

FESTIVAL AS FORM



Queen Mary
University of London



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Report Summary

Poetry at festivals moves people and can even help them to change. In this year-long research project looking at poetry in many types of UK festival, we found it reaches people who do not usually have much to do with poetry, and it touches them in ways they didn't expect. It makes people laugh, but it also creates participatory spaces where personal vulnerability is admissible, and barriers of hostility are overcome. Festivals in general lower boundaries between people; poetry fast-forwards that process, opening some people to new sympathies with others and giving insights into their own life-changes. For a sizeable number, it becomes part of a transformational experience. Poetry also calls out injustice, including the results of it visible at the festival. But the important work poets do is under-recognised and underfunded – partly because the role festivals are playing in the mediation of life-crises, not just temporary feelings of pleasure, is also under-recognised. Using photos taken by festival participants and long-form interviews, this report is the first to track how people experience poetry within their whole festival journey, and to show the work that both festivals and poetry are performing in people's lives.

Peter Howarth and Rowena Hawkins

Introduction

Within the last 20 years, an increasing number of non-book festivals have put on poets as part of their broadening repertoire of acts, as part of what Jordan has called “the festivalisation of cultural production” more generally (Jordan, 2016, 44; Négrier, 2015). In the 1980s and 90s, book festivals like Hay, Swindon and Bath adopted the outdoor format of 1960s and 70s music festivals for their literary events (Finkelstein & Squires, 2020). Now the direction of travel has become two-way. Music festivals, independent festivals, family festivals, activist festivals and council-led regeneration festivals have all started hosting a poet or poets among the other artists, widening the potential audience for poetry while adding a new kind of articulate, emotional engagement within the festival for visitors. Some poets have become crowd-pullers themselves: in three separate events, we were part of audiences exceeding 1000 people.

But hearing poetry at such festivals is not always like poetry read at a bookshop or even a book festival. Audiences approach it within generic expectations drawn from surrounding acts of comedy or music, while each poet is framed within the profusion, conviviality and intensity of the festival setting. This project set out to investigate how festivals as forms shape the poetry within them, what they do for poets, and what they do for their listeners.

I think it's a really brilliant thing to take poetry to [...] music festivals. I think it's great. It's [...] sort of like taking poetry to schools. Like, they think they're getting one thing but you trick them into something else.

Imogen Stirling, poet and performer

Form: we use the artistic term ‘form’, not just a ‘setting’ or a media ‘format’, because the festival has a creative effect on poems. In live performance, a page ‘form’ like a line break merges indistinguishably with the pauses and silences of the poet’s speech, the intensity of crowd attention and the occasion itself which drew them there – all of which then feed back into what the poet is choosing to emphasise or say next. In a festival, the social atmosphere and the access conditions for audiences are formal conditions that generate as well as constrain, no less than a sonnet or a haiku. Like a poem, festivals can use forms well or less well: we treat form as an ‘affordance’ rather than an ideal or a blueprint, asking “what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements” (Levine, 2015, p.19).

Festival: in 2022 we conducted interviews with poets and organisers from across the country, and were participant-observers at seven festivals of different types around the UK: council-sponsored and free-to-access (Bristol Harbourside, Lowestoft’s First Light), music from around the world (the WOMAD festival in Malmesbury), music / activism / religion (Greenbelt in Northamptonshire), urban installation (Edinburgh’s Hidden Door), the book festival (Wigtown in Dumfries and Galloway) and performed poetry (Morecambe Poetry Festival in Lancashire). At WOMAD, Greenbelt and Wigtown, we conducted in-depth photo-elicitation with festival-goers, and we also used postcards to gain quick audience responses during two large spoken word shows at WOMAD and Greenbelt.

The remarkable generosity and honesty of our research participants allowed us to build up a corpus of half a million words of interviews. Analysing it enabled us to identify the recurrent themes of their experiences – boundaries, abundance, levelling and transitions – and to understand how they all interact to produce the festival as an experienced, immersive form.

Poetry takes people across boundaries. People described the poetry that moved them and their whole festival experience in terms of borders being crossed. Listening to poetry at all felt like a barrier being broken, for some – but audiences were surprised by its emotional reach into them, and its truth-telling power. Poetry which dealt with shame and acceptance in content and in form was particularly valued for the internal walls it broke down within people, and for its role in social connection and the changes of heart which the surrounding festival was bringing up.

Festivals cue transition, and even transformation. No matter the festival type, the abundant art and the social levelling seemed to allow participants' submerged anxieties about their own status, changing life roles and social purpose to surface and be recognised. Poetry and other arts spoke powerfully to those searching for direction. Many participants wanted to return home and make changes in their lives or communities. A significant minority felt their festival had been transformational.

People value the unpredictable encounters. Festival poetry is set within a world of over-abundant choice, access to artists normally out of reach, social levelling and unexpected conversations. At every kind of festival, these generate unpredictable interactions around the art which bring up the moments of discovery which participants often find the most memorable and moving.

People notice who is missing. While festivals try hard to be inclusive, there are notable absences related to ethnicity, class, age and disposable income. But the general atmosphere of border-lowering and temporary equality also stimulated performers and participants to notice who had access, and who was not present.

Many interviewees described how festival encounters had spoken to imminent life-changes: moving to a new school, finding ways to manage disability, coming to terms with loss, or reconsidering sexual politics. This was not an overt aim of each festival. Some had ambitions to bring about large-scale environmental and social change, others were celebrations of writers or global music; only WOMAD had a set-aside area for stallholders offering forms of psycho-physical therapy. But the festival's "time out of time" (Falassi, 1987, p.4), its intensity and the lowered borders seemed to allow people's inner concerns to surface and be recognised. For about half of our interviewees, the poetry at festivals had not only been pleasurable but brought them new sympathies for others and insights about themselves, which extended the new forms of sociability and self-relation that the entire festival was permitting. More still reported that the festival had made them think about things they wanted to change, personally or socially.

Around 15% of our participants experienced all of these with such intensity that they described the whole festival as a transforming experience. Some had gained new friends and new confidence, some had recognised difficult truths about themselves and others, and some had experienced a sense of reconnection with a past or buried self, and / or a new creative career – and poetry had played its part in each of their stories. This suggests that what the festivals are as an overall *form* – their particular mix of atmosphere, time, encounter and overload – calls up the transitions people were going through in their own lives, and that poetry which deals with vulnerable experience offers special opportunities for emotional recognition and deep well-being.

Boundary. Because the language of ‘boundaries’ can describe spatial limits, social groupings and emotional self-perceptions, we found it particularly useful to characterise festival experiences where these are often being simultaneously negotiated (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). It keeps a link with the important festival concept of ‘liminality’ (from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold), although the experiences with boundaries that our participants describe are everyday interactions with events and people, rather than set phases of a ritual process (Turner, 1969). Boundary-experiences are present within any poetry performance, too: there are boundaries to access through the cultural capital required to know about the event, the physical boundaries of sharing a temporary space with strangers, and the imaginative boundaries of estrangement or sympathy the listener might have with the poet and the poems. But the size and intensity of the festivals we witnessed amplifies this experience of boundaries being touched, crossed or broken to make them a defining quality of the whole.

Participants are not the only ones who are vulnerable at festivals, though. Poets, volunteers and organisers also spoke to us about the immense amount of hidden volunteer labour that makes the festival do this work, and the difficulties getting funding or getting paid for it. So our final headline is this:

Poetry at festivals needs to be funded properly. A great deal of skill, negotiation and work has gone into generating the conditions that people then experience as transformatory. But poets are not being paid properly for what they do, while organisers report that line-ups have had to be fought for and serious financial risks have been shouldered. Festival stages are whole social reading scenes (Camlot & Wershler, 2015) creating vital contacts and networks among artists themselves (Comunian, 2017); programmers need to be trusted to build them up through the year. Funders (including festivals) need to give stages financial security and longer-term artist development opportunities to make sure line-ups are really diverse, and that poets aren’t taking on hidden costs.

This report shows why festivals can do this with confidence in the remarkable impact that a poetry stage can have on those listening.

2. Festivals and Transition: Research Background and Methods

In a high-level survey of the general purpose of festivals, historically and anthropologically, David Picard states:

The defining element of the 'festive' lies in its ability to allow people to mediate different forms of life crisis... from pivotal points in the life cycle, to the shock of migration, environmental disaster, or revolution. (Picard, 2016, p.600)

Picard's formulation incorporates 100 years of anthropological theory on festivals, and he applies it both to traditional festivals in small-scale tribal societies and to the new festivals that have appeared since the 1980s, like contemporary sports festivals for rival European towns or identity-based festivals for diaspora communities. We found it the most helpful encapsulation of what was happening to our participants during the festival, and of the role that poetry was playing in that. But the way this 'defining element' of mediating social change works at a person-by-person level has been downplayed in many conceptualisations of modern festivals, for three broad reasons.

Firstly, festival research has long identified festivals' power to preserve and celebrate traditions and identity: Mair and Duffy (2017) argue that they can also offer new symbols of belonging for migrants and other uprooted groups. But there is also a strong tradition of analysis observing the ways modern festivals have been set up for entertainment or marketing, not for social change. Sassatelli (2015) notes how many accounts are structured by an implicit contrast between the traditional/organic festival described by classic anthropological studies and the highly-organised, large-scale, big-name events of today. Analyses in the line of the Frankfurt School, Lefebvre or Debord see the latter as simply culture-industry spectacles, she argues, "the outcome of a process of commoditization, homogenization and rationalization of time and space" inimical to the festival's older purpose of community bonding or status transition (Sassatelli, 2015, p.32). This professionalisation and commercialisation means they are "dismissed by mainstream social science and cultural theory and assessed in terms of their (economic) impact only" (Sassatelli, 2015, p.28), leaving questions about their role in the lives of individual audience-members unasked.

These analyses belong to a larger amount of cultural sociology of modern festivals concerned with exposing disparities between their popular image of license and freedom, and the reality of the strong systems behind them which resist change by conserving privilege. The irony of licensed rebellion or "repressive desublimation" (Marcuse, 1964, p.59) has been a central dynamic of carnival analysis since Bakhtin (1984) and it is present in accounts of the tension between utopian and commercial interests at Woodstock and other 1960s music festivals (Warner, 2016), the erasure of genuine working-class interests from any festival organised using a "Creative Industries" model (Weber, 2017, p.176), or the "sanitizing" of urban space in festivals led by city regeneration bodies (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011). Arts-based festivals, too, have been criticized for consolidating the interests of the well-to-do minority. In an early critique, Waterman called them "carnivals for elites" (1998, 54); in a similar vein, Wilks (2011) found music festivals bonded already-existing friends but created few new

opportunities for social cohesion. From a different angle, Sapiro (2017) has used Bourdieu's theory of the literary field to argue that the attention and prizes offered to authors by book festivals appear to open the stage to new voices, but in fact cement their own gatekeeping position and shore up the 'literary' establishment more generally.

Analyses of this kind sharply observe the opposition between the feeling of encounter and access offered at an individual level and the festivals' larger-scale consolidation of class or capital (Driscoll, 2014). Others have responded that festivals really do provide opportunity for dissent or questioning of the identity of place, person and community; "the challenge is that festivals function both as a form of social integration and cohesion as well as sites of dispute and protest" observe Mair and Duffy in their wide-ranging research summary (Mair & Duffy, 2018, p.33; Johansson, 2020; Sharpe, 2008). But these arguments about the function of festivals in the construction and / or misrepresentation of group identity keep the focus on public behaviour and do not focus so much on what participation in the festivals means to visitors in ways outside this binary of control or resistance. They do not usually examine the significance of people's interaction with specific art events, which for cultural sociology has often become "decoupled from their potential to offer meaningful experiences" (Banks, 2017, p.4), nor do they examine the role of the festival in the changes of people's wider life (Yu, 2022), despite the strong evidence linking participatory arts, mental health and well-being (Daykin et al., 2021; Bone & Fancourt, 2022). Both the disappointment that Sassatelli discerns at the failure of post-1960s festivals to produce significant social change and the accounts of particular festivals' troubles in representing their community to itself have meant that the changes that individuals undergo through the festival have garnered less attention. While festivals' role in transformation "is widely accepted by social scientists" (Wilks & Quinn, 2017, p.36), studies of what 'transformation' means have tended to look more at the temporary changes festivals make to their space, place and general social life than at what they do within individuals. Studies of individual transformation have discerned improved levels of general peace, joy and in-group social bonding, but not the challenges or ethical changes our participants report (Neuhofer, 2020). Studies of "transformational festivals" (Rowen, 2020), on the other hand, focus on the intense states of altered consciousness induced during the festival (Ruane, 2017; Gilmore, 2010) or their function as temporary alternative worlds of more authentic living (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Wu, 2020), but only glancingly at the way they mediate the challenges of regular, less authentic lives. Recently, however, Brownnett (2018) has found encouraging evidence of bonding and bridging at small community arts festivals leading participant-performers to a renewed sense of their own capacity, while Rossetti (2021) found that literary festivals unexpectedly seem to produce benefits for mental health and well-being. In this report, we examine in much more detail why and how that might be happening, particularly how people's social experience meshes with the art itself. But in addition to experiences of general well-being, our participants really wanted to talk about how the festival helped them move through crisis and challenge, and those transitions make one of the core findings of the study.

The second reason is to do with the terms of transition. When more tourism-led analyses do examine festivals as places of individual transition, they often describe festivals as 'liminal' zones, where people leave the status markers of their everyday life and become temporarily 'betwixt and between', an idea first developed by anthropologist Victor Turner in his adaptation of Arnold van Gennep's three-stage theory of rites of passage (Bristow & Jenkins, 2022; Lamond & Moss 2020). In Turner's schema, traditional festivals begin with rites

separating the time and the participants from their everyday life, move with music and ritual into an intense, liminal phase where those undergoing the transition or the whole community act with license or play forbidden parts, returning everyone to a polymorphous creation-time before the social or clan or totemic distinctions which structure regular life became set (Turner, 1969). This experience of socially-equal *communitas* is intense and transformative; then rites of reintegration begin and the community celebrates the liminars' new status as brides or warriors. Turner's innovation was to argue that real social change in modern societies would require substantial liminal experience as well, psychologically and collectively.

But although he began by considering the hippy communities of the late '60s "liminal", Turner came to think modern festival experiences "liminoid", because they could only be private experiments in subverting social order rather than socially-recognised changes of status. He insisted that he welcomed the move away from the set roles and rites of traditional societies, considering "the liminoid as an advance in the history of human freedom" (Turner 1981, p.120). But having claimed in the same essay that all genuine social change required liminal experience, the category of "liminoid" left little room to recognise what festivals were doing to help modern participants negotiate real and unavoidable changes of life outside the festival – sexual identity, parenthood or job changes, for example. As Thomassen summarises, Turner's liminoid events "do not involve a resolution of a personal crisis or a change of status. The liminoid is a break from normality, a playful as-if experience, but it loses the key feature of liminality: *transition*". (Thomassen, 2012, p.28). Since modern festivals are now separate from "life-processes", Vlachos (2020) also argues they can only be more liminoid than liminal, "transactions in which the individual has a greater degree of choice, although the choice is as consumer rather than social citizen" (p.42).

In our observations, however, we saw a good deal of social citizenry: artists at every festival highlighted injustices, while the festivals themselves encouraged life-style responses to climate emergency in various ways. We observed many poetry and literary performances working with vulnerability, using and amplifying the liminal state of festival-going audiences, and some of these had powerful reported effects on our photographers. Such movements towards inclusion of un-included groups and types are evidence in a particular key of how well-managed festivals can use liminal experience to offer some bridging social capital (Brownnett, 2018), not just the bonding of existing groups that Wilks found (2011) – although participants and artists also observed serious limits to that bridging capacity, discussed in the chapter on **Access**. And more than half of our participants reported being stimulated by the festival to change something about their life, from creative outlets to new careers or acts of social concern. Thomassen argues that it is "rare" in modern life for a single reading or an art-experience to bring anyone to change how they see themselves, but he concedes in a footnote that "single moments can be explosive and life-altering when we already find ourselves in a liminal moment, open (fragile, receptive, vulnerable) to external input" (Thomassen, 2016, p.85). This is what we found too: particular performances were memorable and significant because the festival's upsetting of social and temporal boundaries had already been bringing people to be aware of their life-crises in a less defended and more self-exposed state of mind.

Vlachos (2020), however, ascribes the lack of real liminality at festivals to the discipline of modern festival management, whose attempt to control inputs and outputs and to profit from

them is inimical to the “truly liminal event” (p.44). Real liminality requires “a sense of vulnerability” and group dependence, he argues; “the discipline of events management”, on the otherhand, “aims to impose an Apollonian rational efficiency onto these liminal and liminoid occurrences and experiences” (p.44). We also found that people valued the surprise encounters, including the interactions with locals and other festival-goers, the vulnerability of performers and their own inner discoveries. But they also appreciated the thoughtful considerations of sound, lighting, safety and accessibility for those managing young families, disabilities and neurodivergences. Events management did not so much contradict the possibility of festival transitions so much as enable them to be a possibility, since unimpeded access to events meant finding artists, new friendship groups and the chance encounters that proved so significant.

The other reason that the transitions festivals reveal or enable have gone under-recognised may be to do with the methods that they have been studied with. Festivals are affairs of millions of moving parts: not only people, artists, costumes, equipment and infrastructure, but styles, attitudes and affects, performances and continual emergent reactions to others’ performances, on and off stage. These are hard to reproduce in language (Frost, 2016), or to pick up on with surveys and other quantitative methods. Duffy and Mair (2021) observe that typical events management reporting frameworks “have flattened out and dampened down the surprising and astonishing nuances” (p.10) of festivals, particularly their “powerful and intoxicating effects... significant to sustaining and transforming social life” (p.13). Schmitz *et al.* (2011) identify the “festive crowd” as one of the sites where the predominant Western legal-rational conceptions of boundaried selves and interiorised emotions are confuted, and people experience their own permeability (p.258). While participant-observation can pick up on atmosphere, event dynamics and group behaviour, it cannot so easily get at the festival journey of a particular participant through that atmosphere, its highs and lows and encounters. Focus-group studies within events have to be short, as people are pre-occupied, and tend not to produce longer reflective narratives.

