be a multitude of different people within it who might experience violence on multiple socio-economic levels. Stryker and Aizura explain that recognising that the "differences in opportunity and vulnerability" experienced by transgender people "map starkly onto the intersections of structural racism, gender inequality and neoliberal economics" ("*Studies 2*", 6). ALOK has spoken about this in interviews, resisting the use of

the word 'issues' as unhelpful in its implication that transgender experiences are a monolith. Yet there is a tension in that resistance.

The platform of the transgender performance poet can give a voice to the voiceless, it can disrupt the silence and make precarious lives markable, grievable. Although the transgender performance poet can only speak to their own experience, many, including ALOK, will strive to raise awareness of broader concerns. For example, ALOK addresses hierarchies in LGBTQ+ communities in 'Funeral', through recalling a conversation with a "liberal" who "tells me that I only dress this way because I want to be bashed" (0:03:32-4). In that case, the poet responds with a scathing: "I tell him that the same women who started his movement are still being murdered in the same cities he's getting married in, calling it momentous and he gasps and says, 'this happens here, in America?'" (0:03:34-50). In other poems, the poet is not at liberty to engage in a direct conversation in the narrative of the poem. The suicide of a transgender woman in Ohio marks the start of 'Bible Belt' and the poet cannot tell her story, only their own: "This is the town where I almost kill myself at thirteen…your bible belt wrapped around my neck" (0:02:44-59). However, the poet is in a conversation of sorts. Whether they recount a conversation or bring their own experiences to their poems, the audience becomes part of the discourse.

The audience/viewers are also the receptive listeners who experience the ephemera of performance. They are the ones who have the ability to take the queer stories and the traces and glimmers of queer performance out into the wider world, through their conversations and actions. For those who attend or view the performance, queer art is designed to leave its indelible, affective mark. In a traditional sense, the audience of a live performance might discuss it with friends or family but in a digital sense the potential for dissemination is wider still, through the use of the viewer's own digital platforms that can expand the audience with each new click, reblog, like, subscribe and so on. For ALOK, it is the liveness of performance and the captivated audience that renders performance poetry so powerful. Print is not always accessible to everyone and in these short snapshots into an encounter on a train, in a doctor's waiting room or walking down the street, that the queer affect of moving through a hostile world that silences, shames and hurts with relentless, oppressive force is most neatly captured. The visceral nature of performance poetry leaves these "beautiful cracks" on physical stages and digital terrains, the ephemera evidence of queer lives. The power of speech is in the disruption of silence and bodily gestures and the vocalisation of grief and pain becomes a refusal to mourn quietly. With each new poem and every new performance, the cracks and fissures web out and reach new viewers who can experience the dark, tender

thrills of negative affect. Through their art and their style, ALOK consciously appreciates the power of being visible, explaining "expression is truth" and actively seeking to disrupt the narrative that for queer, nonbinary people of colour, "we're only salvageable, that we're only safe, if we are invisible" ("*Sixty Inches From Centre*"). Through performance poetry ALOK brings urgent attention to the social vulnerability of nonconforming bodies and does so joyful, vivacious dress that juxtaposes with the way their work is frequently an articulation and pain and expression of grief. Yet that too is important, in a world that all too frequently seeks to silence and stifle the grief and mourning of marginalised communities. To dismiss negative affect as something that receives too much attention in queer art is to further silence those who find radical potential in using their hostile encounters with the world to instigate change.

Community building and catharsis deferred

Danez Smith, a Black, queer, non-binary, HIV positive poet, is one of the foremost names in contemporary American poetry. Of all the poets in this study, they are undoubtedly the best known, having found enormous success and awards through spoken word and pring. Smith does not have their own YouTube channel, but their spoken word performances can be found on many of the big performance poetry channels, including Button Poetry, Slam Find and All Def Poetry. YouTube provides a platform for countless videos of other creative interpretations of Smith's work. Some individual users read Smith's poems and others create more transformative works. A short film by Jovan Todorovic which takes Smith's 'You're Dead America' (2017) as the script offers a dystopian vision of the failure of the American Dream (Fig 29) and a performance of 'Alternative Names for Black Boys' directed by Sentell Harper and performed by young actors from the Success Academy Charter School (Fig 30) offers another example. Smith is an active social media user, with a Twitter account that has over 55,000 followers, and their poetry is widely shared and praised online. Together with their extensive spoken word catalogue, Smith has three print collections, *[Insert] Boy* (2014), *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) and *Homie* (2020), all of which have received critical acclaim, especially the multi-award-winning *Don't Call Us Dead*. In this section, I examine the ways Smith's texts work at multiple intersections of multiple affective contradictions, with poems juxtaposing seemingly oppositional affects—joy with grief—and troubling those binaries through a refusal to adhere to normative structures of feeling. In the virtual spaces that Smith's performance poetry inhabits, the affective qualities of their poetry can be keenly felt

by the viewer. As Syndey Tyber notes, affect can "pass body to body, but it can pass between virtual reality and concrete reality as well" (85). There is a complexity in the affective qualities that are evoked through Smith's powerful poems and there is a complexity and nuance too, as they are rarely if ever straightforward. There is also another kind of affect in play, and that is the affect the poet experiences through audience engagement and critical response, which I consider further below.

Fig 29

Fig 30

The print collections *Don't Call Us Dead* and *Homie* both contain a multitude of visceral encounters with hostile people and spaces, but they also demonstrate a close attention to friendship, community building and Black, queer joy. *Don't Call Us Dead* captures the justifiable anger amongst marginalised communities a year into Donald Trump's presidency and Smith's own challenges grappling with being diagnosed as HIV positive in their early twenties. Three years later, in 2020, *Homie* also captures a pivotal moment in time, published in the midst of a global pandemic and a series of key protests organised through the Black Lives Matter movement. Reading *Don't Call Us Dead* and *Homie* alongside one another gives a clear insight into Smith's vivid and recognisable style, the creative use of form, the immersion of the poet and poems in digital space and the deep investment in history and community. It is also notable that both collections were published in relative proximity to one another, during an era where politicians capitalised on the "politics of fear" with a "carte blanche for generating anxiety, agitation, and uncertainty among American citizens" (Beardsworth 357).

Although this "affective politics", as Adam Beardsworth terms it, inhabits much of Smith's work across both collections, the affective qualities of each collection marks one of the more noticeable differences between them. It is the mood and sentiment of each, those "incremental shimmer[s]" (Gregg and Seigworth 11) that manifest differently which speaks to the complexity of queer affect and non-binary lives. To take the broad ideas of 'positive' and 'negative' affect, *Don't Call Us Dead* is more closely aligned with negative affect and *Homie* with positive affect. Although both have complexities and nuances that trouble that rudimentary starting point, *Don't Call Us Dead* is raw and painful, exhibiting righteous anger at the legacy of trauma and grief. Critics have described it as "polemical" (Beardsworth 375) in the way it engages with "the violence against racialized and indigenous populations in the US by forging an active, immediate connection between poetic speech and political position" (Hunter 615). It captures Smith's yearning for a different world as captured in 'summer, somewhere' that gives the collection its title: "if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call / us dead, call us alive someplace better" (3). By contrast, *Homie* is an intimate testament to friendship and community, a space of resilience and celebration, a place, perhaps, of optimism.

Smith's text 'my poems' from *Homie* begins: "my poems are fed up & getting violent. / i whisper to them *tender tender bridge bridge* but they say *bitch ain't no time, make me a weapon!*" (64). This short excerpt from one of Smith's poems captures the mood of the collection, which is playful, humorous and intimate yet does not hold back from addressing

171

the trauma and grief of anti-Black violence with the repeated refrain of "i poem" connoting Smith's visceral response to the people and institutions that uphold white supremacy: the "judge", "capitol", "senate", "nazi", "ten police", "mayor", "men who did what they know they did", "a racist woman" and "the president" (64). Through their work, Smith uses bold, poetic strategies to honour friendships and Black, queer community past and present and entwines those intimate moments with direct condemnation of the systemic racism that pervades in twenty-first century America. Parul Sehgal in her *New York Times* review of *Homie*, which she describes as "like a flower fighting through concrete…a paean to friendship", comments on Smith's dexterity in working with poetic form. In particular, Sehgal identifies the poem 'how many of us have them' (5—7), where the size of each stanza increases by a line as the poem progresses, "a form I'd never seen before…Smith calls this…a 'dozen'" (Sehgal). This attention to poetic form is best observed in Smith's print collections, The typed text with its moments of italicisation, creative use of page space and formalistic elements enhance Smith's work. The visual aesthetics of Smith's print poetry deconstructs the stage/page binary, capturing the movement, energy and directness of spoken word. Smith's prominence in the spoken word space helps a reader familiar with their work read their print poetry in their distinctive style. Textually, through form, frequently a lack of punctuation and run-on sentences, Smith captures the temporal pace of spoken word and moments where the text 'spills' in *Don't Call Us Dead*'s 'litany with blood all over' (49). This becomes a textual replication of those crescendo moments of spoken word when a poem soars into the live performance space (Fig 31).
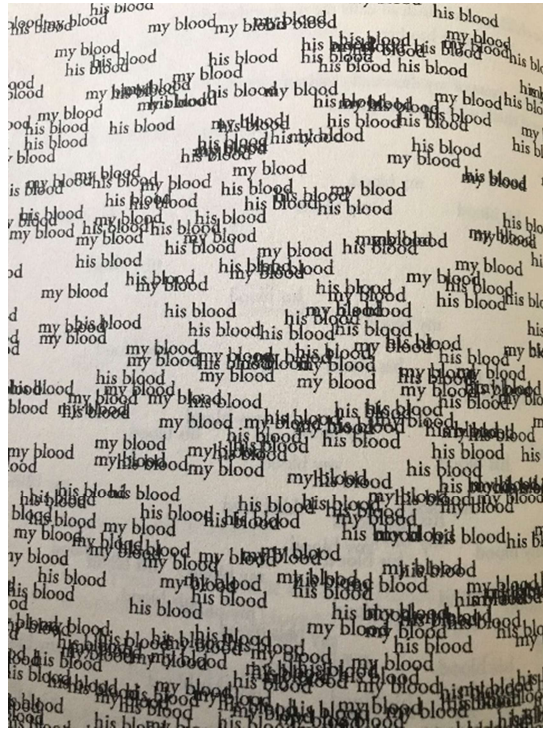
Fig 31

