

**Live Literature and Cultural Value:
Explorations in Experiential Literary Ethnography**

By Ellen Wiles

University of Stirling
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Abstract

This thesis explores live literature and its cultural value through experiential literary ethnography. Focusing on fiction in performance, it features ethnographies of two contrasting live literature events: the Hay Festival and the Polari Salon. Although live literature has grown fast to become a central part of contemporary literary culture, it has been neglected in scholarship until recently, particularly in relation to fiction, and in terms of performance, reception and value, and through phenomenological research. My experiential literary ethnographies are composed using creative writing techniques in order to evoke and recreate key elements of participant experience at live literature events. Participants include both author-performers and reader-audiences. From the ethnographies, I distil key insights into each event, and into live literature and its cultural value. I argue that experiential literary ethnography is an approach that has the capacity to illuminate the value of other arts-based events and cultural practices, and the potential to be fruitfully applied in arts practice, evaluation and funding contexts, as well as in scholarship. An interdisciplinary project, this research draws upon scholarship rooted in anthropology, literary studies, publishing studies, performance studies and neuroscience among other fields.

Keywords: live literature, literary festivals, book events, publishing, readers, audiences, reader-audiences, literary culture, curation, digitalization, attention, experience, embodiment, experientialism, phenomenology, liveness, performance, orality, text, authorship, readership, reading, memory, sensory, aesthetics, ethnography, autoethnography, anthropology, creative writing, evocative writing, impact, evaluation, cultural value, value.

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A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just begins
to live that day.

– Emily Dickinson

Remembering is an act of the imagination.
Any account we make of our experience
is an exercise in reinventing.

– W.S. Di Piero

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Prologue

Conversation burbles among the waiting audience who, seated in tight rows, have packed out a spacious Victorian drawing room. Darkly-polished wooden floors are laid with Persian rugs, the walls are lined with tempting fiction spines, and the room boasts not one but two fireplaces, one of which is now lit and flickering on this chilly February morning. I shimmy my way through to the front, and perch on a bench under a side window next to a poet who is also going to perform today. Glancing outside, I see a few more people hurrying through the dove-grey mizzle towards the entrance.

My novel, *The Invisible Crowd*, only came out last year, but it is already starting to feel like old and insignificant news in the publishing world, as the flurries of new fiction releases keep on coming and piling up on each other, like endless fresh snowdrifts, including runaway bestsellers and major literary prize winners, so I'm grateful to have been invited to perform here in what will be my first live literature event of the year, and curious to find out what this little festival will be like. There are about eighty people in the audience, I'd say, all of whom appear to be white, and about two thirds of whom are women, of varying ages and dress styles, and with varying accents, from the chatter I can overhear.

I have an hour's session to fill by myself today, which gives me much more scope than the standard festival format, and allows more time for readings from the novel. I remember my surprise when, before my first ever literary festival appearance, I was firmly told by the chairperson that there

would be no readings *at all*, as if their inclusion would be an indulgence.

After an introduction by one of the festival hosts, I thank her and smile out at the audience as I introduce myself and my novel, and register several smiling faces in return. I outline the main characters and the polyphonic structure, and explain that it was inspired by a case I worked on years back when I was a barrister, then talk for a few minutes about the effect the case had on me, and the political and media narratives around immigration and asylum that I wanted to explore through fiction. People seem to be listening intently enough, and I don't spot any frowns that suggest displeasure rather than concentration. I relax, a little.

In order to give people a good sense of the various voices in my novel, I've planned to read from five sections, each of which involves a different point of view. I have prepared a PowerPoint presentation with a different photographic image to project for each one, which I hope will help to focus attention, distinguish each scene from the next, and make the event experience feel a little more performative. I launch into the readings, doing my best to make the delivery engaging, and to speak clearly and at a moderate pace, and attempting to render a subtle difference between the various characters' voices. I experiment by reading a section from the chapter that's narrated by Joe, a Lincolnshire bin man, which I have never performed from at an event before, and I even brave a slight accent – and thankfully I don't fluff it. At least, to my knowledge. In fact, I get some laughs in places that I'd meant to be funny, which is encouraging. The readings seem to be

flowing, and there is still a sense of intensity in the room... I don't spot anybody drifting off, anyway.

After the readings, I speak briefly about the value of the fiction, the novel as a form, and reading as an activity. The audience mmmmm collectively at one of my favourite Ursula K. Le Guin quotes: 'We read books to find out who we are.'¹

To change gear, and involve the audience in a more unexpected exercise, I pull out a sheaf of photocopies and tell them I am handing out two poems on a theme of migration by Ruth Padel, from her collection of poetry and prose, *The Mara Crossing*. Padel, I explain, kindly allowed me to use a quote from one of these as an epigraph to the novel. I suggest taking a sheet and passing it on, and then invite each person to read one line aloud, before passing the baton along to the person next to them, and so on. Several people look surprised at this development, some whisper to each other, and some dip their heads to read the sheet intently as if I've just landed them with an impromptu exam. I'm going to be judged for this, I see; I hope it will work. I read the first line aloud, then nod to the woman on the right of the front row, who reads her line with panache. The man next to her follows, and, one by one, the distinct quality of each voice in the room rings out – voices that I wouldn't necessarily have heard if I hadn't risked this exercise, and they all vary in accent, volume, pace and tone, though I detect quite a few local accents. I notice the different approach that each person takes to their performance: most relish the opportunity, some look slightly bemused but eager, one man reads in a monotone like a computer dictation, one

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night* (1985) p.31

woman, for whom English is not a first language, stumbles awkwardly, and one shy woman is barely audible. By the end, I feel as if I have a small but visceral sense of each person, and the poem has come alive for me in a new way. In fact, the activity seems to have shifted the collective mood. What had been an audience displaying remarkably focused attention on me has become a relaxed group of fellow performers.

As the photocopies are passed back, I invite questions. Several hands go up, and I am surprised that the first few people begin by telling me that they had already read my book and loved it; I didn't necessarily expect anyone here to have read it yet. Another couple say they will definitely read it after hearing me speak. Questions span topics from research processes to the technique of writing different voices to immigration policy, and adaptation, and I answer as best I can. "I wondered if you'd thought of sending it to a film or TV company – it would make a terrific six-part series", one woman says, beaming, at which I have to grin wryly and explain that my agent has put it out there but there has been no take-up as yet, but add that, if there happen to be any film producers in the audience, the book could be their oyster. Laughter ripples: *as if*. At the very end, when my hour is just about up, a tall woman seated towards the back, with silver, neatly-curled hair, and a serious face, puts her hand up. "I'm sorry", she says, "but I can't let this go unsaid..."

And then she stops. A pause extends, then swells. People shift awkwardly in their seats. Some look around at her, wondering what she's about to say; others glance at each other. My stomach lurches; she must have taken issue with the politics I've alluded to around the book, I think, and

perhaps want to point out to me that we can't let everyone in who claims to be a refugee, and ask, pointedly, whether I don't think we need to draw a line. This kind of thing has happened before, and I don't mind it – in fact I enjoy encountering a range of reactions to the content what I've written, if not to the quality. But it seems like a shame for an event that has otherwise been so enjoyable – for me, at least – to end on a sour note. Still, I tell myself, at least *some* people here have indicated that they enjoyed the book and this event, and even if this one person has hated all of it all – and even if most fiction readers out there never even hear of my insignificant little novel – and even if nobody ever buys a copy again – then at least it exists, in print, and has had a brief moment in the sun. That's something.

But then I notice that the woman is crying. Her face has gone beetroot. She's pausing, it seems, because she's struggling to speak. Finally, she says, in a croak: "I'm sorry, I was just so moved by what you just read, and it was so wonderful, I just had to tell you."

And I find myself nearly welling up too, because I am so taken aback and touched, and it feels like a moment that epitomises the best I could have hoped for in writing the book – to have that sense of my work connecting on a deep emotional level with just one reader, who I've never met before, and probably won't ever meet again. In an instant, it makes up – at least temporarily – for all the years spent crafting and revising, the stresses of pitching and failing, the pressures of publication and reviews and sales numbers and publicity efforts and endless private, self-derogatory

comparison with novelists who are all clearly far more talented, successful and savvy than I am. And it is especially lovely for this to be happening now, at a live event, among an audience that seems to be so engaged.

So I thank this woman in the audience, whose colour has now faded to rhubarb, and tell her that it really means a lot to me for her to have said that. Inwardly, I resolve to do more myself to share my own responses to books and art that I've loved with their makers, even if not in a live or public forum ... But I also can't help myself wondering, from a live literature research perspective, to what extent this woman's response was genuinely determined by the content of the sections of the novel I just read aloud, and if so which ones, and why – or whether it came out of the way I performed the readings, or how I framed the novel in the talk – or just the experience of being here at this festival, and in the emotionally-receptive mood she woke up in today – or whether I just remind her of a long-lost niece – and whether she has already read my novel, or plans to read it – and, if she hasn't read it yet, but buys it after this event, whether she will actually go on to read it or whether it will just sit on her shelf for a while then end up in a charity shop, and if she does read it, whether the silent reading experience will match up to what she felt about it in this session – and how much fiction she usually reads, and what kind of books she likes, and how many literary festivals and events she has been to before, and what she felt about them, and what drew her to come here today, and where she lives, and who she's come with, and what her occupation is...

But I can't ask her any of these questions. This is not the time or place for a research-oriented conversation, and I have to wrap this session up.

As the rest of this thesis will reveal, though, I have asked similar sorts of questions of many other participants in live literature events in which I was not performing, and not just reader-audiences but also author-performers – and their answers have been varied, unexpected, thoughtful, enlightening, hilarious, and baffling.

Chapter 1.

Speaking of Writing This: What, why, where, how

A greeting, and a word about wording

“Hello and welcome to this live literature event!”

That greeting is genuine. Welcome! It is also a gesture towards the reflexivity at the heart of this thesis. If ‘words are events’², as Ursula K. Le Guin says they are, then their ‘eventness’³ is present each time that an assemblage of words is published, and each time that a paragraph is read silently from a page – but it is magnified in live performance. By exploring ‘live literature’ in this thesis, I will be focusing on events like the one I described in the prologue: performances of literature, specifically fiction, to embodied audiences in physical spaces, such as literary festivals and salons.

Live literature has grown phenomenally in the 21st century. It has grown to the point that it has become a central part of contemporary literary culture and the publishing industry. And yet, while there are now several studies of literary festivals, and a few studies of other types of literary event, this is the first in-depth study of live literature. It is also the first study to focus on live literature events featuring fiction. It is the first to consider such events phenomenologically by interrogating

² Le Guin, ‘Telling is Listening’, *A Wave in the Mind* (2004), p.199

³ See Anthony Gritten, ‘Music before the Literary: Or, The Eventness of Musical Events’ (2006) and Willmar Sauter, *Eventness: A Concept of Theatrical Events* (2008)

how they are experienced by participants. It is the first to explore how ethnographic research can illuminate the cultural value of live literature experiences by including the words of both reader-audiences and author-performers – and, in fact, it is the first to use those labels for those two groups. Looking beyond the scholarship of literary culture, it is the first experiment in ‘experiential literary ethnography’: a term I have created to describe an approach to composition that uses creative writing techniques in order to evoke situated cultural experience.

But before I expand on all of this, I would like to begin with a reflection on *wording* – the verb, that is – and to explain how my approach to wording this thesis arose out a long period of mulling over the subject of live literature, and the relationships between literary and scholarly texts, and between text, orality, performance and experience.⁴

I have tried to keep the language ‘alive’,⁵ attending to your experience as a participant (as a reader, or perhaps a listener) in this communicative event. Since the research is about reading aloud, I have sought to keep the language ‘speakerly’ too.⁶ This has meant keeping the narrative as clear and jargon-light as possible, while not diluting complexity or nuance where it matters. But avoiding jargon and ‘difficult’ prose in an academic text – otherwise known as ‘academese’⁷ – has been

⁴ A similar observation and intention are articulated by Don Ihde in the introduction to his book, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (2007). See also Ruth Finnegan’s observations on the ways in which an attention to orality and performance in literary contexts inevitably affects approaches to Western literary texts, in *Where is language?* (2015) p.42

⁵ See Kirin Narayan, *Alive in the Writing* (2012), p.2

⁶ See Patrick E. Johnson’s discussion of ‘speakerliness’ in his introduction to Conquergood’s writing in the posthumous collection of his essays, *Cultural struggles* (2013), p.12.

⁷ For discussion of academese, see e.g. Jim W. Corder, ‘Academic Jargon and Soul-Searching Drive!’ (1991); Tatjana Marjanovic, ‘The (In)visibility of Academic Prose Writers: A Story of

more difficult than it seems like it should be. As Helen Sword has observed when writing about academic writing, it is hard work to write academic prose that seems effortless.⁸ Using ‘academese’ is particularly problematic when it comes to engaging with subjects involving the arts and culture, because so much academese involves nominalization – that is the shoehorning of verbs, adjectives and adverbs into nouns. As Joe Moran explains, nominalization derives from the emergence of modern science,⁹ and has the effect of turning a ‘live event into a sedentary thing’.¹⁰ Writing about the experience of live events demands the opposite, it seems to me: an aliveness of language, and a kinetic quality.

Almost all live literature events involve reading aloud: an activity which is also a classic editing technique to improve the clarity of written text, as well as making sure that text works well in performance. Reading aloud reveals many literary qualities or deficits, including clarity, which can affect the literary quality, impact and meaning of a text. The renowned copyeditor Benjamin Dreyer has proposed: ‘a sentence that can’t readily be voiced is a sentence that likely needs to be rewritten’;¹¹ while Henry James, who dictated all his novels to his typist,¹² proposed that ‘viva voce treatment’, is ‘the highest

Scholarship Turning Human’ (2011); and Helen Sword, *Air and Light and Time and Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017).

⁸ Sword (2017), p.57. Viet Than Nguyen, the author, scholar and MacArthur Genius Grant recipient, recently echoed this on Twitter: ‘Even after many years of trying, it’s still harder for me to write clearly than to write in academic jargon. That’s the paradox. The more obscure academic jargon is and the harder it is for the layperson to read, the easier it is for the academic to write it.’ Tweet posted on 14 Feb 2019:

https://twitter.com/viet_t_nguyen/status/1096148948715065344 (accessed 15 Feb 2019)

⁹ As Moran puts it: scientists came up with such words when they ‘needed a way of turning single events into general laws’. See *First You Write a Sentence* (2018), EPub location 119.4/446

¹⁰ Moran uses the metaphor of a clock: ‘Scientific language sees the world... as a series of things to be identified and classified...[and] breaks up nature’s ceaseless flow into inert parts, as if it were dismantling a clock’ – see Moran (2018), EPub location 119.4/446

¹¹ See Benjamin Dreyer, Tweet posted on 22 Feb 2019., @BCDreyer, <https://twitter.com/BCDreyer/status/1098960200688635905> (accessed 22 Feb 2019)

¹² See Theodora Bosanquet, *Henry James at Work* (2006) p.34

test of any literary form'.¹³ Both suggest the integral role of sound in all literature: an idea that was forcefully and eloquently promulgated by Le Guin, who points out that: 'The basic elements of language are physical: the noise words make, the sounds and silences that make the rhythms marking their relationships. Both the *meaning and* the beauty of the writing depend on these sounds and rhythms.'¹⁴ Along the same lines, or sound waves, Joe Moran's definition of a sentence is: 'a line of words where logic and lyric meet – a piece of both sense and sound'.¹⁵

As well as aiming to compose this thesis in speakerly language – language that speaks, reflexively, to these ideas about sound and voice – I have attended to other elements of literary craft too, including form, pace, tonal variation, style, characterization, setting, dialogue and metaphor.¹⁶ All of these elements can add to the vitality of the prose while also pertaining to the subject of live literature.

This is not a novel approach to scholarly writing; it is rooted in anthropological tradition, and specifically in a garden of ethnography, where scholars have long been engaged with questions of writing and reflexivity – recognising that, in order

¹³ See Henry James, preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1978)

¹⁴ Emphasis added. See Le Guin, 'In Pursuit of the Gorgeous Sound of Language', Ch.1 of *Steering the Craft* (2015), p.1. A.L. Kennedy has critiqued scholarly writing tendencies from a similar perspective: in an essay written and performed for radio, she bemoans the fact that academia has long tended to view writing primarily as 'marks on a page', when in fact it is always connected to the voice, just as it is to breath and to music. All writing, she says, 'is a kind of musical notation for the mind... We can choose to work on behalf of one of humanity's deepest expressions: our breath. We can choose *not* to... but where's the fun, the light, the *life* in that?' See A.L. Kennedy, 'The Voice on the Page', *The Essay*, Radio 3, first broadcast 6th February 2019.

¹⁵ Moran (2018), p.2

¹⁶ See Helen Sword (2018) p,180, where she points out that metaphor has a powerful effect on the way we think, and should not be neglected in academic prose. See also Joe Moran (2018) Epub location 113.6/446 for a similar idea expressed in a joyful moment of metaphor mixology: 'We tend to see metaphor as literary embroidery, what the poet Mark Doty calls 'frosting on the cake of sense'; but really it is how we nail the jelly of reality to the wall.'

to communicate the meaning of the distinct lifeworlds¹⁷ they are researching, it can help to compose ethnographic narratives in a way that evokes the experience of those lifeworlds, including the ways in which people actually speak.¹⁸ A pioneer of this approach to ethnography, whose work has only belatedly been recognized, is Zora Neale Hurston. As early as the 1930s, Hurston cultivated a performative, literary approach to her ethnographic writing about, among other things, the cultural significance of patterns of speech and language, and the experience of slavery and blackness in America – as part of a body of work that also included fiction.¹⁹ Hurston’s was a visionary forerunner for a host of anthropological scholarship that emerged decades later to challenge entrenched, abstracting tropes of scholarly prose.²⁰ Scholars whose work, in Hurston’s wake, also crosses the literary-scholarly divides, include Michael D. Jackson, Ruth Behar, Ruth Finnegan, Kirin Narayan and Paul Stoller²¹ – all of whose work has inspired elements of this thesis.

¹⁷ See Michael D. Jackson, *How Lifeworlds Work* (2017). An anthropologist, poet and novelist Jackson prefers the term ‘lifeworld’ to ‘society’, explaining: ‘When I speak of a lifeworld (rather than a society), I follow Edmund Husserl’s claim that we live in a world of intersubjective relationships.... Lifeworlds are open, complex, and never self-contained, and an anthropologist enters a lifeworld as a participant as well as an observer’.

¹⁸ See Fiona Copland and Angela Creese, *Linguistic Ethnography* (2015), pp.9-10

¹⁹ See Hurston, *Mules and Men* [1935] (2009); *Barracoon* [1935] (2018), and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937] (1986). For a reflection on the influence of Hurston’s work on the philosophy of language, and specifically ‘performism’, see Parker English, *What We Say, Who We Are* (2010). See also Dwight Conquergood’s discussion of Hurston’s legacy for performance studies and ethnography in ‘Performance’, in Johnson ed. (2013), particularly p.39. For a discussion of Hurston’s neglect in the academy, from the 1950s until she was championed by Alice Walker, see Cynthia Davis and Verner D. Mitchell (eds.), *Zora Neale Hurston* (2013). For a recent historical view of the value of Hurston’s work, and the discrimination she faced as a black woman in her time, see Tiffany Ruby Patterson’s *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life* (2018).

²⁰ See e.g. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives* (1973); Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (eds.) *Women Writing Culture*; Helena Wulff (ed.) *The Anthropologist as Writer* (2016); Judith Okely (ed.) *Anthropological Practice* (2013)

²¹ For examples of scholarly and creative work published by the same author-anthropologist, see: Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) and *Black Inked Pearl* (2015); Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996) and *Lucky Broken Girl* (2017); Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing* (1989) and *Dead Reckoning* (2006); Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997) and *Jaguar* (1999); and Kirin Narayan, *Love, Stars and All That* (1994), and *Alive in the Writing* (2012). See also the work of sociologist Patricia Leavy: *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (2017) and *Low-Fat Love* (2015).

It might seem ironic that, relative to anthropology, literary and speakerly modes of academic writing have been rare within the field of literary studies²² – but this reflects the strong orientation of literary studies towards text and theory, at least in Western contexts.²³ That orientation perhaps also explains why the subject of live literature has received so little academic attention from scholars located in literary studies²⁴.

In some corners of anthropology, performative, experiential and literary modes of writing ethnography are now flowering,²⁵ but they are quite rarely applied to research in contemporary Western arts contexts. Other, newer arts-based methods of research and communication – notably video, photography and multi-modal combinations – are more popular, and are fast-evolving, with fruitful, engaging and significant results.²⁶ Text is sometimes assumed to be outmoded by experimental scholars who are seeking to evolve ethnography in creative and reflexive ways, in comparison to visual forms, like video, which can depict cultural practices in

²² A wave of work in the 1980s challenged this, during the performative and postcolonial turns in scholarship. Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances Hopkins' book, *Performing Literature* (1982) elaborates on the value of reading aloud as an approach to literary studies. As part of Conquergood's performative approach to teaching at Northwestern University in the 1980s, students were asked to read texts aloud – see Johnson (ed.) (2013), p. 329. From a postcolonial standpoint, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work on 'orature' and critique of Western approaches to literature, notably 'Oral Power and Europhone Glory' (1998). A rare exploration of the performance of Western literature is David W. Thompson (ed.), *Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives* (1983).