For our research, we chose instead photo-elicitation, a technique first developed by anthropologists (Mannik, 2011) but more commonly used in consumer research or health sciences (Zaltman, 1996; Harper, 2002; Guillemin, 2014). We recruited participants to choose what they wanted to photograph using their phones, and then tell us why those photographs were significant to them in a long-form interview some weeks after the event. Some participants reported enjoying watching their photos appear within a WhatsApp group and seeing what others were doing. “It was a privilege to see other people – the WhatsApp pictures”, said one, “they actually, you know, kind of added to my experience” (WM4); “it was nice being part of that group and seeing other people drip-feeding their experience”, said another, “you felt connected to people and like, like we were undercover reporters” (GB10). Knowing that some photos would be published as part of this report, some took particular pride in their work, seeing photography as a way to interact creatively and reflectively with what the festival was doing; one enjoyed it so much that the experience had made them consider taking a photography course. Within the semi-structured interviews, we had a list of grounding questions we wanted to cover: previous relationship with poetry and festivals, any negative as well as positive experiences, whether they would make any changes, and three summarising words for their experience. But other than that, we let their photographs lead the conversation and responded with follow-up enquiries to make sure we had understood.

This made the research a collaborative process; interpretation had begun within the festival, seeing their photographs again brought back other memories, and also revealed significances that they were sometimes still reflecting on and formulating (Pink, 2004; Wood, 2015). “The interview, it's made me think a lot about, you know, why I do things, and why I enjoy things, and, you know, what I'm actually going to do with it”, said one, “so I found the whole exercise really, really, you know, encouraging and interesting” (GB18). Several others remarked that taking photos had sharpened their awareness of the event as a whole event, in line with what Harper early on called the method’s potential to give participants “a new view of their social existence” (Harper, 2002, p.21). “You made me take photos I wouldn't have otherwise taken”, said one, adding, “it wasn't a distraction, it made me engage in a slightly different way” (GB19). really, you know, encouraging and interesting’ (GB18). Several others remarked that taking photos had sharpened their awareness of the event as a whole event, in line with what Harper early on called the method’s potential to give participants ‘a new view of their social existence’ (Harper, 2002, 21). ‘You made me take photos I wouldn't have otherwise taken’, said one, adding, ‘it wasn't a distraction, it made me engage in a slightly different way’ (GB19).



This wasn't announced in any way. They just appeared... It was very flowing, and it just looked good. Completely random again. Completely - I suppose that's the thread that goes through everything, it's the spontaneity. (GB16)

What this visual method does not easily reproduce is the merging and surging of bodies in a crowd, the formation of a temporary collective emotion, or the festivals’ wider ‘affective ambience that encourages an openness to others, and sustain[s] a social identification through the intangible feeling that encompasses an emotional space of belonging together’ (Waitt & Duffy, 2010, 458). People’s photos of blurry lights could capture the energy of night-time

crowds, but not the waves of laughter or the stillness and intensity as a crowd leans forward into a poet's intimate performance. Instead, the method offers detailed personal narratives emerging from those feelings, which combine the recollection of moments, some before-and-after context for them, and longer-term disclosure of why this artist or encounter felt significant at the time, and now. In comparison to other long-form interviews done at literary festivals (Weber, 2017), photography revealed an equal degree of attention to what was happening between events or within participants' emotional journeys as to what happened in the events themselves. People wanted to photograph guy-ropes or empty spaces to talk about their feelings of tension or slack time, for example.



It's, you know, people, people not doing something. They're just chilling, relaxing. It's a beautiful sort of background. (GB16)

Given the transient nature of the festival, they particularly wanted to capture moments they knew would not last. Seeing the photos again in the context of the interview then unpacked the memories of the moment and the thoughts that had led into it. Looking back at a photo taken early in the festival of some fairy lights twisting up like a vine, one reflected, 'I seemed to go to a lot of stuff that was about being connected to each other and to nature and I guess I was putting the layer of that in itself is - is a light-giving thing, maybe, to other people?' (GB12).



Close attention to the language used in those interviews also sometimes revealed the underlying preoccupations which united a string of apparently separate observations and photos: a preoccupation with artistic ‘liveness’ and emotional ‘aliveness’ in someone recovering from COVID, or with aliens (festival outsiders, species divides, a crowd lit by green stage lights) in a person of mixed nationality.

Our interview process involved in-depth interviews with 47 participants and 23 poets, hosts and festival organisers. From this we coded the transcripts inductively using data analysis software Nvivo, and gradually and reflexively identified the most frequently-discussed themes of their festival experience – boundaries, abundance, levelling, access, and transition / transformation (Braun & Clark, 2012). These categories share elements with Ballantyne’s model of the four facets of music festivals experience (music, social bonding, festival atmosphere and separation) but, coming from participants’ reported experience, pick up more of the texture of festival experience, including the felt physical environment, the times of difficulty and the inner journeys. One limitation of our sample method, however, was that finding participants to interview depended on a mixture of chance and goodwill – we set up a stall at each festival and invited people to join us – and could not be pre-selected to ensure full diversity. Our age sample ran from teenagers to people in their 70s, with 31 using female pronouns, 13 male and three non-binary. Five wanted to declare a registered disability, but only two described themselves as non-white, which reflects the general lack of racial diversity in festival audiences, something participants themselves addressed head-on (see Access). Another limitation was that we were unable to check in with participants mid-way through their experience except through encouraging remarks in the photographers’ WhatsApp groups, so these words represent some distilled reflection after the event. Wood and Kenyon (2018) innovatively combined festival photo-elicitation with mid-event smartphone surveys to track moment-by-moment changes in friendship groups’ emotion and memory-formation, showing how group process changed how they remembered feeling after particular events. We did not wish to interrupt our participants’ festival experiences, and, moreover, our attention was on longer-term and more interiorised narratives, and the commonalities between different participants. For purposes of anonymity, we refer to them throughout using letters representing the festival they attended (WM for Womad, GB for Greenbelt, W for Wigtown) and a number to differentiate them from each other. The names of poets and other speakers appear in full as they enjoy a more public status.

Because the testimonies are so vivid and because photo-elicitation has not been often used at festivals, we have chosen to produce many more participants’ words than is usual in social science studies to give a flavour of the richness of their experience. The Centre for Cultural Value’s *Vision Paper: Culture, Health and Wellbeing* research review (2023) noted how many studies of culture’s relation to well-being gave “minimal detail relating to the experiences that participants had, dedicating more time and space to presenting and discussing outcomes” (p.11). Unconstrained by journal space, we are able to present participant quotes at length to show the cumulative effects of people’s festival experiences. For these reasons this qualitative study follows the call for researchers to be “more interested in how festivals are normative and sometimes transformative processes” (Duffy & Mair, 2018, p.15), and in encounters that help constitute individual feelings of acceptance and belonging as well as difference (Rowen, 2020). More widely, to understand the “value” arts festivals bring, “we must understand what value and impact ‘looks like’ and how it is described by the people who engage with arts and culture in the places they live in” (Mackay et al., 2021).

Literary and non-literary festivals

Although festival life-transitions have not been explored as much as one would expect, one area in which participants' desire for self-change has more consistently been observed is at book festivals. Literary festival analysis has often considered them as first and foremost vehicles for the marketing and promotion of books and places (Moeran, 2010), but Weber's rigorous full-length study of big British and Australian literary festivals finds them also "re-entry" points for audiences wanting to combine renewed "cultural engagement with professionalism and economic skills", in the "bourgeois / bohemian" manner of Richard Florida's creative class (Weber, 2017, p.164; Florida, 2002). Rossetti and Quinn (2021) have shown how an Irish literature festival engaged people with a wide range of cultural capital, not just fans or experts, and its workshops and performances became "occasions to learn, acquire skills, taste, reflect on values, increase cultural participation, change bodily hexis, and experience 'personal growth'" (p.539) although the study did not go into detail about this last point. More negatively, Driscoll portrays them as the new location for the anxious middle-brow readers first discovered in the mid-twentieth century: "literary festivals, attended predominantly by middle-class women, promote reading practices that are emotional, earnest and highly mediated, inflected by respect for literary stars and enmeshed in the commercial structures of the publishing industry" (Driscoll, 2014, p.153). Anxious about their lack of current expertise, she charges, readers attending events based on intimacy between authors and readers are reassured by the feeling of being part of a group as well as being given exclusive insider access and proximity to "prestige" (p.159). Competition for status characterises both the book marketing and the audiences themselves (see **Levelling**).

We were not studying literary festivals on their own account; our research set out to observe the difference other kinds of festivals made for poetry, with different atmospheres, purposes and cultural capital, and we used book-based festivals as a comparison and contrast. Nonetheless, participants at every kind of festival told us that proximity to well-known names in tents and after-show signings was important, whether they were musicians, speakers or poets. Nor was it only readings: face-to-face conversations with workshop leaders who were professional artists gave some a feeling of permission to try a new creative possibility, while a slam competition brought a chance for others to step onto a stage alongside professionals with a big audience. But the significance of the festival transitions reported to us was more often to do with recovery from difficult circumstances or changes of moral and emotional perspective than it was from upskilling, prestige or new career possibilities. For those who wanted to do more creative work, emotional change and career ideas joyfully merged; for others, the futures the festival opened were more to do with an improved self-image or community action. For these people, it was the informal and unlooked-for interactions the festival permitted outside the performances that registered as much in people's accounts of their transitions, and in their camera images, as any moments of star encounter (see **Levelling**).

There were some differences between the literary festivals and the music, community or activism-based ones we observed. Broadly speaking, the non-literary festivals focussed rather more on the experience of being there (music, atmosphere, costumes, social gathering), whereas the book-led festivals were more concerned with providing enjoyable access to authors and ideas, with community-making events only at the start and end. Music-festival poets had to engage more with what was happening round the performance – overlapping

sounds from other stages, noisy and unpredictable crowds – to bring it all into the ‘now’ of the performance. Live poetry at the book festival, on the other hand, was more sparsely attended, but could rely on attentive silence. This was not an effect of booking ‘page’ rather than ‘stage’ poets, as both types of festival had a range of performance styles and we saw two poets do sets at both kinds; the difference lay more in the event expectations. Book festival events were run as separately-ticketed entities, requiring more prior knowledge and taking in fewer casual attenders. At music or multi-arts festivals, however, all-access tickets were the norm, and people moved to poetry from other kinds of event, which completely changed the dynamic. Stand-up poet Kate Fox observed:

The whole festival [...] has been teaching them ‘Be free, be an audience, express yourself, drink more, be loud!’ [...] The audience has probably just seen somebody in the comedy tent, and they’ve seen a music act, and they’re like, ‘Well, we’ll respond like that then...’ Whereas the literature festival, you know, here’s some lovely chairs sat out in rows, here’s [...] a little table with flowers on it. Now, a little table with flowers on it, to me, does not say, ‘Respond by going “YES” when you hear a line that you really like.’

But the similarities were as important as the differences. We saw poets from the music festival circuit warming up the audience in a cold book festival tent, while the Poet Laureate got cheers from over 1200 people at a music festival. Although the book festival more often used mediators to interview the poet and discuss issues arising from the poetry afterwards, the poets presenting their shows directly were no less carefully mediated, either. Comperes and venue hosts had worked hard to build crowds for individual poets, while in performance the poets often used elaborate self-interrupting asides, straddling the border between poem and commentary, as if improvising an interview with themselves (Bearder 2019, 222-23). Both kinds of festival sold books and arranged celebrity signings, and in both it was the informal, non-commercial interactions with artists, friends and other participants which framed all the art received, and heightened it (Ommundsen 2009).

In the town-based book festival, this included the welcome from locals, impromptu events and the enjoyably-uncertain boundaries of the festival itself through chats in the public gardens or local accommodation. The poetry at the book festival that gained the most appreciative comment was also the immersive, giving the words a situational context: the installation of a walk-in replica Antarctic exploration hut for Elizabeth Lewis Williams’s poem about the continent, Deception Island, involving cinema and soundtrack, and Dan Richards’s *Into the Nicht*, a star-lit poetry walk using headphone theatre and Galloway’s dark skies. Importantly, the book festival also allowed personal transitions and transformations to be recognised as well (see **chapter 7: Transformation**).

Festivals and Poetry History

In their editors’ introduction to *Focus on Festivals*, Newbold, Maughan, Jordan and Bianchini (2015) helpfully outline three broad phases of modern arts festival development. Immediately following the Second World War were the festivals of post-War reconstruction (Avignon, Edinburgh), generating international collaboration with a largely high-arts programme presenting works in relative separation from their surroundings. Then came the community-driven festivals of the 60s, involving protest and oppositional youth culture, taking over cities

and public parks with techniques of street theatre and open-air performance. These aimed to involve participants in building a 'cultural democracy', sought to lower access barriers, sometimes literally, and used a wider range of arts, like film, circus, and pop music. During the 1980s came rapid expansion and commercialisation, with the development of mega-festivals like Glastonbury, festival franchises (Reading, Leeds, WOMAD) and the pluralisation of music festivals by genre. Alongside these were new 'hallmark' urban festivals driven by Cultural Industries policy, tourism and property development (Bristol Light, Glasgow Garden) and an increase in 'heritage' festivals led by diaspora communities, most famously Notting Hill Carnival (cf. Quinn, 2010; Finkel & Platt, 2020). But the authors emphasise that no festival phase has been left behind, so that older festivals' models and aspirations persist, although they have had to adapt to the arrival of newer ones. Within the last 15 years has come a huge pluralisation of the types of festival: visitors to the Ledbury Poetry Festival in Gloucestershire in 2022, for instance, could equally have gone to the urban music festival Eldorado or the Truck Festival in nearby Malvern on the same weekend. Meanwhile, music festivals themselves like Green Man or Bestival or have been undergoing a widespread "responsibilisation" (Woodward et al., 2022, p.150), developing ideas and debate tents, green living stages, children's workshops, art installations and, for some, poetry.

Focus on Festivals' lists indicate something of the complex cultural purposes behind the modern festival: civic pride, artistic showcasing, cultural industries, international cooperation, countercultural rebellion, town regeneration, protest and profit have all been mixed in varying quantities. There are other important influences to add. Events marking a seasonal transition and attending to the state of the land and the weather go back into prehistory and continued throughout the twentieth century in agricultural fairs and fetes, adding a level of environmental and ecological awareness which is now a mainstay of contemporary festivals. Within the British context, there is also the discernible influence of the aristocratic country house party, with its lavish consumption, costumes and theatrical shenanigans; two of our festivals were held on the grounds of large landed estates, Charlton Park in Wiltshire and Boughton House in Northamptonshire. McKay ascribes the origins of the rock festival to the early jazz and blues festivals at another of those country houses, Beaulieu in Hampshire, and outlines the influence of hippy aristocrats on the 70s free festivals with their early social and green agendas (McKay, 2015; McKay, 2004). Another vital influence on the classic late 60s rock festivals were the 1950s and 1960s CND marches, whose influences St John has then traced forward into the anarchist New Age festival scenes of the 1990s, and the 'protestivals' at global political forums (St John, 2008). In turn, the protest festival's sense of imminent apocalypse and sense of being a seed community for the future reveals the still-older influence of revival camps, religious retreats and pilgrimage (Nita & Gemie, 2020). The 'transformational festival', modelled on Burning Man's maxim of 'no spectators' is now a subgenre of its own; participants have to suggest what they will contribute, and there is a vetting process. In short, environmental consciousness, exclusivity (aristocratic or countercultural) and personal change all mingle and react within the rest of the festival's modern DNA too, and their influence is palpable within our participants' comments.

The reciprocal influence of festivals on poetry began much earlier than these post-War festivals, however, and, thanks to its proximity to music and drama, its history runs somewhat differently to the development of the literary festival. In the nineteenth century there were festivals with readings celebrating the anniversaries of particular writers, such as Robert Burns or Jane Austen (Leerssen & Rigney, 2014), and from the 1880s, competitive Gaelic-language

celebrations at the Welsh National Eidsteddfod, the Scottish Royal National Mòd and the Irish Oireachtas na Gaeilge (Finkelstein & Squires, 2020). The first multi-arts festivals in England were probably composer Rutland Boughton's Glastonbury festivals of 1914-1926, which aimed to reproduce what Wagner had done at Bayreuth for his own operas. But Boughton had more of a community approach, employing a mixture of professional singers, friends and local children, and soon his festival began to take on contemporary poetic drama, including work by Thomas Hardy and the Georgian speech revival poets, Wilfred Gibson and John Masefield (Hurd, 1993). Boughton wove it all together with Arthurian myths as an alternative both to British imperialism and to mass production, seeking to re-link the arts to the values of craft, liveness and the face-to-face, values which persisted into the 1960s festival and today. The experience inspired Masefield to set up the Oxford Verse-Speaking Festival in the 1920s, initially as a competition for teachers of elocution to bring their pupils and gain qualifications and status for their art. But from the 1930s one can watch the programme gradually taking back some of the general functions of Boughton's festivals again, with plays, concerts, celebrity visitors and 'buzz' from sell-out public events. With Masefield's help, George Bell, Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, also began a drama and poetry festival within the town's spaces in the late 1920s, its star event T. S. Eliot's site-specific play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). As publishers in the 20s began experimenting with author appearances at 'book weeks' in Cheltenham, Cardiff and Bath, the experience of crowds at pageants, local festivals and political demonstrations inspired new writing experimenting with choral voices from Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden and the poets of the Popular Front.