Unlike other poets of this study, Smith is less explicitly focused on gender and their non-binary experience, but the body of their work nevertheless captures the intersections between gender and race. C. Riley Snorton emphasises this relationship in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), arguing that both Black and trans experience are inextricably entwined and can be better understood through drawing out their interrelationship and "fungibility." Snorton suggests that "blackness finds articulation within transness" (8), positioning "gender instability as part of the history of blackness itself" ("*Trans** 37). Smith's work captures this legacy of Black, queer, trans existence and their multimedia success is also a vital step towards increased visibility of non-binary creatives, who often escape critical attention. Smith's focus on sexuality is also a vital component of their work, through making explicitly visible Black, queer sex and desire, in poems including 'elegy with pixels & cum' ("*Don't Call Us Dead*" 48) and 'all the good dick lives in Brooklyn Park' ("*Homie*" 54). With both of these poems there is a visceral sense of violence that occupies the texts and these intermingle with other poems about love, sex, desire and loss. This juxtaposition of desire and sex with the air of tragedy and loneliness is an example of Smith working against straightforward depictions of love, sex and sexuality, exploring the messiness of queer desire through references to bodily fluids and sharp, witty, sentences such as "fuck me like a loan" ("*Homie*" 54). Reed comments that "[a]gainst the post-racialized

suturing of queerness to shame, abjection and death, we must extend the language for refusing to sever our greatest pains from our deepest pleasures" (61). In their writing about sex, Smith exhibits a similar refusal to divorce sex and desire from the broader structures and systems that inflict trauma on Black, queer bodies. The body is intimately, inescapably present in sexual acts and as such, the violence that the Black, queer body experiences also occupies that poetic space.

Queer desire permeates Smith's three print collections, but also speaks to their investment in community and the literary history that preceded them. The framing of Black, queer desire as a radical act was a preoccupation of Black, gay poets including Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, who wrote during the HIV/AIDS crisis, as discussed in my introduction. In depicting such desire explicitly and unapologetically, Smith's work demonstrates the influences of Hemphill and explicitly raises the connection Smith feels between themselves and the poets of the 1980s and 1990s, on account of Smith's own HIV positive status. For example, in 'gay cancer' Smith lists the names of poets Hemphill and Melvin Dixon, using their first names only in an intimate address, concluding the poem "my wrist to my ear / you're here" ("*Homie*" 60). For Smith, these creative connections become embodied through the "blood's gossip", "cum cussed" and the beating of the pulse in their wrist. The intimate bodily and sexual connection evoked by Smith speaks to a precise site of HIV/AIDS trauma that "makes itself felt in everyday practices and nowhere more insidiously or insistently than in converting what was once pleasure into the specter of loss" (Cvetkovich, 163). Through the language of their poem, Smith refuses to sanitise same-sex desire and the bodily pleasures it elicits. The poem draws on past creatives and the ballroom houses "Saint Laurent…Xtraveganza" of Harlem ball culture who were also decimated by HIV/AIDS and engages bodily functions, focusing on the sites of the beating pulse and the places of the body associated with blood flows: "it grew / in me too" ("*Homie*" 60). Reed explains that "shared histories of struggle generate vital embodied forms of meaning-making" (52). Through their references to these poets and queer communities who lost their lives to government neglect, anti-Blackness and queerphobia, Smith engages in a form of communal mourning.

However, Smith's community building is not without its challenges and complexities, due to their shifting relationship with their audience of viewers and readers. Smith has been clear that *Don't Call Us Dead*—and its intended audience—was largely misunderstood through the address of one of his most successful performance poems, 'dear white america', first published online through Button Poetry in 2014. The title of this poem suggests that both the poem and the broader print collection is designed as a didactic resource for white readers.

The visceral force of Smith's delivery which is such a captivating component of their performance style also contributed to a narrative which saw Smith "pigeonholed" as Lanre Bakare puts it in an interview with Smith for *The Guardian*, "as the person the media went to for angry black poems; an easy fix for white editors and publishers looking to tap into the zeitgeist." In the same interview Smith acknowledges the way their work has been cited and discussed left them uncomfortable: "I couldn't write *Don't Call Us Dead* again…maybe that's why the focus of *Homie* is a lot more personal. I didn't want trauma porn…I don't think that's what I ever created but it was being used as that" (2020). This categorisation and interpretation of Smith's work is reflective of the cruel optimism that Berlant writes about. Through producing work intended to reach their own community, the very structures of whiteness Smith writes so vociferously against means the white reader receives the poetry through a different lens. Berlant explains that "where the optimism hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form…the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object" (24). In other words, with Smith's work, the potential of reaching Black, queer communities is muddied by the series of encounters the texts have with whiteness and this manifests in an affective sense in the poet themselves, whose creative process is adjusted and refined accordingly.

Javon Johnson addresses the way Black pain is appropriated and used to uphold white supremacy, writing that "black pain is used in service of the nation-state because we have been historically constructed as threatening by virtue of being loud, excessive, unruly, illegible, pathological, and outside the comfortable confines of white neoliberal, liberal, and conservative structures alike" (179). In the same article, Johnson considers Smith's poetry, specifically 'Dinosaurs in the Hood' and explains the humour and tenacity at the core of the poem is a rendering of Black joy, functioning as "a force, a method and a political device…we can, and perhaps must, continually imagine black possibility outside the conditions of white supremacy" (180). Johnson's reading of 'Dinosaurs in the Hood' speaks to the issue at hand, where Black critics have found the potential for joy and resilience in a text that many white critics have omitted in their focus on the pain and trauma Black experience. To return to Ahmed's useful analogy, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, our encounters with space are influenced, in an affective sense, by who we are and our position in the world. Ahmed explains affect by describing how individuals walking into a room will encounter that space differently, "the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point" (41). The reception to Smith's poetry—and their discomfort with it— represents this angling of both text and the reader's point of arrival. The different emotions

the poems elicit work with the way the reader, critic or reviewer is already angled when they encounter the poems, leaving room for differing affective responses to the poetry in a way that directly reinforces the political ideas Smith engages with.

On the one hand, Smith's spoken word and their second print collection resulted in the poet being categorised as political, polemic, angry and on the other, critics found the hope, joy and playful humour that returns with more potent and obvious force in Smith's later collection, *Homie*. In the three-year period between the two collections, Smith's own creative process appears to have been shaped by the way *Don't Call Us Dead* was received and discussed. Smith's developing body of work demonstrates a conscious move from a creative space where the poet was preoccupied with forcefully critiquing and condemning the "white gaze" to rejecting that gaze altogether in *Homie*, as by making the gaze the focus of their work, Smith saw that focus being misused and misunderstood. On *Homie*, Smith says: "[t]his book does not care about white people…It's about saying 'hello' to the people of colour in the room, 'let's talk'" (Bakare, 2020). This renders *Homie* a text imbued with the hope that those who encounter the work are the communities, the homies, Smith seeks to reach. The collection loses little of its political force, but it is one of intimate encounters, of friendship and a return to a close-knit community. However, there is a further complexity that accompanies this desire to reach and build community when it comes to the printed word. Reading and sole-authored writing are solitary processes that do not instinctively have the same community-building qualities as performance poetry in online space, with the mobile and physical audience and the spoken word scene that creates and sustains those structures.

In an interview with *Guernica* (2020) Smith discusses how their desire to reach that kind of audience through live performance has shifted. They explain that the time between writing between their first print collection and their latest, resulted in a change in emphasis where reception is concerned. In the Smith comments on their changing relationship with a live audience, saying: "as a spoken word poet…you need them snaps, you need them hoots, some sniffles, some somethings, right? Because it is a call-and-response experience in that way. But I'm not looking for that type of interaction with my audience anymore…that's changed for me" (2020). This move away from the audience response and the affective qualities of "getting a rise" out of an audience as Smith puts it in the same interview, is something that they release in their latest performance for a much quieter, more understated delivery that captures the tumult of emotions that Smith's poetry so deftly captures. Berlant comments in a different context about political interventions through poetry, writing that "the political context of the poem matters…it matters…who's in control of the meaning of the

shift, the pacing of the shift, and the consequences of detaching" (35). Although Berlant writes here about a particular text, the broad point is relevant in the case of Smith's shift from audience-response-driven-slam to an entirely different mode of delivery. Smith's reach means their poetry will be important to many people with differing perspectives and because Smith cannot control or limit who gets to respond to the texts, they eradicate the 'audience' from their work altogether. Through performance, they note this pulling back from the need for the whoops, hollers and catcalls of slam and through their written text they write directly for the audience they most want their books to reach, to start that dialogue between poet and community.