²³ In using the term 'West' or 'Western' here and subsequently, I acknowledge its imperialist origins and conceptual limitations in relation to culture, as cogently explored in Kwame Anthony Appiah's fourth Reith Lecture (2016), but it nevertheless remains a useful term to distinguish a broadly geographically proximate group of countries, including the UK and the US, which share certain socio-cultural traits. There is plenty of anthropological ethnographic research into non-Western cultures, particularly those that are primarily oral, and some that draws links between the divided epistemologies between the two; Finnegan's work is a key example – see e.g. *Where is language?* (2015)

²⁴ There is now a growing body of innovative research into certain forms of live literature, notably literary festivals, but it has mostly come from the newer field of publishing studies, as I will discuss later, and the mode of writing has tended so far to be conventionally sociological.

²⁵ A great example of experimental literary modes of writing ethnography is Anand Pandian and Stuart Maclean (ed.), *Crumpled Paper Boat* (2017), and also Helena Wulff (ed.) *The Anthropologist as Writer* (2016).

²⁶ See for example Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art* [2008](2015); Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (eds.) *Anthropology and Art Practice* (2013).

ways that are immediately arresting and distinctive, and are also well-suited to making an impact through social media. While I wholeheartedly celebrate the new creative and multimodal diversity in anthropology, in this thesis I want to make a case for the creative and critical practice of *wording* ethnography as a still-vital form of innovative research and communication.

When it comes to the arts, particularly, and to the goal of communicating their value, academic writing that constantly condenses lived events into abstract concepts inevitably falls short; instead, re-evoking the experience through writing seems key to understanding its cultural value. As John Dewey put it back in 1934, when writing about art and experience:

To perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent... Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art.²⁷

While no form of worded narrative about an arts-based experience can *replicate* it, Dewey's idea of 'recreation' suggests that an actively creative approach is needed to evoke an experience, retrospectively, in order to value it. Literary writing is well-equipped for dynamic evocation; as Gilles Deleuze suggested: literary writing is 'inseparable from becoming'.²⁸ I propose, in this thesis, that experiential literary ethnography is a powerful approach to writing about the lived experience of live arts-based events that can illuminate their cultural value in the process.

²⁷ See Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1939), especially 'Having an Experience', pp. 35-57. See also the epigraph at the beginning of this thesis by W. S. Piero.

²⁸ Deleuze, 'Literature and Life', in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1997) p.1

My overarching aim in wording this narrative, then, is double-edged: to explore participant experience at live literature events and its cultural value; and to reveal the value of experiential literary ethnography for participants in scholarship and in arts practice, production and evaluation.

Live literature: scene-setting and an outline story arc

It all began with an explosion. At least, that is how the live literature phenomenon of this century has been described.²⁹ Live literature events have now spread across the UK – where my research is focused – to most cities, towns, villages and remote islets you could name, and globally, too, to the point where live literature has become an integral part of the publishing industry and an artistic genre in its own right. While there were many earlier iterations of live literature, it was not until the 21st century that literary festivals³⁰ and other forms of literary event³¹ proliferated exponentially, forming a new wave, and that the term ‘live literature’ became common currency.³²

²⁹ Beth Driscoll uses the word ‘explosion’ in her examination of the literary festival, in *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014) p.153. Millicent Weber also uses it to describe the growth of literary festivals, in the first line of *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* (2018), p.1. Kevin Parker, founder of the literary festivals website, uses it in his piece, ‘The Rise and Rise of Literary Festivals’, <http://www.literaryfestivals.co.uk/announcements/the-rise-and-rise-of-literary-festivals>, 26 February 2015 (accessed 19 February 2019)

³⁰ See Weber (2018).

³¹ For a historical perspective on other forms of ‘book event’, see Daniel Finkelstein and Claire Squires, ‘Book events, book environments’ (2019) p.6

³² NB the term ‘live literature’ does not yet appear in the Oxford English Dictionary and the origins of its common contemporary usage are unclear. However, Arts Council England’s Live Literature specialist, Sarah Sanders, confirms that in her view it emerged in the 21st Century, and that the Arts Council began using it as a category for funding purposes c.2004, in its previous form as ‘London Arts’. Informal conversations with other artists and producers confirmed this view.

The term ‘live literature’, and the phenomenon, are part of a wider preoccupation with ‘liveness’ across the arts and culture, which has gone hand-in-hand with the rise of digitalization in the 21st century – a shift that has been most notable, and debated, in the music industry³³ – and with the increasing value given to experience.³⁴

Despite the rapid growth of live literature, as a subject for scholarly research it has so far received surprisingly little attention. New and important studies are emerging, and I will explore some of them later in this chapter. But still, so far, the existing studies have rarely considered in any depth how live literature is *experienced* by participants, and how that experience impacts on their practices and perspectives, and on broader literary and cultural values. This thesis sets out to contribute to filling that gap.

‘Live literature’ is an umbrella term with a wide diameter, and so this thesis focuses-in on the still-further neglected sub-category of literary events in which prose fiction is performed live to ‘bodily co-present audiences’³⁵ in shared physical spaces: events that can range from large literary festivals to intimate salons, theatrical performances and experimental literary happenings in spaces from warehouses and libraries to

³³ In the music context, the rise of live events is clearly linked with musicians needing to make money as the rise of streaming has slashed their income from album sales. For a scholarly perspective on the economics of music and liveness in the context of the digital, see e.g. Fabian Holt, ‘The economy of live music in the digital age’ (2010). Similarly, in literature this century, authors’ incomes have nosedived, particularly for authors of literary fiction. For commentary and analysis of literary fiction authors’ incomes, see: Arts Council England’s report, ‘Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction’ (2017). However, unlike musicians at gigs, authors are often not paid a fee for appearing at live literature events, despite their declining incomes. See Finkelstein and Squires (2019) p.6; and The Society of Authors (eds.), ‘Philip Pullman Resigns as Patron of Oxford Literary Festival Over Refusal to Pay Authors’, (2016); and Benedicte Page, ‘Authors call for boycott on non-paying festivals’, *Bookseller* 15 January 2016

³⁴ See James Wallman, *Stuffed* (2015), for a futurologist’s treatise on experientialism.

³⁵ See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), p.32

galleries and pubs. As Le Guin proposed, these events can be dynamic and even transformative experiences for participants: 'They transform both speaker and hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.'³⁶

The process of reflecting on live literature, exactly *how* it is experienced, and its cultural value, involves multiple interdisciplinary perspectives and concepts – many of which are commonly juxtaposed. These include the page and the stage; the word and the voice; text and context; authors and performers; readers and audiences; narrative and embodiment; aesthetics and sociality; liveness and cognition; authenticity and connection; reception and evaluation. This thesis will be seasoned with those ideas, and the paradoxes they can appear to present.

Having said that the explosion of live literature was the starting point for this thesis, I also want to contribute to the contemporary debates around the idea of 'cultural value'. Cultural value has come to preoccupy and perplex not just arts and humanities scholars but practitioners and artists too.³⁷ How to define it, and how to prove it?

The urgency of the cultural value debate is linked to the 'impact agenda', which is linked, in turn, to marketization,³⁸ and to data capitalism.³⁹ It has generated a widespread demand, across all fields of scholarship and society, for data-

³⁶ See Le Guin, 'Telling is Listening', in *The Wave in the Mind* (2004), p.199

³⁷ See ACE report, 'The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society' (2014) and AHRC report, by Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, 'Understanding the value of arts & culture' (2016)

³⁸ See Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (2012) And *Speaking of Universities* (2017)

³⁹ See Sarah Myers West, 'Data Capitalism' (2019)

centred quantitative evidence – often economic – to prove the value of any form of work, including research. In arts and humanities contexts, the demand for such evidence to prove impact risks forcing reductive and meaningless justifications and responses.⁴⁰ In considering the value of an arts event, quantitative responses inevitably marginalise or omit completely the rich complexity of participant experience at that event – and, consequently, its value. Stefan Collini has said that the impact agenda would be ‘laughable if it were not so serious’.⁴¹ The impacts of arts-based experiences upon participants, communities and cultures extends far beyond what can be measured and proved instrumentally or quantifiably.

And yet participation in the arts does, clearly, have many tangible and important ‘benefits’, including measurable ones which are important to interrogate – things like improvements in patients’ health and wellbeing,⁴² employability, educational attainment and cognitive ability.⁴³ There are also wider economic pressures, linked to a modern expectation of transparency when it comes to public spending, which mean that cultural value does need to be demonstrated, somehow – apart from anything else, in order for creative projects to continue to be funded properly, for reasons that are *not* just narrowly instrumental.

In view of all this, I asked myself: how might cultural value be demonstrated – and, specifically, *worded* – through

⁴⁰ For discussion of the impact agenda, arts and humanities, see Collini (2012 and 2017); Belfiore, ‘Impact’, ‘value’ and ‘bad economics’ (2015); and Zoe Buliatas, ‘Measuring impact in the humanities’ (2017)

⁴¹ See Collini (2012) p.168

⁴² See, for example, Stephen Clift, ‘Creative arts as a public health resource’ (2012)

⁴³ See ACE report (2014), pp.7-8.

ethnography, in ways that genuinely recognize the richness of participant experiences, including artists and audiences? A kind of writing that ‘recreates’ experience, as Dewey put it, and yet also interrogates it? And how might I attempt to write about live literature’s cultural value experientially?

My ‘answer’ to that question, in a nutshell, is the approach I call ‘experiential literary ethnography’. I call it an ‘approach’, rather than a ‘method’, since the ‘method’, to me, implies a more scientific, standardized process; while ‘approach’, or even ‘genre’, better characterizes the creative ways in which experiential literary ethnography is composed.

The central chapters of this thesis demonstrate its application: they consist of two extended event ethnographies, exploring the Hay Festival and the Polari Salon. These ethnographies are both experiential and literary, in that they evoke and interrogate experience at each event using creative writing techniques, and by combining granular experiential details with wide-lens reflection. They are composed by weaving ‘thick description’, as Clifford Geertz named it⁴⁴ – which includes evocative and granular details of individual events based on my observations and experiences, such as sounds, smells, settings, gestures, utterances and emotions – together with extracts from conversational interviews with participants, including author-performers and reader-audiences; excerpts of texts performed; quotes from media and social media commentaries; references to patterns, structures and practices in the publishing industry and literary

⁴⁴ See Geertz (1973), pp. 5-6, 9-10

culture, and reflections on linked social, cultural and theoretical contexts and concepts.

This ethnographic approach reflects the evolution of humanistic anthropology over decades. Different scholars have adopted different labels for their own 'brand' of ethnographic writing which has similar objectives – 'sensuous',⁴⁵ 'evocative'⁴⁶ and 'interpretive'⁴⁷ ethnography, to name a few.

The term 'experiential' has been used by some anthropologists before, but usually to refer to the importance of experiencing cultural practices or groups, through extended fieldwork, before going on to write about them – rather than to the ways in which ethnographic writing can be crafted to evoke and interrogate experience.⁴⁸ My literary approach to experiential ethnography is closely aligned to Michael D. Jackson's idea of 'radical empiricism' – which meant, as he explained it back in 1989, a kind of ethnography that focuses on 'lived experience' and, crucially, does so through an attention to writing.⁴⁹ Experiential literary ethnography, as I describe it, has not yet been applied in any consistent or concentrated way to ethnographies of contemporary Western literary or other artistic practices. Its potential for being applied in these contexts, though, was foreseen a decade ago by Steven Connor, when he made a case for 'cultural phenomenology',

⁴⁵ See Stoller (1997)

⁴⁶ See Ellis and Bochner (2016)

⁴⁷ See Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997)

⁴⁸ The term 'experiential ethnography' was used by Carol Delany in her book, *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology* [2004] (2017), to refer to the importance of experiencing culture through fieldwork for anthropologists, rather than in relation to the ways in which language and form can evoke experience.

⁴⁹ I note that Jackson specifically proposed that this kind of ethnographic writing should involve the use of 'multivocal' forms, the engagement of all five senses, and the inclusion of the ethnographer's own experiences. See Jackson (1989) p.8

as an evolution of cultural studies, involving evocative, embodied and reflexive writing about experience.⁵⁰ Referencing Clifford Geertz⁵¹, Connor identified ethnography as the single form of writing that has come closest to materializing this vision.⁵² The experiential literary ethnography that I develop in this thesis can be seen as a way of translating that vision into practice, in a live literature context, while building on a varied and creative body of ethnographic writing that can all be linked back to Zora Neale Hurston.⁵³

I propose, in this thesis, that experiential literary ethnography also offers a more accessible and engaging way to communicate the value of live arts events to wider audiences than many other forms of scholarly or evaluative writing: factors that gain in weight and urgency in the context of funding pressures in the arts, the impact agenda, and linked concerns with demonstrating cultural value.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ 'Cultural phenomenology', Connor suggested, 'would aim to enlarge, diversify and particularise the study of culture. Instead of readings of abstract structures, functions and dynamics, it would be interested in substances, habits, organs, rituals... processes and patterns of feeling. Such interests would be at once philosophical and poetic, explanatory and exploratory, analytic and evocative. Above all, whatever interpreting and explication cultural phenomenology managed to pull off would be achieved by the manner in which it got *amid* a given subject or problem, not by the degree to which it got on top of it'. This would mean attending to the 'embodiedness of experience', and the 'affective, somatic dimensions of cultural experience', as opposed to the 'out-of-body experiences of cultural studies'. See Connor, 'CP: or, A Few Don'ts By A Cultural Phenomenologist' (1999) p.18

⁵¹ Interestingly, Geertz later went on to call for a 'cultural phenomenology' himself, without an apparent awareness of Connor having proposed the same thing with reference to his own work. See p.360 of Geertz's, 'Person, Time and Conduct in Bali' (2007)

⁵² Connor highlighted ethnography's reflexive orientation, in comparison to conventional scholarly writing, just as Jackson did, describing it as 'the impulse to acknowledge rather than to conceal the fact that writing is taking place, and that a particular person is doing the writing.' See Connor, 'CP' (1999), p.18

⁵³ See for example Leavy, *Method Meets Art* [2008](2015); Schneider and Wright (eds.)(2013); and Pandian and McLean (eds.)(2018)

⁵⁴ See the discussion of this issue in relation to arts policy in Ben Walmsley's article, 'Deep hanging out in the arts: an anthropological approach to capturing cultural value' (2018). For critiques of the broader 'impact agenda' in academia, see Collini (2012) and Ben R. Martin, 'The Research Excellence Framework and the 'impact agenda': are we creating a Frankenstein monster?' (2011).

I did not enter into this research project with a fixed set of pre-formed research questions about either live literature or its cultural value. But a set of key questions did bubble and rise to the surface in the course of the research, and they all float around an experiential centre that relates to the notion of cultural value. Why have live literature events become so popular, and what is the significance of their embodied 'liveness' for participants? How are live literature events experienced, and what effects do they have upon participants' ongoing literary practices and values? For instance: for reader-audiences, how does witnessing an author reading aloud from their new book at an event affect the way they engage with, interpret and value that text once the event is over? And, for author-performers, how does the act of reading their own work aloud to a group of prospective readers affect their relationship with that text and shape their writing practices? More generally, what impacts do live literature events have upon literary culture, reception and value in a digitalizing age, beyond functioning as opportunities to sell physical books? These questions are addressed in the ethnographies, along with the observations and conversations that gave rise to them, and the insights that suggest answers. They do not govern the structure, though, and other questions emerge amongst them.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I condense a set of key insights⁵⁵ from my ethnographies that I hope will be useful to both artists, producers, funders and scholars when read in conjunction with them.

⁵⁵ I prefer this term to the more common 'findings', because, like 'evidence' and 'method', it is so often associated with scientific notions of objective proof and universal applicability that do not translate to holistic and meaningful understandings of experience, particularly aesthetic experience.

Some points about point of view

As I have mentioned, my approach to this research is reflexive – and so I will take a moment now to air some bits of biography that help to explain my perspective.

Firstly, I come to this subject as an enthusiastic reader of fiction. This perhaps predisposes me to be interested in live literature events. As this research reveals, though, not all fiction readers are drawn to them; some loathe them. Over the course of this research I have now participated in hundreds of live literature events – mostly in the UK, but also beyond. I live in London, where there are multiple literary events happening every night of the week. The first ever literary festival I attended was not in the UK; it was the first ever literary festival to take place in Myanmar, where I was working in January 2013, just after the beginning of its ‘transition towards democracy’. My encounters with writers there, including at locally-organised ‘literary talks’ (another form of live literature event which, I learned, functioned as a hotbed of resistance under censorship) inspired me to write my first book about literary culture in the country: *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts: Literary Life in Myanmar Under Censorship and in Transition* (2015).

In 2014, early on in the course of this research, I took on a role as a live literature curator and director by founding Ark: an experimental live literature project. That creative production process emerged out of this research, and has shaped my view of both the potential for more performative iterations of live

literature, and the practical realities of curating, producing and directing it, as well as writing and performing.

Since 2017, I have had another relevant role as an author – and performer – of fiction. In November of that year my novel, *The Invisible Crowd*, was published, and I have since read aloud from it at many live literature events – one of which I described in the prologue. That process has given me new insights into the experiences of author-performers, which I reflect on autoethnographically at several other moments in the thesis, including at the end of my chapter on the Polari Salon, at which I read from my novel, after having attended the salon for some time as a researcher.

My novel has also been read as a work of ethnographic fiction by anthropologists,⁵⁶ and as such it represents a strand of literary-ethnographic writing that I advocate for in this thesis.

Finally, I have past lives as a barrister and as a musician. On first glance, these occupations might seem irrelevant, or at least tangential – except as evidence of an inclination towards interdisciplinarity – but they also inform my approach to writing and live literature. My training in legal writing, particularly legal writing which is intended to translate into oral narrative when spoken aloud in court, has made me particularly conscious about clarity of structure and language, rhetoric and orality. My musical training, on the other hand, has made me sensitive to the rhythm, phrasing and affective qualities of spoken language. As Ruth Finnegan – anthropologist of communication and oral literature, and,

⁵⁶ *The Invisible Crowd* won a 2018 Victor Turner Prize for ethnographic writing.

more lately, novelist – has pointed out: a sustained focus on orality, when studying literature, tends to lead to the conclusion that language and music are intimately intertwined.⁵⁷

Live literature: scope, history, contemporary iterations

Before expanding on the evolution and dynamics of live literature in the 21st century, I need to address a basic ontological question: What is it?

Live literature is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of live events in which literature is performed or presented. The funding body Arts Council England ('ACE') define 'live literature', unofficially, as including any live performance events, including digital events, where the producer considers literature to be the dominant art form presented.⁵⁸ Its forms range between conversation-based literary events, of the kind that are common at festivals, and more theatrical performances. There is no clear evidence of when the term 'live literature' came into common usage, and it does not appear in the current OED. According to people I have consulted with, both writers and literature officers at ACE, it became commonly used by them in the 1990s, when literary festivals proliferated. Taking a longer view, versions of what are considered 'live literature' in the 21st Century long predate the common understanding of literature itself. In

⁵⁷ See Finnegan (2015) EPub, location: 32.4/447

⁵⁸ This definition is not explicit in Arts Council documentation, but was outlined to me in an interview with members of the Arts Council's literature team in 2014. Within the literature team, ACE have a live literature specialist who is in charge of all live literature projects – projects that may be categorised under the umbrella of either literature or 'combined arts'. The Scottish Book Trust, in contrast, runs a distinct 'live literature' funding stream which focuses on bringing published authors into community settings; for more details see their website: <http://scottishbooktrust.com/live-literature> (accessed 12 December 2018).

Europe, since the late 17th Century, the term ‘literature’ has been understood, primarily, to refer to lettered text, ‘often printed in book form’,⁵⁹ and has been approached with a textual focus throughout the history of literary studies – but anthropologists engaging with diverse literary cultures further afield have long viewed ‘literature’ as having a much broader scope.⁶⁰

Many people, upon hearing the term ‘live literature’, immediately associate it with the literary festival: a now-global cultural phenomenon. While literary festival formats vary, they are always ‘meta-events’,⁶¹ usually held on a single geographical site, where multiple individual live literature events are staged, the majority of which can be characterised by a standard format that involves a live on-stage conversation involving a chairperson and a panel of two or three author-performers, short reading(s) from their fiction, and an audience question-and-answer (‘Q&A’) session.

Literary festivals are now thriving worldwide, and are often seen as symbolic showcases of cultural capital⁶² and heritage. Since 2011, for instance, Singapore’s Government has run the Singapore Writers Festival, which has as its mission ‘to not only present the world’s major literary talents to the people of Singapore, but also to promote new and emerging Singapore and Asian writing to a wider public’⁶³ – and it is viewed as an important way to demonstrate the country’s status as an Asian

⁵⁹ See ‘literature, n.’, Oxford English Dictionary, online edition, accessed 2 December 2018

⁶⁰ See Finnegan (2015) EPub location: 413.1/477

⁶¹ See Hauptfleisch et al (eds.), *Festivalising!* (2007) pp.20-23

⁶² I refer here to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, as elucidated in *Distinction* (1984), p.87 – and discussed in relation to literary festivals in Weber (2018), p.33.