After the War, poets appeared at literary festivals like Cheltenham (1949-) or Ilkley (1973-), but soon began to shape their own, like the British Poetry Revivalists' International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall (1965), Ted Hughes and Eric White's Poetry International (1967-) or Richard Berengarten's Cambridge Poetry Festivals (1975-85) (Berengarten, 2010). They had also begun to appear within other cross-arts and politically-driven festivals, like Leopold Senghor's FESMAN in Dakar (1966-), Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder at the Human Be-In in the Golden Gate Park (1967), or Calvin Hernton at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress at London's Camden Roundhouse (1967). Nina Simone made a poem by David Nelson of the Last Poets the centrepiece of her historic set at the Harlem Culture Festival (1969), while Adrian Henri and Christopher Logue's anti-War performances appeared alongside the rock acts at the Isle of Wight Festival and the 14-hour Technicolour Dream (1967). In the 70s, thanks to the influence of Black Arts and feminist performance (Bennett, 2023), stand-up comedy (Larkin, 2021), rap (Blacksher, 2019), dub and punk (Wells, 2021) poetry developed more of a range of performative styles and became easier to programme within other gigs. The growth of open mic and slam poetry competitions from the 90s then brought an element of contest which dovetailed well with one of the traditional elements of festival ritual, rites of competition. In the UK, support from the Avon Women's Festival led Pat V. T. West to begin the poetry stage at Glastonbury in 1992, and experiences there gave poets like Luke Wright, Jon Seagrave (Jonny Fluffypunk), Rosy Carrick and members of Bristol's Wandering Word collective the impetus to develop serious poetry stages at mixed festivals like Latitude (2006-), Boomtown Fair (2009-), Port Eliot (2003-2019) and Shambala (1999-), as well as make appearances among other acts at big commercial festivals like Reading and Leeds. These festivals helped bring Spoken Word and its crossover artists to a wider audience (English & McGowan, 2021), and with them, poets of all kinds. Latitude's dedicated poetry tent offered up to 16 hours of poetry programming a day, featuring rock poets, sound experimentalists, poets laureate and once, actor Roger Lloyd Pack reading T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

I think there was a sort of a boom fifteen or ten years ago, where suddenly it just seemed like there were all these spaces opening up. And, much to everyone's surprise, audiences as well. They weren't just empty kind of tents with, you know, one drunken passer-by; the poetry tent at Latitude was packed. You'd get a thousand people in there, you know. And so it felt like suddenly you just had this whole other size of audience to play with. And I think that's sort of maintained. I think it's now just become embedded.

(Chris Redmond, poet, musician and WOMAD Hip Yak Poetry Shack host).

Poetry's deep roots in music and performance festivals means it has always been more closely tied to ways of experiencing art within its setting than it has been to debate about art and ideas. As an oral event, its form is not bounded by the genre of story or the covers of the book but by the circle of the audience drawing near to hear, with the mixed noises going on outside; the performer's core principle is 'being responsive to the festival', Hip Yak Poetry Shack host Liv Torc observed. This then puts poetry in a structurally different position to the festival as a whole. Following Bourdieu, Millicent Weber argues that the literary establishment is invested in claiming autonomy for its published writing, consecrating what is really a product and protecting its prestige – and therefore that studies of book festivals which seek to defend them against the charge that they are really commercial or populist by showing other values at work end up serving the publishing establishment's agenda (Weber, 2017). Our perspective here is that performed poetry is inherently heteronomous, open to the influence of sounds and crowds in its formal presentation, but that the heteronomous nature of the festival encounter in which it is set then binds it into therapeutic and social motivations also at work in festivals alongside commerce, celebrity and status. With that immediate sensitivity to context in mind, we supply some brief notes on the festivals about which our participants made their comments, before turning to the participants themselves.

The WOMAD (World of Music and Dance) festival was founded in 1982 by Peter Gabriel, Thomas Brooman and others in the Bristol post-punk scene (Brooman, 2021). Setting global-majority musicians alongside rock, jazz and folk artists, it brought music from outside American and European pop to wider public awareness, and versions of the festival have now been held in 27 different countries. With early educational funding from the Council for Racial Equality, it has an anti-racist message, a multi-generational atmosphere and specialises in participatory workshops with the musicians, including cooking. The UK version at Charlton Park, Wiltshire attracts 40,000 people, and now has a wellbeing section and venues dedicated to Children, Books and Ideas, Poetry, Environment and the Institute of Physics.

The Greenbelt festival was started in 1974 by a group of evangelical Christians who wanted "a version of the Isle of Wight Festival" which they had enjoyed (Creative Director Paul Northup, interview, 2022). Since then it has grown into an activist and inclusive festival "at the collision of arts, justice and faith" (Northup), featuring international musicians, writers and campaigners from other faiths and none, while retaining an ecumenical Christian core (Nita, 2018). The festival has moved location many times, but since 2017 it has been held within the ground of Boughton House, Northamptonshire: alongside the music stages, its venues in 2022 included spaces for theatre, young people, activist / campaigning and public speakers, and the poets' sets were distributed among all of them.

The Wigtown Festival was started in 1999 after it was announced that the town would be

Scotland's National Book Town, part of the international organisation of Book Towns which aim to encourage book-buying as part of sustainable rural development (Macleod 1999; Fordham 2012; Bythell 2019). Its venues are dotted around the small town and its many second-hand bookshops, and there is a large group of local volunteers who help with guiding, venue hosting, cleaning and accommodation. In 2021 and 2022, following the Covid-19 pandemic, the festival used the public gardens in the centre of town as part of its community space. It opens with fireworks and closes with a ceilidh, but the core of the festival time is interviews with writers of fiction and non-fiction, workshops for children and adults, and literary-musical performances.

3. Boundaries

Outdoor festivals are places of thinner or lowered boundaries. Festival-goers are constantly entering and leaving spaces, moving from campsite to arena or browsing between venues. Tents have canvas walls, where sound pervades easily. People have far fewer of their usual protections against weather, heat or cold. Regular markers of time passing are absent, mealtimes are haphazard and people are up at unusual times, exposing them to the night sky and its larger scales of time.



I was having dinner...in the moment it's really normal just to be sat there, sort of in the dark eating dinner, listening to some music with, you know, however many people...You're like, "Oh, OK, this is just what a festival is like". But it's very unlike every day, isn't it? (GB2)

In a space where toilets and café tables often have to be shared, boundaries between festival-goers also come down; many of our participants report unexpected and surprisingly intimate conversations with strangers as a defining part of their festival experience. The profusion of the festival programme means that most people saw acts they did not expect, or which they found accidentally (a feature explored further in the section on **Abundance**). Boundaries between one event and another blur through overlaps of venue and sound, while the boundaries between artists and audience are re-set through participatory events, workshops and poetry slams.

As poets and festival events cross boundaries of genre, we found they also challenge people to cross other social boundaries, through personal encounter with transgender people or refugees / asylum seekers, for example. Correspondingly, we heard many stories from the poetry stages of participants' internal boundaries coming down: unexpected sympathy for another person,

hostile self-judgements reconsidered, or re-connection with feelings buried by work and family conflict, moments explored in the final section on **Transformation**. Poets in this space seem to be given audiences momentarily willing to cross cultural, educational and personal boundaries – including some people’s previous reluctance to consider poetry – in order to listen, connect and be moved. Those who do often cross boundaries within themselves: the poets’ words, an anonymous postcard writer said, ‘reach right into me’.

This does not mean that the festivals we studied were an all-out experience of boundarylessness. Certain boundaries stand resolutely in place as other boundaries come down. The price of the festival and the hard work of volunteers secure the festival space against outsiders, while volunteers report invisible hierarchies still at work within the festival’s infrastructure. Nor did our participants describe fusion or total immersion experiences in the manner of the transformational festivals described by Johner (2015): most were continually self-conscious of life going on outside the festival, even as they felt themselves separated within it. Even among participants who use the language of transformation, the sense was of boundaries crossed without being removed, limits redrawn but not erased. But through their physical design and their implicit social contract, festivals allow people to experience more porous or permeable boundaries internally and with each other, an experience that was both risky (particularly for neurodivergent participants) and valuable.

Boundaries of feeling and time

The thin boundaries between indoors and outdoors correlate closely in reports to altered social and personal feeling. At the camping-based festivals, WOMAD and Greenbelt, people linked tents with freedom to cross personal and social boundaries:

Nobody’s in the comfort of their homes, no one’s in those four walls. There doesn’t seem to be any guidelines...when you’re at a festival. You’re out in the wilderness, in the forest, in the woods. Those, those social interactions change a bit. There’s more freedom...less awkwardness, I think, at a festival. (GB21)

Campers recalled easily sharing items, one noting that ‘there’s something about camp life that creates community, I think’ (GB4). Some regretted the night-time noise, but more often tent life came with a feeling of personal liberation: ‘there’s barely any space [in a tent] yet, [you] feel like you’ve got space because you got these massive vistas, the skies. If you were indoors, it would be horrible. But because you’re outdoors, you still feel like you’ve got space’ (WM12).

Unwelcome midnight trips to campsite toilets gave two participants an unexpected sense of connection with volunteers and neighbours:

This is one of my love-hate relationships with camping, is the having to go - well, Portaloos in general, having to go to the toilet and trek and sort of - usually the middle of the night. I can remember the first time I had to do it in the middle of the night on the camping, and I got up, and I was like, “OK, actually this is quite beautiful,” because I just feel connected to all of this kind of city of souls in a way that I never do when there are concrete buildings. (GB4)

I went and wandered around the campsite and I loved those moments 'cause I just had a chat with

a, you know, one of the security blokes up all night and the fire chaps and then sat in that empty space with St Francis sort of looking out over these sleeping people in the tents, and that was very profound actually. (GB10)

Few camped at Wigtown, but participants there noticed that a yurt used for a series on 'Explorers' allowed more conversation between festival-goers than the formal festival marquee tents. One photographer noted the 'magical' feeling of its enclosed but permeable structure, where 'you're enclosed, but you're still outside.' (WT13) Another felt grateful for its 'fabulous' circular design for bringing about lucky meetings that sparked future collaborations and friendships: 'the yurt was definitely a, a space that, um, brought about several things that need pursuing' (WT4).



If you're within the circle you all feel that... it's more easy to feel equal with people there, and you've all got something to add to... what's being talked about. (WT4)

The sense of living with fluid inside / outside boundaries gave many participants a sense of stepping across social boundaries too. At Greenbelt, there were specific stages set within in the forest, and one in particular, the Rebel Rouser, attracted many photos for its hospital beds on the leaf-litter, with lampshades hung from the trees overhead:



All the photographers of this stage reflected on the implications of this indoor / outdoor overlap for social barriers ('where the weirdos want to hang out' (GB10), 'full of misfits and people playing too loud' (GB17)), and artistic ones:

And I loved the hospital beds because again, it's just- it's that subversion of, of- I don't know, materials and art and all that... I love the fact they're on the edge, those beds, as well. So there's the main performers and the main stuff going on somewhere else, but there's this even "on the edge on the edge on the edge" bit. (GB10)

A wooden caravan stood to one side, which another participant found a metaphor for the whole festival:

I was watching this child. He went into the caravan and he shut all the doors. So he was, he separated himself from his Mum, you know. And you know, and I think he was obviously just experimenting, because after about five seconds he opened it just to check she was still there, which I found especially cute. And I thought there is definitely a thing there, that Greenbelt actually gives you a chance just to break out of your norm. Break out of your safety net if you like, you know, and be, be who you are. (GB18)

Outdoor performances allowed non-traditional poetry audiences to cross cultural barriers too. At the free-to-access Bristol Harbour Festival, a stage under the trees offered shelter from the intense sun and intense noise of the music zones; we observed young parents with pushchairs and prams slowing and then stopping to listen for around twenty minutes, drawn in by the peace as their children slept. At other times, vulnerability to festival bad weather brought people in. Poet Sophie Sparham recalled a stage at Bloodstock, the heavy metal festival:

Like, it was ridiculous. Because all these metalheads - it started raining, so they all gathered in this tent. The wind was raining through, going absolutely mad, and I was just on stage doing poetry and it just worked like a treat.

As if the poet were another band they had discovered, Sparham's new audience wanted to buy t-shirts. At First Light, a 24-hour multi-arts festival on Lowestoft beach designed to run through the longest day and shortest night, we watched as intensifying rain brought crowds into the poetry tent, some of whom turned back again when they found it was poetry and some of whom stayed. The afternoon programme had been zigzagging between serious theatre, comedy and activist poetry, while struggling to deal with constant sound interruptions from the music stage up the beach. But as the rain came down, the tent filled up:

I think the funny thing with the First Word tent was because of the rain, you know, quite a lot of people were sheltering in there and so they were being exposed to stuff that they really might not have chosen necessarily to go in there if they could have gone and had a dance or something else.

(Genevieve Christie, Founder Director and CEO of First Light Festival).

Social and Gender Boundaries

Festivals encourage conversations with people you don't know. In van Gennep's classic typology of the rites-of-passage festival, the centre section is when customary barriers of gender or seniority are suspended (Turner, 1969); in a modern, British context, it seems to mean surprisingly intimate conversations with strangers, a sociable atmosphere that is more valuable than the music for some (Brown, 2023). Over three-quarters of participants in our sample across all ages and festivals reported unexpected encounters in queues for food, late-night

cafes, at workshops or waiting for events. Snapping Wigtown's 'Happy Bench', which invites people to sit down and wait for a conversation, one participant remarked that he wished he could bring it back to his hometown, and then reflected "I thought that in many ways summed up a lot of the fest-, the feel of the festival, you know. Sit here, and somebody is going to talk to you" (WT11).



Many enjoyed the carefree feeling, "almost liberating, you know, whereas perhaps in the street, you wouldn't necessarily speak to someone automatically, but there people are out to have fun", adding, "particularly after the pandemic, I think" (WM8). Londoners noticed the difference from the city:

We talked to people we'd never met, and you know, talked about our lives and um, you know, what we were doing and what was going on. And yeah, it was just a really great feeling, which is, again, something you don't really get in sort of larger areas. (WT10)

Others relayed conversations reaching across more awkward boundaries. After some crossed wires with a stranger in a refreshment tent, one participant felt the festival had encouraged her to reach out:

He was struggling a bit with the fact that he'd... interrupted my world and that had really bothered him. But I've sat there, kind of trying to un-bother it for him by going 'Well, I'm sat here now. We're friendly, we'll have a chat' and so we did... you're just opened for that. Especially if you're going there as a single person as well, erm, you know, or by yourself, you're just more open, I think, to those encounters which I think are really precious and beautiful. (GB10)

At WOMAD, a fellow festival-goer had been offended by the costume of one participant's son (a Native American headdress) and came up to rebuke him angrily for cultural appropriation, before walking off. Later, she sought him out to redress the situation:

So if it had been on the street, to the busy London streets, and someone had made that comment, we'd have yeah shut down and just gone into kind of f- off, you know. But we were all there to enjoy the music of the world, we were all there to, kind of... there was more space around us. It was like a prolonged happiness experience, wasn't it? We were there just to be to be with one another and to kind of relax around each other and so, yeah, it kind of provided the much more suitable, conditions to have a helpful conversation, and to actually contain it. (WM11)

Several reported surprisingly deep encounters with strangers in the queue for the toilets:

I was 'congratulated' on my 18-year-old daughter coming out, the man in his 60s in front of me talked about his daughter's wedding to her wife, and the woman in front of him spoke of her son's boyfriend – an intimate and open chat lasting about 10 minutes to strangers who felt like friends and who I'll never see again. (Greenbelt postcard)

Sharing the festival with strangers seemed to allow other conversations about the shame of family crises, loss of faith and mental health breakdown. "I let feelings in, and I felt, you know, I was able to talk about parts of me and have conversations about parts of me with people that I would be less willing to do, or more cautious about doing, in other settings" (GB4). At First Light, a change in the programme brought an unforgettable moment of deep collective grief. Replacing a comedian, Piers Harrison-Reid read the uncensored version of his poem, 'Dandelions' about working as a nurse on the COVID wards. People broke down in tears as the poetry tent moved to an unscripted group ritual of anger and mourning, led by a poet naming what everyone had just been through. Nor was mourning only to do with COVID: grief for lost or absent parents surfaced unexpectedly and directly during six of our interviews and across all three of our focus festivals, suggesting that for some, festival time allows emotionally 'live' memories to emerge, and inner boundaries of time to be crossed in mourning.

Costumes played their part in this temporary lowering of boundaries, particularly of gender. One man admitted to having to let go of some defences:

If people look a particular way, I feel a bit threatened somehow, you know. And I think WOMAD was a gift for that, because there was loads of blokes wandering around in dresses, and my wife, as the weekend went on, got more and more colourful and ended up covered in glitter and [inaudible] crocheting – it would get more outrageous as the day went on. (WM4)

Another enjoyed helping a non-binary couple make a costume out of glowsticks on their way to dance:

I'm in the military, so it's not a world that I hugely connect with. So for me - but, you know, it was really lovely to kind of go 'Right, what's going on?' You know? Just to, to have this moment of sharing the joy of making a mad costume and hearing a little bit about, you know, about their story and their lives. (GB10)

Then she reflected, “there's something about that festival space... where you can suddenly engage with people that you may not have. You can talk to people on a different level that you [normally] might not, you can meet people that you might not, you can share a moment that you might not.” Against the background of global church splits over homosexual marriage, a Christian participant at Greenbelt felt this monk’s combination of robes and a Pride flag represented a festival that was not either / or in its outlook:



Every time I saw him, he always had his, his habit on and his big flag, and it just made me really happy... And it just seemed absolutely normal. Like, it, it kind of summed up Greenbelt for me. I was like 'Ah, yes. This.' (GB11)

The atmosphere of newly-crossable boundaries then extended into the boundary-testing and social discomfort that some events afforded. Given the long media history of festivals presenting themselves as ‘hedonistic playgrounds’ (O’Grady, 2013, p.30), it was noteworthy that almost half of our interviewees across all types of festival reported that challenging

themselves had been important to their experience. One attended a festival talk by rapper Darren McGarvey (Loki) on “social exclusion and change of class structures in Britain”, and remembered his “buzz-saw-like Glasgow accent”:

Not the sort of person you expect to be rhapsodising about class structures. So there was, there was a little bit of kind of breaking down the barriers, and a bit of, you know, just changing the way you, you looked at people, I think, from different backgrounds. Perhaps, you know, uncovering a bit of unconscious or conscious bias in my own mind... that was the another of the talks that you know, I perhaps wouldn't have normally gone to but challenged myself to go to, and enjoyed, actually, in spite of myself. (WT12)

Poetry and events about the crossing of boundaries themselves (sexual, transgender, Travellers, interfaith) left listeners both uncomfortable and newly-sympathetic. One man confessed to feeling a mixture of apathy and irritation with LGBTQIA poets, because the perception of “people changing gender” was fuelling the culture wars which his local politician was using to distract attention from poor performance. He was initially unimpressed by poet Leila King’s lyrics about lesbian identity:

So when that girl started talking about, you know, the dilemma of, of having to shave her legs, I'm like rolling my eyes and thinking ‘who cares?’ No. It's like in the thousand problems in the world, that's not even in them, d'you know?... It's like, find something important, you know, there's people two miles from where I live, you know, the crowded housing, you know, the schools are terrible, you know. (WM4)

But her performance had made him reconsider:

I['d] kind of listen to her poetry and think, well, [exasperated tone] ‘please stop!’ but then... I sort of think but well, yeah, but that's life her experience and that's important and she's brave enough to do that. So, you know? So I dunno. It's quite challenging for me, you know? ... her life had been painful and you know there- there were expectations that had been put on her that had caused her great pain so, erm, you know. And the beginning of sort of insight, perhaps, is empathy, isn't it?... it's out of my comfort zone is that. So, but because it's sort of poetry, which is something I now identify as a fan of, I'm prepared, to sort of go with that, and sort of listen to that. (WM4)

As well as the poetry, it was the trust that he placed in the WOMAD line-up which made him stay and keep listening. For others it was the festival staging which started chains of thought. At Greenbelt, a self-described ‘middle-aged’ man was struck by the inside/outside décor of the lampshades in trees and beds on the forest floor.