The difference between Smith's high-energy deliveries of of 'dear white america' and the quieter performance of 'i'm waiting for you to die to i can be myself' embodies this important shift in Smith's performance strategies. The poem is the latest performance by Smith on YouTube at the time of writing. It also represents a shift in creative direction in terms of the content of the text itself, as well as the mode of deliver, as the poem was originally published in Smith's first print collection. It has since been substantially revised for the *Homie* collection. This version, Smith says, represents the poem they originally conceived of but were not equipped to write at the time. The title remains the same and Smith says "I had to grow as a poet in order to stand up to it" (*Guernica* 2020). They also comment on the way the feelings within the poem didn't strike the right note in the first draft: "it didn't love the right way" (*Guernica* 2020). I reference this here because although I do not propose to analyse where the earlier and later versions differ, that evolution of the text creates an interesting and useful synergy with the evolution of performance in thinking about the ways these poets are continuously refining and developing their work. The performance was uploaded on 13 April 2021 to the Walker Art Center YouTube channel and is part of a collaborative digital performance project between Smith and the Dark Noise Collective.

The poem is filmed in a series of close-ups of Smith's face, long full body shots and a number of side-angled shots that capture different moments of the poem. The poem begins with Smith's head bowed and is delivered to a completely silent room, with none of the murmurs, movements or whistles that would be typical of competitive slam. Smith begins with their head bowed in the middle of a still stage, before they raise their head and meet the viewer's gaze head on as they recite the title: "waiting on you to die so I can be myself" (0:08-0:11). Watching the performance online has an immediate impact, with the eyes focused on meeting Smith's gaze and the direct, intimate address of "you" drawing the viewer in. Before continuing, Smith looks to the side, looks down and pauses, biting their lip

177

and indicating the difficulty of delivering a poem with the particular vulnerabilities exposed by this text (Fig 32). Speaking to their history, Smith says "a thousand years of daughters, then me, / what else could I have learned to be?" (0:16-0:24). In the latter part of the line, Smith smiles at the camera and laughs, the mood shifting from the emotionally charged and sombre opening. In this line Smith draws a breath and the moment to breath followed by the smile and laughter causes the tension in the viewer to dissipate as they too relax into the poem and the performance. Immediately after this breathing space, the camera pans out slowly revealing Smith's side-on profile.

Fig 32

In one of Smith's most explicitly gender-focused poems, they say "the body too is a garment / I learn this from the snake / angulating out of her pork rind dress" (0:40-0:49). The snake has religious connotations, imagery that is echoed throughout this poem, and the shedding of skin speaks to both birth and rebirth. This notion of inhabiting a body in continuous flux is repeated throughout, yet despite Smith's positioning of the body as a garment through the image of the snake shedding its skin is one which emphasises the core that is left behind, the individual who sheds their skin remains, if not outwardly, the same individual. This is emphasised when Smith says, "I crawl out of myself into myself" (0:49-0:54), highlighting through the movement of their fingers and hands which become the focus of the frame that the process of crawling out and in, between selves, is all undertaken by the

same body, the same individual. At this point in the performance, the camera focuses on Smith's hands, which become a recurring focal point of the poem (Fig 33). Smith's physical presentation subverts binary gender expressions, with painted, long nails evoking the textual resistance to being restrained by a body that does not tell the story of identity. As Pryor, paraphrasing Butler explains, "gender is a stylized repetition of acts that only appear stable because they have been rehearsed and consolidated over time" (92) and through this small but important choice, Smith's physical presentation challenges lessons the Western world is taught about ways to be and appear, with all their gendered expectations.
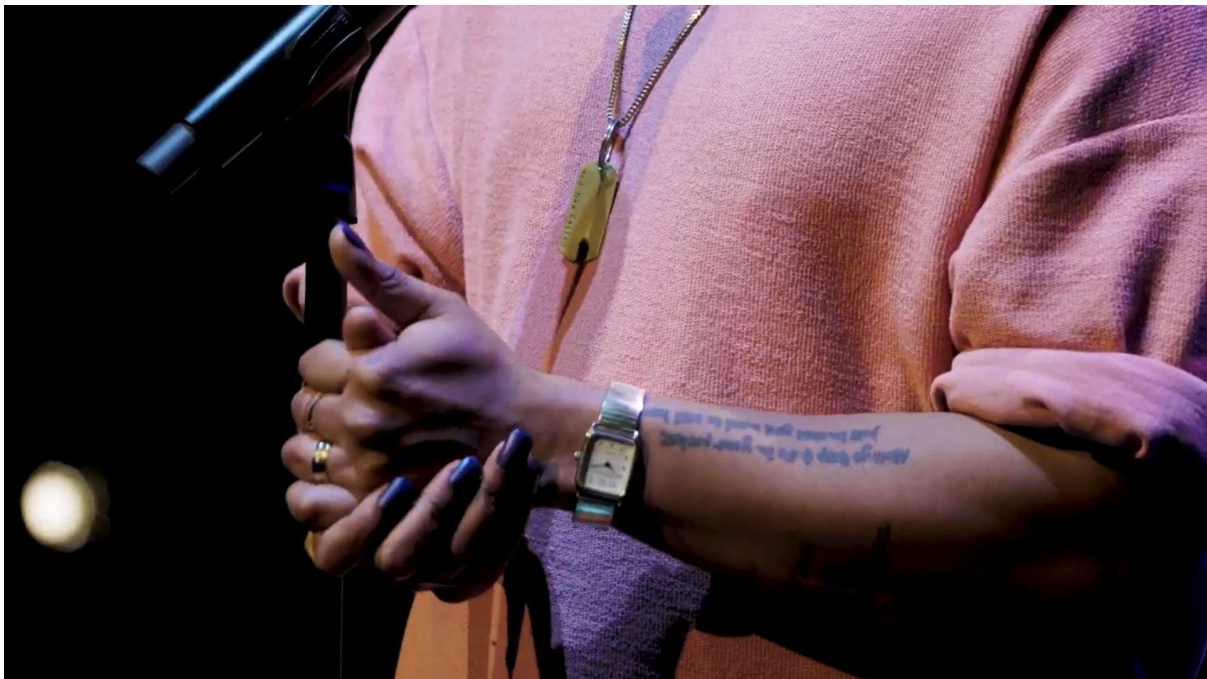

Fig 33

When analysing the performance poem the body of the poet on stage and screen, their movements, gestures, delivery and dress are all features of the text itself. In a performance poem, the body and the performance are as relevant to interpretation as the punctuation and organisation of the lines on a printed page. The way gender is performed or subverted is, particularly in the context of texts so explicitly focused on the queer slipperiness of gender, a vital component of reading these poems. Nevertheless, in citing Butler's writings and discussing the way gender can be performed and subverted in these poems, there is a risk of skimming across a thorny area of contention around the distinction between performance and performativity. Stryker explains this contention, noting that the transgender scholars who take issue with Butler's writings on performativity "see their gendered self as ontological,

inescapable and inalienable—and to suggest otherwise…is to risk a profound misrecognition of their personhood" ("*Studies I*" 10). However, Stryker suggests that such critiques risk misinterpreting Butler, noting that Butler's notion of performativity is distinct from performance, as performativity is something that is done and constructed through language, as opposed to conscious acts taken by a knowing agent to perform gender in a particular way. Butler's writings, as Sara Salih suggests, involve "no doer behind the deed, no volitional agent that knowingly 'does' its gender, since the gendered body is inseparable from the acts that constitute it" (57). For the purposes of my investigation into the affective qualities of Smith's work it is not necessary to dwell on this issue in depth, but the question of agency is a useful one when it comes to the depiction of self in Smith's poem.

Throughout the text a sense of inalienable personhood persists, yet the self itself is radically unstable. The camera focuses solely on Smith's hands as they talk about "two girls forever playing slide / on the porch in my chest" (1:03-1:08). The girls are not distinct from Smith, but part of them, playing inside their chest and through their game they merge into one: "they could be a single girl, doubled and joined at the hands" (1:11—1:16). This evocative line is punctuated by the hand claps that accompany Smith's delivery, their motions mimicking the game played by the young girls. These clapping hands serve multiple functions. In a poetic sense, they add a distinct rhythm to the poem, giving it a musical beat and tempo as Smith speaks, the oral delivery in sync with the clapping hands. On another level, with Smith's delivery typically in front of a live audience, this is a significant moment where the claps often associated with slam are undertaken by Smith. In the silence of the performance space, Smith therefore echoes the clapping of the slam poetry audience in their own delivery, taking control of the sounds and murmurs of slam and incorporating them into the performance, a collapsing of the viewer / audience into the poet's own body.