⁶³ See the Festival’s website:

<https://www.singaporewritersfestival.com/nacswf/nacswf/about-swf/about-swf0.html> (accessed 30 April 2019)

and a global hub, in relation to its economic competitors; Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Ubud all host literary festivals. Most global literary festivals began life this century, including those held in Somaliland, East Africa; Galle, Sri Lanka; Accra, Ghana; Jaipur, India; Paraty, Brazil; Dubai; and even the Rock of Gibraltar. In the UK, and elsewhere, literary festivals have now diversified to form part of cross-arts festivals; notable examples are Latitude Festival, which features a poetry and a literature tent, as well as theatre, cabaret, comedy multiple music stages; Wilderness Festival; and Port Eliot Festival.⁶⁴

But there are many other forms of live literature, not least small-scale book shop and library readings, where authors read from their books, but a myriad of other forms of ‘book event’⁶⁵, and word-based events where no physical books are present. Usually live literature events involve verbal performance and embodied audiences, but not always. For instance, in a ‘Live Writing’ series of events curated by Gemma Seltzer and David Varela, writers used digital technology to project and publish their writing as they composed, as a live public performance.⁶⁶ In one event I attended, writer and artist David Musgrave projected text digitally onto a wall along with imagery as a form of silent telling.⁶⁷

Within the live literature umbrella, performed poetry is a more firmly-established cultural scene and practice, since the form

⁶⁴ Port Eliot Festival will, sadly, be discontinued after 2019.

⁶⁵ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019), for a discussion of ‘book events’ in the 20th century that sets out to expand the usual focus on literary festivals.

⁶⁶ See the Live Writing Series website, <http://livewritingseries.com> (accessed 19 February 2019)

⁶⁷ This event was part of Plastic Words at the Raven Row Gallery (2014) – see http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/plastic_words/ (accessed 13 February 2018).

has always been more closely associated with orality and music. Poetry in performance has consequently been researched and written about more widely than fiction in performance.⁶⁸ Performed poetry incorporates the sub-genre of ‘spoken word’, or ‘performance poetry’ – terms that refer to poetry composed primarily for verbal performance rather than the page, and that also tends to have a rap-influenced aesthetic.⁶⁹ Performing writers often hone their craft through competitive ‘slam’ open mic nights. But ‘spoken word’ has increasingly crossed over into ‘page poetry’ publication during the last five years. In the UK, this has been largely through the work of artists like Hollie McNish and Kate Tempest, many of whom gained fame through YouTube. McNish and Tempest are now published by top literary imprints: a recognition that has caused controversy and division among poets.⁷⁰

The distinction between page and stage, though, has become increasingly blurry within literary culture as live literature has evolved – and also as diversity has become more actively debated and championed, in terms of class and race, after increased exposure of how certain groups have been excluded from traditional publishing, along with the forms and styles that they often espouse.⁷¹ Some live literature projects have focused on giving platforms to underrepresented authors

⁶⁸ See Rubery (2016) p.20

⁶⁹ See Susan Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* (2009); and Maria Damon, ‘Was that ‘Different’, ‘Dissident’, or ‘Dissonant’? Poetry (n) the Public Spear’ (1998)

⁷⁰ See Rebecca Watts’s controversial article published in the *PN Review*, in place of a review of McNish’s work which she refused to write: ‘The cult of the noble amateur’ (2018). The article prompted heated debate about amateurism vs. elitism in the poetry community and the media, as well as spoken vs. printed forms.

⁷¹ See Melanie Ramardashan Bold’s important studies of diversity in publishing, revealing a lack of representation persisting despite high-profile diversity campaigns – including ‘The Eight Percent Problem’ (2018), and *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* (2019). The 2011 census identified 86% of the UK population as white (Office for National Statistics, ‘Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales: 2011’; whereas in 2017 the publishing industry was deemed to be 90% white (Alison Flood, *The Guardian*, 6 Sept 2017). For an interdisciplinary cultural perspective on how race impacts on cultural production more widely, see Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (2017)

– notably Speaking Volumes, founded by Sarah Sanders and Sharmilla Beezmohun after they left roles at PEN International;⁷² they have gone on to produce many live literature events featuring literature in translation, including by European writers in the UK, often showcasing writers of colour.

Live literature events also include the newly-revitalised genre of literary salons. Many of these were initially founded by writers seeking to create a network to promote and perform from their own and others' new books, but have expanded to draw in significant audiences. The most well-known in the UK salon is Damian Barr's, which brings in the biggest literary names; but there are many others, including Polari: the LGBT salon that I explore in depth in this thesis. Publishers soon cottoned on to the new popularity of the salon, and have now begun hosting their own; 4th Estate, for instance, a literary imprint of HarperCollins, now runs a salon⁷³.

Popular literary entertainment nights have also begun to pop up over the last two decades, staged after dark. Some of these feature competition between author-performers, akin to the 'slam' events that have long underpinned the contemporary spoken word tradition. Literary Death Match,⁷⁴ for instance, founded in the US in 2006 and then brought over to the UK, is a popular example.⁷⁵ Other literary entertainment nights feature live music performances alongside performed fiction

⁷² See Speaking Volumes' website, <http://www.speaking-volumes.org.uk> (accessed 21 Feb 2019). PEN International is a charity championing the work and lives of imprisoned and persecuted writers internationally, and has national branches in many countries.

⁷³ See 4th Estate's salon page: <http://www.4thestate.co.uk/tag/4th-estate-literary-salon/> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁷⁴ See LDM's website: <http://www.literarydeathmatch.com> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁷⁵ LDM is currently dormant.

readings; one such event is the Book Slam, a ‘shindig’ co-founded by the novelist Patrick Neate and musician Ben Watt.⁷⁶ Again, publishers soon caught on to the potential of this live event concept; the literary publisher Faber, for instance, launched the Faber Social:⁷⁷ an informal event involving performed readings and sometimes live music, often hosted in bars and festivals.

Live literature also includes oral storytelling, which has always been the lynchpin of literary culture in many parts of the world. Storytelling has increased vastly in popularity in Western countries over the last two decades, alongside other forms of live literature, spearheaded by The Moth:⁷⁸ a US-based event series founded in 1997, just one year before Hay, which also involves a competitive ‘slam’ element.⁷⁹

There are also live literature events categorised as ‘theatre’ that are focused around extended prose monologues or storytelling elements, and staged, often in theatre spaces, and in performative ways, usually without reference to printed texts. The show *Gatz*,⁸⁰ created by Elevator Repair Service, is a rare example of a novel, *The Great Gatsby*, performed in its textual entirety in a single show, by actors, as a play. Daniel Kitson’s off-kilter, interactive monologue-based work⁸¹ is a contrasting example of theatre crossing into both comedy and live literature; another is Ross Sutherland’s experimental

⁷⁶ See Book Slam’s website: <https://bookslam.com> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁷⁷ Faber Social was founded in the late ‘00s. See Faber Social’s website: <https://fabersocial.co.uk> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁷⁸ See The Moth’s website: <https://themoth.org> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁷⁹ For an exploration of the growth and impact of The Moth, see Catherine Jo Janssen, ‘An Ethnographic Study of The Moth Detroit StorySLAM’ (2012)

⁸⁰ See Elevator Repair Service’s website: <https://www.elevator.org/shows/gatz/> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁸¹ See Kitson’s website: <http://www.danielkitson.com> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

poetic, live performances, that meld memoir with analogue video of pop culture classics.⁸²

Live literature can also manifest itself as events also categorised as live or performance art, which are often held in gallery spaces among visual and performance art communities, where performances often interact in creative and visual ways with printed texts. One of the most fascinating and experimental examples that I have seen was 'Plastic Words', hosted by the gallery Raven Row in London: a series of events, including live literary performances, curated by a group of artists and writers, that set out to 'mine the contested space between contemporary literature and art', and reflect on the 'overlaps, parallels, tangents and interferences between them'.⁸³

A fascinating, longer-lived series of events I attended many times was 'Homework': a 'night of literary miscellany' created by a group of performance poets, whose work was expanding into other forms of literature, including fiction, theatre and scriptwriting.⁸⁴ Each night was curated around a theme, for which they would each produce new, experimental work for performance, often involving live interactions with other media like PowerPoint and video or props. Staged in the retro Bethnal Green Working Men's Club in the trendy part of East London, Homework always opened with an entertaining cult film quiz to get the audience interacting and to cultivate a deliberately playful vibe. While seriously experimental in the

⁸² See Ryan Gilbey on Sutherland's work: 'The Fresh Prince to the Crystal Maze' (2015)

⁸³ For more on Plastic Words (2014-15) see Raven Row's website: http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/plastic_words/ (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁸⁴ Homework is currently dormant. An early preview of their work was featured by Rachel Holdsworth in The Londonist (2012)

work produced, the author-performers actively encouraged the audience not to receive their work too seriously.

In 2014, curious about the possibilities for combining art forms and pushing the performativity of live literature through curation, I founded my own small experimental live literature project, Ark,⁸⁵ to stage immersive short story shows in library spaces involving cross-arts collaborations. I curated each show around a theme, and to be site responsive. Each show involved new commissions of short stories designed to be performed live, and performances of published stories by actors. I worked with libraries as diverse as a small community library, a university library and The British Library. Soon after Ark began, a project called Story Machine, supported by the Writers' Centre in Norwich and run by Sam Ruddock, staged an immersive show in a warehouse featuring short story performances in conjunction with other art forms, with audiences given the option to choose the order of stories and to navigate themselves around the space.⁸⁶ Echoing the *Gatz* concept, in 2015 the Southbank Centre staged a complete performance of *Moby Dick*, unabridged, over four days, produced by a new company called The Special Relationship, directed by the writer Jared McGinnis,⁸⁷ a producer who feels strongly that, when it comes to literary events, 'the event's the thing'.⁸⁸

All around the UK, particularly in the bigger cities, there are now plenty of live literature events and experiments evolving

⁸⁵ For more about Ark, see the website: www.arkshortstories.com (accessed 10 April 2019)

⁸⁶ For more on the Story Machine Project, see their website: <https://storymachineproductions.co.uk> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁸⁷ For more on The Special Relationship, see their website: <http://www.thespecialrelationship.net> (accessed 14 Feb 2019)

⁸⁸ See Jared McGinnis, 'The Event's the Thing' (2016)

and interacting with each other, as well as their audiences, and other art forms. In Edinburgh, UNESCO City of Literature, for instance, Neu! Reekie!, an artist collective-turned-‘literary production house’, stages events that it describes as a ‘delicious feast of spoken word, music, animation and film fusion’ involving a ‘wild mixture of different performers and styles as well as an enthusiastic audience’.⁸⁹

In many ways, live literature is diversifying and evolving in more performative and experimental directions, as well as expanding. That being said, ACE’s live literature specialist admitted to me that they did not get as many genuinely experimental and performative live literature proposals as they would like, partly because such events were seen as hard to market, compared to theatre, for example. This tends to be because many people tend to automatically associate ‘live literature’ with the conversation-based format that dominates at literary festivals.⁹⁰

That was a rough sketch of the contemporary live literature scene in the UK. But, as I alluded to earlier, in considering the cultural value of live literature, it is important to note that it has a deep significance across all human cultures for as long as our species has had language. Oral narrative has been held up by linguistic anthropologists such as Richard Bauman and John D. Niles as ‘constitutive of social life’,⁹¹ and fictional

⁸⁹ For more about Neu! Reekie! See their Facebook page: @neureeking (accessed 19 Feb 2019) and their listing on Edinburgh’s City of Literature website:

<http://www.cityoflitterature.com/a-to-z/neu-reekie-2/> (accessed 19 Feb 2019)

⁹⁰ This comes from an interview I arranged with Sarah Sanders and Gemma Seltzer from the Arts Council’s Literature team in 2014.

⁹¹ Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event* (1986), p.112

‘storytelling’ an ‘ability that defines the human species even more than the use of language’.⁹²

Oral prose-poetry dates back to before the ancient Greeks, with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* both being based on more ancient legends;⁹³ while the oral performance of short prose fiction is recorded as far back as 100 BC, in the form of the lost *Milesiaka*.⁹⁴ The literary competitiveness that marks out many contemporary literary events with ‘slam’ elements was present among the ancient Greeks.⁹⁵ Classicist Rosalind Thomas argues that most of their literature took place ‘in situations of contest or antagonistic exchange’⁹⁶, and that, by focusing on texts documented in writing, scholarship has tended to marginalise the fundamental role of performativity to the social meaning of those texts.⁹⁷ Performativity was central to Roman literary culture, too; ‘in Cicero’s day authors ready to launch their newest work would gather friends at home or in a public hall for a spirited recitation or reading. Audiences would cry out when they liked a particular passage. Nervous authors enlisted their friends to lend support, and sometimes even filled seats with hired “clappers”’.⁹⁸ Evidence from Sumeria to India reveals oral literature’s historic role in

⁹² John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans* (1999), pp.2-3

⁹³ Richard Jenkyns, *Classical Literature* (2016)

⁹⁴ Author/teller/performer: Aristides of Miletus. See Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History* (2010) p.101

⁹⁵ See Derek Collins, *Master of the Game* (2005)

⁹⁶ See Rosalind Thomas, ‘Performance and Written Literature in Classical Greece’ (2013), p.34

⁹⁷ ‘A full understanding of Greek literature’, she asserts, should involve ‘not simply the written texts, but also how these texts related to their performances’, in order to better understand their ‘original performative meaning’, and the ‘social and cultural background to the written texts’ which only became ‘crystallised as great literature’ later. See Thomas (2013) p.28

⁹⁸ *The Economist* (editors), ‘From Papyrus to Pixels’ (2017)

communicating both mythology and ‘news’, before the use of writing and independently of writing.⁹⁹

After Gutenberg and the development of the printing press during the 15th Century, reading aloud remained a core part of Western European literary culture. This persisted during the growth of the print publishing industry, which generated new commerce-focused events; the Frankfurt Book Fair began in the mid-16th Century.¹⁰⁰ It was only after a widening of access to printed books that silent reading began to be a common practice.¹⁰¹ By the 18th Century, when the novel emerged and bloomed as a literary form in Britain, literacy rates were still fairly low, and books were expensive and not necessarily easy to come by. Reading novels aloud to groups, largely made up of family and friends in domestic settings, remained a popular pastime, and continued across socio-economic groups well into the nineteenth century.¹⁰² As several of Jane Austen’s novels illustrate, skill at this practice was considered an ‘art’¹⁰³ and highly valued – to the point of being considered a way to judge the reader’s character, and even their soul.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ John D. Niles has written, for instance, about the literature produced by the ‘people who inhabited lowland Britain in the centuries before the Norman Conquest’, as being largely composed of prose poetry ‘in narrative form: it consists of stories’, and exploring subjects ranging from ‘the creation of the world, the fall of Satan and the angels, and the story of Adam and Eve’ to tales of ‘ancestral kings, queens, and heroes of northern Europe’, ‘ancient wars and feuds, wonders and betrayals. They heard the imagined voices of people of faraway times of places: voices of singers, of wanderers and pilgrims... all projected upon the mental stage that poetry invited them to contemplate. They sometimes heard stories of newsworthy events: great battles, tragic deaths, and grand heroic gestures. Through versified riddles, one of their more imaginative pastimes, they even heard the mute world speak: they heard beer or a reed pen tell its own life story.’ See Niles (1999), pp.7-8

¹⁰⁰ See Peter Weidhaas, *A History of the Frankfurt Book Fair* (2017)

¹⁰¹ Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words* (1997), p.1

¹⁰² For more on this practice, see Rosalind Crone, Katherine Halsey, Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed, ‘The Reading Experience Database 1450-1945 (RED)’, in Towheed, Halsey and Crone (eds.) (2010), p.436

¹⁰³ See John Mullan, *What Matters in Jane Austen?* (2012), p.238

¹⁰⁴ As Mullan has put it: ‘there’s a telling passage in *Sense and Sensibility* when we hear about this slightly un-expressive, even slightly wooden man, Edward Ferrars, whom Elinor, Marianne’s sister, loves, but without being quite sure if that love is returned. He is given some poetry – some William Cowper, who was a great favourite of Austen’s – to read aloud, and Marianne protests afterwards: “he read with so little sensibility”, as if the thing you display when you’re reading aloud and the thing which is the essential valuable human quality in the heart or in your soul are the same. As if you know a good person because they’re a good

Literary salons, which Jürgen Habermas singled out as a defining feature and mechanism of the rise of the liberal and democratic public sphere,¹⁰⁵ emerged in the 17th Century and grew in the 18th Century alongside book clubs, reading parties, coffee houses and accessible political journalism.¹⁰⁶ The salons often involved performed readings of new works of literature by notable authors before publication of the text, and by emerging authors seeking networks, audiences and patrons, and extended discussions about literature, ‘literariness’¹⁰⁷ and society. Meanwhile, reading parties were a popular and more class-diverse form of event, where participants would gather socially to read aloud from published texts, not usually in the presence of the author.¹⁰⁸ Both were both a significant part of European cultural life, extending until the mid-nineteenth Century, when they were – until recently – thought to have died out.¹⁰⁹

In last two decades of the 18th century, there was an ‘explosion of writing and publication’,¹¹⁰ when books and other periodicals became radically cheaper and easier to access.¹¹¹ This corresponded with a flood of Romanticism across the arts, with its emphasis on individuality, feeling and inspiration as opposed to classical form and order, elevating the persona of the artist in society. By the 19th century, when

reader.’ See Abbie Jagers’ interview with John Mullan: On Jane Austen and Reading Aloud’, *Listening Books Blog* (2017). For Austen herself, reading aloud from her novels-in-progress to friends and family was an integral part of her composition process; her brother referred to these events as ‘gradual performances’; see Lucy Worsley, *Jane Austen at Home* (2017)

¹⁰⁵ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962] (1991)

¹⁰⁶ See p.xii of Thomas McCarthy’s introduction to Habermas (1991)

¹⁰⁷ See Elizabeth A. Fay, ‘Author’ (2012)

¹⁰⁸ See Amy Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2015) Epub: location 46.6/692

¹⁰⁹ See Susanna Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (2013)

¹¹⁰ See Fay (2012)

¹¹¹ See ‘Introduction’, p.7, Towheed, Halsey and Crone (eds.) (2010)

serial publications of novels became popular, at accessible prices, prominent authors of fiction were able to reach much wider readerships. They also began to take a more active role in the public sphere¹¹² – in part by performing readings from their work at events, helping to generate still-wider audiences. Dickens's staged readings of his novels, which lasted up to three hours at a time, packed out theatres and halls in London and on tours throughout Britain and America, with audiences numbering up to 2000.¹¹³ Having trained as an actor, Dickens would edit his texts for performance, and rehearse them extensively, hundreds of times, learning them largely by heart, to maximise the impact of his delivery, while also employing his own lighting and stage manager: evidence of the value he placed on the performativity of these events.¹¹⁴ The effects were striking; his performed readings triggered dramatic physical and emotional responses from his audiences, from fainting to sobbing and fighting over who could touch his props.¹¹⁵ Dickens gave so much energy to these performance tours that they are said to have hastened his death.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, though, the practice of silent reading in domestic spheres spread, as books' ownership and availability increased.¹¹⁷ According to Walter J. Ong, this wider move from sonic orality to silent engagement with printed books was a kind of 'silencing', and an 'abrogation from the body' in literature.¹¹⁸ Critiquing Ong's take on this, Steven Connor has pointed out that silent reading also involves an embodied

¹¹² See Fay (2012)

¹¹³ See David Ponting, 'Charles Dickens as solo performer' (1983), p.124

¹¹⁴ See Ponting (1983), p.120

¹¹⁵ See Ponting (1983), p.126

¹¹⁶ See Susan Ferguson, 'Dickens's Public Readings and the Victorian Author' (2001), p.745

¹¹⁷ Elspeth Jajdelska, *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator* (2007)

¹¹⁸ See Steven Connor, 'Writing The White Voice' (2009), which includes a critique of Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy* [1982] (2002)

‘inner sonorousness’,¹¹⁹ including ‘inner speech’¹²⁰ – an experience the poet Denise Riley has explored philosophically as a ‘feeling of hearing’:¹²¹ an idea that is borne out by contemporary neuroscience.¹²² Still, it cannot be denied that social practices of embodied verbal performance, including but not limited to literary culture, significantly diminished during the 19th Century in Western cultures. Dickens would prove to be not only exceptional as a performer of his own fiction, but an exception to this wider shift. For instance, until the late 19th Century, oratory pervaded school and university curricula, reflecting the social and cultural value allotted to public speaking, which was seen as a core skill underpinning civic life.¹²³ I remember vividly the ceremonial experience of being admitted to the ‘Utter Bar’ in 2007, as a brand new barrister, and being struck by the importance of the ‘utterance’ to all forms of education in centuries past – in contrast to most of my years of school and university, where the written word was central, and silent reading and writing were the primary modes of engaging with it.

As book production industrialized and commercialized, individual silent reading increased still further. Broadly speaking, from the mid-19th Century to late 20th Century, a reader’s typical experience of literature and literary culture would involve buying a printed book or borrowing one from the library, and, after the completion of silent reading, perhaps some limited communal sharing of that experience,

¹¹⁹ See Connor (2009)

¹²⁰ For a psychologist’s neuroscientific take on the prevalence and significance of inner voices, see Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within* (2016). For analysis of the psychology and science of ‘inner speech’, see also Keith Rayner, Alexander Pollatsek, Jane Ashby and Charles Clifton Jr., ‘Inner Speech’, in *Psychology of Reading* (2013)

¹²¹ Denise Riley, “‘A Voice Without A Mouth’” (2004)

¹²² See, Fernyhough (2016) and Marcela Perrone-Bertolotti et al., ‘How Silent is Silent Reading?’ (2012), pp.17554-62.