And quite a lot of time, things are either right or wrong, and I think, lampshades in trees, you know, why have you got lampshades in trees? That's ridiculous, it's, it's not what should happen, really. And I think it just made me think - just lying back in the, in the chairs, you know, looking up at these trees, and seeing the lampshade swinging and think – and you just think, why shouldn't you have lampshades in trees, you know? And I think from that just stems a whole load of stuff, that says, actually look for the unexpected in the everyday. (GB18)

As the interview progressed, it emerged that the lampshades in trees stood for other more difficult boundary-crossings:

And I think, to my shame, I feel that that was especially true of the whole LGBT thing, which, you know, I'm desperately trying to not feel uncomfortable with, you know, two men holding hands... whereas most people would find that affronting, you know, and be offended by that, in what the lampshades and the trees said to me was actually, let's make that normal. Let's have, in our everyday life, let's have more lampshades in more trees, you know. (GB18)

Trans issues also spoke to people about other challenges. A talk by a parent of a trans teenager reminded a cisgendered listener of her own isolation:

I did cry at – listening to her, because I just felt... it was just such a hard, hard place for them to be, and I think, I think just sort of that sense of being so alone and not knowing quite who to turn to, and then having to go right to the bottom. And I kind of - from my own personal experience over the last years [knew] that sense of hitting rock bottom... it really resonated with me. (GB7)

People were also able to cross boundaries of faith and non-belief. A non-religious student at Greenbelt noticed how “hearing people talk about religion and things like that aspects of religion kind of challenges a lot of the feelings that I have about it, and can lead to some very interesting discussions and stuff” (GB17). The partner of another participant there, however, felt “that he was at risk of being judged” for his atheism, and “wasn't able to fully relax and be himself” at the festival (GB5). But the festival had allowed some tentative lowering of guards too:

My partner is, I guess, less receptive to religious beliefs than I am? But he really loved seeing Richard Dawkins there, and I thought the conversation was curated really well towards getting, getting a sense of where things might be shared. Yeah, I think having that [event] there made me feel like it's okay to be an atheist in this environment, because clearly we're being invited and we're being welcomed. (GB5)

Another Christian-Muslim hybrid performer both impressed and scared Greenbelt participants for the way she crossed borders of faith identity. One saw a performance by an artist whom she felt was “not going to be defined by barriers, boundaries, definitions”, (GB10), but another found it alarming:

I felt very uncomfortable and very challenged by what she was doing. I thought it was really, I thought it was great, but also I was mindful of who I would be really able to talk to about that. Particularly Muslim friends. (GB12)

But crucially, no one reported these challenging experiences as simply unwelcome; almost everyone felt they had been significant, and five participants described them as part of their transformative experience. One participant, who had been deterred from attending the festival by her hatred of camping, reflected on the experiences her previously upheld boundaries had forced her to miss out on:

In seeking a degree of comfort, I've also denied myself experiences, and is that right, is it wrong? Well, it just is. And so somehow I've had to engineer what is my comfort and what my boundaries and barriers are in order to then re-access stuff. (GB10)

Poetry and boundary-crossing

Festival poetry events take place within this general atmosphere of boundary-crossing: not just physical layouts and programmed diversity of acts, but the unexpected conversations and one-off encounters. Coming to hear poetry itself is an act of crossing boundaries for many, as postcards from audience members reveal:

The Hip Yak Poetry Shack has reminded me that poetry is for everyone. Not just the elite waxing lyrical in ancient languages; or the righteous anger of the young. It's for us all.

It brings people together and makes connections, as we all reflect on shared human experience. It makes us laugh and cry. I would not approach spoken word in the 'real world' but can here.

WOMAD postcards

I don't normally listen to poetry but have found I have laughed, been moved and saddened by the poetry I have heard.

11-year-old: "I hate poetry" ... said whilst laughing hysterically (with above older brother) to Harry & Chris [spoken word and music duo]

It brought poetry to life for me. In the past I tended to avoid poetry in written form, as it felt inaccessible, irrelevant, a challenge. Hearing it spoken as a poet intended was refreshing and awe inspiring.

Greenbelt postcards

The only stronger theme than poetry's accessibility in festival contexts among postcard-writers was its emotional boundary-breaking. Many drew attention to the poet's vulnerability during performances and their feeling of participation in the performance, explored further in the section on levelling. The generally lowered barriers between poet and audience meant audiences found the poetry a means to know themselves in new ways:

Came for the music, stayed rooted for the poetry. Real sharing, willing to be vulnerable. So touched inspired and blessed.

WOMAD postcard

Who needs therapy when you have poetry? It cuts straight to the heart.

Discovering feelings / emotions that I deeply empathise with and didn't know I had that in me has helped me open up to myself about what is really going on inside me, underneath it all.

So good to escape the 'Action Plan' language and be nourished and enriched by words that sparkle, break us in half and put us together again.

Greenbelt postcards

One postcard writer from the Greenbelt mental health team described their clients' need of poetry:

It's been striking how the deep 'inner journey' of the festival has taken people into issues of anxiety, grief, fear of going home – from Greenbelters and the volunteer team in ways that they didn't expect and need a language to describe it. Some people are finding it in poetry.

The emotional boundary-crossing that the live-performed festival poetry brought was also noted by several of our long-form interviewees, across some very different poetry stages. One recalled being drawn to Lemn Sissay's performance at the previous year's festival:

He's not a poet, I would say, who's overlapped with my sphere of the world, but his sheer power and delivery and his... authenticity and just the- the genuineness of these words. It just - it really woke me up. I just sat in this sort of that beautiful area listening to him. Ah! I felt so connected. It was amazing! And he made me really think about [it], you know, 'cause he talks about what happens when you're in care and then you get to 17 and suddenly no one cares anymore, d'you know? (WM4)

Another at Greenbelt was mesmerised by Kae Tempest, a poet she had not come across before. Conscious of her own difference from the artist's generation, she felt their performance articulated what the whole crowd were feeling:

It was really extraordinary. I remember watching it thinking 'This is like almost like a new modern type of liturgy'. Because it really spoke to, you know, deep pain and deep longing and sadness and grief and joy and pleasure with no holds barred, you know, kind of thought processing. It was fantastic... the way Kae I think sort of articulated those deep inner thoughts, as poetry does, but in a way that was so engaging and so... challenging. (GB10)

A different participant summarised the emotional difference the poetry stage at WOMAD made in particular. She had previously mentioned that online poetry groups during lockdown enabled her to press “fast forward on the degree to which we normally connect with people” (WM11). That effect was redoubled at the festival's Hip Yak Poetry Shack:

There's a kind of a barrier between you and other people. And something about the poets... it's that fast-forwarding I was talking about before. So the poet kind of links you to the other people in the audience, but also to them, but also to yourself. It's a... defying, kind of, a breaking down of a miasmic skin that's suddenly missing, and you kind of fast-forward into a more authentic experience of your emotions. (WM11)

Such emotional power is present at many kinds of non-festival poetry readings and spoken word performance, of course. But given the extended boundary-crossing experiences festivals cue, the poetry is given particular personal significance within the festival, as a way to cross boundaries with strangers and within participants themselves.

Poetry Slams: Ceri Baker's story

The poetry slam at WOMAD shows with particular intensity how these physical, social and emotional boundary-crossings join into one another. Audience-members sign up, crossing the boundary between paid and unpaid, amateur and professional; winners will be invited to give a

set the following year and sell books. Slams had been an initial entry point for three of the professional poets we interviewed: Kathryn O'Driscoll, Sophie Sparham and Harry Baker. Physically, competitors walk up from the audience to the stage; emotionally, the competition pulls them between the conflicting demands of their own vulnerability, the need to communicate with strangers, and the wish to win. In a long-form interview, WOMAD slam winner Ceri Baker was emphatic about the personal boundary that had had to be broken for her to sign up:

Like it's really terrifying doing slams. And it is a bit like, why the hell do you do it? I've done a few, you know, I've got through to the final of a couple, and then not progressed at all in some...when I got [to the Hip Yak stage] and I saw so many people, so many people, that's like the biggest audience I've ever done a slam to. And it was, but I kept I kept thinking, the old Ceri, like before kids and before I realized that you've just got to do this stuff, would have just found an excuse to get out of it, you know.

Competing and then winning was so intense an experience that Ceri described it as a kind of 'rebirth', emerging from a period of confinement by motherhood, COVID and illness into a new professional career. "For me it's such a turning point. It's like it's, it's so massive", she confirmed, "it was just showing me another life and just showing me other connections, and another version of me that I've wanted to see for a long time". But she also witnessed poetry breaking through emotional boundaries in others. A special needs teacher, she had volunteered backstage and noticed a person with a neurodiversity lanyard sitting at the front of the crowd for long periods, needing not to be too crowded by others. Following a poem by Scott Tyrrell about his autistic child, Ceri noticed:

they were absolutely in floods of tears. . . And she said that she, she'd never had somebody witness her experience of autism growing up. And to hear somebody, to hear a father show that amount of understanding and love for their child and seeing their child's autism. . . I think it's witnessing, that's what poetry is.

In the elation of her win, Ceri experienced a moment of psychic boundaries being redrawn with her own father, with whom "I have a funny, tricky, sad relationship". Volunteering to pick up litter, she found an unopened beer can, whose warmth in the afternoon heat reminded her of father, who liked to drink it that way:

I texted [my partner] Pete saying look, the Poetry Gods have rewarded me with this can of warm San Miguel, to say well done for winning the slam... And it just felt, like it was, just felt really serendipitous and quite funny.

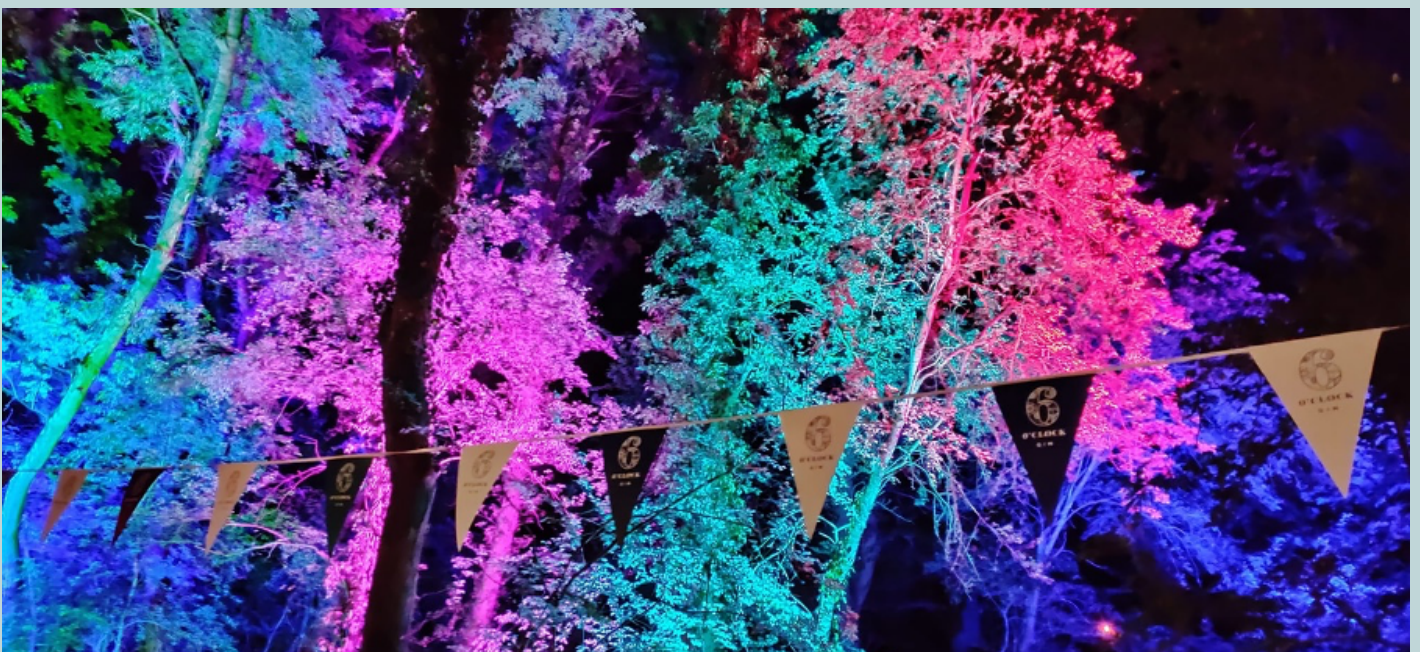
This experience of festival hyper-significance, where everything within the festival feels like a sign or a gift for the change of life the participant senses is characteristic of the festival transformations we explore in the final **Transformations** section. In the sections on **Abundance**, **Levelling** and **Access** which follow, we explore in more detail three of the major components that make this boundary-crossing experience possible, and how they interlink to become part of the transitions that people experience.

4. Abundance

Festivals do not feel like festivals without profusion: there must be a joyful excess of events, entertainment, sound and people. Shows go on till late into the night, or right through; extra meals are fitted in, people eat holiday foods, drink and some take drugs. A format which appears at first to offer a limitless panoply of individual choice and possibility, however, had some opposite effects for our participants. Abundance became a form of festival levelling, because it led to chance discovery, unexpected overlaps between events, and a state of willing receptiveness to whatever the festival had to offer. It was these conditions of free-floating attention which allowed other thoughts and emotions to surface, and contributed to the transformation experiences of some. But abundance costs money and access to it is limited and unequal. When festival costs are reflected through separately-ticketed shows, as they were at the Wigtown Book Festival, they discourage risk-taking and the easy mixing of events that people enjoy. At other festivals, stage programmers reported having to fight for attention, recognition and budget from festivals so that they could provide the abundance in a diversity of line-up. So that “the regeneration can happen – you need that carnival atmosphere”, Morecambe Poetry Festival organiser Matt Panesh affirmed. But sometimes the costs are unfairly off-loaded: we were told several off-the-record stories of poets being paid in kind rather than money, off-loading their real expenses, while organisers who do pay properly have taken huge financial risks, making it more difficult to bring poetry to new areas in need.

The feeling of abundance

Wonder at the size, scale or noise of the festival was a near-universal theme among our interviewees. The sensory overwhelm was nicely caught by one, who remembered thinking, “Wow, look at all the sounds! and all the- I mean, not the sound - look at look at the sounds? [chuckles] Look at all the colours!” (WM1).



Photograph: WM1

When we asked whether the Wigtown festival was an escape from daily life, a Londoner said, “it’s busier...it’s so busy”, adding, “it’s just joy. I love it” (WT7). It is an immersive experience. “At a gig you’re always, like, kind of bound to reality and the fact that you will go home at one point”, one music-lover noticed, whereas a festival is an entire “environment”, where you “just... acclimatise yourself, and kind of act differently” (WT1). At the festival, “you’re involved with ‘art’”, a Spanish-speaking participant said, then corrected herself, “not involved... envuelto... wrapped! Wrapped around? You know...you feel as if you’re in an art world, you know” (WM1).

Many enjoyed the scale and breadth of the line-ups, and the feeling that gave them of personal possibility and permission to explore other worlds:

There’s a diversity of programming as well. That’s another thing that shows there aren’t real boundaries. When you have such a spectrum of different events, different people speaking about different experiences. (GB21)

It was the sheer range of stuff on offer - that’s why I loved [it]... that sheer, you know, all the, all the conversations being had in that space and nothing’s taboo... You know, it was all- it’s all there and it’s only if you, if you wish to engage, there it is. (GB10)

Part of the abundance also lay in the way that actual performances exceeded what was on the timetable. We witnessed alternative unlisted stages being set up, with acts written on a whiteboard, or unannounced circus performers in the crowd between acts. Impromptu music performances took place under trees, around campfires or along the public walkways of the Bristol Harbourside Festival where security could not clear them off. The Greenbelt disco acquired people manipulating home-made puppet dancers; an unrehearsed ceilidh sprung up on the Wigtown Green while the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra played in the rain. We ourselves became an improvised replacement talk for the ‘Explorers’ strand at Wigtown when a train strike meant the scheduled explorer couldn’t get there. People in costumes also gave the feeling of many separate acts of mini-theatre going on amid the crowds, rather than just on stage.