The instability of self is emphasised by the disjointed temporal quality to this poem. This strategy is reminiscent of Chrysanthemum Tran's work which grapples with a continuously fluctuating, non-linear time. Like Tran, Smith evokes the long reach of history and the way that history manifests inside their body through lines that recall "a thousand years of daughters" (0:16-0:19) merging into one, with "one long, ring-shout name" (0:32-0:35). When speaking about the girls playing slide, Smith asks who knows how they keep time?" (1:03-1:11). This speaks to the queer experience of being outside 'straight' time, of having an uneasy relationship with a life trajectory that marks cisgender heterosexuality as the desirable way of being. Smith's clapping serves to advance the tempo, stopping at the point when they say, "I'm stalling" (1:18-1:19). The pause that follows puts a distinct beat in

the poem that is prolonged by the silence from the audience and on stage. Smith follows the pause with the line "I want to say something without saying it but there's no time" (1:21-1:29). Time in the poem both moves rapidly and not at all, oscillating between fast-tempo journeys through a thousand-year history to the present moment of suspended time where Smith's recollections shift to look forward to an unspecified moment where "I can be myself" (1:45-1:48). From this point in the poem, Smith focuses on the people who have to die in order to enable their personal liberation. They flashforward to a funeral, concluding the poem with the powerful line "If they woke up at their wake, they might not recognize that woman in the front, making all that noise" (2:08-2:28). In terms of agency this line evokes the temporal discordance of the closet, the tension between knowing oneself and truly being oneself.

Smith's poem evokes the continuous negotiation of temporal and spatial boundaries associated with transgender experience and passes comment on the complex relationship with self, the anticipation of a currently stymied agency. The repeated images of death and rebirth are intimately entwined with transgender identity and the affective tension between the loudness of being and the grief of loss is captured through Smith's performance and the fluctuating and disjointed pace of the delivery. The text speaks to generational conflict and also, perhaps, offers a wider social commentary which envisions a world where everybody is able to live without fear of violence and recrimination that seeks to stifle and shame queer, racialized bodies into silence. In many ways the poem deliberately raises questions in the viewer, with Smith explicitly refusing to name the "self" they envision in the poem: "Please. Don't make me say who" (1:51-1:57). This creates a further troubling of identity and self, with the poem leaving the viewer unclear if Smith is speaking to their own experience or if their work is inspired by the life of someone else, or countless other stories. There is nevertheless something markedly queer about the affective qualities of the text that capture the complexities of non-binary affect, the instability of self and the deconstruction and collapsing of gender binaries and expectations heightening a moment of deferred catharsis that cannot be fully realised in the present.

It is too simplistic to describe Smith's text—or indeed any of their broader work—as hopeful. Smith's hope is troubled by the weight of grief, the loss that must be experienced and processed to bring about catharsis. The poem 'i'm waiting on you to die so i can be myself' is imbued with what Muñoz would describe as utopian longing, something I discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. This particular form of yearning informed by the queer past and, the AIDS crisis in particular, which is so pivotal to Smith's work,

functions as "a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*" (35). The affective nature of this form of queer longing has its roots in history and memory that explicitly resists nostalgia to instead become a "force field of affect and political desire" (35). The instability of self in Smith's text reflects the way Muñoz theorises and pushes back against drawing a bright line between the present and the future. The woman at the funeral in Smith's text inhabits every aspect of the poem, from the girls joining at the hand to become one, to the later image of the loud voice at the wake. She is intimately part of the embodied text throughout the performance and delivery and as such Smith's poem falls into the category of performance that Muñoz describes as "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world…sites of embodied and performed queer politics" (49). It is in this way that although a complete catharsis is necessarily deferred in Smith's text, the performance and imagining of it causes a slippage between the present and the future, a site where the very act of performance "cuts through fragmenting darkness and allow[s] us to see a politically enabling whole" (64). Smith's work captures the complexities of non-binary affect, bringing out through their performance the radical potential of queer liberation and challenging at a deeply intimate level the wider social, political and cultural structures that operate to silence and supress.

Conclusion

In the first three chapters on space, time and motion, I identified the way transgender performance poets occupy and queer space, inhabit non-linear time and deconstruct and challenge hegemonic ideas both of linear life trajectories and the mainstream transition journey narrative of transgender experience. This chapter has focused on how it feels to live and move through the world as a transgender person in twenty-first century America. I have discussed the ways the affective qualities of poems by two non-binary poets resist easy categorisation and consciously trouble the binary of positive and negative affect, while also resisting gendered expectations. Both ALOK and Smith grapple with their experiences as queer people of colour, challenging not only the gender binary but also the construct of race and its colonial implications. In the examples above, both poets subvert the positioning of "the racialized subject as an excessively emotional and expressive subject (a situation in which the affect…'animatedness' becomes especially problematic" (Ngai 7) through deliveries where the affective qualities oscillate and challenge the expectation that certain sites of affect (such as grief and joy) might be diametrically opposed.

Through this constant interrogation and disruption of presupposed affective binaries, Smith and ALOK also interrogate constructs of race and gender, the physical and the digital resulting in texts where the full gamut of affective potential is allowed to breathe and exist, on the surface and through the subtextual elements of their work. These are poets of the digital age whose relationship with social media, as evidenced by my earlier exploration of the online violence experienced by ALOK, reinforces the way digital space can both make visible and suppress, the manner in which it can operate as both an instrument for change whilst simultaneously being weaponised by those who stand in opposition to progressive politics. For ALOK, social media is a tool not only for genderqueer visibility, but also for education. They have a follower count of nearly 900,000 on Instagram, and use infographics to produce book reports archived in their highlights. These infographics combine bite-sized quotes and visual content to condense complex academic texts into an easy-to-read format that can be shared and disseminated by other accounts which have even further reach, such as Jameela Jamil with her 3.4 million followers. These texts explore the connections between gender and colonialism and offer invaluable insights into the history of race and racism in America. On Twitter, Smith's smaller platform of 55,000 followers nevertheless provides a space where they can be vocal about both their politics and poetry, challenging the ways in which their poetry is sometimes received in the mainstream.

The challenge of being public and present in online space is captured through the work both of the poets produce, highlighting the homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, anti-Blackness and racism that exist as an online replication of the physical systems that feed into such political ideologies. Creating art that criticises America places both poets at risk from violence in the digital spaces they occupy. In an affective sense, to stand in opposition to something is to express unhappiness with the status quo; and as Ahmed explains, "happiness is…used as a technology of citizenship…a way of binding…to a national ideal" ("*Happiness*" 133). Both poets discussed in this chapter and indeed many of the poets in this thesis more broadly, exhibit a complex way of feeling that speaks to the way their affective encounters with the world are influenced by individual identity, collective history and narratives of the future. To confront the subliminal affective qualities of transgender performance poetry is to bring this research to a point of culmination which establishes a queer theoretical toolkit for analysing the embodied performances of these poets who engage an array of multimedia strategies and exhibit the ability to create powerful, evocative works of literature for both the stage and the page.

Performance poetry challenges more traditional forms of literary criticism, particularly where the innovations of today's spoken word poets is best found in their use of digital technologies as part of their creative process. Although in some respects the collections of poets like Smith represent a very traditional form of print poetry, even these print poems represent a desire to experiment with form and style, a process adopted by other contemporary print poets whose work is beyond the scope of this study. The wave of anti-transgender expressions of discontent, a turn towards populist politics and national hubris, fast-paced technological advancements and the growing popularity of spoken word, both as a site of creation and academic investigation, position these poets at the heart of a perfect storm. Through their extensive and diverse work, today's transgender performance poets tell us much about identity and collective community building, yet they also challenge existing narratives that suggest there is one way of being, offering a multitude of narratives that consistently invite the audience, viewer and/or reader to break down, challenge and deconstruct the physical and digital landscapes we inhabit.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, three strands—transgender rights, technology and American politics—have together formed the core of my study of online transgender performance poetry through a queer theoretical lens. My research has been inspired by a flourishing spoken word scene that has enabled me to identify multiple texts that capture the urgency of transgender activism, the fractious politics of contemporary America and rapid advancements in technology. These transgender poets bear witness to gender-variant life through reflecting on space, time, motion and affect with playfulness, urgency and critical depth. Increasingly accessible and user-friendly technologies amplify the diverse voices of these poets, offering platforms where transgender creators can disrupt the literary status quo and take control over the narratives of transgender experience through multimedia performance poetry. It is no accident that transgender activism, the wider political landscape and technological developments intersect so frequently throughout this thesis, as they operate in a series of feedback loops, with one informing the other. For example, narratives of transgender experience have a connection with notions of being, becoming, transitioning, dismantling and deconstructing, of being open to the possibility that occupies sites of change. This ability to adapt to change is reflected in the way these poets explicitly relate to technological advancement and reflect on the implications of living in a digital age, with references in their poems to social media, mobile phones, dating apps, photoshop and so on, in the multimedia techniques they employ, and in the attention paid to modes of online community building.

Technology has fundamentally altered the way individuals live, co-exist and create. As Jeneen Naji explains, "technology has transformed us, digital technology more so" (29). The Internet has amplified spoken word by breaking down spatial boundaries to take performance poetry beyond geographical locations with an active spoken word presence. The rise in influencer culture and the 'self-made' social media celebrity has equipped the spoken word poet with the tools to create and publish work with ease, empowering spoken word poets to record, upload and share their poetry online. There are political ramifications that come with this increased exposure. Politics permeates the virtual stage, on the one hand providing an unprecedented platform for marginalised voices and on the other, replicating systemic oppressions in the very architecture of the Internet, in the codes, the algorithms and the practices of the behemoth 'Big Tech' machines that profit from the rapid integration of social media into daily life. At the start of this thesis, I commented that speech is a powerful

tool of protest and throughout I have drawn connections between the poetry analysed, the virtual stage and the politics of transgender life in twenty-first century America. As Pete Bearder puts it more generally, "[w]e can't speak of poetic movements without speaking of their politics, and we can't speak of political movements without speaking of their poets" (267). Whether explicitly or implicitly, the poets of this thesis are part of a new wave of transgender activism, a decidedly twenty-first century movement that highlights divisions in and outside queer communities.