¹²³ See Rubery (2016), p.6

through comparable private conversations or joining a subscription book club.¹²⁴

As for authors, after handing their manuscript over to a publisher, they were largely free to retreat to the desk and work, silently – or so it is often assumed – on the next book. This, in part, was because authors tended to have more sustainable incomes than they do now;¹²⁵ and, in part, because the expectation of their role, within literary culture, was primarily to write books. From the 20th Century onwards, agents became the books' gatekeepers and advocates of most fiction in relation to print publishers; print publishers were the books' gatekeepers and advocates in relation to bookselling; booksellers promoted and distributed the books to readers; and literary critics were respected authorities on books' quality.¹²⁶

The late twentieth century ushered in a range of new 'book events' and 'book environments', including not just the earliest literary festivals,¹²⁷ but the first experimental events run by publishers to promote reading and literacy,¹²⁸ and the invention of transnational 'book days' in the 1990s.¹²⁹ Ursula K. Le Guin, in a talk on the voice in literature, described how,

¹²⁴ See Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books* (1997), for an exploration of the experience of being part of a subscription book club, and its role in wider literary culture and taste formation.

¹²⁵ This statement is controversial, though; for discussion of it, and a contrary point of view, see Jane Friedman's article, 'Author Income Surveys Are Misleading and Flawed' (2018). At the top of it, she quotes Dr. Edward Eggleston, in 1890, as saying: "Of all the learned professions, literature is the most poorly paid".

¹²⁶ For an analysis of the impact of this industry structure, see D.J. Taylor, *The Prose Factory* (2016)

¹²⁷ The earliest literary festival was Cheltenham, launched in 1949. For more on this history, see Finkelstein and Squires (2019), and Driscoll (2014), p.154

¹²⁸ An example cited is the 'Bedford Square Book Bang' in 1971 run by the publisher Jonathan Cape, which was an inspiration for the Edinburgh International Book Festival. See Finkelstein and Squires (2019).

¹²⁹ A key example cited is UNESCO's World Book and Copyright Day, inaugurated in 1995. See Finkelstein and Squires (2019)

in the US, bookshop-based literary readings for fiction writers did not become popular until the 1970s.¹³⁰ The emergence of such events was linked to changes in the structure of the publishing industry, specifically the marketing of literature.¹³¹ The 1970s was a decade characterised by a significant intensification in the marketing activity surrounding fiction, in the wake of an increase in financing available to publishing, alongside conglomeration and globalisation. As Claire Squires has shown, the new wave of marketing, including through live events, significantly affected literature's reception.¹³²

There followed an era of 'corporate buyouts, mergers' and 'downsizing' across the publishing industry¹³³ in the 1980s-1990s, alongside the rise of digitalization in the mid-1990s – most notably the founding, in 1994, of a start-up online bookstore called Amazon, which, in the 21st century, has transmogrified into the gargantuan publisher, producer and global retailer of innumerable other products. Now a ubiquitous household name,¹³⁴ Amazon also owns Goodreads: a social reading site where non-professionalised readers can comment upon, review, promote and share their reading, and it also has dominated in the evolution and mainstreaming of e-books and self-publishing, while a profusion of blogs, vlogs and other social media have become significant contributors to literary-cultural conversation,¹³⁵ alongside the traditional literary press.

¹³⁰ See Le Guin, 'Off the Page: Loud Cows' (2004), p.117

¹³¹ See Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature* (2007). See also John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture* (2010).

¹³² See Squires (2007) and Thompson (2010)

¹³³ See Radway (1997), p.356

¹³⁴ For an incisive analysis of the growth, ambitions, publishing impacts and future dangers of Amazon, see e.g. Guy A. Rub, 'Amazon and the New World of Publishing' (2018)

¹³⁵ For commentary on and analysis of these developments and their implications, see Claire Squires, 'Taste and/or big data?' (2017); and Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere* (2018)

All these changes have contributed to profound shifts in the broad structure and power dynamics of literary production, creating new economic imperatives for the industry's stakeholders. Authors' incomes have plummeted, partly due to e-book piracy; in 2018, the average income of an author in the UK was £10,500 – more than £5,000 below the lowest sustainable income – with only one third of all authors able to make their living from writing, and women authors' incomes just 75% that of their male counterparts.¹³⁶ Publishers are generally doing better than authors, but they, along with specialist physical booksellers, have become increasingly David-like in their quest to keep competing with Amazon's Goliath¹³⁷ – though the global conglomerate publishing groups appear resilient.

This has caused the roles of all stakeholders in the publishing industry to change in fundamental ways: booksellers have been forced to become curators, baristas and event hosts; publishers have had to step up their role as publicists; agents have had to increase their editorial role to fill the gap; critics have become marginalised as taste shapers; audiences have become online critics and live audiences, and authors have had to become self-publicists and performers.¹³⁸

In this competitive, digitalizing environment, and amongst the mass proliferation of information and entertainment available

¹³⁶ See Katherine Cowdrey, 'ALCS survey finds 15% drop in average author earnings since 2013' (2017)

¹³⁷ For discussion of these changes, see Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, 'The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit' (2013)

¹³⁸ For more on the changing roles of publishers as gatekeepers, see Simone Murray (2015), p. 332; and Squires (2017)

online, it has become harder than ever to promote and sell books, by capturing the attention of readers.

And this brings me to one function of live literature and a cause of its rise: curation. All live literature events are forms of curation; any literary event producer makes a curatorial choice in selecting works of fiction and authors to feature. And all forms of curation have become more important in a digital age involving a greater-than-ever mass of available information, art and sources of entertainment.¹³⁹ Even within literary culture, potential reader-audiences have instant access to a myriad of literary sources online, including e-books and audiobooks, literary podcasts, book blogs and BookTube videos,¹⁴⁰ in addition to online literary articles and traditional literary criticism – and even videos of live literature events.

In comparison to the curation offered by booksellers in a bookshop, the selection at a live literature event is smaller, more accessible and more comprehensive, in that the reader-audience is introduced to each text and/or author involved in depth through a performance experience. These factors alone suggest that it has greater impact and value as a form of curation. The extent to which participants experience live literature events as a form of publishing curation, though – and *how they value* that curatorial function through their experience – is under-explored, and I address it in this thesis.

It is clear that the growth and transformation of live literature has been caused – in part – by the economic and publicity

¹³⁹ See Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The power of selection in a world of excess* (2016)

¹⁴⁰ For discussion on the literary-cultural implications of BookTubing, see Kathryn Perkins, 'The Boundaries of BookTube' (2017)

imperatives that characterize an Amazon-shaped 21st Century publishing industry, including the increased need for effective curation. Face-to-face contact with audiences through live events clearly helps to promote and sell copies of books, both physical and digital. And appearing live at events can be a form of direct income for struggling authors, as well as a form of publicity for their work in the longer term – at least, a fee is more often paid to authors now for appearances, following a vigorous campaign by the Society of Authors, spearheaded by Philip Pullman, after public revelations that many literary festival organisers had been inviting authors to perform for free at their events, even though the events turned the festivals a profit.¹⁴¹ This situation indicates a wider devaluation of the labour and skill of authors as performers – and also a devaluation of the performative and aesthetic elements of live literature events, caused by a focus on their economic impacts for the publishing industry.

This research will suggest that the participants' experiences of live literature events as performances are more significant than is often assumed – and that their value for literature culture should be reassessed accordingly.

**Contemporary live literature in recent scholarship:
communications studies, publishing studies, sociology**

Despite the proliferation of live literature that I have described, and its evident relevance to the publishing industry in the UK and globally, it seems curious that there is so far no

¹⁴¹ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019) p.6; and The Society of Authors (eds.), 'Philip Pullman Resigns as Patron of Oxford Literary Festival Over Refusal to Pay Authors' (2015); and Benedicte Page, 'Authors call for boycott on non-paying festivals' (2016)

scholarly study dedicated to it as an umbrella concept. Why is this?

In the context of literary studies, as I have alluded to, this is linked to a distancing of text from orality within the discipline. That, in turn, is bound up with a dominant post-structuralist philosophy of literary interpretation rooted in Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' treatise¹⁴², where he argued against relying on aspects of the author's identity for interpreting their work. Instead, he proposed, any given text contains multiple meanings, and it is the individual reader's task to determine them – the assumption being that this will be achieved through silent reading on the page.¹⁴³ As reader-response theory evolved, Barthes' theory remained influential, despite being modified, most notably by Stanley Fish with the concept of 'interpretive communities'¹⁴⁴. As Fish sees it, while any reader interprets a text subjectively, they do so as part of an interpretive community, and the meaning they take from it is shaped by cultural assumptions. Authorial intention can be one element of that meaning.¹⁴⁵

Gerard Genette modified this idea by exploring the way in which 'paratexts' affect the way in which a literary text is read;¹⁴⁶ by paratexts, he meant features of the physical book, like the blurbs and cover design¹⁴⁷, and also any other element that is not part of the physical book,¹⁴⁸ like press releases.

¹⁴² See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967)

¹⁴³ Foucault bolstered this idea two years later in a talk, 'What is an author?', which also sought to deny the privileged status of the author when interpreting a text. See Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' [1969] (1979)

¹⁴⁴ See Stanley Fish, 'Is there a text in this class?' (1980)

¹⁴⁵ Fish's idea would be echoed and developed with a wider socio-political perspective in Benedict Anderson's theory of *Imagined Communities* (1983)

¹⁴⁶ See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts* (1997)

¹⁴⁷ Genette called these 'peritexts' – see Genette (1997)

¹⁴⁸ Genette called these 'epitexts' – see Genette (1997)

Based on this definition, live literature events would clearly count as a paratext – but Genette did not explicitly consider them. Notably, his theory was published before the 21st century live literature boom.

As Juliet Gardiner pointed out, though, in an article posing a direct challenge to Barthes in its title, ‘Recuperating the Author’, Genette characterisation of the paratext is problematic, in any event, because it elides the roles and intentions of the author and the publisher, and presents the publishing process as being more unified with the act of writing than it often is.¹⁴⁹ Genette ultimately presented paratexts as ‘vulgarizing commercial add-ons’¹⁵⁰, Gardiner argued – but in reality, the contemporary idea of the author has become increasingly ‘foregrounded’ for multiple reasons, including the growth of consumer choice, and the rise of identity politics, in ways that ‘undoubtedly’ recuperate the role of authorial biography, reify authorial intention,¹⁵¹ and fundamentally affect the ‘meaning’ of the text itself.¹⁵² Gardiner’s article, published in the year 2000, also appeared before the 21st century live literature boom – but it anticipates the consequences.

The rise of live literature this century can clearly be seen as another leap towards ‘author foregrounding’; yet it has still tended to be neglected by scholars as a relevant issue in considering the reception of literary texts.

¹⁴⁹ See Juliet Gardiner, ‘Recuperating the Author’ (2000)

¹⁵⁰ See Gardiner (2000) p.274

¹⁵¹ See Gardiner (2000) p.256

¹⁵² Ibid. In this vein, Squires (2007) delved more deeply into ways in which the marketing of fiction fundamentally affects its reception.

The majority of the niche collection of studies relating to live literature events so far have come from the publishing studies field, with a sociological focus, and by far the dominant focus has been on literary festivals – at least until very recently.

The early studies of literary festivals tended to adopt a dismissive attitude to their value for literary culture, and for culture in general. Caroline Lurie, for instance, wrote an article in 2004 painting literary festivals as examples of mass cultural production that served to dumb-down literary culture by replacing the currency of literary texts with the shallow façade of literary celebrity.¹⁵³ Michael Meehan, a communications scholar, in his 2005 article about the literary festival, regarded it positively in its early days (which he does not define) on the basis that it functioned as a ‘kind of de-industrialisation ritual’ in which the ‘disembodied’ commodity of the book was ‘sheeted back to physical presence’, and ‘authenticated by the reassuring presence of the author’;¹⁵⁴ but, along the same lines as Lurie, though, he took a dim view of the commercial direction of the festival trend, arguing that festivals had become too commodified along with their popularity, infecting it with a ‘deep cultural putrescence’.¹⁵⁵

Scholars then began to consider contemporary festivals’ role and value with more nuance. Liana Giorgi suggested that they were contemporary manifestations of the Habermasian public sphere, and functioned as a rare space where ideas can be freely and democratically discussed between people from

¹⁵³ See Lurie, ‘Festival, Inc.’ (2004) p.12

¹⁵⁴ See Michael Meehan, ‘The word made flesh’ (2005)

¹⁵⁵ See Meehan (2005)

diverse social groups.¹⁵⁶ Katya Johanson and Robin Freeman considered audience experiences at festivals in an article published in 2012, based on a day of qualitative interviews conducted at the intimate Eye of the Storm Writers' Festival in Alice Springs, where there were only about 100 audience members¹⁵⁷ – making it an unusually small and remote event in literary festival terms. Like Meehan, they noted a common desire among audience members for an 'authenticity' of experience, gained by 'the medieval experience of being read aloud to' – these, it would seem, being the scholars' words, rather than their interviewees'.¹⁵⁸ Audience members, they said, also appreciated the 'time to reflect' at the festival, and felt a sense of 'artistic community' there.¹⁵⁹ They concluded that there is a 'wider social and cultural role for audience participation in festivals than originally anticipated'¹⁶⁰ – which, I presume, is meant to refer to the cultural value of that participation.

Breaking out from the festival focus, in 2013, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo authored a book exploring 'mass reading events'¹⁶¹ – that is, events broadcast through media channels, including 'televised book clubs and community-wide reading initiatives', engaged in by groups of 'leisure readers', involving several case studies including the Oprah Winfrey's Book Club and Canadian Broadcast Corporation's 'Canada Reads' project. The authors critiqued dismissive attitudes expressed among literary scholars about such 'popularizing'

¹⁵⁶ See Liana Giorgi, 'Between Tradition, Vision and Imagination: The public sphere of literature festivals' (2011), p.34

¹⁵⁷ See Johanson and Freeman, 'The reader as audience: The appeal of the writers' festival to the contemporary audience' (2012)

¹⁵⁸ See Johanson and Freeman (2012) p.312

¹⁵⁹ See Johanson and Freeman (2012) p.313

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ See Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: the social practices of contemporary literary culture* (2013)

projects for ‘mass’ audiences as ‘dumbing-down’ and ‘vulgarizing’¹⁶² interpretations of fiction. They proposed that such events in fact have important economic and ideological implications – they create social connections and forge intimacy, and as such they ‘hold out the promise of belonging’ and ‘affective community’ within a globalized economy, and in a digital age.¹⁶³

With a similarly open mind towards perceived popularization in literary culture, Beth Driscoll’s notable book, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* – published the following year – sought to reclaim and interrogate the value of literary festivals, among other popular literary practices she characterises as being typically ‘middlebrow’. One chapter focuses on the ‘middlebrow pleasures of literary festivals’ through a case study of the Melbourne Writers Festival, based on extensive survey data. Driscoll concludes that literary festivals have ‘value and meaning’ for audiences, and ‘provide intellectual stimulation, a sense of intimate community, and opportunities for social and ethical reflection. They add a layer of personal meaning to books and offer the entertainment pleasures of large scale performances’.¹⁶⁴ Criticisms that ‘dismiss literary festivals as commerce driven and are snide about their predominantly female, middle class audiences’, she argues, ‘only reinforce the fact that festivals are middlebrow institutions, working outside the legitimate site of higher education and offering a more accessible kind of cultural

¹⁶² For more on this, see Danielle Fuller, ‘Listening to the Readers of “Canada Reads”’, in Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2013)

¹⁶³ See Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2013), p.244

¹⁶⁴ See Driscoll (2014) p.192

experience'.¹⁶⁵ Driscoll's characterization of the activity of literary festival attendance as 'middlebrow' has been critiqued as having a homogenising effect that discounts the individuality and variety of audiences' engagement¹⁶⁶ – despite the fact that Driscoll's work is informed by a complex appreciation for the social, affective, feminised and mediated practices' that she identifies as 'middlebrow', and attributes to herself among many others.¹⁶⁷

The most sustained and important study on the subject of literary festivals is Millicent Weber's book, the first devoted to the subject: *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* (2018).¹⁶⁸ Like Driscoll, Weber offers a strong challenge to earlier sociological studies of literary festivals, like Lurie's, that painted derisive pictures of them as sites of mass cultural production, serving to dumb-down literary culture.¹⁶⁹ Building on Driscoll's work, Weber argues that such studies¹⁷⁰ 'overlook the complexity of the festival, or at the very least diminish its role in audiences' social and cultural lives, arguing that this is a symptom of a wider 'false opposition between commercial and cultural spaces'¹⁷¹ – but, in characterizing festival audiences, she does not adopt Driscoll's characterization of festivals as 'middlebrow'. Drawing upon James English's study

¹⁶⁵ See Driscoll (2014) p.192

¹⁶⁶ See Weber (2018) p.186

¹⁶⁷ See Weber (2018) p.33. To experiment with another innovative approach to exploring audience experience at literary festivals, Driscoll went on to conduct a sentiment analysis of the Melbourne Writers' Festival using audience Twitter feeds – see Driscoll, 'Sentiment analysis and the literary festival audience' (2015). The results were limited; Driscoll's main conclusion was that emotion expressed through Twitter tends to be 'moderate'. See discussion in Weber (2018) p.33

¹⁶⁸ This book follows Weber's earlier article on 'Conceptualising the audience experience at the literary festivals' (2015)

¹⁶⁹ See Lurie (2004) p.12

¹⁷⁰ Other sociological studies of literary festivals, many of which are outlined in more detail in Weber (2018), include: Carolyn Bain, 'Searching for Tennessee: Performative Identity and the Theatrical Event. Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival' (2007); Giorgi (2011); Cori Stewart 'We Call Upon the Author to Explain: Theorising Writers' Festivals as Sites of Contemporary Public Culture' (2010); Wenche Ommundsen, 'Literary festivals and cultural consumption' (2009)

¹⁷¹ See Weber (2018) p.10

of literary prizes and cultural value,¹⁷² among other sociological studies of contemporary literary culture, one of Weber's central propositions is that literary festivals operate as microcosms of the literary field, as characterized by Pierre Bourdieu¹⁷³ – spaces, that is, where authors, readers and other stakeholders in the literary industry 'compete for legitimacy through the acquisition of cultural, social and economic capital'.¹⁷⁴

While Weber, like Driscoll, used surveys to research audiences, she also used semi-structured interviews, which she conducted with audience members across five literary festivals. From the results, she suggests that audiences generally value literary festivals as 'accessible and social forms of cultural consumption',¹⁷⁵ with 'aesthetic, cognitive, affective and social dimensions'¹⁷⁶. Her surveys revealed diverse motivations for attending, which include 'people watching', having a 'shared experience', having 'interpersonal' and 'professional interactions', and having 'conceptual interaction with a community'.¹⁷⁷ Her interviews revealed other motivations too, which Weber summarises as 'enhancing appreciation of literature', 'developing professional knowledge', 'intellectual engagement' and 'broadening cultural experiences'.¹⁷⁸ Weber also considered the relationship between festivals and social media, observing that

¹⁷² See English (2008)

¹⁷³ Bourdieu's texts expanding upon his theorization of the literary field include: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984); *The Rules of Art* (1996); and 'The Field of Cultural Production' (2006).

¹⁷⁴ See Weber (2018), p.28

¹⁷⁵ See Weber (2018), p.155

¹⁷⁶ See Weber (2018), pp.39-40

¹⁷⁷ See Weber (2018), p.63

¹⁷⁸ See Weber (2018), p.65

there is a complex relationship between digital culture and communities, and live and print-based literary spaces.¹⁷⁹

Although Weber foregrounds her survey data as a key form of evidence, she also incorporates qualitative material into her text, including some ‘fine-grained’¹⁸⁰ individual audience accounts, in order to avoid the ‘homogenising tendencies’¹⁸¹ of other sociological studies, and to offer a more ‘nuanced theoretical model’¹⁸² of festivals’ cultural role. Including such qualitative data, she argues, is ‘fundamental to understanding the way in which literary festivals are experienced’ and their ‘value’.¹⁸³ Referencing research from performance studies scholars on audience experiences, Weber notes that the ‘live’ and ‘unique’ quality of the events often functioned as a ‘pull’ for audiences, in comparison to digital alternatives¹⁸⁴, and comments that it is ‘worth noting the pertinence of this impact of ‘liveness’ to further discussions of literary festival experience’.¹⁸⁵ My research can be seen as picking up where hers leaves off in this respect.

The distortion of the singular focus on literary festivals among scholarship on contemporary literary events has recently been pointed out and critiqued by David Finkelstein and Claire Squires, in a study of ‘book events’ and ‘book environments’ in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁸⁶ Festivals, they argue, need to be viewed within a ‘broader view’ of events and environments encompassing a ‘range of activities and

¹⁷⁹ See Weber (2018), pp.95-6

¹⁸⁰ See Weber (2018), p.185

¹⁸¹ See Weber (2018), p.196

¹⁸² See Weber (2018), p.10

¹⁸³ See Weber (2018), p.48

¹⁸⁴ See Weber (2018), p.77

¹⁸⁵ See Weber (2018), p.37

¹⁸⁶ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019)

spaces',¹⁸⁷ including 'literary award ceremonies, mediated book spaces and sites of literary tourism'¹⁸⁸. They point out how productive studies of such events can be for understanding the relationship between the publishing industry and the literature contained in books, notably by shining a 'particular spotlight on the author as the promoter of his or her books' and the 'ways in which readers have encountered both books and authors'.¹⁸⁹

Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires have since been taking the scholarship of literary and book culture into new and expressive directions. In 2018 they co-authored an article titled 'Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival',¹⁹⁰ making a semi-playful case for a new conceptual framework of 'game-inspired thinking' to contribute to the study of book festivals, by using board games as an arts-informed method¹⁹¹ involving 'metaphors that concentrate and exaggerate aspects of book festivals in order to produce new knowledge about their operations'.¹⁹² They have since drawn up a new 'manifesto' for book culture scholarship, founded upon 'non-traditional, arts-informed responses' that explore multiple relationships between the metaphorical and the material.¹⁹³

While this burst of creativity represents a turn toward considerations of affect and experience in book culture scholarship, until now, most sociological approaches to publishing, and to literature and the arts, have focused on

¹⁸⁷ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019) p.1 of Ch.30

¹⁸⁸ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019), p.2 of Ch. 30

¹⁸⁹ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019), p.2 of Ch. 30

¹⁹⁰ See Driscoll and Squires (2018)

¹⁹¹ See Driscoll and Squires (2018), para.18

¹⁹² See Driscoll and Squires (2018), para.16

¹⁹³ The phrase: 'Oh look, a ferry' – a comment that emerged as a non-sequitur to a conversation they had with a member of the public about the smell of books – has become one of their guiding principles. Driscoll and Squires (2018)

power structures, often relating to economics, and generalized patterns of behaviour. They have also tended to be communicated through more traditional forms of scholarly writing, in terms of language, form and style. Many of these have been influenced – as Weber’s study is – by Bourdieu’s formative work. Bourdieu’s approach, though, is well-known for marginalizing questions of aesthetics, including value and judgment.¹⁹⁴

Ethnography and contemporary literary culture

Georgina Born, as a sociologist and an anthropologist, has thoroughly critiqued Bourdieu’s marginalization of aesthetics, and makes a counter-case for ‘social aesthetics’,¹⁹⁵ from a perspective that is fundamentally interdisciplinary,¹⁹⁶ and informed by her own background as a practising musician as well as a scholar. In her extended ethnographies of arts and cultural institutions¹⁹⁷, aesthetic questions are seriously considered, alongside structural and political ones – though rarely in terms of lived experience.