This festival abundance also generates moments of unexpected overlap between events. At WOMAD, an annual scratch volunteer choir sang in a circle before the poetry stage had got going for the day. Sound spilled over from the mainstage in rehearsal and threatened to overwhelm them, but the choir unconsciously came into time and rhythm, and for a minute or so a new song was created. During Roger Robinson’s poetry reading at Greenbelt, he revealed that he had been uncertain what to choose, but on his way to the stage had heard the sound of a hymn being sung by a gospel choir from another stage, a tune which had been a favourite of his mother and her sister. “That was a good enough sign for me”, he said, and found an old poem, ‘Song for Angela’, an elegy for his aunt which closes with the poet joining in the same hymn, as if extending both moments into the present. Enjoying the sounds of Gambian singer Sona Jobarteh at WOMAD, one participant spotted someone in a lit-up butterfly costume, and as she tracked it through the crowd towards another art exhibit (Luke Jerram’s Moon), began to feel that the song, the costume, and the lighting were combining into a theatrical moment of their own:



This guy, it was getting quite dark and this guy just walked through. You know, like he was sort of embodiment of the magic of this woman singing. In the end I had to chase him for quite a long time to get the photographs, he was walking through the crowd...quite loosely, bit like the butterfly.... this person had kind of taken on a bit of a moth-like persona, and all of them, the strange music and the lighting and kind of otherworldliness, it was just - it was a perfect moment in that sense. (WM4)

But as the festival stimulates attention between events as well as within them, many participants – not just those who disclosed autism – experienced the whole event as too much. “Everything is continuously happening”, said one (GB6); “it’s quite an overwhelming site, and I guess it is a lot of people in one place”, said another, “and, at least I found, there’s just never a time when you get to go and just be on your own because you’re like sharing tent with someone”, adding, “I definitely had that feeling of overwhelm” (GB2). People frequently reported being torn between wanting to see as much as possible and paying attention to their own tiredness and restricting their focus. One Greenbelt stage manager who had watched the patterns of people arriving and leaving over two days observed that “a lot of people, you know, they look at the programme and see got to go here, then timetable and got to go there – they can’t be bothered. They stay here and take whatever comes. There’s something about hearing the poetry, it catches them unawares”.

However, another commonly-repeated story was about the best or most moving moments of the festival being just the ones that people had not chosen to go to. A WOMAD attendee was blown away by a chance encounter with a music performance in Arabic, a language she does not speak:

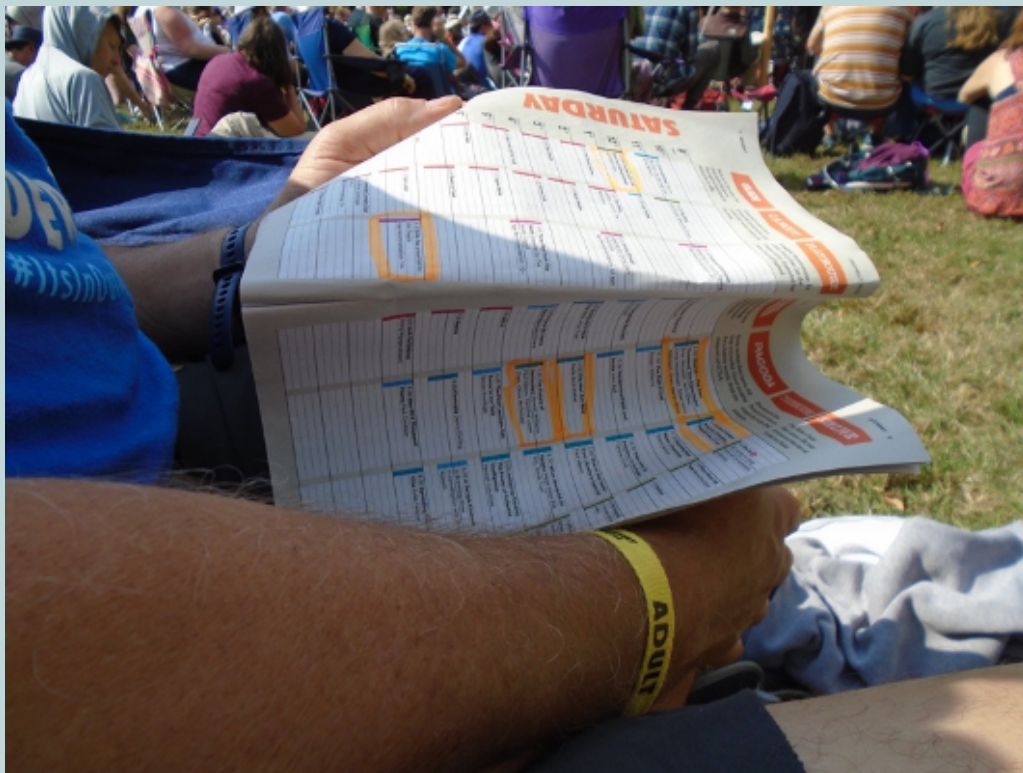
Everybody that I was standing next to, we were all close to tears, and he was crying on stage and you could still understand what the song was about, even though you didn't know the literal translation of the words... I wasn't expecting that from that set. We just sort of went there because it was the last thing on and it was actually one of the best moments of the festival.(WM3)

A participant who attended Greenbelt noticed the same thing:

You look at the programme and you think 'Well I'm going to go and see this, this and this', and then someone- you're walking across a field and someone goes 'Oh yeah, we're on our way to that!', you know, and then you, you get pulled in the opposite direction and you go and see the other thing, and that ends up being the thing that you remember most. And that's happened over the years countless times, you know... that's the joy of what being in a festival is about, I think. (GB18)

Morgan (2008) reported festival-goers' anxiety about missing performers thanks to an over-stuffed programme. For our participants, the abundance of the programme allowed friends' influence, coincidence or mistakes to shape discoveries:

I accidentally went to one event because I turned up at the wrong venue, and I didn't realize. And in the end, I was listening about the colonization of gospel music. And that was really interesting. But that's the great thing... that you come across things accidentally. (GB19)



This was somebody who had planned all his day and got everything planned. And he turned round to me and said, 'I think I'll go to this instead!'... That, to me, is a lot of what the festival is about. (GB16)

Another person found herself “kind of wandering around” with nothing to do, before finding herself walking past an off-programme venue:

I looked down and it said, 5:30, Padraig O'Tuama, 'Make believe'. And I thought, 'Great! I'm in the right place. This is exactly where I want to be.' And Padraig was reading from a new collection of poems called Make Believe... it was a really lovely surprise thing, and that is the epitome of Greenbelt. Those things that you don't plan. (GB12)

The feeling of lucky discovery was not universal, however. The all-events entry ticket at WOMAD and Greenbelt allowed participants to sample whatever they wished. Participants could then let venues guide their choice: the Hip Yak stage was an ‘entry point’, for one WOMAD volunteer, since outside the festival, “there's a lot of bad spoken word poetry”, and “when you don't know anything about it, or you don't have specific people, it can be quite hard to just be like, ‘Oh yeah, I'm gonna, you know, take a punt on this’” (WM3). At the Wigtown festival, however, events were separately ticketed, meaning calculations had to be made. “It's about playing safe: do you go to what you already know and you're willing to pay for?” (WM12). Here, it was the volunteers who made serendipitous discoveries:

I'm there because I'm assigned there because I'm a steward, and I'm like, ugh, why do I want to be here? But I've always been totally engrossed with the subject, even though I didn't think I would be. And that was, we had to talk to some of the stewards when we were at events about that. How, you know, you're there because you have to be. But you find out that you want to be, because it turns out it was like I wouldn't have gone there. I wouldn't have paid money for it. But now I'm so glad I saw it. (WT11)

The limitation on numbers for each event gave “a sense of excitement” for one person “just reading the programme and seeing how many different people were there and trying to get tickets for things” (WT9); for others with less generous budgets, it led to a sense of having to play it safe:

We can't afford to go and see everything we'd want to see. But then we're the type of people who would happily go along and see everything if we could! (WT4)

And sometimes when you go to a talk or something it inspires you to get a book, but when it costs £7.00 to get in... that was actually a barrier. So we ended up not going to anything. (WT6)

In this rather different festival ecology, it was the free bookshops which felt like abundant discovery, the feeling that “you always see something that you haven't noticed before” (WT14).

And it's just like you could spend hours there. I mean, I, you know personally, as I think I've explained, I'm more of a music lover. [My son] is the book lover, but, like, I just, I totally get when I go to places like that what he— why he loves books. And like, you could get lost forever in a place like that, and just go to so many different places. (WT8)

The bookshops had become not only “admission-free cultural attractions” (Macleod, 2009, p.137) but their abundance and the possibility for discovery now felt in keeping with the festival events.



(Photo: WT15)

Fordham's 2012 study quoted a disgruntled Wigtown bookseller complaining that the festival hadn't brought in customers: "they won't buy any other books because they are not book-buying people, they're really only interested in seeing that celebrity" (p.269). But in common with three other interviewees, this participant had been brought in by the mixed events for families and a celebrity signing and was browsing the second-hand shelves, suggesting that the overall festival experience is now generating crossover experiences between the town and the tents.

Poetry and abundance

The poetry people experienced at the music festivals was part of this feeling of abundance. At each festival, there was a wide range of poetic styles – not only humorous, confessional or spoken word poems but semi-improvised poets' theatre, poems written and read from the page, poems derived from collaborations with scientists, installation poems, chance-based happenings, long dramatic monologues, and a DJ set from the Poet Laureate. Interestingly, our interviewees did not note the range of styles, however, but the range of emotions:

I was like, ohh, you know,... poetry can be this end of the spectrum as well... I think a lot of the time people think it has to be really serious and about something incredibly poignant based on your, you know, trauma or the world hurt that's going on, all of these kind of things. And it can also be... equally moving and meaningful but focusing on something that's quite absurd, or quite ordinary. (WM3)

Because it really spoke to, you know, deep pain and deep, erm, longing and sadness and grief and joy and pleasure with no holds barred, you know, thought-processing. (GB10)

For WOMAD performer and stage facilitator Chris Redmond, the ‘wonder’ of festival poetry is the “space to feel all the things... that we can laugh and that we can be made to really feel and empathise and think and be inspired and uplifted and to kind of be reflective...and all of that can happen in the space of, you know, a few minutes, but it- it also keeps happening throughout the day, depending on the set.”

But from the point of view of some poets performing, the surplus of other circumambient events and acts means there are an overwhelming number of hidden factors affecting the show, so that abundance also generates moments of forced improvisation:

So you might be competing with a band that's next door or a circus act walks past. Or someone in the audience is off their face and really drunk and shouting at you. So it's sort of how you... if you can be alert to the moment enough to be able to respond, but still stay true. (Kate Fox)

You don't know who the audience is gonna be... you can't control the sound, you can't control the mood of the audience, you can't control the space... the weather. There's so many factors out of your control, and I think the art form, spoken word, feels like it inherently should have an aspect of improvisation, even if it's really, really technically rehearsed and precise. It always feels like there's an inspirational – an improvisational aspect, just because of the live audience. And festival performances are really like that. (Francesca Beard)

At the Lowestoft First Light festival, we observed how downwind sound bleed from a banjo orchestra almost wrecked several poetic plays, to the compère's frustration. But poets who could adapt to the sound overlaps also found moments of serendipity, as when the sea shanty ‘Away, haul away’ began to echo with the rhymes as James McDermott performed, ‘The Wrong Type of Gay’. Beard reworked poems to focus and incorporate the ambient noise, re-tuning the audience's attention, while Mike Garry resisted, then incorporated the interruptions into a poem, focussing the audience's attention on how the performance might twist and shift at any moment as the next surprise came. Festival abundance not only brings unexpected people into the tent and sets many different kinds of acts alongside each other, it means sharing sound space, so that performances of many styles take on some of the qualities of experimental art: risky, collaborative and chance-generated.

I could summarise it as: I am really aware of their context, and my context in relation to them, and we're a process as well as an event. Me and the audience together form a process, an ‘assemblage’, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms... And I- before I had the language for that, I felt that. (Kate Fox)

The cost of abundance

But the abundance, chance and riskiness of the event itself cannot happen without a strong structure, and this is sometimes hampered by the festivals' internal conditions. Dating back to the time when Pat West was establishing poetry at Glastonbury, poetry stages within music events have often been treated as afterthoughts, relegated to a forgotten poets' corner of the site and invisible on the programme. When Liv Torc was establishing the Hip Yak Stage at WOMAD, it was a ‘fight’ to be recognised.

I always fought really hard to be on a path[way, to benefit from passing foot traffic]. I had to fight really hard to be in the programme and on the app because we weren't, like, listed for the first couple of years...I fight for [the Hip Yak Bookshop] because it's the way I can get bigger name poets for less money.

Photos and evidence of the crowds being drawn eventually proved the Hip Yak stage's value to WOMAD's overall production team, but the sums committed to put on three days' worth of poetry were still tiny:

I mean, I eventually, probably about six years ago, managed to get a two and a half grand budget and that was to pay everyone, including tech, and you know, [a] stage manager and myself and, and all the artists. (Liv Torc).

Stage organisers from two other festivals not in this report told us off-the-record stories of small budgets allocated late, making line-ups last-minute and under-publicised.

Given the financial precarity of some poetry stages, it is no surprise that cost pressures are sometimes unfairly passed on to poets. Harry Baker described being paid in festival tickets as a younger poet, because certain festival stages were unable or unwilling to pay the new poets on their line-ups:

a free ticket is all well and good, and you can tell yourself that you saved £200 and you've had a relatively cheap weekend, but actually, you know, that relied on me having a summer where I was willing to do that, and I was willing to spend money I'd saved up doing that... I don't think it [a festival poetry stage] should rely on the artist taking a hit for it to be able to happen.

A programmer himself now, Baker added that paying poets poorly affects the diversity of line-ups and means work cannot be heard by poets from insecure backgrounds, a point amplifying Banks's study of the lack of 'distributive justice' in stage opportunities for minority jazz artists (Banks, 2017, p.115). At a festival like the Edinburgh Fringe, "extortionate" venue-hire and accommodation means only the financially-cushioned can perform, Baker added:

I think that it's the people who are the exciting voices that we need to hit. If you've got a festival where it's essentially people who have thousands of pounds that they can put towards it already, you sort of think, 'those aren't the people that we need to be hearing at a fringe festival.' He described having to be an 'advocate' for younger and less secure poets to Greenbelt management, in which he has been successful.

But organisers take financial risks too to make abundance possible. During Matt Panesh's preparations for the first Morecambe Poetry Festival in 2022, he had lined up Linton Kwesi Johnson and John Cooper Clarke, but no one was sure people would come to Morecambe off-season, and no external funding was forthcoming. Then a contact from Creative Lancashire called:

And he said, 'So, how are you financing all this? This is an incredible programme'. And I went, 'Oh, I'm running out. I'm looking at [my] overdraft, basically' and there was a silence at the other end, and then he said, you know, 'Well, look – I'm not happy about that'. And then I put the phone down,

and then he got back in touch with me, 'So I, I, I can get you £2k, but that's it. Does that help?'... And suddenly it wasn't going to bankrupt me anymore. And so I could relax a little bit.

In the feedback to draft versions of this report from poetry organisers, we heard several confirmatory off-the-record accounts of overdrafts taken on to back poetry performances. In the event, Creative Lancashire's instinct was correct, for the Morecambe festival proved so popular it has now attracted secure funding for three years from another literary charity; 'the gamble paid off', Panesh added in a follow-up conversation. Festival abundance – and with it, the levelling, diversity and access which people so value – depends on secure festival funding.



Photo: WM2

5. Levelling

Festivals have “a peculiar intensity that comes with a collapsing of time and space, and a blurring of the distinction between visitors, performers, and organisers”, the ethnologist Nicola Frost summarises (Frost, 2016, p.572). Our festival-goers noted instances of this blurring time and again, finding a levelling of distinctions that felt critically important to their festival. They enjoyed the seemingly-levelled relationships between artists and participants in workshops and the off-stage and unscripted encounters between shows. Competitions and games between amateur and professional are another form of status-levelling (Falassi, 1987), which we witnessed in poetry slams, question-and-answer sessions, and in the proliferation of fringe stages, as people sought to improve on the official festival programme.



Off-programme stage. Photo: the authors

Even while there were big-name acts on stage, our photographers wanted to capture these personal moments more than they did the performers. Forty-nine out of 127 photos at WOMAD were of events, 34 out of 117 at Greenbelt, and only 19 out of 160 at Wigtown – and some of these were focussing on the audiences rather than the artists. People took pleasure in the age-levelling intergenerational mix of the festival, in spontaneous ‘finds’ in shops and events, and in everything amateur and home-made.

Nevertheless, not all hierarchies disappeared; one volunteer reported being treated as disposable, while at the other end, there were very large crowds for certain poets, so large they needed special escorts to the stage. In contrast to the criticism of author-events at book festivals as celebrity promotion more than literary experience, however, we found the poets had a different structural relationship to the festival as a whole form than just an artist performing a slot. The poets’ performances were interventions, fostering the emotional and social border-

crossing of the festival in what they said, and in the way they built shared feeling and sympathetic attention among the audience. While the act of performing, particularly slam performance, did legitimate particular poets' status within the literary field, this was not the sole or main effect: people's comments were far more about the way the poets built and channelled the festival's collective feeling.

Kinds of levelling

Many people commented on the 'blurring of distinctions' between artists and audiences that took place outside the scheduled gigs. One Greenbelter, for instance, was surprised to meet a band in a queue: "I just thought that was weird because I wasn't expecting them to be performers, I just thought they were like me, but I guess it shows how kind of...mixed everything is" (GB6). While other festivals discouraged contact with musicians, she felt, at Greenbelt "there's no kind of them versus us". A Greenbelt venue felt "comfortable" and "homely" to another attender, because while one band were warming up, "the people who'd played before them would sort of mill around in the crowd, going to watch and chat to people and stuff" (GB17).