In an interview with Saeed Jones for *Buzzfeed*, actress and activist Laverne Cox notes "it is revolutionary for any trans person to choose to be seen and visible in a world that tells us we should not exist" (2014). This visibility] is not without risk, but it also disrupts and challenges us to revisit narratives of gender variance. Discourse around transgender rights all too frequently focus on the body, with discussions around bathrooms, surgical interventions, puberty blockers, gender dysphoria and so on. Halberstam explains that in trans studies there has been a shift "from the idea of embodiment as being housed in one's flesh to embodiment as a more fluid architectural project" ("*Trans**" 24). The differences and synergies between the poets of this study embody that fluidity in poems that do not "impose ever more precise calibrations of bodily identity" but instead invite us to "think in new and different ways about what it means to claim a body" (Halberstam, "*Trans**" 50). Spoken word holds a power that resists reducing transgender experience to medical discourse and instances of violence, enabling these poets to reclaim the transgender body and ignite fresh conversations.

For some critics, online performance poetry cannot replicate live performance, but these digital texts do not exist as a supplement to open mic nights and in-person slam events. Much like the stage/page dichotomy is unhelpful, positioning the live and online performance poem in opposition to one another makes little sense in a world immersed in technology that experienced the collapse of physical and virtual boundaries even more acutely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has illuminated how essential digital technology is to our everyday lives. Technology continues to advance at a pace that leaves scholarship struggling to keep up with new developments, but it also offers exciting new areas of study. My own research has benefitted from the fact that YouTube remains such a dominant platform, despite changes in the wider online video landscape. The advance of in-video advertising, ad-free subscription services, and the growing popularity of platforms like TikTok and Twitch mean that not even a behemoth like YouTube can survive without adapting. The poetry in this thesis marks a decade of significant technological innovations, many of which seem like foundations for further development. In a chapter 'Speaking With

Machines and Machines That Speak' in *Spoken Word in the UK*, David Devanny writes about the popularity of digitally augmented sound techniques, live coding and interactive media techniques that have drawn on "pre-digital traditions such as projection art, electronic literature and of course spoken word and performance poetry" (409). The collaborative process between human and machine and the increasingly more sophisticated developments in artificial intelligence and robotics suggests that these collaborations will become increasingly commonplace, innovative and creative as technology develops. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, human augmentation, blockchain databases, the Internet of Things and new 5G technology are just a handful of areas where significant advances are anticipated in the coming years. These offer huge creative potential for poets and opportunities for researchers.

These socio-political and technological changes coincide with a flood of exciting output in the broader spoken word scene. The influence of technology has also had an impact on the format and aesthetics of spoken word, as noted by Peter Bearder in his work dissecting "the 'slamminess' of the US spoken word archetype" (65), pointing out a growing resistance to certain aesthetic tropes and structural formats. Due to the popularity of sites such as Button Poetry tropes have developed which have undoubtedly been influential on poets entering the scene with exposure primarily to youth-oriented competitive slam. However, even just within this study the changing aesthetics of a poet such as Danez Smith offers an example of a move from the more energetic and formulaic style of slamming that has influenced spoken word more broadly across the globe. As more aesthetically diverse works are shared, liked and circulated online and as new platforms emerge to support the works of performance poets, the potential for continued growth and change is significant. Much like technology, performance poetry and its creators are increasingly prominent in our cultural consciousness, in specific cases, like the use of transgender model and poet Kai Isiah Jamal in the recent Louis Vuitton fashion campaign. Transgender poets such as Jamal are becoming increasingly visible in the UK spoken word scene which includes poets such as Travis Alabanza, Jay Hulme and Kae Tempest, the latter one of the foremost names in the UK scene who came out as transgender in 2021. This represents another area of potential research and a particularly urgent one due to the political, legislative and media climate that has heightened debates about transgender rights and gender recognition in the UK.

The appeal of spoken word for communicating political messages continues apace, with the Internet providing a space where poets can reach its growing audience. This growth shows no signs of slowing, with poets increasingly turning to TikTok to make full use of the

bite-sized audio-visual format for their work. The poetry hashtag on TikTok has over 24 billion views and the platform has many popular poetry accounts such as Christi Steyn's, where she reads her own work and snippets from classic and contemporary poetry. Steyn's tagline promises "I'll help you fall in love with poetry" and at the time of writing her account has 1.5 million follows—more than the Button Poetry subscriber count on YouTube. In fact, Button Poetry's TikTok has far fewer follows, with approximately 128,200 accounts on its current subscriber list. In many ways, TikTok does not lend itself as well to the Button format, with a one-minute maximum video length. Button's poems on the platform have been split into parts, which cuts the text into sections and does not capture the full energy of the poem as a whole. TikTok's announcement in July 2021 that it plans to increase its video length from one minute to three minutes (Kirchhoff) might make this site much more useful to slam poets and sites like Button that archive these poems.

The rapid rise of TikTok suggests that those who are involved in the creating and archiving of spoken word will need to be prepared to experiment with new platforms and digital techniques to keep up with our increasing immersion in the digital. There are already innovations which point towards poetry's expansion into the virtual. For example, projects like "Deep-speare", the AI poet created by Jey Han Lau, Trevor Cohn, Timothy Baldwin and Adam Hammond is trained to produce sonnets of Shakespearean quality and although it has its limitations at present, the research continues. Google has introduced 'Verse by Verse' a fairly clumsy tool that operates somewhat like predictive text, enabling people to craft poems based in the style of famous American poets. Although the latter in particular might seem fairly rudimentary, the pace at which advancements are being made with AI is rapid and it is slated as a site of particular investment over the coming years. In fact, AI is already part of our lives with devices such as the Amazon Alexa and Amazon Echo infiltrating the homes of many consumers, and there is clear potential for researchers working in this space to increase the sophistication of AI poets and related programmes over the course of the coming decade.

Another site of potential future investigation is virtual reality, a technological space that, together with augmented reality, is attracting particular interest and investment. Perhaps the future of slam competitions will include a virtual audience attending around the globe. The boundaries between physical and digital could be further blurred with the poet and audience existing as a digital avatars, inhabiting a wholly virtual world. Indeed, the intersections between VR and poetry is something creators have already been experimenting with for some time. The Voices of VR Podcast, 'Experiential Poems: Exploring Emotions & Embodied Vulnerability in VR with Cabbibo' (Episode #512) features an interview with an

188

independent VR artist Isaac 'Cabbibo' Cohen about the way the emotions of a text can be translated into an immersive VR experience that transcends words. In a later episode released this year, 'Nightsss: From Erotic Poem to Immersive Poetry to Neuroscience Research' (Episode #976) is an interview with Weronika Lewandowska and Sandra Frydrysiak who have created an immersive erotic poetry experience, using physical movement in virtual reality to translate a Polish-language poem into an immersive VR experience. I have talked at length about the blurring of page and stage and with the advancing technological capabilities in this space a further site for investigation is the collapsing of written text into code, digital movements and audio-sensory experiences that capture the *feeling* of a text in alternative ways.

In terms of the critical theory that structures this thesis, I have chosen to frame my work around so-called 'turns' in queer theory that have been instrumental in pushing the field forwards and opening up new ideas. I have also focused heavily on the community-building aspects both of online engagement more broadly and for LGBTQ+ individuals specifically, addressing the tensions between the way digital space transcends geographical boundaries offering unparalleled connectivity, whilst also serves to foster a growing sense of isolation through immersion in digital space. Queer theorists have been interested in technological developments and their impact for many years, but when it comes to analysis of media in particular, the mediated spaces of the Internet offer further sites for investigation that have not been as thoroughly explored as film and television. So too, the power of online community formation versus the individual isolation that the Internet can exacerbate is another space which has tangential connections to narratives of community formation and the structures and hierarchies that are potentially replicated in those online spaces. Due to the rapid growth of social media in a relatively short space of time, we are only just getting to the point where prolonged investment and participation in social media can be thoroughly investigated with comprehensive, long-term empirical evidence. In terms of queer theory specifically, I am not certain that it would be wise to predict queer theory's 'digital turn.' In many respects this has already occurred simultaneously alongside other shifts and turns in focus. As a child of the 1990s, queer theory is itself a 'Millennial', a theoretical construct of the first generation whose lives have been substantially altered by advancements in technology, social media and mobile phone usage. It is unsurprising that digital evolution is a flourishing site of queer theoretical investigation, and I have little doubt that the scholarship around the queer possibilities of online space will continue to grow, potentially with a focus on 'posthuman' capabilities of developing technologies.

189

There is undoubtedly enormous potential for creators and researchers alike when it comes to the evolution of the Internet and technology. The steady growth Button Poetry during my four-year research period suggests that the popularity of online spoken word shows no signs of waning. At the same time trans visibility has increased across other forms of visual media, most notably the popular American series *Pose* that first aired in 2018 and focuses on the ballroom scene, featuring a cast dominated by transgender people of colour. However, as I have explained in depth, there is a risk that comes with holding a marginalised identity and having a sizeable online presence. There is also the issue of access to online space which must be considered, particularly as it pertains to transgender people of colour. Our increased immersion into virtual worlds during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgency of recognising the barriers to entry created by digital poverty. The pandemic accelerated our reliance on technology in a way that further exposed socio-economic disparities experienced by marginalised groups.