In anthropology, research into aspects of Western contemporary literary culture generally is still fairly limited¹⁹⁸ – but its roots intersect with the beginnings of publishing studies. An early pioneer of ‘literary anthropology’¹⁹⁹ was the

¹⁹⁴ See, in particular, Georgina Born’s article making this case: ‘The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production’ (2010)

¹⁹⁵ See Born, Eric Lewis and Will Straw (eds.), *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (2017), blurb.

¹⁹⁶ See Born (2010) p.8. See also Andrew Barry and Born (eds.), *Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences* (2013)

¹⁹⁷ Born’s institutional ethnographies are: *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde* (1995), and *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC* (2006)

¹⁹⁸ See Helena Wulff (2017)

¹⁹⁹ John Sutherland used this term to refer to Q.D. Leavis’s work in his book, *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* (1978). Leavis herself called the project ‘anthropological’, in her introduction to the book (1932) p.xv

scholar Q. D. Leavis, whose 1932 book, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, was the first of its kind to explore how the literary industry and public taste shaped popular novels and vice versa, after a period of research involving composing surveys and posting them out to authors. Her conclusion, essentially, was that literary culture was disintegrating as 'lowbrow pulp' took over.²⁰⁰

In the 1980s, Janice Radway, a scholar based in communications, cultural and literary studies, pioneered ethnographic approaches to writing about literary culture, in a way that took readers' perspectives more seriously. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) is an innovative ethnographic exploration of the culture around reading romance fiction, which interweaves reader-response criticism, based on individual accounts of readers from the anonymised town of 'Smithton', with Radway's own criticism. By juxtaposing 'multiple views of the complex social interaction between people and texts known as reading', Radway underscored the romance genre's 'semantic richness and ideological density', and its relationship to the 'culture that ha[d] given rise to it',²⁰¹ contrary to establishment perceptions. The book was said to represent a significant 'shift towards the reader'²⁰² in literary studies.

Radway went on to publish a more autobiographically-oriented study of a subscription book club, of which she was

²⁰⁰ See The Middlebrow Network of scholars' summary of Leavis's contribution, accessible online at: <https://www.middlebrow-network.com/Annotations/tabid/1061/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/1459/Leavis-Q-D-Fiction-and-the-Reading-Public-London-Pimlico-2000-first-pub-1932.aspx> (accessed 4 March 2019)

²⁰¹ See Radway (1984), p.210

²⁰² See Loren Glass, 'An Interview with Janice Radway' (2009), p.92

once a member: *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (1997): an even more radical experiment in incorporating autoethnography into a broadly structural sociological inquiry so as to better explore questions of emotion, aesthetics, taste and sociality.

Despite Radway's influence, evidenced, among other things, by the multiple republication of *Reading the Romance*, she has recently expressed surprise that ethnography has not been taken up by others within literary studies in subsequent decades.²⁰³

An early anthropological ethnography exploring contemporary literary culture is Adam Reed's *Literature and agency in English fiction reading: a study of the Henry Williamson Society* (2011), which investigates the impact of a readers' society on participants' engagement with their favourite authors' work. Reed explores how readers 'create meaning'²⁰⁴ from this process themselves, rather than 'trying to locate the source of agency' himself, in a top-down fashion. As he admits, his study becomes an ethnography of a 'certain stratum of British society' as much as a readership, but it reveals the 'vivid' ways in which 'Henry' has captured members' imaginations and impacted on their lives beyond their reading and society activities.²⁰⁵ Reed flags the absence of comparable anthropological work on literary culture, stating that 'a body of important ethnographic work [remains] undone'.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Radway herself has become increasingly interested anthropological approaches to understanding local and global dynamics and the 'micropolitics of subjectivity' in contemporary culture, but clearly considers herself to remain an outlier in this respect in relation to the fields in which she is established. See Glass (2009)

²⁰⁴ See Reed (2011) p.27

²⁰⁵ See Reed (2011) 193

²⁰⁶ See Reed (2011) p.195

In 2015, I published *Saffron Shadows*: my ethnographic exploration of the lives of literary writers in Myanmar, and how their creative writing was affected by the literary and political culture around them under repressive censorship and beyond. Among other literary cultural practices, it considers the impact of live ‘literary talks’ performed by authors in the context of repressive state censorship.

This body of work is now growing further with Helena Wulff’s pioneering work, exemplified by *Rhythms of Writing: an anthropology of Irish Literature* (2017). Opening with the question: ‘How come the Irish are such great writers?’, it goes on to explore the social world of contemporary Irish writers, tracing a path from training and creativity to seeking recognition, while operating as a public intellectual, writing journalism alongside fiction, ‘selling stories’ in the publishing market, all of which is ‘built on the rhythms of writing’, including ‘long hours at the desk, alternating with periods of promotion’.²⁰⁷ Wulff’s research is based on a combination of observation, in-depth interviews, journalism and analysis of literary texts.²⁰⁸

This thesis forms part of a continuing attempt to plug the ethnographic research gap identified in relation to contemporary literary culture.²⁰⁹

But it is important to note that the connection between literary studies and anthropology is not new. I have already

²⁰⁷ See Wulff, *Rhythms of Writing* (2017), p.xiii

²⁰⁸ See Wulff (2017), p.xvii

²⁰⁹ See Wiles, ‘Three Branches of Literary Anthropology: Sources, Style, Subject Matter’ (2018). These branches often overlap – as they do in this thesis.

mentioned the importance of Hurston's work – but the links date right back to anthropology's founders, Malinowski and Levi-Strauss, as Clifford Geertz discusses in his book, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). As Nigel Rapport points out, reflecting on the connection between literature and anthropology, both disciplines 'tend to offer corresponding ways of writing or narrating social reality'.²¹⁰ Many anthropologists seek to maintain clear distinctions between fiction and ethnography, though. Didier Fassin, for instance, accepts that they often 'share the same project of representing the reality and truth of life', but seeks to distinguish them on the basis that, while fiction may be more 'powerful' at 'unveiling profound truths about the world', anthropological ethnography has a 'duty' to stick to 'reality'.²¹¹

When it comes to creative uses of language and metaphor, though, the lines are difficult to draw.²¹² There is an established body of anthropological work that uses literature, usually realist novels, as source texts.²¹³ And there is another body of anthropological work, buoyed by the 'writing culture' debate within the discipline in the late 1980s,²¹⁴ that explores literary writing techniques and forms for writing ethnography, drawing upon Geertz's earlier call to arms.²¹⁵ A range of anthropological writing exploring such approaches is displayed in Helena Wulff's edited collection, *The Anthropologist as Writer: Genres and Contexts in the Twenty-First Century* (2016). It is now widely accepted that ethnography can extend

²¹⁰ See Rapport, *The Prose and the Passion* (1994), p.22

²¹¹ See Didier Fassin, 'True Life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries Between Ethnography and Fiction' (2014), pp.51-52

²¹² I discuss this issue in Wiles (2018)

²¹³ Examples are Denis and Aycok's *Literature and Anthropology* (1988), and Marilyn Cohen (ed.), *Novel Approaches to Anthropology* (2013)

²¹⁴ See George Clifford and James Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* [1986](2010)

²¹⁵ For a feminist evolution of the 'writing culture' debate, see Behar and Gordon (eds.)(1995)

to fiction, and there are many more examples of ethnographic fiction, by scholar-authors ranging from Kurt Vonnegut to Ruth Behar.²¹⁶

Of all the literary-anthropological studies of contemporary literary culture, the only one I have come across that explores live literature events as a performative and social experience is an article by Helena Wulff titled 'Literary Readings as Performance: On the Career of Contemporary Writers in the New Ireland' (2008). Drawing on the work of oral performance scholars,²¹⁷ she reflects on the 'multisensorial embodied experience' of live performances of fiction at events, distinguishing that from the experiences recorded performances that are 'mediated' through a camera. She notes several features of fiction performances, some of which appear paradoxical. She mentions the 'unpredictability' and 'risk' of live performance; yet notes that all the writers in her study denied preparing for readings in any way. She suggests that Irish writers seem inherently disposed towards public performance; yet notes that 'some writers in her study were 'shy and introverted'. She alludes to the multi-faceted role of the performing author: that they have to act as both the 'narrator in the text' and 'their public persona'. She suggests that writers often struggle with how to approach their readings, as some 'do not really enjoy doing voices or accents'. This affects their choice of which extract to perform at a given event – though, in general, Wulff, proposes, they 'prefer to perform pieces that are dramatic, interesting, touching or amusing. Something with some conflict, or action', rather than

²¹⁶ See e.g. Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* [1963] (2008), first written as a PhD thesis; and Behar (2017). See the Society for Humanistic Anthropology's website for Victor Turner Prize awardee lists and resources on literary anthropological writing.

²¹⁷ Scholars referenced include Richard Bauman (1992)

‘long passages of description’.²¹⁸ This research echoes several of these themes, and explores how they play out in practice through situated ethnographies of live literature events, in order to interrogate their experiential qualities and their cultural value.

The vast majority of existing literary festival research, as I have outlined, that attends to their participants as well as their structural functions for the publishing industry, focuses exclusively on the audiences rather than author-performers – and, within that, on audiences’ social and cultural roles and instrumental motivations for attending. It rarely evokes ways in which audiences actually experience live literature events, or how that compares with performers’ experiences. My ethnographies are the first to explore how the experiences of both author-performers *and* reader-audiences relate to each other – or, indeed, contradict each other.

My ethnographies also explore the idea that experiencing live literature might have a more significant and complex effect on how participants responded to and valued literary texts than has often been assumed by scholars in the field. They delve into the *dynamic* way in which, as Le Guin brilliantly put it, words are events that ‘do things, change things. They transform both the speaker and the hearer; they feed energy back and forth and amplify it. They feed understanding or emotion back and forth and amplify it.’²¹⁹

‘Reading’ vs ‘performance’; ‘reading’ vs ‘listening’
– terminology, audiobook research, reception

²¹⁸ See Wulff (2008)

²¹⁹ See Le Guin, ‘Telling is Listening’ (2004), p.199

At this point I would like to reflect briefly on some terminology, and explain why I have begun using two hybrid terms of my own concoction: ‘author-performers’²²⁰ and ‘reader-audiences’.

As alluded to in Wulff’s article, in most live literature contexts, when authors read aloud from their texts to audiences, this activity is usually referred to as a ‘reading’, rather than a ‘performance’.²²¹ This may well link to the historical value allotted to the activity of silent reading as a more ‘advanced’ way of engaging with literature.²²² Authors tend to refer to these events as ‘readings’,²²³ even when the events involve substantial question and answer sessions and only a little reading from their books – a fact that suggests that they value the reading aloud element highly. Clearly, though, both the reading-aloud and conversation elements amount to forms of performance – and not just because they occur in an aesthetic, theatrical ‘frame’. Since Erving Goffman’s work on the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’²²⁴ and the ‘performative turn’ in scholarship, many of our actions, including silent reading, have been viewed as ‘performances’. Even printed books of fiction can be viewed as ‘arrested performances’²²⁵ for the benefit of a primarily-silent-reading audience. So, to what extent does the common usage of the term ‘reading’, in the context of live literature events, signify a general lack of ‘theatricality’ in terms of ‘staging’ and presentation? To what

²²⁰ This term echoes Juliet Gardiner’s term, ‘author-promoter’; see Gardiner (2000)

²²¹ The reading/performance distinction is briefly reflected on by Stephen Wade in his introduction to *Reading the Applause*, ed. Munden and Wade (1999), p.10

²²² This hierarchy is discussed in Rubery (2016)

²²³ See e.g. Peter Derk, ‘What an Author Reading Is and Why You Should Go To One’ (2016)

²²⁴ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1956] (1990)

²²⁵ See Whitaker-Long and Hopkins (1982) p.2

extend does it reflect the nature and tone of the ‘readings’, and the qualities of performativity that authors manifest in comparison to actors?

The issue of *how* literary texts are read aloud, and the relationship between voice, delivery, performance and reception, has recently been examined in audiobook research. Audiobooks are another oral element of literary culture that has been neglected until recently, with the publication of Matthew Rubery’s important book on the history of the ‘talking book’.²²⁶ As he points out, audiobooks had long been dismissed by literary scholars with ‘hostility’²²⁷ on the basis that listening was seen as a lesser form of experiencing prose fiction than silent reading.

Rubery reveals how listeners’ letters to producers revealed that they were intensely engaged with narrators’ voices and delivery styles, and that this significantly affected their reception of the literary texts. One letter from a blind reader argues forcefully that narrators should *not* ‘impose’ their own ‘interpretations’ on the reading, but should instead allow blind people to find their ‘own meanings’ in the text, in a comparable way to sighted people – which rules out attempts to ‘act’ characters, imitating, for instance, male or female voices. A ‘straight reading, in a normal tone of voice, at a normal speed’ was said to be the ideal.²²⁸ Talking book producers issued directions to their narrating actors along similar lines, and the American Foundation for the Blind prescribed readings that were ‘not overly dramatic or

²²⁶ See Rubery (2016)

²²⁷ See Rubery (2016) p.25 on the issue of hostility and perceptions of ‘reading’ and morality

²²⁸ See Rubery (2016) p.86, quoting a letter published in *Dialogue Magazine* in 1976.

obtrusive', in order to achieve 'complete fidelity to the text'.²²⁹ The Library of Congress issued a set of guidelines directing narrators to read in a way that was '(a) appropriate to the book, (b) sympathetic but not exaggerated, (c) restrained but not stilted or mechanical, (d) attentive to the sense of the book and skilful in securing proper emphasis'²³⁰ – placing weight, here, on seeking to convey an *authorial intention* of the meaning of a text through its oral delivery, in a way that is clearly intended to apply to narrators other than the author. Letters also revealed the positive impact that a good 'reading' could have – including that good narrators made books 'come alive', and making the listeners 'think about a book's language in a new way', including by bringing out 'even the smallest, most obscure, most elusive and most subtle nuances'.²³¹

As Rubery emphasises, narrators 'influence a story's reception at a formal level through accent, cadence, emphasis, inflection, pitch, pronunciation, resonance, pace, tone, and any eccentricities that stand out. These sonic details matter, since... reading aloud is itself an act of interpretation.'²³² Putting qualities of delivery aside, Rubery points out, even the individual human voice is 'like a fingerprint'²³³ – except that, unlike fingerprints, human, without the aid of technology, have an ability to distinguish and interpret subtle characteristics that make each one unique. But voice quality can also have an emotional impact 'at a gut level'.²³⁴

²²⁹ Quoted in Rubery (2016) pp.88-9

²³⁰ Quoted in Rubery (2016) p.95

²³¹ See Rubery (2016) p.96

²³² See Rubery (2016), p.10

²³³ See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice is Nothing More* (2006) p.22

²³⁴ See Rubery (2016), p.10

Consistent with Gardiner's notion of the 'resurrection of the author', Rubery points out that many talking book listeners felt that that 'author's voice seemed to offer a more accurate reading than could be gained from the page alone', and felt they could 'detect the author's personality through tones, inflections and vocal mannerisms kept off the printed page'²³⁵ – a clear indication that the voice and text were experienced as being linked.

Not all authors were deemed successful narrators of their own work, though – by reader-listeners or even themselves. Toni Morrison apparently found Faulkner's drawling renditions of his own novels 'horrifying',²³⁶ while Le Guin confessed, with typical self-deprecating wit, while describing her experience of recording her book, *Gwilan's Harp*: 'I had to read it in my own God-given croak; and in the corner of my mind, all the while, Dylan Thomas was weeping softly'.²³⁷ Thomas, renowned as a narrator of his own work, opined on the subject too, warning of 'the twin perils of mawkish, melodramatic readings on the one hand, and flat, detached readings on the other hand'.²³⁸

Le Guin vividly described her experience of witnessing Dylan Thomas in a live performance of his poetry at Columbia in 1952:

You know the Caedmon tape of him reading at Columbia in 1952? I was there at that reading, and you can hear me – in the passionate silence of the audience listening to that passionate voice. Not a conspiracy of silence, but a participatory silence, a community

²³⁵ This was part of evidence offered at the Library of Congress, quoted in Rubery (2016) p.106

²³⁶ See Rubery (2016) p.209, quote taken from a phone conversation between Rubery and Morrison in 2013.

²³⁷ See Rubery (2016) p.211, quote taken from Le Guin's liner notes for the recording in 1977.

²³⁸ See Rubery (2016) p.214, referencing a recording made by Dylan Thomas in 1949 on 'reading one's own poems'.

collaboration in letting him let the word loose aloud. I left that reading feeling two feet above the ground, and it changed my understanding of the art forever.²³⁹

Her description illustrates, incisively, how the experience of *embodied* live performance can enhance the multiple impacts of hearing a literary text read aloud, and the profound effect that experience can have upon participants – including in terms of how they value a certain text or author, but also how they experience, and participate in, literary culture in general.

The impact of embodiment on literary reception is now understood to be significant for all forms of reading, including silent reading. Neuroscience has proved how closely linked silent reading remains to embodied orality; that people do hear ‘internal voices’ while reading silently,²⁴⁰ and ‘subvocalize’ words themselves, making tiny movements in the mouth using the muscles involved in speech. Denise Riley calls this evidence of the inherent ‘sociability of language’²⁴¹ which always ‘throws us back on the materiality of words’.²⁴² Don Idhe has made the point that there is no ‘pure’ auditory experience either; that hearing is done with the whole body,²⁴³ and there are ‘complex spatial attributes to auditory experience’²⁴⁴ too, which is relevant when considering how people listen in specific physical environments, as they do at live literature events.

²³⁹ See Le Guin, ‘Off the Page: Loud Cows’ (2004) p.117

²⁴⁰ See Perrone-Bertolotti (2012) and see discussion of orality earlier in this chapter.

²⁴¹ See Riley (2004) p.81

²⁴² See Riley (2004) p. 95

²⁴³ See Don Idhe’s work on the phenomenology of sound and voice, building on the ideas of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (2007), p.44

²⁴⁴ See Idhe (2007), p.59

All these perspectives on voice, performance, reading, listening, experience, reception, interpretation and authenticity, in an audiobook context, are highly relevant a live literature context, and consequently manifest themselves in my ethnographies.

Some author-performer perspectives

Just as scholarly research has so far given limited attention to contemporary performances of fictional texts, and has neglected author-performers' experiences of them even more, the literary community in which they take place has only recently begun to discuss these matters in depth.

As the poet and multidisciplinary artist, Steven J. Fowler – who is now well-known for his performative, live art-influenced events and innovations in the live literature scene – has put it: 'When I was to read for the first time in public then, I immediately felt, along with painful nerves, I was *performing* the act of reading. It struck me immediately that everything from the tone of my voice, the clothes I wore, the content (and length!) of my introduction utterly changed the impression of my actual poem and its semantic meaning. This is a fact so obvious to be meaningless or revelatory. To me it was the latter' – but he then became aware, after attending 'poetry reading after poetry reading', 'how extraordinarily formal and full of pretence, the notion was', and how '*utterly uninterrogated as a thing.*'²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ My emphasis added. Fowler's article is titled: 'Reading in Public is Always a Performance' (undated) - accessed on 21 December 2018 on the ILS website at: <http://litshowcase.org/content/reading-in-public-is-always-a-performance/>

Many authors of fiction are, understandably, wedded to the core of their role as it has become conventionally understood: that of writing, in the sense of composing texts to be read on the printed, or digital, page, rather than as performers – and that perspective seems to be fuelled by the publishing industry that produces and promotes those texts in book form, to be read as such.

In Robin Robertson's edited collection, *Mortification: Writers' Stories of Their Public Shame* (2003) poets and novelists describe their experiences of their public-facing activities, including live literature events – focusing on incidents of humiliation. And there are many. Jonathan Coe begins his contribution with a rhetorical echo of his brief: 'One story, of a bad experience in front of the reading public? Just the one? That's impossible.' Coe, and several other authors featured in the collection, describe similar experiences of travelling a long distance and getting psyched up to perform at an event that is ultimately attended by just one or two people. John Banville writes about speaking at the same event as a Pulitzer prize-winning author, and being unable to remember much about the event itself apart from feeling convinced people were only tolerating him as a necessary appendage to the other author – and then, at the book signing, being approached by just three customers, one of whom confided: 'I'm not going to buy a book... but you looked so lonely there, I thought I'd come and talk to you.'²⁴⁶ Some confess to blunders made while on stage, including John Lanchester, who managed to offend a large panel of other, more famous writers by intimating that he was the only one who had actually written his own book.