It looks like he's doing his reading... And with the crowd not really paying him any attention which is so funny. (GB1, photographing poet laureate Simon Armitage's DJ set)

Although the Wigtown festival used many ‘audience with’ events, participants reported more interest in authors met outside the tent:

I was in in a different queue, and some people behind me were saying ‘oh, which events are you going to?’, and one of them said, ‘I’m going to the Jeremy Bowen talk this afternoon’, and their friend went, ‘Oh, that’s a shame, I couldn’t get tickets for it’. And the man stood in front of me wearing a baseball cap turned round and said, ‘Oh, that’s a shame!’ And it was Jeremy Bowen! And that, kind of, that was one of the interesting things. It’s kind of breaking down this barrier between the authors as totemic figures on the stage, but also as regular human beings, who are themselves interested in literature. (WT12)

While marquee stages formally divided authors and audiences, the temporary public spaces brought them together, a fact commented on by a third of Wigtown festival interviewees. This was perhaps a point of pride because previous studies of Wigtown noted some tension between the festival and the locals, who felt it was “elite” (Fordham, 2012, p.262) – although Fordham also observed that people from the farming community did attend the events (Fordham, 2012, p.266). A pop-up bar had been created in a local garage-cum-antique shop, where speakers would come by after events to rub shoulders with visitors and locals, as elsewhere in the town:



You go to the pop-up bar or something, and you end up talking, [or] you're sat in the garden, and they - they wander through looking bemused because they've got nothing to do. But they come and sit down next to you. (WT4)

A long-term town volunteer praised the lack of selfies at such moments; authors “enjoy being able to walk around the town, knowing that people recognise them, but at the same time they’re not particularly bothered by those people to, to be, or to do something” (WT3).

These comments should be set within many more stories people told about their pleasure in the festivals’ apparent levelling of status and age. “Your profession is dropped”, said one doctor with a note of relief (WM12). A retired Greenbelt volunteer took pride in photographing teammates who for the rest of the year crewed for major rock bands; “you think, ‘whoa, I’d love to have that kind of lifestyle’”, he commented about one, but “here, he’s one of the guys who’ll clean up after you” (GB16). At Wigtown, people enjoyed an open-air performance by the Scottish Fiddle orchestra in which anyone could play; “these are people who play professionally”, said a Wigtown volunteer proudly, “and yet, you know, everybody who had a violin, who had an instrument, who had a fiddle, was encouraged to come along and join them”, which showed the festival’s “lack of hierarchy” (WT3). Workshop leaders who were also band members or poets on stage provided official encouragement for people trying creative work, some of whom hoped to cross from amateur to professional: “hearing all these people talk, it kind of makes you feel like well, you can do it, too” (WT13). At Greenbelt, a workshop participant was surprised by her leader’s warm response: “He didn’t brush me off at all”, she said, and felt that the encouragement “could be quite important for her life” (GB20). A WOMAD participant found herself taking over a mobile letterpress stall when the stallholder went off for a rest:

And then there must have been a queue of about 20 kids waiting to make a poster, and we’re all standing there looking at each other, thinking, ‘OK, what? What’s happening here?’ And I said ‘Right, I know what to do, let’s just do it’. So while he was having his very long cigarette break, my brother and I, we took over the printing press! [laughs] We did all these posters with these kids and he came back and his little donation box was full and all these kids were happily taking off their posters. (WM7)

Before she could leave, she added, she ended up quickly running off more posters for the festival’s director, who, used to dealing with artists on tour, saw the stall as one of the real one-offs, “a unique WOMAD gift”.



Somehow just delightful and just brought a lot of joy to people passing by, laughing. Someone had thought... I'm going to take that to WOMAD and set it up for the general public. Just for the pleasures of random strangers. How nice. (WM11)

Photo: WM10

The value put on the home-made or hand-made is another form of the festivals' celebration of social levelling and of performances made for the occasion. Craft production where buyers meet makers has been a staple value of festivals since the anti-industrial medievalism of Boughton's Glastonbury (1914-26). Our photographers often valued objects which felt like personal encounters: the puppets made by children's workshops ("a human, very human side of things... it's not industrial, it's just there for the fun of it" (WM10)), elegant displays of books made by volunteers, ethical clothing ("grounded and connected and earthy...rather than the glitzy, cheap-y, fast-fashion-y" (WM7)), or an imported garden display, complete with gnomes

Intergenerational mixing allowed a further sense of equalising encounters. "I could be in a place with some older people, I could be in a place with a young mother and her baby and stuff, and it wasn't . . . weird", said one student (GB6). One older WOMAD participant carefully took a photo of a family wheeling fretful toddlers round in a cart:



I'd watched that family, with the baby crying in the little buggy, and then their toddler dropped a drink and I just watched in awe as the parents coped and just sort of didn't, didn't fret and... and life wasn't perfect, life was difficult. And they'd come along to a festival with little kids and they'd sort of gotten comfortable and sat still... You, you don't see all the work, you don't see all the pain, you don't see all the effort that people put in... and I was just really inspired by their parenting. I just thought they were wonderful.
(WM4)

Many noted the range of ages in the dance tents: "I'd never met any trans people older than me before" (GB13), or at scratch choirs: "young people there, older people there - it was just an amazing feeling" (GB7). One photographed children practicing circus skills because she felt they were an epitome of the whole festival ethos: "a space where you can fail and it's funny and you pick up when you start again. And you're just there to have fun and learn from other people and watch other people and have a go" (GB12). Workshops, in particular, gave many pleasure by

mixing experts with amateurs or children with older adults, all made temporarily equal by the unfamiliarity of the task. “We’re all in a circle with the pens in the middle and drawing the same thing, but in different colours, and everybody’s kind of got a slightly different take on it”, said one, “kind of personal, but also harmonious, communal experience as well... [with] people of all different ages” (WT10). “One of the best bits of Greenbelt was when an eleven-year-old girl taught me to make a friendship bracelet”, remembered another, “I just really enjoyed that, because I don’t know why I expected anyone else to be teaching friendship bracelets. Because obviously eleven-year-old girls are the masters of that!” (GB11).



I think the child’s about three or four, but, you know, what they wanted to do is sit down and read a book. And I thought that epitomised the first stages in reading, the first stages in education, the first step into finding out all sorts of things about the world, and it was just... I just felt it was a great moment, really, I was privileged to see it. (WT3)

Volunteer labour itself was another dimension of the personal face at the festival. Not only did it encourage “an incredible camaraderie” among volunteers themselves (WT3), but participants saw it as part of the festival’s real ethos: “it’s got a lot more volunteers than people realize”, said one WOMADer, “and they put a lot of effort in behind the scenes...there’s a lot of care that goes in, actually goes into it” (WM10). At urban festivals, the volunteers can be just “human signposts”, said another, but at Wigtown, “I felt like I was really engaging with the community when I talked to volunteers, and was shown around by people” (WT10).

Despite the purportedly ‘flat hierarchy’ of the festival, however, a WOMAD volunteer picked up a tiered system at work between volunteers on the gate, the visitors and performers:

Don’t get me wrong, I encountered so many people that were lovely, but you get other people that come in, you know, and they’re like, waving their letters for their backstage passes and I have to tell them, ‘Oh, sorry, you have to go to the passes office over there’ and they’re like ‘Oh’, you know, ‘how dare you make me walk an extra three minutes to the other side of this field?’ Whereas, I’m

a volunteer, I, I don't know what's going on I'm just following instructions. And then, you know, those people feel like... that they should be treated a certain way... and then sometimes that frustration is vented on people... not within the same group as them, often on the volunteers or the traders or people like that who are, you know, charging them too much in their opinion for a coffee or, you know, not dealing with the wristbands fast enough and all of these different kind of things. (WM3)

Having grown up in a family that used to run a stall at the festival, she noted the hidden division between visitors and traders:

the traders, because... in terms of the hierarchy of all the people that go, I would say that they are probably at the bottom. And speaking from experience, like... the artists and the backstage people and the general public all had cloth wristbands and the traders all had plastic wristbands which are, like, much more uncomfortable to wear. It's like, well, 'why? Why does this group of people not get the same amount of ... priority?' (WM3)

The festival culture of volunteer labour may also provide an excuse for poets themselves to be poorly paid. We heard several off-the-record stories of poets being given derisory rates of pay, though not from the festivals we attended (see Access). Poets had been invited to perform and be part of a poets' 'scene', but at the price of being paid in free tickets or fees that were not enough even to cover travel, making their performances effectively voluntary.

"I think it's mostly the moving parts that go behind making that [festival] experience happen that don't necessarily all fall into the same, you know, flat hierarchy or lack of hierarchy", WM3 reflected.

Poetry and levelling

Informal encounters between poets, musicians, speakers and audiences have hitherto been more a distinctive feature of literary festivals than of big-name music festivals. But literary festival criticism has largely been sceptical of its levelling potential when made a style of official event. For Lurie (2004), book festivals' focus on encounters with authors substituted for a reading of the actual works, and trivialised the public sphere (cf. Ommundsen, 2009, p.32). Others have argued that book festivals are mainly means for publishers to give their authors celebrity, status and distinction before a market of readers now gathered and made visible to itself, with the whole event structured as a "tournament of value" (Moeran, 2010; Driscoll & Squires, 2020). Festival audiences, meanwhile, seek discussion events where that distance is apparently reduced again, through live confession or the revelation of personal details that allow listeners to see the parallels with their own stories. (Weber, 2017, pp.44-45). The intimacy or authenticity of these encounters, they argue, is simply the other side of the coin from the prestige the literary festival trades in, so that participants pay for fame and for access to it. The Australian literary festival audiences interviewed by Johanson and Freeman valued events that felt intimate, authentic, community-making and participatory, and they disliked the idea of books being used for status (Johanson & Freeman, 2012). But the literary festivals themselves, the authors judge, "have not been successful in achieving this goal" (p.313).

All our festival-goers' comments confirm the general values of authenticity and intimacy Johansen and Freeman observed. But relatively few reported them in moments of (possibly

commoditised) on-stage revelation through interviews or at book-signings, though these were a feature of the programme at all the festivals. Unlike a typical 'an audience with' format where interest in the author is generated through the personal interview more than a long reading of the work, the spoken poem (with asides and introductions) is one instance of the work, so that effects of intimacy or distance with the crowd are formally part of it. Setting their comments within the context of their whole festival, audiences then singled out vulnerable, honest or brave performances because they felt the levelling encounter within a poetry reading or performance fitted the sympathetic, face-to-face *communitas* of the whole event. Turner described *communitas* as the temporary ability to relate to "another person as he presents himself in the here and now... free from the culturally-defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche" (Turner, 1982, p.48). For poetry, the levelling experience of festivals translates into the value put on poets and poems who can make the audience themselves feel it happening there: not intimacy with the great, but sympathy with each other.

I think that the relationship between the audience and the performer isn't very hierarchical. I think really good Spoken Word feels like, you know, I'm here telling my story or, you know, asking my questions today, but tomorrow it could be you. (Francesca Beard)

'Connection' was a keyword. One participant, a teacher, commented:

I've seen senior British writers... turn up and do their thing. It's at the level of it's extremely well-polished, it's professional, they know what they're doing, but it has got to the point where it becomes... it's just like they're, they're turning it in. But it's not actually about the connection anymore. What was great about both Simon [Armitage] and Roger [Robinson] was that they clearly were... rejecting that impulse to phone it in, they were actually reminding themselves of who they were, if you like, and who we are as [an] audience as well. (GB1)

This connection could be sensed in a variety of ways. Younger audiences enjoyed poems made by audience participation, comic or serious. Many at Greenbelt enjoyed comic duo Harry and Chris, who "incorporate songs where the audience will shout out bits and then Harry puts it together in a kind of . . . slam poetry format", meaning "it changes wherever you go" (GB6). Their act "is what Greenbelt festival is about - improvising and things adapting and things changing and being with your friends", said another fan, delighted that a suggestion of hers had made it into the poem (GB8). Harry and Chris proved to be a gateway act for two younger photographers to try a more avant-garde audience-generated performance by Aislinn Evans, using Chinese whispers or deliberate inaudibility:

I went along just expecting to sit there and listen to poetry, but it was exciting as well. It was like, this isn't a passive thing, this is something you are active in and we are active in feeling the emotions of the author. [...]

Interviewer: Did any of the poetry that you saw at Greenbelt change how you feel about poetry? *I mean, the collaborative poetry definitely did. It kind of showed me that poetry doesn't have to be... a production, necessarily? It doesn't have to be something that somebody produces and you read, it can be... participat- You can participate in it. (GB6)*

Another participant saw the person next to him start unconsciously acting out a line from a poem about fantasy execution scenes: "the person next to me whom I'm now friends with, like

actively got on their knees, and I just think it just – that stuck, that sticks with me, ... Like it was entirely spontaneous. It's a thing, it wasn't like planned. It was - entirely spontaneous" (GB15). Spontaneity, like the chance discoveries detailed earlier, is another form of levelling, by-passing differences made by prior knowledge and intention.

Older participants felt the levelling more in artists' on-stage vulnerability. "Even the ones who, you know, that don't resonate with me personally, I- I- I felt quite in awe of their, err, um their bravery, really", said one listener, noting that unlike musicians, poets can't fall back on a guitar solo: "the poetry is very much, kind of, like naked music, isn't it?" (WM4). Several were moved by hearing poet Jay Hulme's work and story:

his vulnerability, he, he allowed his poetry to be vulnerable? D'you know?... So he was talking about this body and talking about the transformation of his body as a trans person and I just thought...I don't know, it was just 'Wow', really. You know, that bravery to share that? Publicly? You know, and to, to want to give other people hope that they can get there that they, you know, whatever they're going through, you know. (GB7)

This performance was being valued not as an unashamed declaration of identity but as a moment of levelling contact with others who had different struggles. Hearing T. S. Eliot prize-winner Roger Robinson's reading, in which the poet acknowledged how tough his mentors had had to be with him, another listener felt it was "immensely encouraging and reassuring to know that, you know, everyone struggles, and he didn't hide away from the fact that it's just hard work, and, you know, you need help from other people, and it's not this kind of glorified solo thing that only a few people get to do because they're the talented ones, you know" (GB1).



Zena Kazeme. Photo: GB19

As the festival poetry brought people into contact with authors and backgrounds far from their own, listeners began to perceive the shared connections. Several remembered Zena Kazeme's poems about being a child refugee (Baker, 2021) but framed them within a series of their own encounters and memories to do with exclusion, on- and off-stage. Hearing her poetry was all about "engaging with real, listening to real people", said one:

when you hear from the, first-hand from an immigrant and their experience...when you hear their story and what they go through, you know, it brings it to life in – and you realize these are humans. These are people like you or me. Instead of that detached, abstract 'immigrant' rather than a human being. (GB19)

Another found the poems speaking difficult truths about her work in a museum:

She wrote about the British Museum. And her taking her mum to the British Museum? And her mum placing her hand on the glass. And it's interesting because we always get so, so many people wanting to, they want to touch the objects – they can't help it. But it is interesting what those objects mean to the people that they were sort of taken from... I just thought was really meaningful to me in my job, and I wanted to share it with other colleagues. (GB7)

Another felt the uncomfortable correlation with her own experience of social rejection:

I don't cry in public. I, I don't like crying in public, but her poem about the corners, the round peg - I was sobbing, you know, and, and the bit where she said [pause] our- basically our treasures are good enough for you but our people are not. It was just like, 'oh, no'. Um, that was- very- touched me a lot. (GB8)

The moments of vulnerability on stage were also cultivated by the poets, however, particularly at WOMAD. We observed how frequently they would use comic poems about toilets or other shameful experiences to settle audiences and provide common ground at a camping festival, before proceeding to something more genuinely vulnerable. Many went to some lengths to make themselves look weak, making jokes about their weight (Scott Tyrrell), failed political activism (Jonny Fluffypunk) or the fact that they were "only doing this because I get childcare: someone actually takes my kids for me" (Liv Torc) – before she began a moving poem about her children coming out of lockdown and instantly playing "you're it", acting out in a game the infection they had been kept from. But the vulnerability was then passed into the audience. Experienced performers used collective action poems to allow audiences to see each other looking silly or exposed, and therefore less defended when the most serious points came. John Hegley's capacity crowd signed along to his angular poems about being guillemots or jellyfish before falling into silence at the awkward rhyme, "homeless / not gormless". Chris Redmond got the crowd to build a chorus chanting the name of the most annoying child in his primary school, "James Martin", before suddenly turning on them with the quip, "and that poem's called 'How the Nazis Started'". Jasmine Gardosi reworked a version of their poem "Raise Your Hand" which asks audiences to make a signal to confess silently "if you've ever said, 'thanks for the gesture, though'" or were "still working out how to be happy on your own". People watched, and, seeing there were no repercussions, began to dare to make the actions in front of each other, as the poem began to bridge the lack of trust between strangers. "If there are things you wished you talked about / More / Look at your hand" it ran. As audience members saw others

of different ages, ethnicities and appearances looking at their hands and signalling their wish to talk – with the shared risk of admitting it – the atmosphere changed from entertaining party game or recognition comedy to the feeling of releasing someone else’s shame, as if the audience reception were part of the labour of the poem. This reception didn’t mean that prestige had disappeared: the poets were on stage and their books were still for sale at the back. But across all three festivals, they were being valued for the capacity to generate moments of collaborative feeling more than for granting privileged access to themselves. A performance partly in Gaelic stunned an English-speaking audience member:

In that moment, having the extra dimension of it being performed, and having it performed in such a - not theatrical, because that could be construed in a bad way, but in such an emotive way - made me feel like I was a part of it, and, like, my interpretation was important. And that I was, yeah, a part of the whole experience. (WT10)

Another was moved by a confession from Harry Baker about his mental health during lockdown:

He'd opened up to these people who he was probably not seeing - they, they're not his friends, you know, they're, they're his audience. But in that moment we all felt his pain... And we cried in empathy with his pain, and it was just shared hurt but also shared joy because...we could give him- we could show him he was loved and we could see that he felt it, and allowing ourselves to feel his pain allowed us to- allowed him to feel our love for him, and it was- it was a moment that lasted maybe three minutes. But it was beautiful. (GB8)

Or as one audience member summed up her feeling of the mixed pulls of the WOMAD stage: “each performer is at once vulnerable, but sort of untouchable. And also unifying and also fallible” (WM11).