For Black and indigenous populations, Grace Noppert explains how "centuries of segregation and discrimination…have disproportionately placed people of color in communities without access to health care, with degraded and crowded living conditions and a lack of basic opportunities for health and wellness" (2020). These sub-standard living conditions give rise to digital barriers, exacerbated by geographical location. A report by the non-profit KFF identifies that for LGBTQ+ people in America the pandemic has exacerbated existing economic disparities (Dawson et al. 2021). A report by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation offers more concrete statistics, noting that approximately 22% of LGBTQ+ people in America live in poverty compared to "an estimated 16% poverty rate among their straight and cisgender counterparts." For transgender adults living in poverty the statistic increases to 29% and then to 40% in the case of Black, transgender adults. Further research would need to be undertaken to fully understand the incongruity of digital poverty on the one hand and the heightened online reach of transgender creatives on the other, to establish how a particularly digital moment is translating into local communities, protests, schools, queer spaces and so on. I have exercised caution throughout this thesis in framing the Internet as a utopian space and this kind of further research into the impact of digital poverty on transgender communities would recognise some of these tensions, where theoretically accessible platforms require a certain economic investment in fast broadband connections that not everyone can afford and expensive devices including smartphones, tablets and laptop computers.

There remains political uncertainty for marginalised groups in America, despite the fact the pandemic precipitated a fall for Donald Trump that was as rapid as his rise. Globally, there is evidence that LGBTQ+ progress is beginning to stall, or in some cases, roll backwards. At the time of writing, only 29 countries allow same-sex couples to marry (HRC). There have been a number of highly publicised attacks on LGBTQ+ people, including the murder of 24-year-old Samuel Luiz in Spain and the cancellation of the Tbilisi Pride in Georgia following an attack orchestrated by right-wing sympathisers. A much-publicised legislative shift saw Hungary pass new anti-LGBTQ+ legislation banning any depiction or promotion of same-sex desire and transgender experience in schools and on television. Here in the UK, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crime is on the rise and a rising tide of anti-transgender rhetoric has left transgender communities increasingly vulnerable to physical and state-sanctioned violence. There is also a psychological impact that comes from persistent challenges to individual rights that bleed into online spaces through trolling and hate speech. The opposition of detractors has accompanied the amplification of transgender voices and those who oppose proposed legislative changes that would aid transgender communities are particularly vocal online. There is also the real and urgent threat of physical harm, as mentioned at the outset of this thesis, as the violence against transgender women of colour in America shows little signs of abating. The political transition from Trump to the Biden administration may offer a hope of sorts, but the statistics that surround LGBTQ+ lives are inconsistent with narratives of progress. Indeed, the stories of LGBTQ+ people, particularly those who hold multiple marginalised identities, suggest there is still a significant amount of work to be done to address the anti-queer and specifically anti-transgender violence that occupies so much of the discourse around transgender rights.

In this thesis, I have worked at the intersections of multiple disciplines and sub-disciplines to engage with the constantly moving space of technology and the relatively unexplored literary site of transgender spoken word poets. Throughout the course of my research, notable events have taken place that have solidified the necessity of this stud, in terms of the contributions it can make to the digital humanities and the broader sphere of not only transgender literary studies but also the queer activist movements that support transgender rights. During the period in which I undertook my research, America experienced significant and volatile political change, the world has been forced online for a prolonged period of time during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Big Tech has made substantial profits, a new civil rights era has gathered traction through the Black Lives Matter movement and the continued stigma and

violence experienced by transgender people, particularly transgender people of colour, has been rising steadily. Although my own research has not been inhibited by these seismic shifts in political, social and economic landscapes and the technological development that has defined the decade spanning from 2010 to 2020, it has opened up new sites of investigation, raised further questions and emphasised the radical act that these transgender poets undertake by being so publicly and unapologetically visible, taking control of their own narratives and using social media as a tool of resistance.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Aizura, Aren Z., and Susan Stryker. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Routledge, 2013.

Alexander, Bryant Keith, et al. "Queer Performance and Performativities." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 2013, pp. 193-194.

Alexander, Julia, "Vine's Closure Led to YouTube's Most Debated Trend", Polygon, 2018, www.polygon.com/2018/1/17/16901392/vine-youtube-jake-logan-paul-pewdiepie

Amin, Kadji. "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3/4, 2016, pp. 173-189.

Anderson, April et al. "Queer Erasure: Internet Browsing Can Be Biased against LGBTQ People, New Exclusive Research Shows." *Index on Censorship*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2020, pp. 75-77.

Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. Random House, 1994.

"Angels of the Get-Through", *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 12 December 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVZEVfInB_E&t=

Aptowicz, Cristin O'Keefe. *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*. Soft Skull Press, 2008.

Ash, James, et al. *Digital Geographies*, Sage Publications Ltd, 2019.

Awkward-Rich, Cameron. *Transit*. Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press, 2015.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin Group, 1958.

"Basically I'm Gay." *YouTube,* uploaded by Daniel Howell, 13 June 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja_VoM0

Bauridl, Birgit M. "Contemporary 'Black?' Performance Poetry." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2010, pp. 715-724.

Bay-Cheng, Sarah. "Digital Historiography and Performance." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2016, pp. 507-527

Bearder, Pete. *Stage Invasion: Poetry and the Spoken Word Renaissance*. Out-Spoken Press, 2019.

Beardsworth, Adam. "Panic, Don't Panic: Poetry and Affective Politics from the Cold War to Trump." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2020, pp. 356-376.

Bergen, Mark and Shaw, Lucas. "Black YouTubers Ask Why They're Left Out of YouTube Kids." *Bloomberg,* 2020 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-09/youtube-for-kids-families-say-still-not-enough-diversity

Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Bernstein, Charles, editor. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

Bertie, Alex, *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/c/TheRealAlexBertie

Bial, Henry, Sara Brady, editors. *The Performance Studies Reader (Third Edition)*. Routledge, 2016.

Bial, Henry. "Performance studies 3.0." *The Performance Studies Reader (Third Edition)*, edited by Henry Bial and Sara Brady, Routledge, 2016, 402-412.

Blake, Bill. *Theatre & The Digital*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Blaque, Kat, *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/c/KatBlaque

Boëthius, Ulf. "'Us is near bein' wild things ourselves': Procreation and Sexuality in The Secret Garden." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 22 no. 4, 1997, pp. 188-195.

Boni, Marta. "Transmedia and 'Techniques of the Body." *Body Images in the Post-Cinematic Scenario: The Digitization of Bodies* edited by Alberto Brodesco and Federico Giordano, Mimesis International, Italy, 2017.

Bost, Darius. *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Brawley, Lisa. "The Virtual Slam: Performance Poetry on the Net." *Chicago Review*, 1994, vol. 40, no. 2/3, pp. 164-174.

Bruce, Heather E. et al. "Slam: Hip-Hop Meets Poetry—A Strategy for Violence Intervention." *The English Journal*, vol. 89, no. 5, 2000, pp. 119-127.

Bruk, Diana. "You Have to Read the Powerful Letter this Trans Guy Wrote to the Girl He Used to Be." *Seventeen*, 2015. www.seventeen.com/life/news/a31575/a-letter-to-the-girl-i-used-to-be/

Bull, Michael. "To Each Their Own Bubble: Mobile spaces of sound in the city." *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* edited by Nick COuldry and Anna McCarthy, Routledge, 2004, 275-293.

Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Polity Press, 2018.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

Bye, Kent. "Experiential Poems: Exploring Emotions & Embodied Vulnerability in VR with Cabbibo." *Voices of VR Podcast—Episode #512.* 8 March 2017, https://www.roadtovr.com/experiential-poems-exploring-emotions-embodied-vulnerability-vr-cabbibo/

Bye, Kent. "Nightsss: From Erotic Poem to Immersive Poetry to Neuroscience Research." *Voices of VR Podcast—Episode #975,* 18 February 2021, https://voicesofvr.com/979-nightsss-from-erotic-poem-to-immersive-poetry-to-neuroscience-research/

Cabico, Regie, Brittany Fonte, editors. *Flicker and Spark: A Contemporary Queer Anthology of Spoken Word and Poetry.* Lowbrow Press, 2013.

Cárdenas, Micha. "Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* edited by Reina Gossett et al., The MIT Press, 2017, 161-181.

Causey, Matthew. "Postdigital Performance." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 68 no. 3, 2016, pp. 427-441.

Causey, Matthew. *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness.* Routledge, 2006

Chen, Mel Y. "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett et al., The MIT Press, 2017, 147-160

Chisholm, Jamiyla. N. "'Black Trans Lives Matter' Searched 10x More in 2020 Than 2019." *Colorlines*, 17 September 2020, www.colorlines.com/articles/black-trans-lives-matter-searched-10x-more-2020-2019.

Collins, Billy. *The Spoken Word Revolution.* Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003

"Coming Out To You." *YouTube*, uploaded by Phil Lester (AmazingPhil), 30 June 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqXFKSWniVU

Corts, Alicia. "(Un)limited: Virtual Performance Spaces and Digital Identity." *Theatre Symposium*, vol. 24, 2016, pp. 113-128.

Couldry, Nick, Anna McCarthy, editors. *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age.* Routledge, 2004.

"CRES Talks: 'Queering the Present with Chrysanthemum Tran." *YouTube*, uploaded by CSRPC UChicago, 23 May 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H6lXQ18QU4&

Crimp, Douglas. "Mourning and Militancy." *October*, vol. 51, 1989, pp. 3–18.