²⁴⁶ See Banville, in Robertson ed., (2003) p.214

While framing this experience, Lanchester fumes at the entire culture of live literature events:

The truth is that the whole contemporary edifice of readings and tours and interviews and festivals is based on a mistake. The mistake is that we should want to meet the writers we admire... that meeting them in the flesh somehow adds to the experience of reading their work. The idea is that the person is the real thing, whereas the writing is an excrescence or epiphenomenon. But that's not true. The work is the real thing, and it is that to which readers should direct their attention. The writer herself is distraction, a confusion, a mistake – she should be heard and not seen. If you want to meet her, go to meet her on the page.²⁴⁷

This approach echoes that of J.M. Coetzee, who is notorious for avoiding all forms of publicity – particularly events and publications for which he is expected to offer opinions about matters of and beyond his fiction. In his speech on receiving the Nobel Prize in 2003, he critiqued the idea of the author as a 'sage' who could 'offer an authoritative word on our times', suggesting that the idea present at the time the Nobel Prize was inaugurated, in 1901, but was 'dead today' – and he would, in any case, 'feel very uncomfortable in the role'.²⁴⁸ He proceeded to write a semiparodic, quasi-autofictional novel exploring this idea with *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)²⁴⁹. As Peter McDonald has put it, Coetzee's approach is a deeply-rooted philosophical and ethical one; he has 'dedicated his life to defending literature as a legitimate mode of public intervention in its own right, not to escape the burden of

²⁴⁷ See Lanchester, in Robertson ed. (2003), p.256

²⁴⁸ See Peter McDonald, p.496 of 'The Challenge of *Diary of a Bad Year*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 43:3, Fall 2010, pp.483-499.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

history or politics but to confront them on his own resolutely literary terms'.²⁵⁰

Not all contributors to the *Mortification* collection see live literature events this way, though. In his piece, Simon Armitage calls them the 'human interface between writing and reading'.²⁵¹ But, aside from the black comedy disasters featured there, the performance element of that interface, and the ways it is experienced by authors at events, has rarely been given careful consideration either in scholarship or non-fiction.

As live literature becomes more and more prevalent, though, perspectives are changing. Fiction writers seem to be becoming more aware of the performative aspect – and potential – of live literature events for their books, and their careers, with more of an awareness of how they are valued by audiences. Will Self, a notably dynamic performer of his fiction, while also being a notoriously derisive cynic about the publishing industry and about readers and audiences, has written about his view on reading aloud at live events, his experience of it, and the element of performance:

I've always understood that my fiction of extreme mental states, genital transformations, and the linkage of mental illness to social change, would prove a tough sell, and I've also understood that it would be me who'd largely have to do the selling, so I've worked hard at understanding which passages will come across well when read – comic set pieces usually, but not always – and how to introduce these passages in such a way as to hold an audience's attention.

But the truth of the matter is that if you are a shy,

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p.497

²⁵¹ See Armitage, in Robertson ed. (2003) – and see Barthes (1967).

blushing, Proustian recluse for whom the least sound is exquisite torture, you'll never be able to wake up and smell the coffee being served up in the bar adjacent to the windy yurt where you're being called upon to declaim. Reading one's own work aloud to an audience requires the ability to gauge their reaction, while at the same time affecting complete nonchalance. Basic rules on projecting and stage presence can be acquired, but these must be honed by years of experience.²⁵²

When I came across this piece – in fact by reading it in a special edition of *The Telegraph* that was given out at the Hay Festival in 2013, when they were sponsoring it and Self was performing – I realized how rare it was for an author, or commentator, or scholar, to speak in such language, using terms like 'stage presence', about the act of performing at a live literature event. This rarity seems to be another symptom of a wider lack of attention given to performance in a live literature context.

Now, talking of: Communication studies, orality, the ethnography of speaking

There is a trove of scholarship on performance traditions in oral literary cultures, largely by anthropologists. Malinowski, one of the earliest anthropologists, emphasised the importance of communication, including phatic communication – that is apparently trivial or purposeless speech acts in any given situation – for understanding sociality.²⁵³ Communication burgeoned as a sub-field of anthropology in the 1970s, largely in the wake of the influential work of Ruth Finnegan on Limba storytelling in

²⁵² See Will Self, 'Hay Festival 2013: Will Self's rules for reading aloud' (2013)

²⁵³ See Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' [1923] (1989)

Sierra Leone,²⁵⁴ in which she pointed out the fundamental role of orality in literature outside the bounds of Western culture. Soon after that, Raymond Williams's notable class-based critique of 'scriptocentrism' in literary and other Western cultural scholarship was published.²⁵⁵

Finnegan's emphasis on the importance of paralanguage in narrative performances – factors like the rate of speech, length, pause duration, pitch contour, tone of voice, volume and stress – led other linguistic anthropologists²⁵⁶ to conceive of ways to incorporate those features in transcriptions for use in ethnographic writing. In Richard Bauman's book, *Verbal Art as Performance* (1975), drawing upon Finnegan's work, he argued that anthropology had neglected the 'social use of speaking' and that more 'ethnographies of speaking'²⁵⁷ should explore 'speech communities', and the 'socioexpressive dimension of speaking'.²⁵⁸ Referencing various cultural forms of oral literature, including Japanese professional storytellers from the *rakugo* tradition who have to undergo years of special training before they are culturally permitted to perform,²⁵⁹ Baumann pointed out that 'performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication' 'rests on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways' relative to the cultural context' and the communities in which they take place.²⁶⁰ He linked this to the emerging 'performative turn' in scholarship, reflecting on the power of the 'emergent quality of performance'²⁶¹ to bind participants

²⁵⁴ See Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* [1970] (2012)

²⁵⁵ See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* [1958] (1983), p.309

²⁵⁶ Dennis Tedlock, for instance – see *Finding the Center the Art of the Zuni* (1972): a book of translations of Native American Zuni narratives

²⁵⁷ See Bauman and Joel Sherzer (eds.), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (1974)

²⁵⁸ See Bauman and Sherzer eds. (1974), Introduction: p.12

²⁵⁹ See Bauman (1975), p.30

²⁶⁰ See Bauman (1975), p.21

²⁶¹ See Bauman (1975), p.38

through a 'special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction'.²⁶²

Finnegan took this further in *Oral Poetry: Its nature, significance, and social context* (1977) by explicitly critiquing the Western literary establishment's devaluation of orality, and its tendency to sneer at oral literary cultures as 'primitive'²⁶³ in literary terms. 'If a piece is orally performed', Finnegan proposed, 'it must be regarded as in that sense an "oral poem"', even if it is by a Western poet, since 'the concept of 'oral-ness' must be relative, and 'oral poetry' is constantly overlapping into 'written poetry'.²⁶⁴ Distinctive factors 'may include the context and setting of the performance, the mode of delivery, the audience's action... as well as the stylistic features... and... the atmosphere of 'play' rather than 'reality', an activity set apart from 'real life'.²⁶⁵ Finnegan pointed out that the '*performance* aspect of oral poetry in Western contexts' tends to be 'forgotten'; and yet 'the circumstances of the performance' are 'integral to the identity of the poem as actually realised. Differently performed, or performed at a different time or to a different audience or by a different singer, it is a different poem'²⁶⁶. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o went on to develop a postcolonial critique of Western literary scholars' tendency to devalue orality, and the inherent ethnocentrism of this stance.²⁶⁷

²⁶² See Bauman (1975), p.42

²⁶³ See Finnegan (1977) p.3

²⁶⁴ See Finnegan (1977) p.2. She went on to clarify: 'In the written form we set it apart typographically, but also by its setting or the way it is performed or read aloud: whatever its rhythmic properties may be, a poem is likely (even in a literate culture) to be delivered in a manner and mood which sets it apart from everyday speech and prose utterance' – p.25

²⁶⁵ See Finnegan (1977) p.26

²⁶⁶ Finnegan added: 'even when there is little or no change of actual wording in a given poem between performances, the context still adds its own weight and meaning to the delivery, so that the whole occasion is unique' – (1977) p.28

²⁶⁷ See Thiong'o, 'Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature' (2007)

Walter J. Ong looked at orality and literature from a different perspective. In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), he argued that the advent of writing and literacy fundamentally changed literature and culture. In part, this was by causing transition from a world of sound to a world of sight. 'In primarily oral cultures' that do not use writing, Ong argued, 'the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, 'as processed by the spoken word', and it helps to 'form close-knit groups',²⁶⁸ through a form of communication that is not only verbal, but is embodied, being formed around the process of audience feedback in real, 'evanescent' time.²⁶⁹ Not having writing, such cultures need to use spoken language in such a way as to preserve information, so rely on stylized techniques such as proverbs, which writing renders unnecessary – and they also tend to think about history cyclically. Writing, Ong argued, causes cultural thinking to change from being cyclical to being linear and evolutionary, resulting in more climactic linear plots, rather than episodic narratives,²⁷⁰ and it also causes literature to shift towards interiority and individuality. Ong saw the role of 20th century media and communications as a different kind of orality: a 'secondary orality' that coexists with writing and relies upon it. Ong's theory, though, as Steven Connor has pointed out, fails to account for the continued role of orality and embodiment in core elements of literary practice and culture, from writing to reading.²⁷¹

The performative turn: Turner, ritual, liminality and communitas, performance studies

²⁶⁸ See Ong [1982] (2002) p.73-4

²⁶⁹ See Ong [1982] (2002) p.32

²⁷⁰ See Ong [1982] (2002) p.142

²⁷¹ See Connor (2009) for this critique of Ong, referenced earlier.

The 1980s saw anthropologists' concern with communication and orality evolve into a more widespread preoccupation with performance in Finnegan's wake.²⁷² Vital to this development was the work of Victor Turner, who drew from his early research on rituals in Zambia to develop broader concepts about the effects of ritualized performances, notably 'liminality' – the state of being 'betwixt and between'²⁷³ during a rite of passage, characterized by a 'subjunctive mood... the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire';²⁷⁴ and 'communitas' – the feeling of camaraderie associated among a group experiencing the same liminal experience or rite²⁷⁵. Turner later applied these ideas to Western performance contexts,²⁷⁶ collaborating with theatre director and scholar, Richard Schechner,²⁷⁷ who forged the new (inter)discipline of performance studies.²⁷⁸ Turner's ideas have continued to be applied by anthropologists in contemporary Western cultural performance contexts as diverse as sports events and the Burning Man Festival.²⁷⁹ As performance studies developed, scholars such as Della Pollock developed evocative, performative modes of writing about performance as a way of engaging with its depth and value more meaningfully.²⁸⁰

²⁷² Pun intended – I mean Ruth (1977), though.

²⁷³ See Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage' (1967)

²⁷⁴ See p.129 of Sharon Rowe, 'Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminal Leisure' (2008)

²⁷⁵ See Graham St. John, 'Introduction' in St. John (ed.), *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (2008), p.7

²⁷⁶ Turner adapted the term 'liminal' to 'liminoid' when referring to Western contexts, on the basis that such performance events were less transformational; see Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: an essay in comparative symbology' in Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982). This has been critiqued by later scholars; see e.g. Rowe (2008) p.141. Turner would go on to expand upon these ideas in *The Anthropology of Performance* and *The Anthropology of Experience* (both 1986).

²⁷⁷ Schechner would go on to write *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985): a direct consequence of his work with Turner.

²⁷⁸ See Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002)

²⁷⁹ See St. John (ed.) (2008)

²⁸⁰ As Pollock put it: 'The struggle to write performance seems to me to give performative writing its depth and value, ethically, politically and aesthetically. In this struggle at least,

Performance studies approaches have recently been seeping into literary studies in relation to poetry,²⁸¹ spurring new interpretations of traditional canons²⁸² as well as the new studies of contemporary practices. As I have noted, there is, as yet little comparable, performance-focused scholarship that deals with the embodied performance of fiction.

The bodily and sensory turns: beyond ‘tasteless theories’

The performative turn in scholarship was followed by ‘sensory’ and ‘bodily’ turns in the 1990s, which emerged from a growing awareness, linked with developments in neuroscience, that conventional assumptions about the mind-body dualism were fundamentally flawed. Scholars gravitated increasingly towards Merleau-Ponty’s understanding that perception, and engaging in the world, plays a vital role in understanding it, emphasizing the central role of the body and senses as sites for knowing²⁸³ – an idea that had been developed significantly by Adrienne Rich through feminist scholarship.²⁸⁴

Anthropologist Thomas Csordas proposed that that attention comprises a ‘more bodily and multisensory engagement than we usually allow for in psychological definitions of attention’, and that ‘somatic modes of attention’ are in fact highly valuable as ‘culturally elaborated ways of attending to and

performative writing seems one way not only to make meaning but to make writing meaningful.’ See Pollock, ‘Performing Writing’ (1998), p.95

²⁸¹ Recent scholarly publications in this vein include Triona Ní Shíocháin, *Singing Ideas: performance, politics and oral poetry* (2018)

²⁸² See, for instance, Laura Severin, *Poetry Off the Page: twentieth-century British women poets in performance* (2017); and Julia Virtanen, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960-1980* (2017)

²⁸³ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* [1945] (2013)

²⁸⁴ The central importance of the body is explored, for example, in Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* [1976] (1995)

with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others'.²⁸⁵

Two books by Paul Stoller explored the translation of these ideas into ethnographic writing, and, to me, contributed a vital sense of how an ethnography of a live arts-based event might be approached and conceived of – and, importantly, written and styled – so as to incorporate these elements of embodied experience. In *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Ethnography* (1989), Stoller argued that, for most anthropologists, 'tasteless theories' had become more important than the 'savory sauces' of ethnographic life; that ethnographies have lost the smells, sounds, and tastes of the places they study. He describes 'coming to his senses' about this through long-term research into the lives of the Songhay of Niger, while actively observing and participating in their cultural productions. In *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), which opens with an evocative conversation about Sufi storytelling and French toast, Stoller developed his thinking about how to write scholarly texts.²⁸⁶ Critiquing the ways in which the 'fixed standards of science' are too often applied to lived experience,²⁸⁷ he argues for 'a fully sensuous scholarship in which experience and reality, imagination and reason, difference and commonality are fused and celebrated in both rigorous and imaginative practices as well as in expository and

²⁸⁵ See Thomas Csordas, 'Somatic Modes of Attention' (1993), p.138

²⁸⁶ The book opens, not with a theoretical reflection, but with a scene, involving a conversation between two scholar friends over French toast about the contemporary resonances of an ancient Sufi story that explored the interconnectedness of the intelligible and the sensible. 'Stiffened from long sleep in the background of scholarly life', Stoller reflected, 'the scholar's body yearns to exercise its muscles... to restore its sensibilities... it wants to breathe in the pungent odors of social life, to run its palms over the jagged surface of social reality, to hear the wondrous symphonies of social experience, to see the sensuous shapes and colours that fill windows of consciousness. It wants to awaken the imagination and bring scholarship back to "the things themselves'. See Stoller (1997) p.xi-xii.

²⁸⁷ Stoller here references the work of Kirsten Hastrup; see Stoller (1997) p.91

evocative expression'.²⁸⁸ While I prefer 'sensory' to 'sensuous'²⁸⁹, Stoller's argument, delivered in deliciously readable prose, nailed much of what I felt the need to capture in writing ethnographically about arts-based experiences. It also resonated with what I had learned, particularly through reflection during my postgraduate creative writing studies,²⁹⁰ about the narrative power of involving all the senses in evocative modes of writing.

Stoller's work was followed by a host of scholarship attending to the senses in other disciplines, and spawned more theories about how they might be incorporated into ethnography.²⁹¹ Inspired by Stoller and Turner, sociologists Phillip Vannini, Denis Waskul and Simon Gottschalk co-authored *The Senses in Self, Society and Culture: a sociology of the senses* (2012),²⁹² in which they emphasized the importance of somatic experience for understanding culture, pointing out that sociology 'badly needs to catch up with anthropology' in this respect.²⁹³ Their illustrative ethnographic narratives include an experience of a wine festival, described as a Turner-esque 'ritual', in which participants' performed descriptions of taste and their evaluations of the wines are portrayed as a form of transformative artistic meaning-making. Like Stoller, they proposed that scholars not only need to engage with the 'deep significance of sensations', but they 'need to present sensations in evocative, passionate, carnal and imaginative ways. Vitaly, they pointed out that this may require

²⁸⁸ See Stoller (1997) p.91

²⁸⁹ To me, the word is too loaded with sexual implications.

²⁹⁰ I completed an MA in Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London (2011-12)

²⁹¹ A key example is Sarah Pink's book, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009)

²⁹² Echoing Stoller, they described the basic premise of the book as being that *humans sense as well as make sense*'. See Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk (2012) p.18

²⁹³ See Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk (2012) p.13

experimenting with writing, with organization of one's work, and with different modes of representation (e.g. film, performing arts etc)²⁹⁴ – and they offered useful writing guidelines for social scientists, to help them translate such ideas into scholarly publications. These include abandoning traditional forms and structures; beginning with a descriptive scene to draw in the reader; abandoning disembodied voices, mingling description and analysis; being reflexive in relation to encounters and experiences, and how one's own biography shapes one's experience; using an embodied style of writing; and conveying a sense of situatedness and emergence when describing experiences.²⁹⁵ They emphasised that writing in this way to evoke 'lifeworlds', is an acquired '*skill*', a '*creative act*', and 'a form of poesis'.²⁹⁶

This emphasis on evocation through writing was developed by scholars working in autoethnography – notably Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, who have made a case for 'evocative autoethnography', arguing for the legitimacy of creative and reflexive modes of individual storytelling that focus in on the author's subjectivity in order to fully 'navigate the landscape of lived experience', often by employing poetic, lyrical and performative forms and language styles.²⁹⁷

In literary cultural scholarship, scholars working on the history of reading have also begun to incorporate ideas about embodiment and evocation through metaphorical or poetic wording in their own work over the last decade. Michel de Certeau has proposed that 'readers are travellers; they move

²⁹⁴ See Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk (2012). pp.53-54

²⁹⁵ See Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk (2012) p.75-6

²⁹⁶ See Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk (2012) p.80

²⁹⁷ See Ellis and Bochner, *Evocative Autoethnography* (2016)

across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write'²⁹⁸ – and that scholars should 'try to rediscover the movements of this reading within the body itself, which seems to stay docile and silent, but mines the reading in its own way. From the nooks of all sorts of "reading rooms" (including lavatories) emerge subconscious gestures, grumblings, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body'. In making this case, he recalls that: 'to read without uttering the words aloud' is a "'modern" experience, unknown for millennia.'²⁹⁹

Liveness, time, attention, experientialism

Liveness, and the inextricable issue of time, have long been a focus for scholars working in performance studies, many of whom have considered the relationship between embodied liveness and 'mediatized' liveness, i.e. live events relayed via a screen. Opinions on the impact and significance of liveness have been passionately divided.

In 1993, Peggy Phelan famously claimed that: 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented... once it does so, it becomes something other than performance'³⁰⁰. Dismissing that out of hand in his book on *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized*

²⁹⁸ See Michel de Certeau, 'Reading as Poaching', pp.130-139 of Towheed, Crone and Halsey (eds.) (2010). He adds: 'Reading is... situated at the point where social stratification (class relationships) and poetic operations (the practitioner's constructions of a text) intersect.' (p.135). 'In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor.... The withdrawal of the body... is a distancing of the text. (p.137)

²⁹⁹ See p.136 of De Certeau in Towheed, Crone and Halsey (eds.) (2010)

³⁰⁰ See Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Production' (1993)

Culture (1999), Philip Auslander rejected any 'ontological differences between live and mediatized cultural forms'.³⁰¹

In *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte made a more nuanced argument for the distinct value of live performance that involves the 'bodily co-presence of actors and spectators' who 'assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time'. She introduced the metaphor of a 'feedback loop' between participants, whereby, 'through their physical presence, perception and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the 'play', that they have all generated, and helps the performance to feel spontaneous.³⁰² The feedback loop process creates a kind of 'community among participants'.³⁰³

More recently, performance studies scholars have focused on the importance of risk and of failure in live performance, particularly in the context of 21st century digitalization.³⁰⁴ It is a conundrum that, while audiences almost always want to witness a 'good' performance, the risk of the unknown – the possibility that the star performer might trip on stage or utter something outrageous – heightens the significance of its liveness. No doubt people have always been perversely drawn to the prospect of witnessing others' embarrassment and humiliation, as a way to make themselves feel better or to feel more powerful in comparison. But in a digitalized era, there is

³⁰¹ Instead, he proposed, liveness was a 'historically contingent concept continually in a state of redefinition'. See Auslander (1999), p.184

³⁰² Fischer-Lichte adds that there are 'rules that govern the performance' which 'correspond to the rules of a game, negotiated by all the participants – actors and spectators alike.' See Fischer-Lichte (2008), p.36

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ See Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (eds.), *Beyond Failure: New Essays on the Cultural History of Failure in Theatre and Performance* (2018)

perhaps an added sense that witnessing the reality of embodied failure, in a live context, is a refreshing counterpoint to the slickly-produced perfection of media and entertainment available online, which often extends to the ways in which people perform their everyday lives on social media. The digital picture is far more complicated than that, as many digital performers, including vloggers, are valued for their imperfection – another form of ‘authenticity’ – but even then, video usually allows for retrospective editing. The potential for risk, and failure, on stage, can be seen as intensifying the value of live literature experiences for embodied reader-audiences, whether or not they admit to it.