6. Access

Festivals lower the boundaries to hearing poetry, particularly for those who have been put off it by school. But making an inclusive festival is hard work and has consequences for the artists as well as the audience. Because festival poetry is so audience-dependent, its open access format changes what poets can say and do. Festival access teams worked hard to make it easier for people with disabilities, neurodivergences and caring responsibilities to take part, while programmers felt a responsibility to invite acts that were as or more diverse than their prospective audience. Despite the prevalence of families, the festival audiences we observed still conformed to the general demographic pattern for arts events, with fewer people of colour and more previous engagement with the arts than the UK averages (Audience Agency, 2020; Maughan & Bianchini, 2003). Given the festival's culture of levelling within its borders, the unequal levels of access to it stood out as an irony to several people, who noticed who had been shut out due to cost and to cultural barriers. Still, we found poets themselves bringing the unresolved issue of unequal access home by making it part of their act. Rather than allowing the festival to be an enclosed bubble or even a “temporary autonomous zone” of anarchy in which historical identities no longer apply (Bey, 1991), they drew attention to the exclusions in operation within the construction of the festival audience itself.

Access to poetry

Younger adults are generally under-represented at live literature events, whether local ones or at literary festivals (Audience Agency, 2020). But music festivals have a much younger demographic (Brown & Sharpley, 2019) and one that is not already literary, which the poets we interviewed recognised as important for their work:

Festivals are a great opportunity to reach a very different and much more significant audience. There's really kind of three ways that you get gigs as a poet: you do the kind of a top room of a pub stuff; you do the gigging that you get around Pride month, or other like occasions like that, and then you get festivals. And it's a very different audience, in that people are in a space to be experiencing all kind of arts and you get often like much larger crowds who aren't regularly engaging with poetry. But what you find is while you have to adjust your tack sometimes, they're much more open-minded and much more generous. (Poet and performer Aislinn Evans)

“Open and free” are “not what you associate with Spoken Word”, a Greenbelt author observed:

Because Spoken Word, I don't know about you, but for me, there's a kind of movie quality to it where everyone goes to a den... somewhere that's almost closeted and secret. So you're only allowed to enter if you know about it, or you're part of that community already. Whereas here, she's [poet Imogen Stirling] out under the trees, and anyone can come and go as they please, and her words are kind of resounding against the music as well, so it's really interesting.

(Onjali Q. Raúf MBE, author and activist)

For the audiences, it was the festival atmosphere – and their trust in the festival itself – which brought them to listen and stay listening. We did not specifically ask about school experience, but many interviewees spontaneously brought up the contrast between classroom boredom and what they had rediscovered at the festival. “The way it was presented at school to me”,

said one man in his 50s:

I'd ally it to, like, cleaning, cleaning a kitchen floor. It's a task to do - you've got to learn this poetry by heart, you know? It gave me a great aversion to... [sighing] kind of written literature. (WM4)

But the “magic” of the festival, he added, “is participating in it live, you know, like I bought the books from some of the people who performed there... even if you've witnessed those performed poems it doesn't come alive quite so off the page, d'you know? It's a - It's a kind of living thing”. Several postcard-writers agreed. “I discovered that I actually love live poetry at Greenbelt after not enjoying poetry at school”, said one. “At school it was boring”, a teenager said, adding, “I don't like poetry. But I love poetry at festivals.” Encountering spoken word at the festival had led some to seek out more. “I just didn't like it at school”, one photographer said, “the whole analysing it and, and spending, like, months and months and months on, like, the one poem” (GB11) - but, she went on, festival poetry had led her on to find R. S. Thomas and Mary Oliver. Another postcard said: “Greenbelt is what got me into poetry... This has led to much wider poetry... My daughter now writes and performs and hopefully will take this further, and this all started here’. To Harry Baker, who programmes ‘Woken Spurred’, a multi-poet Spoken Word event at Greenbelt, the chance to give relatively unknown artists an audience of a thousand or so is irresistible: “it just feels like such a win-win in that, to my mind, the poets get the audience that I think they [have] deserve[d] for a long time, but also the audience are rewarded for their faith in that”.

Nevertheless, the ready access to poetry within the festivals comes with consequences for what the poets can perform. At a book festival, First Light programmer Luke Wright noted, “people have chosen to go to specific events”, but at a music festival “they're there for the whole thing, and so they're more likely to drift in and out”. Poets in this situation must win them over, again and again, for any emotional connection to be made.

We're at a festival and, erm, people are walking past - they can leave anytime, they're not a captive audience. So, erm, you, you need to do poems that are accessible, that can compete with the noise, so, like, sentiments are easily grasped by them? (Jasmine Gardosi)

It is not only the choice of poems but the atmosphere itself which the poet needs to manage. A transient audience will only relate to the poem when they feel comfortable with each other too, Chris Redmond observed:

You're kind of in energy management. That's- that's your job, really... it's about keeping those people who are- who, who haven't got up, who are still sitting there or standing there watching, just getting them straight away engaging with all the kind of usual audience participation things, sort of call and response and cheering and shouting and, and making people laugh and picking on individuals and getting them to shout out something...it's like you're kind of conducting the energy of the space.

Some enjoy the contest to keep people's attention:

you get people [in the audience] who wouldn't otherwise be at a weekly poetry night, and so it- I like that challenge, as a form, that you've got to try and engage people. And, and, and most of

what I write, the whole aim is to try and be accessible anyway. So I'm hoping that I can get people in.

(Harry Baker)

But, Baker added, making a narrative arc through the poems becomes impossible, because each poem has to make its impact now:

In the tour show I would always, like, try and start with something that's going to get people's attention. But I think there's more permission then in the middle to be a bit gentler, or to have a bit more storytelling, I guess, and then at the end to try and sort of call back to some of that stuff and bring it together and have a, a moment that it builds to. Whereas I think at a festival, I've tried to do that, and it- it kind of can work, but it feels more hit and miss. So I think what I've learned to do at a festival is just do my favourites. Well, maybe not my favourites, but the ones that feel most sort of crowd-friendly.

Kate Fox observed that audiences have also been cued by the other genres they are used to, including the main feel of the festival and the expectations of other events they have just come from:

A festival audience is not a poetry audience, is it? It's a different thing. It is, I am aware, it is an audience, many of them might not have been to poetry before, so they haven't got the conventions necessarily of 'Oh, well, we respond only politely, or, or we respond massively, enthusiastically, with clicking' - they're coming to it from a variety of other genres, so they might be carrying, 'We've just been a comedy audience. We've just been a music audience.'

Festival poets will have to change poems, delivery style, introductions and gestures as different expectations come and go with people. O'Grady and Kill note that the festival's participatory feel means any event seeking to attract passers-by will be "consistently subverted by participant-performers who utilize the festival space as way of enacting their own performances, actions and interventions", and that ways to incorporate these and keep the show going have become an under-recognised dimension of festival theatre itself (O'Grady & Kill, 2009, p.276). But the absence of an audience affects the whole performance quality too, as poet and former Port Eliot festival stage organiser Rosy Carrick noted about a poetry venue within the Reading rock festival:

I don't know what the stage is, but yeah, it's vast. And which actually means that it feels half empty. And therefore they want the kind of poets that sort of fill the room, as it were, with the sound of their own voice... it's just that kind of context that also gives people permission to not listen.

Access to the festival

The poets' comments about the effect wide-open access had on their poetry set must be put within the question of general access to the festival, however, because our participants themselves drew attention to it. Over two-thirds of our survey made comments about what kind of audience they had found themselves in, the inclusions and exclusions based on disability, age, class, race or money. They presented a mixed picture. Over the years, one mobility-

impaired camper at WOMAD thought, the festival had “become far more inclusive, far more, thoughtful about people’s needs” (WM8), and in common with three others, praised the access team:

They're very, very helpful indeed. And, um, and people just wandering around as well, not being intrusive, but just occasionally just kind of looking in, seeing how you're doing and having a bit of a chat. (WM8)

Access teams had also helped festival-goers with autism to deal with over-stimulation. Some appreciated the mental room that festival’s outdoor performance space gave them:

Just the difference in it being so accessible because you're not crammed in... It's not lots of people everywhere, you've got that space and I could sit there at the front of one of my favourite artists and have my space feel... to... it- it's just amazing to have that. (WM5)

Visitors noticed and appreciated other people’s access (“there was a complete range of disabilities, you know, it's not just simply physical ones” (WM8)) and the free tickets for carers. Another found the festival actually better than regular life:

I was just driving around on my mobility scooter and enjoying the freedom of being able to go around. Like, usually I wouldn't be able to get somewhere with that good of a view.

Interviewer: Because they’d thought about how to do outdoor access for scooters?

Yes, exactly. And also... I'd hired the mobility scooter. I don't usually have access to one, so usually I can't go very far at all. (GB13)

Parents were grateful for the access teams’ welcome for those with small children. Others enjoyed the festival being an intergenerational space, with children wheeled round on trolleys or given opportunities for climbing, circus and skateboarding. “The trolleys are a really key part of the festival”, said one photographer, “not just for unpacking your - or packing up your stuff to take to your campsite, but just for pulling your kids around and they sleep. Everyone's happy. It's a win-win, isn't it?” (WM12). In previous years at Wigtown, “the children had been shunted off” into a venue on the outskirts, a volunteer said, but “this time, they got it better... they were really firmly in the centre of town” (WT3).

But there were many more who drew attention to those who were not there. A mixed-race doctor couldn’t stop noticing how healthy the “nice, middle-class, fairly white” audience at WOMAD looked:

I guess maybe it's new eyes 'cause I don't, I actually haven't been to that many festivals and I work in a very deprived area. So of course people just look so well to me. I've never seen so many elderly people who look so well... people were thin, tall, happy, healthy. They were relatively fit, you know, they could walk around, they could camp. (WM12)

Three expressly brought up the difference between the diversity of the performers and the homogeneity of the audience: “the clichéd criticism is that you've got black people entertaining [a] white majority. I mean, I wasn't doing a head count of people, I- I'm, I was just there to enjoy myself” (WM8). A Black Lives Matter event made another Greenbelter wonder how the festival

could be more inclusive, “Greenbelt being quite a white festival” (GB7). Poets noticed the difference between line-ups and listeners too:

Festivals... they are quite white, you know, and the black faces you'll see will often be performers... Because I think it's one thing to be able to fund, you know, more diverse performers, and that kind of happens anyway, doesn't it? And I think festivals have a remit to have more representation in their acts and their performers... but then the central question is: what about the audiences?

(Francesca Beard)

In common with the reasons for not attending a music festival more generally (Ticketmaster, 2019), many people mentioned the cost of the ticket and of the festival shops, and some thought it the root of the other exclusions. “I think the cost of it is- is a, is a bar”, said one WOMAD participant, noting that the festival’s rural location made it harder to travel by public transport, “and that rules out, you know, people without access to resources, you know, from all sorts of- from every ethnicity” (WM2). Coming to the festival “does highlight the inequalities”, another said, “and it's expensive. It's really expensive. You know, you almost have to stop looking at the cost” (WM12). A visitor to Wigtown felt that:

We ended up feeling, actually, quite excluded [pause] by cost... Not that we're in poverty, but there's, you know, we think carefully about how we spend money. We would easily spend £7 to £10 on a book, or more, but actually to take- to spend £7 on an unknown book... And there was one- one talk on travel writing which I would have been interested in, but unfortunately that was the one that was full! Erm, so it's about playing safe. (WT6)

She supplied a photo:



I'm outside... and if it had been free, I might have slipped in, just to see? So I think overall they needed more things that were accessible to those, on low- not necessarily on low or tight budgets, or who just want to take a punt without... committing. (WT6)

Other participants who saved by camping locally felt that having only individual ticketed events had made them take safer-sounding choices with events:

Interviewer: Would you be able to take more risks in what you saw if- if it was cheaper or you had, like, a festival pass, do you think?

Yeah. Yes, certainly. We- we'd definitely go to more. (WT4)

All the programmers confirmed that diversity on stage was and had long been a priority for them. The Port Eliot line-up hadn't been there to reflect the big names, former programmer Rosy Carrick said, but to create new kinds of respect for under-represented artists:

And particularly, we started to discover that, you know, you really had to make female headliners because there are only about 2 or 3 female headliners. And so after the first couple of years, we were like, well, what's going to happen? Well, actually, they're never going to be seen as headline people until people start pulling them out again... Be your own talent spotter and take the risk for that, because nobody's going to do it for you; the system's certainly not going to do it for you now.

Wigtown's Artistic Director Adrian Turpin confirmed that Wigtown always programmed local writers and artists' projects for the community, and was proud to set them on equal terms with international writers in venues and in the programme. Unlike a weekend-based music festival, he noted, at Wigtown "you're running multiple audiences at the same time", meaning a high-level talk on "disinformation in Ukraine on in one venue, but you're actually doing something that's sort of very, very community in another". Bristol Harbourside poetry stage host Rebecca Tantony saw her job as "showcasing that new writer who, you know, is just beginning their journey but is, you know, phenomenal in their own right", so that an audience member can say, "brilliant, there's someone from my community or from my culture / religion / ethnicity / class / age". But, she added, the audience themselves could be exclusive:

You know, you don't always get that wide range in audiences, like, the audience can still be from a very particular demographic and because of the environment, a literature festival or a festival where you're paying 180 quid to go.

Laing and Mair (2015) have shown that when music festivals do focus on increasing audience diversity, it tended to be among their own portable community, to the exclusion of locals. Even the socially-levelling 'heterotopia' of the Sidmouth folk festival, Wilks and Quinn found, "continuously reasserts the need to meet entry requirements/adopt entry rituals with every iteration" (Wilks & Quinn, 2016, p.35) – requirements that come through social connections with festival insiders and the cultural capital required to know which under-the-radar artists to follow.

It has been a specific criticism of the Wigtown festival in the past that while it provides employment and brings valuable tourism, not enough people from the town itself attend (Fordham, 2012), and that they resent not being able to come in by car. One local farmer's wife who had enjoyed the open political horizons of the festival commented to us in passing that it was particularly the working men who were missing, and that the festival should programme more sports books by celebrities to "get them in". However, it was notable that each one of our Wigtown participants reported warm conversations with locals who had come to enjoy the

show: one was offered an 80-mile round trip lift to the railway station in the absence of a bus. This contrasts with the hints of local discontent reported in Macleod (2009) and Fordham (2012), that the festival had legitimated the Book Town place-branding and required local people to play their part in a marketing scenario which they didn't always agree with.

Poetry and access

Increasing festival access has more implications than simply getting more kinds of people through the gates, though. If the boundary-lowering, levelling, semi-improvised experience of the festival is part of the medium for all its acts, then diversifying audiences will change the poetry itself, and not just the access to it. The middle-classness of some festivals gave "a slight sense of a potential homogenisation of the audience that is also less exciting" to Kate Fox, who felt that anything people at such festivals heard would be overlaid with a subtle sense of self-congratulation: "three hundred quid for a weekend in, in a field with our mates, and we will now accrue a certain amount of cultural kudos, and we will demonstrate our cultural taste to a certain degree". Despite believing that "festivals are always magical", Francesca Beard also drew attention to the pernicious effects of tiered access, where certain artists are helicoptered in and some audience members given luxury experiences

You know, what you're selling is this moment of, you know, freedom and community and kind of connection and access. But what you're really selling is this tiered system of privilege and actually exclusion and inclusion.

In our observations, however, festival poetry did not continue to live in an aesthetic bubble, ignoring the unequal social conditions that were paying for it to happen. Knowing the audience to be a part of the festival medium, poets frequently made poetry events by drawing attention to what (or who) the medium was being made of, at levels beyond people's individual choice to attend. At WOMAD, Dizraeli and Ray Antrobus introduced survivor-guilt poems about schoolfriends who were in some way their doubles ("For Tyrone Givans"), but weren't ever going to be at the festival, either because they had been failed by racist assumptions in their schools or damaged by the jail system. Mid-way through performing "Dear Hearing World", Antrobus suddenly dropped into silent enunciation leaving the BSL interpreter to keep signing in sync with him. The hearing audience were suddenly made aware of the medium of sound they had all been taking for granted by having it suddenly taken away from them, leaving them to be gesticulated to in a language they mostly couldn't understand. Another poem, "Two Guns in the Sky for Daniel Harris", put race and deafness together. It describes the shooting of a deaf American black man by an officer who didn't understand he was using sign language, and turns on the visible hand-shape "rhyme" between the ASL sign for "gun" and the ASL sign for "alive". Getting the mainly-white audience to make the dual-valence sign too, Antrobus made them act out the officer's lethal gesture, pointing a gun back at the poet of colour simultaneously as the listeners tried to sign the protesting word, "alive". At Wigtown, Hannah Lavery discussed Scotland's unacknowledged or disavowed racism in conversation with her host, and then used the quiet attentiveness of the tent to read a suite of poems ("Everyday Racism", "The Anti-Racism Workshop", "Hush Now (Shitty Brown)") about awkward conversations with fellow parents or within supposedly anti-racist situations. These poems required her audience to listen carefully and still not to understand where the racism might be operating for a long time, so that the delayed penny-dropping moment put festival-goers who might have thought they were

clued in from the discussion back in the situation of the dimly-aware people in the poems. In the middle of WOMAD poems about defying stereotypes of Muslim women, Shagufta K. Iqbal spontaneously drew attention to the special privileges the festival was giving to Ukrainian refugees, but not to other refugees, in line with the border arrangements then in place. We sensed some discomfort among the audience as she spoke:

I was aware of the WOMAD policy on free tickets to Ukrainian refugees (<https://womad.co.uk/welcoming2022/>). As a festival that prides itself as a World music festival, it is disappointing that this invite was not extended to refugees in general. I felt the need to discuss this, because on top of the trauma of finding yourself in the situation of a refugee, to then have your experience put into a system of hierarchy that further discriminates [against] you I feel is unjust, and goes against the image of WOMAD as being a WORLD music festival.
(comment by email).