Cumiskey, Kathleen M., Larissa Hjorth, editors. *Mobile Media Practices, Presence and Politics: The Challenges of Being Seamlessly Mobile.* Routledge, 2013.

Cvetkovich, Anne. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures.* Duke University Press, 2003.

Damon, Maria. "Was That 'Different,' 'Dissident' or 'Dissonant'? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings and Dissident Traditions." *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, edited by Charles Bernstein, Oxford University Press, 1998, 324-342.

"Daughters." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 25 August 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4ljRhqzASM

Davidson, Ian. *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Dawson, Lindsey et al. "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBT People." *KFF*. 11 March 2021, www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-lgbt-people/

De Certeau, Michael. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by S. F. Rendall, University of California Press, Ltd, 1988.

Delaney, Samuel. *Times Square Red, Time Square Blue*. New York University Press, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1994.

De Souza e Silva, Adriana. "From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Online Spaces." *Space and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2006, pp. 261 – 278

Devlin, Paul. *SlamNation: The Sport of Spoken Word*. United States: T. Poole, M. Shaw, 1998

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers and the Queerness of Time*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.

English, Lucy, Jack McGowan, editors. *Spoken Word in the UK*. Routledge, 2021.

Fathallah, Judith. "Moriarty's ghost: or, the queer spectre in the BBC's Sherlock." *Television and New Media*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2015, pp. 490-500.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*. Basic Books, 1985.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors: Making History From Joan of Arch to Dennis Rodman*. Beacon Press, 1996.

Filippo, Maria San. *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*. Indiana University Press, 2013.

Firestone, Amanda, Leisa A. Clark, editors. *Harry Potter and Convergence Culture: Essays on Fandom and Expanding the Potterverse*. McFarland & Company, 2018.

Florini, Sarah. *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*. New York University Press, 2019

Foley, John Miles. *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*. University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Foucault, Michel. "Des espaces autres." *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, vol. 5, 1984, pp. 46-49 translated by Miskowiec, J. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1., 1986 pp. 22-27.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010

"FTM Poem: I Don't Belong Here", uploaded by Aydian Dowling, 14 February 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auor3QBM_0o. Accessed 1 September 2021.

Galt, Rosalind. *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

George, Bruce et al., creator. *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam*. Home Box Office, Inc, 2002

Gibson, Andrea. "Hey Galaxy." *Soundcloud*, uploaded by Tender Loving Empire, 11 January 2018, https://soundcloud.com/tenderlovingempire/sets/hey-galaxy

Gibson, Andrea. *Lord of The Butterflies*. Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press, 2018.

Gibson, Andrea. *Take Me With You*. Plume / Penguin Random House LLC, 2018.

Gibson, Andrea. *The Madness Vase*. Write Bloody Publishing, 2011.

Gioia, Dana. *Disappearing Ink: Poetry and the End of Print Culture*. Graywolf Press, 2004.

Glazner, Gary. *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. Manic D. Press, 2000.

Goltz, Dustin Bradley. *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation*. Routledge, 2011.

Gossett, Reina et al. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. The MIT Press, 2017.

Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?" *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 179, no. 2, 2013 pp. 177 – 182.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, editors. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Grossman, Lev "The Boy Who Lived Forever", Time, 2011, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2081784,00.html

Haber, Benjamin. "The Queer Ontology of Digital Method." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 44 no. 3, 2016, pp. 150-169.

Halberstam, Jack. *Trans* — A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press, 2018.

Halberstam, Jack. *In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005.

Herman, Andrew, et al., editors. *Theories of the Mobile Internet: Materialities and Imaginaries*. Routledge, 2015.

"Hey World, I Have an STI." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 4 August 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIeONLQUr3g

Hoffman, Tyler. *American Poetry In Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Holland, Nancy J. "The Death of the Other/Father: A Feminist Reading of Derrida's Hauntology." *Hypatia*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2001, pp. 64-71.

Hu, Jane. "The Second Act of Social-Media Activism." *The New Yorker*, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-second-act-of-social-media-activism.

Ing, Shannon. "Interview with spoken word poet Andrea Gibson ahead of their show at the NAC—04.15.19", *Apt613*, https://apt613.ca/andrea-gibson-interview/, 2019

"I Sing The Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out." *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 1 June 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLP_oNmGiFs

"I Will Mean Everything." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 16 July 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVJBOJcqpc4

Jacques, Juliet. *Trans: A Memoir*. Verso, 2016.

Jehan, Stella. "17 Spoken Word Artists That Will Leave You Speechless", *Kitschmix*, https://kitschmix.com/17-spoken-word-artists-will-leave-speechless/. Accessed 17 September 2021.

"Jellyfish" *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 12 June 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgALhKr4ZZo

Jenkins, Ruth Y. "Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden: Engendering Abjection's Sublime." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 36 no. 4, 2011, pp. 426-444.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture, Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. Routledge, 2013

Jenkins, Henry, et al. *Participatory Culture in A Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning Commerce and Politics*. Polity Press, 2016.

Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York University Press, 2006.

Jenkins, Henry et al. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in A Networked Culture*. New York University Press, 2018.

Johnson, Javon. *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.

Jones, Saeed. "Laverne Cox is the Woman We've Been Waiting For." *Buzzfeed,* 16 March 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/saeedjones/laverne-cox-is-the-woman-weve-been-waiting-for.

Kellaway, Mitch. "WATCH: Poet Performs Powerful 'Letter to the Girl I Used to Be." *The Advocate*, 29 May 2014, https://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2014/05/29/watch-poet-performs-powerful-letter-girl-i-used-be.

Kerchhoff, Drew. "More Tok on the Clock: Introducing Longer Videos on TikTok." *TikTok*, 1 July 2021, https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/longer-videos.

King, Moynan. "Queer Performance: Women and Trans Artists." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 149, 2012, pp. 3-5

Klebnikov, Segei, "Apple Becomes First U.S. Company Worth More Than $2 Trillion", *Forbes*, 2020, www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2020/08/19/apple-becomes-first-us-company-worth-more-than-2-trillion/.

Klink, Flourish, Elizabeth Minkel. "Episode 67: Stephanie Burt: Part 1." *Fansplaining,* February 7 2018, https://www.fansplaining.com/episodes/67-stephanie-burt-part-1

Lackner, Eden et al. "Cunning Linguists." *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, McFarland, 2006, 189–206.

Lara, Ana-Maurine. "Of Unexplained Presences, Flying Ife Heads, Vampires, Sweat, Zombies, and Legbas: A Meditation on Black Queer Aesthetics." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 18 no. 2, 2012, pp. 347-359.

Lefebrvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell Publishing, 1974.

"LGBTQ: Receiving Hateful Comments.", *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 6 July 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5l91M6eoPM

Lick, David J et al. "Minority Stress and Physical Health Among Sexual Minorities." *Perspectives on psychological science: a journal of the Association for Psychological Science* vol. 8.5, 2013, pp. 521-48.

Lindner, Katharina. *Film Bodies: Queer Feminist Encounters With Gender and Sexuality in Cinema*. I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018.

Lonergan, Patrick. *Theatre & Social Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Malchow, H.L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford University Press, 1996.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002.

Massumi, Brian. *Politics of Affect*. Polity Press, 2015.

Maxwell, Tom. "A YouTube channel for kids just hit a record-setting 1 billion views in a single week." *Input*, 21 May 2020, www.inputmag.com/culture/cocomelon-is-a-kids-youtube-channel-that-hit-1-billion-views-in-a-single-week.

Melt, H. editor. *Subject to Change: Trans Poetry and Conversation*. Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017.

Melt, H. "Cameron Awkward-Rich: On Engaging with Trans Literary Tropes and Writing for the Future." Lambda Literary, 8 June 2016, www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/06/08/cameron-awkward-rich-on-engaging-with-trans-literary-tropes-and-writing-for-the-future/.

Miller, Ryan A. "'My Voice Is Definitely Strongest in Online Communities': Students Using Social Media for Queer and Disability Identity-Making." *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2017, pp. 509-525

Mokobe, Lee. "Ode To Poetry: Tuner of Silence." *YouTube,* uploaded by Abode, 1 November 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FbyoQdqsBQ&t=

Mokobe, Lee. "The Not yet Burning Country", *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 16 November 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUzYXLoMexo

Mokobe, Lee. "Surviving Blackness", *YouTube*, uploaded by Fine Acts, 13 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKeff-hDQQI

Moretti, Franco. "The Dialectic of Fear." *New Left Review*, vol. 136, 1982, pp. 67-85

Morris, Jan. *Conundrum*. Faber & Faber, 1974.

"Most Popular Social Media Platforms in 2021", *Oberlo,* www.oberlo.co.uk/statistics/most-popular-social-media-platforms, 2021. Accessed 17 September 2021.

Moshin, Maryam. "10 YouTube Stats Every Marketeer Should Know." *Oberlo*, 25 January 2021, www.oberlo.co.uk/blog/youtube-statistics

Mosman, Jocelyn. "50 Spoken Word Poems you need to listen to right now." Odyssey, 3 February 2016, www.theodysseyonline.com/top-50-spoken-word-poems

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006

Nagler, Brook. "Chrysanthemum Tran Reclaims Her Roots Through Poetry." The Chicago Maroon, 2018, https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2018/5/22/chrysanthemum-tran/

Naji, Jeneen. *Digital Poetry*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2021

Needham, Gary. "Scheduling normativity: Television, the family, and queer temporality." *Queer TV: Theories, Histories and Politics*, edited by Glyn Davis, 2008, 141-158

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press, 2005

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018

Noel, Urayoán. "The Queer Migrant Poemics of #Latinx Instagram." *New Literary History*, vol. 50 no. 4, 2019, pp. 531-557.