Liveness was largely neglected by social scientists until Les Back and Nirmal Pawar addressed it in their book, *Live Methods* (2012).³⁰⁵ They make a case for sociological writing that not only puts the senses at the centre, but also pays due ‘attention to time’, including ‘the multiple shapes duration assumes during lived moment’,³⁰⁶ and the ‘unpredictable attentiveness’ of perception.³⁰⁷ This, they propose, needs to be reflected in scholarly writing, through a ‘liveliness of words’, and by ‘incorporating a vivid imagination from the beginning of research design’³⁰⁸.

David Wiles, in his book *Theatre and Time* (2014),³⁰⁹ explores the linked issues of time, duration and rhythm in

³⁰⁵ As Dariusz Gafijczuk puts it, reflecting on Back and Pawar’s work in a special ‘Live Methods’ edition of *The Sociological Review*: ‘the contemporary sociological imagination has proven remarkably resistant to duration as an active analytical dimension’; he describes sociology as having been ‘starved of temporal sensibility’. See Gafijczuk, ‘Vividness, time and the restitution of sociological imagination’ (2017)

³⁰⁶ See Back and Pawar (2012), p.8

³⁰⁷ See Back and Pawar (2012), p.13

³⁰⁸ See Back and Pawar (2012), p.21. This aesthetic disposition to sociological writing mirrors the approaches proposed by Stoller and by Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk among others.

³⁰⁹ In the interests of reflexivity, I note that David Wiles is my dad. They say you always start to become your parents, whether you like it or not.

performance,³¹⁰ and points out that, in writing about live events, all these temporal factors have to be linked to *memory* in order for any theory of liveness 'to have real meaning'. This speaks to my concern with exploring, not just participants' experience of live literature events as they were taking place, but the nature of the lasting *impact* of the experiences, beyond the site and duration of the events themselves – how participants go on to value the events, and how their memories and values affect their daily lives and cultural practices. 'Memory', David Wiles points out, is vital to any discussion about the importance of a performer's 'presence', or the experience of a spectator relishing that presence.³¹¹ He quotes Peter Brook as saying: 'When a performance is over... the event scorches into the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture'.³¹² But as well as a subjective impression, David Wiles argues, memory has a 'collective element'; the experience of being part of an audience at a live performance in shared time creates 'mnemonic communities' – that is, 'people bound together by possessing a shared system of memories that are shaped over time'.³¹³ This idea links in with Fish's idea of 'interpretive communities', and Benedict Anderson's iteration of this as 'imagined communities'³¹⁴ that shape culture and society.

³¹⁰ I note that Temporality, and especially rhythm, is another aspect of the 'feedback loop' of liveness that Fischer-Lichte describes as 'a principle based on the human body. The heartbeat, the blood circulation, and respiration each follow their own rhythm, as do the movements we carry out while walking... writing... The same goes for the sounds we make when speaking, singing, laughing, crying. The inner movements of our bodies that we are incapable of perceiving are also organized rhythmically', and have a 'particular capacity for perceiving rhythms and tuning our bodies to them'. Her notion of 'the autopoietic feedback loop', she suggests, 'can show whether and to what extent the performance succeeds in drawing the audience into its rhythm'. See Fischer-Lichte (2008) p.140

³¹¹ See D. Wiles (2014), pp.47-8

³¹² See D. Wiles (2014) p.53

³¹³ D. Wiles references Eviatar Zarubavel's use of 'mnemonic communities' in *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Shape of the Past* (2003)

³¹⁴ See Anderson (1983)

Drawing upon these ideas, my multi-vocal ethnographies involve conversations about long-past and future-projected memories, as well as ‘present’ experience, and memories of events in the immediate past – recalling Dewey’s point, discussed earlier, that memory is itself a creative act.

In the new ‘attention economy’ – or, as Yves Citton characterises it, the attention ‘ecology’³¹⁵ – embodied, live events have been found to have an even greater impact on memory-formation, and the implications of this are far-reaching for society and culture. The ‘time-space compression’³¹⁶ of contemporary, globalized life, particularly with today’s intensive digitalization of media and communications, with an abundance of information and content able to be delivered in seconds, has made attention not only a more precious and limited resource – but also a resource that is more difficult to manage for those seeking to capture it.³¹⁷ This puts a premium on services or experiences that succeed in immersing people in the present moment. As Philip Tassi puts it, because ‘digital convergence has transformed us into ‘continual transmitters and receivers of information of all kinds’ on smartphones and other devices, and consequently ‘multitaskers’,³¹⁸ it is harder than ever for communicators, including artists and writers, ‘not only to establish contact but also to attract the attention of and hold the interest of the recipient’.³¹⁹ While capturing an audience’s attention has been a concern of writers and speakers ever

³¹⁵ Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (2016)

³¹⁶ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1990, p.240

³¹⁷ See Crawford (2015)

³¹⁸ See Tassi (2018), p.54

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, digitalization and related technology has significantly raised the stakes.

Philosopher Martin Crawford has emphasized the stress that the battle for attention linked to digital technologies places on individuals, calling it a 'crisis of attention' that is causing our 'mental lives' to become 'fragmented' to the point that 'what is at stake often seems to be nothing less than the question of whether one can maintain a coherent self' – which he clarifies as a 'self that is able to act according to settled purposes and ongoing projects, rather than just flitting about.'³²⁰ This idea reinforces the value of curation across all aspects of contemporary culture, including literary culture, as a means of directing reader-audiences' attention towards selected texts, people, objects, events or experiences.

Not only do literature events function as a form of curation, but their popularity can also be seen as a manifestation of another phenomenon linked to the attention crisis, and that is the new era of 'experientialism'. This refers to the idea that experiences have now superseded materialism as a marker of cultural and economic value, and it was proposed and discussed by futurologist James Wallman in his book, *Stuffocation*.³²¹

It helps to explain the 21st century preoccupation with liveness across the arts, and wider culture and society, of which live literature forms a part. And it is exemplified by multiple new forms of live arts events that describe themselves as 'immersive' – a descriptor that highlights the intensity and,

³²⁰ See Crawford (2015), p.ix

³²¹ See Wallman (2015)

hence, the value, of the experiential quality, of events that seek to drench participants' attention in an all-encompassing live experience, both in the 'now' of the event itself, and beyond, through the resonance of embodied, multisensory memory. An example of this is the stellar rise of Punchdrunk³²²: an immersive theatre organisation that stages highly interactive, site-specific performances, in which each audience member often determines the 'narrative' of their experience, and Secret Cinema³²³: an immersive cinema organisation that creates live audience experiences in found spaces around screenings of classic films. Both continue to attract huge audiences. Immersive live literature events can be seen as a comparable form of embodied performance experience.

In scholarship of contemporary literary culture, the issues of attention, experience and phenomenology are now being tackled by scholars working in the history of reading³²⁴. Sven Birkerts has argued that, in a 'saturated digital media environment, a particular type of literary reading has been lost forever', as the 'single-track concentration' of reading has been 'hijacked' by the 'restless, grazing behaviour of clicking and scrolling'³²⁵. But, as Brian Glavey has suggested, this

³²² For a discussion of Punchdrunk and the evolution of scholarship on immersive theatre, see Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres* (2013) and James Frieze (ed.), *Reframing Immersive Theatre* (2017)

³²³ For an examination of Secret Cinema's immersive design, see Sarah Atkinson and Helen W. Kennedy, 'From conflict to revolution: The secret aesthetic, narrative spatialisation and audience experience in immersive cinema design' (2016)

³²⁴ The key anthology on the history of reading is Towheed, Crone and Halsey (eds.) (2010)

³²⁵ See Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, p.xiv, quoted in Towheed, Crone and Halsey (eds.) (2010), 'Introduction', p.4. Several other notable examples of phenomenological scholarship in relation to histories and theories of reading can be found in this volume. These include Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', pp.80-92, in which he proposes that the 'activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections' (p.82); Robert Darnton, 'First Steps Toward a History of Reading', at pp.23-35, where he makes a case for more analysis of reader response in histories of the book and of reading; and Stanley Fish, 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?' at pp. 96-108, in which he considers the notion of 'reader-response critics' and the text, not as a 'material object' but as a 'the occasion for a temporal experience' (p.103).

cultural shift can be seen as a 'double-sided coin' for writers, and for culture; while it is now a greater challenge to fight for the attention spotlight, this has made many contemporary poets [and other artists] focus on trying to capture the essence of experience, often with fertile creative results.³²⁶

These ideas about attention, experientialism and memory have double-edged implications for live literature, too. Producers and author-performers face a renewed struggle to compete and to hold their audiences' attention away from their smartphones; yet they gain in 'impact', and arguably in cultural value, if they succeed in doing so.

Emotional brains: the revolutionary neuroscience of emotion; implications for impact and value

Intimately bound up with these intertwining notions of the performance, the senses, embodiment, memory, attention, and value is another key element of live event experiences, and that is *emotion*. Emotion is now understood to have a far greater effect on cognition, and consequently on evaluation, than had previously been assumed in philosophy and most branches of scholarship.

Emotion and affect have long been themes in scholarship relating to the arts, but usually in the context of aesthetics, and thought of primarily in terms of audiences' subjective responses to works or events that do not necessarily contribute to their cognitive, aesthetic or cultural value. Raymond Williams shook up thinking on the subject back in

³²⁶ See Brian Glavey, 'Poetry and the Attention Economy' (2017), p.425

the late 1970s with his theory that ‘structures of feeling’ produce a collective sense of a generation or period’,³²⁷ rather than being simply individualistic or subjective – just as he viewed ‘style’ and aesthetics as being formed, not by individual artists’ impulses, but out of a myriad of idiosyncratic qualities that make up any social group. In anthropology, in the 1990s, Ruth Behar pioneered a feminist case for incorporating emotion into ethnography, to render it more empathetic and socially-engaged.³²⁸

In the 21st Century, neuroscience has bolstered these approaches, and revolutionized the role of emotion across all fields of scholarship by revealing what a fundamental role emotion plays in human decision-making, both collectively and individually. It is now proven that emotions ‘constitute potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making’,³²⁹ in contexts that were previously assumed to be driven by rational thought. Lerner et al point out that ‘many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are, for better or worse, the dominant driver of most meaningful decisions in life’.³³⁰ Helena Wulff, when discussing the ‘emotional turn’ in her edited volume, *Emotions: A Cultural Reader* (2007), proposed that the neuroscience of emotion effectively ‘closes the traditional Western gap in which emotions are separated from rationality and thought: the heart vs mind debate’.³³¹

³²⁷ See Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1978) p.131

³²⁸ See Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer* (1997)

³²⁹ See Jennifer S. Lerner, Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim S. Kassam, ‘Emotion and Decision Making’ (2015), p.799

³³⁰ See Lerner et al (2015), pp.800-801. They point out here that scholarly papers on emotion and decision making doubled from 2004 to 2007 and again from 2007 to 2011.

³³¹ See Wulff (2007), p.1

In literary studies, neuroscientific research has revealed how the practice of reading fiction – silently, it is usually assumed – significantly improves readers’ Theory of Mind – that is, the ability to empathize with another person’s emotions and reactions.³³² This forms part of an ‘emergent meaning’ that is derived from experiencing a literary narrative³³³. This has implications for understanding how participants in a live literature event might experience and value a performed reading from a work of fiction.

More recent neuroscientific evidence about audience experiences suggest that this impact may be heightened in a live literature event context – particularly in the context of digitalization. A core selection of evidence of the impact of emotion on human communication is engagingly discussed by neuroscientist Tali Sharot in her (appropriately) influential book: *The Influential Mind: what the brain reveals about our power to change others* (2017). ‘The tsunami of information we are receiving today can make us even less sensitive to data because we’ve become accustomed to finding support for absolutely anything we want to believe with a simple click of the mouse’, Sharot explains. ‘Instead, our desires are what sharpen our beliefs. It is those motivations and feelings we need to tap into to make a change’.³³⁴ Consequently, ‘data is often not the answer when it comes to changing minds’ or making an impact on people, in comparison to emotion – a finding that Sharot says came initially as a ‘terrible blow’ to her, as a scientist.³³⁵ Live, embodied interactions with human

³³² See David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, ‘Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind’ (2013)

³³³ See Lisa Zunshine, *Why do we Read Fiction? Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), p.164

³³⁴ See Sharot 2017, ‘Does Evidence Change Beliefs?’, EPub location 20.7/444

³³⁵ See Sharot 2017, ‘The power of confirmation’, EPub location 30.1/444

speakers that engage with audiences' emotions are also proven to be far *more effective* than other forms of communication. Sharot describes a live event that she attended – a live literature event, in fact, though featuring non-fiction – in which author-performer Susan Cain was speaking about her new book, *Quiet*, on a stage. 'The attendees were uniformly transfixed', Sharot writes, and 'it was crystal-clear that her speech would have broad influence. I did not record the firing of neurons in the brains of the thirteen hundred people seated with me, yet I can make an educated guess as to what we would have observed had we done so.'³³⁶ She outlines the way in which the science of audience brain synchronization evolved: 'At Princeton University, a group of researchers recorded the pattern of brain activity, using an MRI scanner, of individuals while they tuned into the speeches of politicians. What they found was that while people were listening to powerful speeches, their brains "ticked together"'. This synchronization was observed, not only in brain regions important for language and hearing, but also in those involved in 'creating associations, in generating and processing emotions, and in enabling us to place ourselves in the shoes of others and feel empathy. Powerful speeches did more than capture people's attention – a commendable feat in and of itself.'³³⁷

This active process of empathy, through attention, in a live event context, links to another cognitive process: the work of mirror neurons. While watching someone speak, mirror neurons mean that 'we are able to feel what other people feel' and therefore 'respond compassionately to other

³³⁶ See Sharot 2017, 'Emotion, The Conductor', EPub location 78.3/444

³³⁷ See Sharot 2017, 'Emotion, The Conductor', EPub location 78.3/444

people's emotional states'³³⁸ – a finding that amounts to ‘a major revision of widely held beliefs’ in relation to human biology over the last decade. Traditionally, our biology has been ‘considered the basis of self-serving individualism; but this new research on mirror neurons tells us that our linked ability to empathize is a ‘building block of our sociality’.³³⁹ Sharot explains why using emotion to engage a live, embodied audience is not merely a good way ‘to generate interest’, but goes much further – actually ‘brain coupling’ performers with audience members: ‘emotion equates the psychological state of the listener with that of the speaker, which makes it more likely that the listener will process incoming information in a similar manner to how the speaker sees it’. So, ‘when listening to a story that involves the expression of emotion, through tone of voice and content, listeners’ neural activity patterns first begin to match, and then begin to anticipate what the storyteller is going to say, enabling even better comprehension and engagement. While the injection of emotion is ‘by no means necessary for synchronization’, Sharot clarifies, ‘it heightens it.’³⁴⁰

These neuroscientific insights on emotion are linked to our evolution, which has not kept pace with our technological developments. As Sharot explains, our brains are ‘still designed to transmit emotions to each other more quickly and easily than rational ideas’.³⁴¹

³³⁸ See Iacoboni (2009), p.659.

³³⁹ See Iacoboni (2009), p.666

³⁴⁰ See Sharot 2017, ‘Sharing the Love’, EPub location 86.7/444

³⁴¹ This, Sharot clarifies, makes it more likely that, by communicating in a way that engages emotions, an audience will adopt the speaker’s point of view. Biologically, and evolutionarily, she explains, this is because ‘an emotional reaction is the body’s way of saying, “hey, something really important is going on”, and it is crucial that you respond accordingly’; so, ‘when something emotional happens, your amygdala – the region in your brain important for signalling arousal – is activated. The amygdala then sends an “alert signal” to the rest of the brain, immediately changing the ongoing activity’. See Sharot (2017), ‘Coupling’, EPub location 81.7/444

Neuroscience has also shown how being present in an audience alongside other bodies at a live event impacts our responses in ways that relate to value, partly through a tendency to imitate those around us. As Sharot explains it, our ‘brains operate according to the rule that what is desired by others is likely valuable’.³⁴² This means that participants at live, embodied events observe and respond to the emotional reactions of others, and this shapes how they receive and assess the content of what has been communicated. That all supports Le Guin’s claim that ‘[o]ral performance is a powerful bonding force, which, while it is occurring, bonds people physically and psychically’,³⁴³ creating a ‘community of body and mind’;³⁴⁴ that ‘listening is not a reaction, it is a connection. Listening to a conversation or a story, we don’t so much respond as join in – we become part of the action.’³⁴⁵

The proven cognitive role of emotion in embodied, performative communication clearly suggests that being part of an audience at a live literature event is likely to have a far greater impact on a participant than having a one-on-one conversation, or watching a live literature event online – and

³⁴² See Sharot 2017, ‘Inside the Brain’, EPub location 289.4/444. Again, Sharot explains that this dates back to humanity’s evolution; ‘the first humans were social creatures... They had yet to evolve language, but they could communicate fear, excitement, and love with a facial expression, touch and sound. The joy of human interaction could be expressed with laughter, signalling others to move closer.’ See Sharot (2017), ‘The Future of Influence?’, EPub location 356.0/444. Although language, writing, print then digitalization significantly changed forms and technologies of communication, once again, as Sharot observes that ‘the principle organization of the brain has not experienced significant change since written language first appeared’, and ‘the basic biological principles of how one mind affects another remain.’ See Sharot (2017), ‘Connecting Humans, Physically?’, EPub location 363.7/444

³⁴³ See Le Guin, ‘Telling is Listening’ (2004), p.199

³⁴⁴ See Le Guin, ‘Telling is Listening’ (2004), p.200

³⁴⁵ See Le Guin, ‘Telling is Listening’ (2004), p.196

³⁴⁵ Vittorio Gallese has also emphasised the sociality of empathetic connectedness through ‘embodied simulation’: an approach to intersubjectivity that helps us to ‘share the meaning of actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification with and connectedness to others. Social identification, empathy, and “we-ness” are the basic ground of our development and being.’ See Gallese (2009), p.520

that it should be valued by scholars and by the publishing industry accordingly.

Sharot's insights also shed light on how author-performers value their experiences of performing at live literature events, based on the reward mechanisms of the brain. Evidence from brain imaging shows that 'the opportunity to impart your knowledge to others is internally rewarding', and that 'when people received the opportunity to communicate their pearls of wisdom to others their brain's reward centre was strongly activated'.³⁴⁶ Clearly this translates into our vulnerability-inducing desire to achieve social media 'likes'. But it also translates into a live performance context, where audience reactions like laughter, applause, and questions, enhance the impact of the performance experience. As Sharot puts it: 'merely sharing is not enough. We need to cause a reaction... Each time we share our opinions and knowledge, it is with the intention of impacting others.'³⁴⁷ Conversely, where a performer does *not* receive that response at a live event, it can be acutely disheartening. Again, Le Guin describes her own experience of this with typical acuity through the example of a reading she once gave in Santa Barbara:

They had no lights on the audience, so I was facing this black chasm, and no sound came out of it. Total silence. Reading to pillows. Despair. Afterwards the students came around all warm and affectionate and said they'd loved it, but it was too late, I was a wreck. They'd been so laid back or so respectful or something they hadn't given me any response, and so they hadn't been working with me, and you can't do it alone.³⁴⁸

Taken together, this new neuroscience fatally undermines the

³⁴⁶ See Sharot (2017), EPub location 19.0/444

³⁴⁷ See Sharot, 2017, 'Does Evidence Change Beliefs?', EPub location 19.0/444

³⁴⁸ See Le Guin (2004)

theories proposed by performance studies scholars like Auslander that there is no qualitative difference between the experiences of embodied and 'mediatized' live events.³⁴⁹ Among other things, it suggests that live, embodied events, featuring verbal performances, can create resonant connections between people,³⁵⁰ harnessing emotions and the sense, and consequently have a significant impact on audience's collective memories – supporting the idea of a kind of 'mnemonic community' being created by the experience of a live event. Crucially, it can also affect judgments of value profoundly – and those include literary and aesthetic value.

A resurgence of interest in Raymond Williams's 'structures of feeling'³⁵¹ suggests that these findings are part of a resurgence of interest in the power of collective, embodied experiences. A related theory that has regained prominence is Michael Maffesoli's idea of 'emotional communities', which can exist among groups of people assembling in contemporary, urban 'tribal' groupings – live literature events, for instance – and are characterised by an empathetic 'sociality' that is formed and 'expressed by a succession of ambiances, feelings and emotions'.³⁵² In the context of musicology, Georgina Born has proposed the idea of 'affective publics' as a way to understand how music generates social relations through affect and vice

³⁴⁹ See Gallese (2009)

³⁵⁰ As Fischer-Lichte puts it, describing the power and impact of the voice in performance: it 'leaps from the body and vibrates through space so that it is heard by both the speaker... and others. The intimate relationship between body and voice becomes particularly evident in screams, sighs, moans, sobs and laughter.' Voice can 'clarify the syntactic structure of what is spoken', 'accentuate and emphasize the intended meaning', and 'further reinforce its desired effect on the listener,' by creating a 'bridge' and establishing a 'relationship between two subjects.' See Fischer-Lichte (2008) p.125-6

³⁵¹ See e.g. Sharma and Tygstrup (eds.) *Structures of Feeling* (2015). The Introduction (p.2) acknowledges the belated reevaluation of Williams's work in this area.