Another WOMAD photographer took inspiration from an exiled Egyptian musician whose performance turned criticism of his own homeland back towards his audience: she remembered him saying, “we’ve got, you know, this horrible patriarchal society in Egypt and prisoners of war, but you’re not doing so great either so, you know, step up”, adding, “and to say that in front of a predominantly white, fifty-plus audience was a brave thing to do but he did it anyway” (WM3). Weber’s study notes her British book festival interviewees’ universal, guilty acknowledgement of their own middle-class status, and observes rightly that even by widening access, festivals are only redressing the impacts of social exclusion, not the mechanisms creating exclusion (Weber, 2017). But the poets and performers could use the temporary social levelling of the festival occasion itself to point out that and other exclusions at work in the very constitution of their audience, and its contradiction of festival values.

7. Transitions and Transformations

At the end of our interviews, we asked participants whether their festival experiences had led them to recognise change in their lives, or to make changes. Roughly 20% said there would be little change, either because daily life was preoccupying them, because the festival was simply a break, or because the festival showcased something they were already close to. Another similar-size group wanted to make smaller, personal changes: to continue the meditation sessions they had enjoyed, or get outdoors more, or buy more poetry and slower fashion. But 60% reported a feeling of quite significant change, within and without. Around a third of all participants reported that the festival had made a significant positive shift in their emotions and self-perception, particularly younger people. A Ph.D. researcher attending WOMAD felt that hearing a sequence of poems derived from discussions with climate scientists had given her new confidence in her own research approach. Several Wigtown parents delighted in the way their shy children had come alive in author-led workshop sessions. LGBTQIA participants felt newly accepted, particularly at Greenbelt, which had been a refuge in many ways:

In churches, I don't know where they stand, often. In a queer community often I'm going to hear a lot about the pain that churches cause... it's, it's this one space where I can go and, and pretty much be both those things... And I think the sense of safer space expands beyond that, erm, because I noticed, like, I mean, my stuff is in a tent, and I'm not freaking out that it's in a tent... I have much more connection and trust for the people around me? So in that sense it feels safer as well. (GB4)

All wanted to keep that inner feeling of acceptance and “just confidence... to be” when going back into a “hard world” (GB15). Three others said that their festival had helped them come to terms with difficult partner break-ups by returning them to a forgotten state of feeling:

Kind of going back to a time when I felt free as a person, I felt I was sort of, erm, that sort of sense of self-discovery, and yeah, just being able to sort of- just kind of find something that was going to really- helped me to reconnect with myself. (GB7)

Another 20% reported changes they wanted to make at work, either within the ways they do their job (research ideas, managing dyslexic children, better events management) or by changing jobs. Some wanted to move from teaching or counselling roles into more creative careers; one was surprised to find herself contemplating a shift from GP work to prisons:

Interviewer: There were a couple of mentions of prisons from the Hip Yak stage...
It must have been prompted by that then because it's something I used to be quite passionate about, or kind of. I worked in one prison once so I kinda had one experience. So. Yeah, actually that is something quite – quite profound in a way. (WM12)

Another 10% felt they could make festival-related changes in their community, like starting environmental groups or changing their church's unspoken attitudes towards sexual minorities.

These percentages do not add up to 100, because inner and outer changes naturally

overlapped, and some people wanted to take more than one kind of action. As would be expected from an activist festival, Greenbelt participants also focussed more on community change whereas Wigtown Book Festival attendees had more come to pick up new ideas, and saw change coming that way. But what was most striking were the number of participants, around 15% of our whole sample, who felt the festival had not only spurred change, but helped them realise a major transition was underway, with repercussions for their income, their work, their community and their intimate lives:

It was for me, coming back [to WOMAD] after 15 years, it was sort of like a rebirth or a way of connecting with something I already knew was there... open the door to other cultures, you know sort of you're invited to all of these places... A gift, definitely felt like a gift, as I was driving away.
(WM11)

In common with others, they had found a primary feeling of safety and community within the festival, enabling them to cross boundaries with strangers and discover renewed personal insights, often through poetry. But for those in this group, almost everything they encountered at the festival had become significant for that inner shift: artists, children, physical setting, speakers, new friends, lucky meetings and the emotional atmosphere were all working in “one sustained conversation” (GB14). In certain ways, their stories resemble a festival-length version of what Schäfer describes as “Intense Musical Experiences”, in which people describe music breaking through “barriers or defences”, “giving contact with hidden thoughts or feelings and providing feelings of openness and freedom”, or providing “new insights concerning one’s way of living, relations to other people and to reality in general”, and making “one feel acquainted with, and confirmed by, other people, thereby increasing one’s self-confidence” (Schäfer et al., 2014, p.528). They were not mystical experiences of ego-loss, oneness with the universe or “transpersonal” experience, associated with EDM transformational festivals (Bannerman, 2016; Redfield & Thouin-Savard, 2017); they would better be characterised as “insightful transformations”, continuous with personal development than the radical interruption to the self in mystical experience (Wilson & C’de Baca, 2001). For a couple of participants, there was an experience of “post-traumatic growth” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004); other journeys might be described as an extended version of Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” experiences, which Bearder relates to Spoken Word artists in mid-performance, when the poet’s words, the audience response and creative insight merge together (Bearder, 2019; Schoenmakers, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For such participants, every festival experience seemed to find its place in the emerging whole, with the intensified significance of art-making in process. Several had in fact started creative projects mid-festival, and all felt they were involved in a re-set of how they might then live:

It was sort of almost overload with people and conversation and ideas and, and even the quiet and stillness becomes quite tiring 'cause of where you are, there’s this sort of electrifying atmosphere, it can be intoxicating? Is that the right word? ...a sense of ‘Oh, I, I, I can, I can do something other, I can come out of this, I can change, I can grow, I can, you know, I need to go back as something different.’... it was about transformation. I wasn’t necessarily looking for that this time, but it found me. (GB10)

This person had come to the festival alone, but her transformation experience had involved a surprise reconnection with long-lost friends, two “really extraordinary” poetry performances,

boundary-crossing encounters with the Traveller community, buskers, trans and interfaith people, and a rescue by volunteers when her caravan got stuck. “I was surrounded by love in that festival”, she reflected, an experience which had given her confidence to rethink her career in the military and begin an autobiography with the working title, the “Book of Everything”. She thought to herself:

If a guy can sit there playing his one-string diddly bow guitar and have an engagement with people; if someone can, you know, stand up with their tattooed arms and have an engagement with people, if someone could sit with their, their lyre and zither and incant their prayers and have an engagement with people, what's your voice? So that's what it's inspired, really. (GB10)

Transformation and poetry

In each of these transformative experiences, poetry played its part. We described Ceri Baker’s story in **Boundaries**. Another WOMADer had a life-changing moment of family reconnection and forgiveness through taking part in a feminist ritual, which then became a poem for slam performance with the family listening. Less dramatically, a couple, who described themselves as “definitely not the most social of people usually”, reported finding a new community of friends in Wigtown through unsought conversations and serendipitous meetings:

Because it was so busy, we ended up sharing a table with people. And again it was just like, everyone was just, you know, big smiles, and you know, ‘are you joining us?’ and you know I think they were locals, and they were telling us something. So many just little interactions where you kind of sat next to somebody, and they’d show you something, or they’d share something, or, you know, tell you, ‘Oh, why don't you go here?’ (WT13)

On the opening weekend, both had taken part in a chance-derived story workshop by Will Buckingham, author of *Hello Stranger!*, in which participants received a cue from a stranger, wrote their own story, and passed it on.



Photo: WT4

This first inspired them to wonder if they could make an artist's book, but then they found a whole series of unlooked-for but significant encounters characterised their whole festival experience, which in turn became a poem:

*The festival is more than authors and their words.
It is the connections both sought and accidental, fortuitous and unexpected,
The metaphorical touch from a stranger.
A chance encounter stall encouraging the micro story to share,
The songwriting workshop we thought would be a talk...
Moments upon moments within the town and the tents and within the surrounds, Chancing upon
the badger as he waddled down the road,
The heron, spreading its wings on the tarmac,
That rose and swooped overhead and into the field.*

(WT13)

Festival events, accidents and the natural life surrounding the town were sensed here to be creatively equal, both chances and gifts: the whole festival experience was so good it had made them consider relocating to the area permanently.

For another who felt her festival had been “transformational” (GB8), poetry brought healing and insight directly. An autistic person, she knew the noisy and crowded festival atmosphere would be difficult to manage, and had developed ways to ensure she could keep personal boundaries at events. “It’s loud, it’s bright, it’s overly stimulating, it leads to meltdowns”, she admitted, “and it’s totally worth it”. What made this festival both difficult and worthwhile were the overwhelming intensity of the boundary-experiences the festival entailed. Hearing a speaker from the Traveller community had made her realise with horror how many prejudices against them she held, which “was overwhelming. I couldn’t deal with it. I was non-verbal, I was sobbing”. Equally, she felt overwhelming experiences of kindness and “love” from an LGBTQIA support group, who “made me feel wanted”, and from herself too, as part of the audience for a Harry Baker show in which he admitted how depressed he had become in lockdown:

And he did a poem, and I forget the exact line, but people started crying. And when he finished the applause just went on and on and on, and that was love for, for him... I mean, as someone who's autistic and, and struggles to, to pick up the feeling of a room, you could feel that love... because he'd made himself so vulnerable. (GB8)

But a different kind of poetry reading gave her a new insight into what poetry might do for her. Pascale Petit’s *Mama Amazonica* describes her difficulties growing up with a mother largely absent in a mental hospital, employing a sustained comparison between her mother and the indifferent, wild and vital rainforest. Between poems, Petit explained how writing them had helped her move from anger at being neglected towards a more caring approach:

And she said something that really, really made a difference to me. She said... ‘when you are writing the story, it’s very therapeutic because you control the story and you can change the ending.’... that really moved me. That, that makes me a bit tearful now. That, um, makes it OK to struggle because...if you want to change it you can. (GB8)

As a teenager who had “experienced quite a lot of death and some neglect”, this photographer

remembered writing a poem expressing intense loneliness. After a recent spell in hospital had exposed more dark and unresolved feelings, Petit's comment had made her sense how writing could be a way to stop them from overwhelming her, restoring some safer internal boundaries:

I can control that story, so I can control what my feelings end up as by how I write it. ...It's like, 'OK, this happened, and this is what I wish had happened. And this is how I'm going to end this story because it's stopped now, and I'm going to take it this way. I'm not going to let it go that way.'
(GB8)

Live poetry at the festival, in fact, had been so empowering an experience that she intended to go to more for her own health:

I have someone working on a care plan with me at the moment. It's something that we're, we're looking at putting stuff like that in the care plan, because I- it does- I do enjoy it so much that when I'm struggling it might just be worth finding some poetry that's on locally and just going, because you can just immerse yourself in it. (GB8)

While each of these is an individual story, there were enough of them, and they shared enough similarities, to stand out in our research. In the festival setting, the poetry was not just commenting on life but suggesting a way to live.

8. Reflection and Recommendations

We hope these findings are an encouragement to councils, organisers, funders and poets. Not only do festivals show people what poetry can really feel like, they can play a very significant role in the transitions of their participants' lives. The All-Party Parliamentary Group's 2017 report, 'Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Well-Being' included within "well-being" concerns with "meaning and purpose", "coping and resilience," "personal identity, creative skills", social "identity" and "reciprocity" (p.19) – while recognising that the arts will allow people to feel deep "anguish, crisis and pain" (p.20) and will not manage away the unjust structures constraining people's lives. Adopting this broad definition, poetry and the way it happens within festivals is deeply embedded in people's well-being without expressly trying to be.

Transition and transformation invite the big question of how one separates the layers of causation in these research findings, though. Given there are many kinds of festival, and that festivals are not only artistic events but social experiences, what a festival does is contingent on who comes, what they are looking for and how the countless interactions between people, space, events and weather build up. It is unwise to make generalisations about what festivals in general do, because there is no 'general'. For the same reasons, it is hard to know how much of what people reported to us is due to their one-off festival environment, how much down to the artists' skill, and how much to the social capital and life-situations people brought with them. Were our photographers wanting to talk about transitions because they already sensed something exciting happening at the festival, and volunteered for us as part of that? Some people were certain that their festival had made them feel differently, but might they also have felt differently had they been to a moving Spoken Word night instead? Because we didn't expect to find people talking about transitions or transformations, we had not set up control groups to tease out the variable factors. What gives us a degree of confidence in the findings, nevertheless, is that they happen at different kinds of festival, and the transformation stories build on the same kinds of festival happenings that the majority of other photographers reported (chance encounters, recognising life-changes, bridge-building conversations with strangers), only in a more intense and all-inclusive manner. In follow-up events, several participants have confirmed to us the major changes of life and well-being catalysed by their 2022 festival experiences. But while festival organisers do not micro-manage individual experiences, neither do these experiences just happen, nor (we fear) do they happen at every kind of festival with poetry in. Follow-on research at different kinds of festival and at poetry events will be needed to unpick the various contributing factors, including the relation to participants' own creativity, the length of their stay, the kind of bonding / bridging between participants and the degree of experienced safety among them.

We don't suggest that the emotional vulnerability and therapeutic influence of live poetry only happen at festival events. 'Emotional participation' is what Spoken Word events aim for through the mutual tuning of poet and audience-members to each other, creating what Kapchan calls a "social field of listening" (Bearder, 2019, pp.238-242). And though festivals are generically immersive, not every poetry event within them was. We witnessed readings that kept to the book, that failed to recognise the difference the present audience made, or were set within unwelcoming spaces which audiences quickly left. By contrast, people reported intense immersive feelings not only through narratives of vulnerability, but also by poems using

headphones and soundtracks, poets' theatre and chance-derived procedure, none of which are usual in Spoken Word. But the festivals we saw allowed far more people to have the feeling of being caught up in the poem than would otherwise be the case - and they then connected that with the proliferation of other personal and unpredictable encounters before and after the event. This is what embeds poetry within the festival as an entire form, and also what makes festival causality so multi-layered. There is no festival separate from the people who make it and the concerns people bring to it, just as there is no festival that is a neutral 'container' for the poems. What our research captures is the range and depth of the feelings and situations that people bring into the festival and its poetry. People came as fun-seeking consumers and as educational self-improvers, but also as those who carry feelings of being excluded, defiant, anxious or grieving, and this is where the poetry more often found them. An anecdote: we were not able to interview participants at the free-access Bristol Harbourside Festival, but as we watched poet Eve Piper perform "Creatures of the Rave", about drink and drugs trouble on the free party scene, the security guard came alongside us and remarked, "these poets, they make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck" - before disclosing his own journey with Turning Point, the drug and alcohol rehabilitation charity.

One crucial factor in enabling these releases of feeling must be the sense of what one poetry venue host called "wagons drawn around the circle" (Liv Torc), that is, audiences feeling safe enough and interested enough to risk emotional attention to something new. One third of our interviews brought up safety explicitly, both physical and in terms of social attitudes. It was also noticeable that a majority of those who reported experiences of transformation had some prior contact with the festival itself - some already knew people who would be there, some had been to the festival before, and some were friends with a performer. None of these are in themselves sufficient or causal conditions, but we think they must help to create enough of that basic trust for people to be able to immerse themselves more fully in the festival. All the programmers we spoke to were moving towards thinking of festivals as year-round resources rather than annual events: sponsoring small local poetry stages through the year would then be a really useful way of not only bringing new poets forward, but bringing their friends, and friends of friends into the trusting and accepting atmosphere of the festival too. The festival is "unsettling, I think, in that it will always challenge... preconceptions and [you] find things being undone and remade within the space", mused one participant, before adding, "you actually need home as a security to it in order to do that, so the two weave together" (GB14).

The abundance of artists necessary to generate the diversity, chance and novelty within the festival is costly, though. This means that the role played by regional, government and charity funders for festivals is also crucial in creating the security that allows risks. It should allow festivals to make socially-responsive innovations in ticket price, to put a more diverse range of poets on the line-up, and give poetry stages time to develop and grow their presence within the festival, all of which increase the chances of more poetry reaching more people. Planning two or three festivals ahead to apply for funding itself takes a degree of stability that some poetry organisers found burdensome, though, and requires evidence about the social mix of the audience and the role of the festival in their lives that is hard to come by, without the kind of innovative in-depth audience research partnerships being brokered by the Centre for Cultural Value. We hope that this participatory research encourages more academic-festival research projects, to help festivals understand their own role in people's wider lives, not just temporary emotions or consumer satisfaction. We therefore close with four recommendations.

Put poetry in more festivals.

Poetry heard at festivals seems to lower the defences of many who were forced into it at school, and the festival atmosphere and mood make people particularly receptive to what it might be saying to them, as well as about the world. Funders should recognise this is a precious public outreach opportunity for an artform which is often hated, or confined to those in the know (Lerner, 2016). Festivals themselves should see the social value that poetry stages offer. As these stages need to be nurtured as communities of practice, though (Comunian, 2017), organisers starting a poetry stage up can be encouraged to draw on thriving Spoken Word / live performance nights happening year-round.

Research the links between festivals, transition and transformation.

Dealing with the turning points in people's lives has always been part of the festivals' role in small-scale and traditional societies, but it has not been widely looked at within modern festival research, even in the burgeoning literature on well-being. One of our participants wanted poetry to be on her care plan; the APPG's definitions of well-being suggest that festivals could have a role to play in social healthcare. More qualitative research into the all-round experiences of festival-goers will help develop an understanding of which kinds of festivals or events this is happening within, and what conditions foster it.

All artists should be paid recognised rates.

Poets should follow musicians' example and not be paid in festival tickets. Rates should cover travel. Slam and other open-access competitions should offer tangible rewards to winners. Poetry stages should be given the recognition due to them for the quality of emotional engagement they generate (Banks, 2017).

All-event or all-day ticketing

This opens up possibilities of abundance, chance and personal discovery which were crucial to people's deepest experiences of the festival as a whole form, not just a series of parallel events. We recommend this becomes part of every festival offer, particularly to locals.

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