Novak, Julia. *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*. Rodopi B.V., 2011.

Oakley, Tyler, *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/c/TylerOakley

O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Penguin UK, 2016.

"Pansies" *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 12 February 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjekwfgMrUw

Pattison, Pat. "Song Lyrics and Poetry." *The Handbook of Creative Writing* edited by Steven Earnshaw, Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

Parker-Starbuck, Jennifer. "The Spectatorial Body in Multimedia Performance." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2011, pp. 60–71

Pearl, Monica. B. *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss*. Taylor & Francis, 2013.

Perec, Georges. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Penguin Group, 1974.

Popat, Sita. "Missing in Action: Embodied Experience and Virtual Reality." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 68 no. 3, 2016, pp. 357-378

Price, Danielle E. "Cultivating Mary: The Victorian Secret Garden." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 26 no. 1, 2001, pp. 4-14.

Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Columbia University Press, 1998.

"#ProudToBe: Coming Together to Celebrate Identity." *YouTube*, uploaded by YouTube, YouTube, 21 June 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtCyepuLt8Q

Pryor, Jaclyn I. *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance and the Hole of History*. Northwestern University Press, 2017.

Purrpussful. Re: Ethan Smith "A Letter to the Girl I used to Be". Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sc6w4I1Z00, 2015.

"Radio Feat. Jesse Thomas." *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 2 November 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBbjZCDQWgE

Rak, Julie. "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity." *Biography*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 166–182.

Raun, Tobias. "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection between Trans Identity and Information Technology." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, May 2015, pp. 365–378.

Reed, Alison. "The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You're Dead: Spectacular Absence and Post-Racialized Blackness in (White) Queer Theory." *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* edited by E. Patrick Johnson, Duke University Press, 2016, 48-64.

"Relapse/Flux." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 9 April 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFv8vFJ8BQ8

Riggs, Marlon T. *Tongues Untied*. United States: M. Riggs, 1989.

Rollmann, Rhea. "How Do You Define the Genre of Trans Literature?" *Pop Matters*, 28 September 2015, www.popmatters.com/how-do-you-define-the-genre-of-trans-literature-2495490457.html

Ronan, Wyatt. "2021 Officially Becomes Worst Year in Recent History for LGBTQ State Legislative Attacks as Unprecedented Number of States Enact Record-Shattering Number of Anti-LGBTQ Measures Into Law." *Human Rights Campaign*, 7 May 2021, www.hrc.org/press-releases/2021-officially-becomes-worst-year-in-recent-history-for-lgbtq-state-legislative-attacks-as-unprecedented-number-of-states-enact-record-shattering-number-of-anti-lgbtq-measures-into-law

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press Ltd, 2008.

Shaviro, Steven. *The Cinematic Body*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Sivan, Troye, *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/user/TroyeSivan18

Smith, Danez. "waiting on you to die so i can be myself." *YouTube*, uploaded by Walker Art Center, 13 April 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjBGZ0cj7E8

Smith, Danez. "dear white america." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 17 June 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSp4v294xog

Smith, Danez. *[Insert] Boy.* Yesyes Books, 2014.

Smith, Danez. *Don't Call Us Dead*. Chatto & Windus, 2017.

Smith, Danez. *Homie*. Graywolf Press, 2020.

Smith, Ethan. "A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be (CUSPI 2014)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 16 May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lkn06Y8prDU

Smith, Ethan. "A Letter to the Girl I Used to Be." *YouTube*, uploaded by Raw Word, 16 December 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sc6w4I1Z00

Smith, Marc and Kraynak, Joe. *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam and the Spoken Word*. Sourcebooks Inc., 2009.

Snediker, Michael, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Snorton, Riley C. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Solo, Liz. "Adventures In A Hybrid Space." Canadian Theatre Review, vol. 163, 2015, pp. 8-13.

"Some Days it Feels Like." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 14 October 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rj3djXkhK0

Somers-Willett, Susan B.A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. The University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Steele, Taylor. "SPIT, POET! 10 Trans*, Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Fluid, and Genderqueer Poets You Need to Hear." Medium, 21 June 2016, https://medium.com/anomalyblog/10-trans-non-binary-gender-non-conforming-gender-fluid-and-genderqueer-poets-you-need-to-hear-296d3f1cede7

Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Strudwick, Patrick. "This Trans Guy Wrote A Letter to the Little Girl he Once Was to Say Sorry." BuzzFeed, 11 June 2015, www.buzzfeed.com/patrickstrudwick/from-ethan-to-emily?utm_term=.sv1Zj7mMD9#.ayGD1qKgrA

Stryker, Susan, Stephen Whittle, editors. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2006.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Seal Press, 2008.

Szita, Kata. "Haptic Cinema: Smartphones and the Spectator's Body." *Body Images in the Post-Cinematic Scenario: The Digitization of Bodies* edited by Alberto Brodesco and Federico Giordano, Mimesis International, 2017, PAGES

Takei, George. "Her 11th Birthday Was The First Time She Said She Didn't Want To Live. She Left On His 21st." *Upworthy*, 23 May 2014, www.upworthy.com/her-11th-birthday-was-the-first-time-she-said-she-didnt-want-to-live-she-left-on-his-21st?c=ag

Taylor, Diana. "Interview with Richard Schechner." *What is Performance Studies?* 2001, http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/richard-schechner-what-is-performance-studies-2001- ("Schechner Interview")

Taylor, Diana, and Abigail Levine. *Performance*. Duke University Press, 2016.

"The Discrimination Administration: Trump's record of action against transgender people." *National Center for Transgender Equality*, 2020, https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration

"The Platypus Poem: Zone of Rarity." *YouTube*, uploaded by J Mase III, 15 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnNguCYwx1U.

Tolbert, TC, Tim Trace Peterson, editors. *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, 2013.

Tompkins, Joanne. *Theatres Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Cognates (WOWPS 2016)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 16 March 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjIijPxOLrI&t=

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Discovery (For Jennifer Laude) (PPS 2016)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Slam Find, 8 June 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaR_lzLW2LY

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Transplant (CUPSI 2016)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 1 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wbMug2cXrU

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Vampires (CUPSI 2016)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 29 June 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogWqjhxzjwc&t=

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Why I Never Reported My Rape (WOWPS 2016)." *YouTube,* uploaded by, Button Poetry, 26 September 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZFllMR-gME

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "An Acceptance." *YouTube,* uploaded by Erin Anastasia, 13 January 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjLjA3AtUPw

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "On (Not) Forgiving My Mother (RRPS 2016)." *YouTube,* uploaded by Button Poetry, 9 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-snsLLr7nQ

Tran, Chrysanthemum. "Biological Woman (After Maya Angelou) (WOWPS 2018)." *YouTube,* uploaded by Poetry Slam Inc., 12 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhKFnr9Te6c

"Transgender Day of Remembrance." *YouTube*, uploaded by Skylar Kergil (skylarkeleven), 18 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_Xczm8Wt0Y

Tremlett, Sarah editor. *The Poetics of Poetry Film: Film Poetry, Videopoetry, Lyric Voice, Reflection*. Intellect, Inc., 2021.

Tutorials, Nikki, *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/user/NikkieTutorials

Vaid-Menon, Alok. "Funeral." *YouTube*, uploaded by Button Poetry, 10 March 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLeObePNRa8

Vaid-Menon, Alok. "Bible Belt." *YouTube,* uploaded by Button Poetry, 3 February 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SMM1w6dSxA

Vaid-Menon, Alok. *Femme in Public*. 2017.

Wall, Cheryl A. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Walser, Miles. *What the Night Demands*. Write Bloody Publishing, 2013.

Walser, Miles. "A Letter to My Vagina", uploaded by KilometersW, 1 May 2012 www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpWCh1tGbTw

Wareham Morris, Katy. "Playing for affect in counterpublics: an interdisciplinary investigation into the transformative potential of spoken word hybridity." *Spoken Word in the UK* edited by Lucy English and Jack McGowan, Routledge, 2021, 221-234

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. New York: Free Press, 1999

Wheeler, Lesley. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance From the 1920s to the Present*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Whittington, Charlie et al. "The Lives and Livelihood of Many in the LGBTQ Community are at Risk Amidst COVID-19 Crisis." *Human Rights Campaign Foundation*, 2020, https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/COVID19-IssueBrief-032020-FINAL.pdf

Wilkie, Fiona. "Out of Place: The Negotiation of Space in Site-Specific Performance." University of Surrey, 2014

Winnabst, Shannon. "Vampires, Anxieties, and Dreams: Race and Sex in the Contemporary United States." *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1-20.

Wood, Amelia. "10 Slam Poems in Honour of Women's History Month." The Odyssey, 6 March 2017, https://www.theodysseyonline.com/10-slam-poems-in-honor-of-womens-history-month

Woods, Gregory. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. Yale University, 1999.

Young, Thelathia 'Nikki.' "Imagining Queer Life after Death." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 9-12.

"Your Life." *YouTube*, uploaded by Andrea Gibson, 29 September 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsUp6Wd_o8I&t=

Zenarosa, Michelle et al. "Don't Miss This Trans Poet's Moving Letter to the Girl He Used to Be." *Everyday Feminism*, 20 February 2016, https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/letter-to-girl-i-used-to-be/