³⁵² See Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes* (1996), p.11. He notes here that the German Romantic idea of *Stimmung* (atmosphere) is being invoked more and more often, on one hand to describe relations between social micro-groups, and on the other hand to show the way these groups are situated in spatial terms (ecology, habitat, neighbourhood): a reference to how emotions are connected to physical, spatial environments.

versa; music is both entangled in societal structures and hierarchies, like the capitalist economy and gender relations, and it also refracts those structures. In order to understand the impact of affective publics, Born argues, scholars need to study the 'microsocialities of musical practice'³⁵³ – and here she echoes Radway, who has advocated for more 'microsocial' research into literary practices (see earlier discussion of Radway's work). Both Born and Radway hold up ethnography as the best way to achieve this.

The emotions 'revolution' in scholarship has prompted many scholars to suggest that wider structures of academia and modes of writing need to change in order to reflect it. As Billy Ehn and Orvar Lofgren have put it, scholars need to stop 'camouflaging' the real role of emotion in their writing³⁵⁴, and academia needs to change from being a 'world in which feelings are either denied or denigrated', in lieu of a traditional 'academic mode of producing knowledge' in which emphasis tends to be put on 'rationality, scientific objectivity and a constant rhetoric about keeping 'person and thing' separate'.³⁵⁵ One remedy that they propose – along the lines of Born and Radway – is to develop ways to capture 'body micropractices'³⁵⁶ involving emotion, and to translate these into words. Similarly, in his book, *Language and Emotion* (2009), linguistic anthropologist James Wilce argues that the 'fusion of language and feeling' is the 'very stuff of culture',³⁵⁷ and so not only do cultural stories about this fusion 'need telling',³⁵⁸ but the *mode of telling* really matters. He points out

³⁵³ Lecture given by Georgina Born at the British Academy, 19th May 2015

³⁵⁴ See Lofgren and Ehn, 'Emotions in Academia' (2007), p.102

³⁵⁵ See Lofgren and Ehn (2007), p.102

³⁵⁶ See Lofgren and Ehn (2007), p.103

³⁵⁷ See Wilce (2009) p.1

³⁵⁸ See Wilce (2009) p.2

that ‘all speaking and writing is inherently emotional to a greater or lesser extent’, and ‘objective, distant coolness *is* an emotional stance’.³⁵⁹ Wilce recommends that ‘ethnographies of local linguistic-emotional practices’ should ‘attend to the microinteractional engagement of bodies’, as well as to the ‘economies of language, feeling, and embodiment’.³⁶⁰

These new neuroscientific understandings of the impact of affect, emotion and sociality on cognition and value processes have now seeped into the field of literary studies – even if this is still, primarily, considered in relation to silent reading. In a special edition of *Textual Practice: ‘Affect, Text and Performativity’* (2011), Alex Houen points out that, while aesthetics and literature ‘both thrive on feeling’, that fact has rarely been discussed explicitly within literary studies³⁶¹ – but it is now clear that ‘how a text functions as a literary form or genre is contingent upon social performativity’, as well as upon the ‘illocutionary forces of affect’, or how emotion actively affects the way in which a text is received and valued.³⁶² In the same volume, Derek Attridge proposes that a literary work should be seen as ‘less an object than an *event or encounter* for its readers’.³⁶³ He identifies a ‘paucity’ of vocabulary within literary studies for ‘dealing with affective experience’, which he sees as a reflection of the poverty of our understanding of this domain of our lives’; and argues that our new knowledge about affective experience better reveals ‘the capacity of literature to engage powerfully and subtly with the extraordinary complexity of emotional responses, in

³⁵⁹ See Wilce (2009) p.3

³⁶⁰ See Wilce (2009) p.190

³⁶¹ See Houen, ‘Introduction: affecting words’ (2011), p.218

³⁶² See Houen (2011), p.222

³⁶³ See Attridge, ‘Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect, and Performance’ (2011)

which the psychic and the somatic are so inextricably entwined.³⁶⁴

Clearly, there is scope for these new directions in literary studies to connect up with new scholarship from anthropology, sociology, performance studies and neuroscience on the ways in which emotion is bound up with experience in literary-cultural practices, and to explore how literary modes of writing might productively elucidate such connections. As Gilles Deleuze proposed, literary writing has a unique capacity to translate, or ‘catapult’, lived processes – processes of becoming – into affects and precepts, to combine them into ‘blocks of sensation’ by their conjunction in composition,³⁶⁵ and thereby evaluate a work of art in terms of its ‘vitality’ or its ‘tenor of life’.³⁶⁶

Aesthetics, experience, sociality, transformation

I have referred to ‘aesthetics’ several times so far but, since it is so central the idea of cultural value in arts contexts, I will take a moment here to explain how I approach it here.

The word ‘aesthetic’ is commonly used to refer to ‘the perception, appreciation, or criticism of that which is beautiful’, or relating to artistic taste.³⁶⁷ But it has been a contested concept ever since Plato and Aristotle’s

³⁶⁴ Attridge elaborates this to propose that ‘the affective event of a literary work arises as the tangible experience of an ‘as if’, which ‘means we feel [the work’s] emotions, but always as performances of language’s powers’, which are bound up with literary form. He demonstrates this through a close reading of a visceral, gory passage from Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Blood Meridian* (1985), pointing out the difficulty of articulating the ‘complex of feelings’ of a reader engaging with this text, but describing how McCarthy’s account of a horrifying event ‘produces not just some mental simulacrum of affect, but a real feeling that is quite likely to register on the skin or in the pit of the stomach.’ See Attridge (2011), pp.392-3

³⁶⁵ See Daniel W. Smith’s introduction to Deleuze (1997), p.xxxiii

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.liii

³⁶⁷ See Oxford English Dictionary entry, ‘aesthetic’, 3rd edition (2011).

disagreement – and, no doubt, before that and across cultures. As philosopher Berys Gaut points out, in his study of the subject, there have been several historical threads of aesthetic thought, in which aesthetic value has variously been seen as having a primarily moral dimension; being simply about beauty and form, involving cognitive effects; and moving us emotionally. Gaut’s own view is that it involves all these threads – albeit he substitutes morality for ethics.³⁶⁸ He does not clarify, though, how this perspective might usefully inform processes of aesthetic evaluation in specific socio-cultural contexts.

In *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (2017), Georgina Born, Eric Lewis and Will Straw focus in on this socio-cultural dimension. They argue that aesthetics should not only be viewed in terms of abstract concepts like those that Gaut outlines, which are ultimately ‘neo-Kantian’ in nature, as they end up being ‘peculiarly barren of nuance, unable to understand actual aesthetic attitudes, and blind to how such social relations as those pertaining to class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or nationality.... inflect aesthetic experience’.³⁶⁹ They argue, instead, that aesthetics must be seen as ‘immanently social’ in nature,³⁷⁰ since they are affected by social relations, and have the capacity to affect social relations in return. This means, they conclude, that aesthetic inquiries need to explore the role of ‘social and cultural processes’ and how they influence ‘individual aesthetic judgments’³⁷¹ – and they need to engage with ‘situational’ elements of experience, including the ‘sensory,

³⁶⁸ See Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (2007)

³⁶⁹ See Born, Lewis and Straw, ‘Introduction: What is Social Aesthetics?’ (2017)

³⁷⁰ See Born, Lewis and Straw (2017) p.9

³⁷¹ See Born, Lewis and Straw (2017) p.3

perceptual and embodied'³⁷² elements, by looking at the 'microsocialities of musical practice'.³⁷³

After revolutionising how emotion is understood, 21st century neuroscience has delved into aesthetics, to the point that a new field of 'neuroaesthetics' has emerged, pioneered by Anjan Chatterjee. So far, it has mostly been applied to visual art.³⁷⁴ As Chatterjee explains, brain imagery has revealed that the appreciation of art involves multiple different areas of the brain, across both hemispheres, which interact in a 'flexible ensemble', including through the work of mirror neurons and reward circuitry, and means that any evaluation of art must involve both the senses and the emotions.³⁷⁵ But Chatterjee acknowledges the limits of a neuroscientific approach, pointing out that understanding the *historical and cultural context* behind an artwork can enhance aesthetic appreciation, and add to its 'richly textured meaning'.³⁷⁶

G. Gabrielle Starr has considered the neuroaesthetics of poetry and music in her book, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (2013). Along similar lines, she sees aesthetics as being formed of a powerful 'web of value', emphasizing that aesthetic pleasures tend to be *mixed*, and include 'multiple positive and negative emotional factors',³⁷⁷ as well as senses, ideas, events and perceptions, which exist in a '*valenced* relation' to each

³⁷² See Born, Lewis and Straw (2017) p.4

³⁷³ See Born, Lewis and Straw (2017) p.46

³⁷⁴ See Anjan Chatterjee, 'Neuroaesthetics: Researchers unravel the biology of beauty and art' (2014) and *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* (2015). Chatterjee calls neuroaesthetics a 'discipline dedicated to exploring the neural processes underlying our appreciation and production of beautiful objects and artwork, experiences that include perception, interpretation, emotion, and action', which 'represents a convergence of neuroscience and empirical aesthetics' and is 'rooted in observation'.

³⁷⁵ See Chatterjee (2014)

³⁷⁶ See Chatterjee (2014)

³⁷⁷ See Starr (2013), p.120

other.³⁷⁸ Together, they ‘have a neural value, a reward value, that helps produce the structure of aesthetic experience’.³⁷⁹ She also describes how this affects memory and retrospective formations of value: after a particular event is over, the ‘*durable* potential of complex aesthetic experience’ lies in how it ‘allows us to integrate unexpected or evolving knowledge in new ways’, as part of a ‘dynamic form of learning’.³⁸⁰ In this way, she explains why our aesthetic judgements evolve along with our memories and our embodied perspectives on the world. Like Chatterjee, though, Starr acknowledges that there is much in neuroaesthetics still ‘to be discovered’, including the impact of ‘the broader somatic context of aesthetic experience’.³⁸¹

All these contemporary socio-cultural and neuro-scientific insights into the multifaceted nature of aesthetics further support the legitimacy of the experiential literary ethnographic approach I have proposed for writing about the value of arts-based experiences in a way that incorporates aesthetics. My approach has the capacity to incorporate these various elements through a multifaceted approach to the evocation of aesthetic experiences, both individually, and in relation to communities, cultural practices, situated histories and social structures.

³⁷⁸ See Starr (2013), p.118

³⁷⁹ Starr elaborates this, explaining that such reward values ‘exist in comparison (for that is what reward value does, enabling us to compare choices, experiences, desires, and outcomes), so that pleasures, displeasures, and uneasiness combine in dynamic play. Any such configuration (laughter, discomfort, awe, longing, pleasure) is a unique one. And once made, it is not fixed but can decay over time or newly evolve, becoming available for new configurations and new evaluations. From the perspective of neural circuitry, she explains, this occurs through communication between reward regions (such as the nucleus accumbens) and the frontal cortex. See Starr (2013), p.121

³⁸⁰ See Starr (2013), p.120

³⁸¹ See Starr (2013) p.150

In a live literature context, the overtly 'aesthetic' character of events, in terms of artistic content, is variable. In a conversation-based literary festival event, in particular, the element of performed reading from literary texts often represents a small proportion of the whole. However, as recent neuroaesthetic insights reveal, the context from which any artwork was created is integral to any aesthetic valuations of it. Elements of any literary performance events that may affect audiences' overall evaluations of the text featured will therefore include, for example, the design of the space, and the architecture of the staging, and even appreciation of a performer's facial features, as well as elements of delivery in reading aloud. Even if the performed reading element of such events is short, it may still be an important element to consider in terms of questions about the literary reception and value of a text, as well as its wider cultural value.

Taking all this into account, I propose that the concept of aesthetics remains vitally important an understanding of artistic and cultural value, including in a live literature context, despite – indeed because of – its complexity. Without aesthetics, assessments of artistic and cultural value tend to incline too reductively towards instrumental criteria.

Cultural value, currents in audience research, modes of measurement

Largely as a means to tackle the need to demonstrate impact and cultural value in the arts, over the last decade, scholars have been focusing on new ways to understand audiences. Notably, most have done this in ways that do not directly engage with the thorny concept of aesthetics. 'Audience

studies' has emerged as a lively field spanning several disciplines, particularly in the context of theatre performance. The verb 'audiencing', initially coined by John Fiske,³⁸² describes the activity of being an audience member, in contrast to the passivity previously assumed – as well as its impacts, including the generation of meaning.

By measuring bodily and cognitive responses among audience at live performance events, including live musicals and theatre performances, groups of neuroscientists and psychologists have found that audiences members' hearts beat together³⁸³ when they are engaging in the experience. Many different technologies are now being used to explore different corporeal reactions that are suggestive of impact and value of live event experiences.³⁸⁴

While these fascinating findings help to reveal new aspects of cognition and experience, they cannot, by themselves, fully reflect the complexity and multifaceted ways in which participants experience and evaluate such events.³⁸⁵

In the realm of performance studies, scholars have also been investigating 'audience experience' in ways that seek to

³⁸² See John Fiske, 'Audiencing: Cultural Practice and Cultural Studies' (1994)

³⁸³ Experimental psychologists and neuroscientists from the UCL Division of Psychological and Language Sciences (PaLS), for instance, monitored audiences' electro dermal activity at a West End show and found that watching a live theatre performance can synchronize your heartbeat with other people in audience. See 'Audience Members' hearts beat together at the theatre', UCL News, 17 November 2017: UCL Division of Psychological and Language Sciences (PaLS) has found that watching a live theatre performance can synchronize your heartbeat with other people in audience.

³⁸⁴ These include 'psycho-biological measurements based on physical characteristics such as cardiac activity, blood pressure, electro-dermal activity and electroencephalographic activity, measurement based on observation of a motor behaviour such as facial expressions and body movements, and self-reporting via questionnaires. See Tassi, 'Media: From the Contact Economy to the Attention Economy', p.58

³⁸⁵ See Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (2008), p.6, for an elaboration of this argument by reference to the history of debates around the social impact of the arts.

address this complexity with an increased focus on subjectivity, including through ethnographic and other qualitative research, involving interviews with audiences at events that seek to engage critically with their experiences, including their emotions.³⁸⁶ An interview-based approach, though, will inevitably be limited in its capacity to explore the nature and dynamics of experience during the live event itself, in comparison to writing that incorporates multivocal interview material alongside experiential ‘thick description’ and reflection on wider critical and socio-cultural dynamics.

In England, ACE has become increasingly focused on communicating the value of the arts and culture. On their website, they make a ‘case’ for their value, stating that: the arts and culture ‘bring us joy, they help us to make sense of our own experiences and to empathise with others’, and ‘benefit us economically, socially, and educationally’.³⁸⁷ In 2014 they published a report on an ‘evidence review’ they had conducted on the issue,³⁸⁸ which highlighted multiple ‘instrumental’ benefits of the arts, including ‘promoting social and economic goals through regeneration’, ‘attracting tourists’, and ‘contributing to the delivery of public services’.³⁸⁹ But the report admitted that there were evidence

³⁸⁶ Penelope Woods, for example, through her study of audiences at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, sought to foreground the role of ‘the experiential, of the phenomenological, in audience studies’, through ‘critical engagement with affect and feeling’, by recognising audience subjectivity through a new ‘ethics of listening’, largely through conversations with audiences before and after performances, based on a set of indicative questions. Woods proposes that, despite possibilities for engagement with audiences through social media, such as Facebook, ‘the discursive face-to-face sociality of the theatre may yet remain best served, in research terms, by methods that invoke and engage with this discursive sociality in an unmediated face-to-face context’. See Woods, *Globe Audiences: Spectatorship and Reconstruction at Shakespeare’s Globe* (2011)

³⁸⁷ See Arts Council web page, ‘The Case for Arts and Culture’, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/why-culture-matters/case-art-and-culture> (accessed 21 Feb 2019).

³⁸⁸ See Arts Council England, ‘The Value of the Arts and Culture to People and Society’, 2014, www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/The-value-of-arts-and-culture-to-people-and-society-An-evidence-review-Mar-2014.pdf

³⁸⁹ See Arts Council England (2014), p.47

gaps, including this rather significant one: ‘we cannot demonstrate why the arts are unique in what they do’.³⁹⁰ It concluded that a larger evidence base was needed.³⁹¹

Criticising ACE’s choice of wording, cultural value scholar Eleonore Belfiore published an article after the report’s release, pointing out that even using the phrase ‘making the case’, in the context of the arts’ value, pointed to an economically-focused notion of ‘impact’ that is linked in turn to the prevailing power structures that continue to shape public funding. She sought to debunk the way in which the term ‘impact’, when understood instrumentally – and largely economically – is too-often used as a ‘proxy for value’.³⁹²

The following year (2015), a group of scholars at Warwick, including Belfiore, published a report on the ‘future of cultural value’, entitled ‘Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth’. This report focused on pragmatic recommendations to government, including ensuring more diverse access to arts and culture, and more investment for research aimed at exploring audience engagement and cultural value.³⁹³

The year after that (2016), the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) published their report on a Cultural Value Project, which was based on seventy commissioned studies conducted over three years. In their conclusions, the report’s authors, Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, did not critique the notion of impact *per se*, but argued that there is a need to ‘transcend’ old debates between the ‘intrinsic and

³⁹⁰ See Arts Council England (2014) p.4

³⁹¹ See Arts Council England (2014) p.47

³⁹² See Belfiore (2014)

³⁹³ See Heywood et al, ‘Enriching Britain’ (2015), p.27

instrumental camps’ when it comes to the arts, and to put the ‘experience of individuals back at the heart of cultural value’.³⁹⁴ They suggested doing this in various ways, including through ‘rigorous case studies’³⁹⁵ – notably by prioritising ‘phenomenological approaches’,³⁹⁶ which they said had ‘previously been neglected’³⁹⁷ – in part due to the ‘politics’ of evaluation. They pointed out that ‘measurement’ and ‘value’ need to be disentangled’,³⁹⁸ and argued that trends in evaluation suggest that ‘evaluation models’ must be ‘more sensitive to what they evaluate’.³⁹⁹ Helpful phenomenological approaches, they suggested, might include ‘first-person perspectives’,⁴⁰⁰ and ways to capture ‘feeling and experience’,⁴⁰¹ including forms of ‘empathy’ and self-reflection,⁴⁰² community relationships,⁴⁰³ connections to place,⁴⁰⁴ and ways in which affective and cognitive dimensions of experience interact.⁴⁰⁵

They considered multiple methods, the last of which were ethnography and arts-based. Intriguingly, they viewed these as being separate from each other – in other words, they assumed that ethnography could not be arts-based: an assumption that is challenged by a myriad of arts-based ethnographic work. That being said, they gave cautious support for ethnography, as a valuable method to

³⁹⁴ See AHRC project report, by Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, ‘Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project’, (2016), Executive summary, p.5

³⁹⁵ AHRC (2016), p.9

³⁹⁶ AHRC (2016) p.22

³⁹⁷ AHRC (2016) p.22

³⁹⁸ AHRC (2016) p.121

³⁹⁹ AHRC (2016) p.127

⁴⁰⁰ AHRC (2016) p.21

⁴⁰¹ AHRC (2016) p.22

⁴⁰² AHRC (2016) pp.52-4

⁴⁰³ AHRC (2016),pp.67-8

⁴⁰⁴ AHRC (2016) p.78

⁴⁰⁵ AHRC (2016) p.45

‘supplement’ others.⁴⁰⁶ They suggested, though, that it was ‘resource-intensive’⁴⁰⁷ in comparison to others – though acknowledged that ‘sustained ethnographic approaches’ might offer more insights than those they considered as part of their study.⁴⁰⁸ As for ‘arts-based methods’, they proposed that these were useful on the basis that they could enable ‘access to forms of knowledge and awareness that are difficult, but not impossible, to articulate in words’⁴⁰⁹ – thus apparently assuming that arts-based methods were not themselves worded. They suggested that the contribution of arts-based methods was significant because they can entail an ‘imaginative re-visiting of the original experience’⁴¹⁰ – a core principle underpinning my approach to experiential literary ethnography. Again, though, they expressed some caution about arts-based methods, stating that they need to be taken in conjunction with others.⁴¹¹ To me, this report did not fully reckon with the imaginative possibilities of wording ethnographies experientially.

One of the scholars who contributed to the AHRC report, and who has been seeking to explore experiential qualities of performance, is performance studies scholar Matthew Reason. Together with Anja Mølle Lindelof, he edited an interdisciplinary volume called *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance* (2015), in which they argue, along the lines of the AHRC report, that audience research needs to be more phenomenological – and that it needs to include analyses of ‘*how do* – how do performances and audiences

⁴⁰⁶ AHRC (2016) p.141

⁴⁰⁷ AHRC (2016) p.142

⁴⁰⁸ AHRC (2016) p.150

⁴⁰⁹ AHRC (2016) p.145, citing Pink (2009) and Paterson (2009)

⁴¹⁰ AHRC (2016) p.145, citing Matthew Reason (2010)

⁴¹¹ AHRC (2016) p.145

interact to construct a live experience, whereby the 'particular dynamic, the particular experiential qualities of these performances' are considered. The 'focus needs to shift away... from liveness and towards experiencing live', they proposed, because the 'challenge of engaging with, understanding and mapping experience seems fundamentally more vital than searching after an ontology'⁴¹². This, they added, 'invites consideration of a *thickening* of our understanding of the experience of live performance'⁴¹³ – a metaphor that links neatly into the 'thick description' that is possible in ethnography.

This challenge was taken up by Ben Walmsley, another of the researchers on the AHRC project, who in 2018 published an article reflecting on the experience, titled 'Deep hanging out in the arts: an anthropological approach to capturing cultural value'.⁴¹⁴ The title suggested that his approach would accord with my own. After reading Walmsley's article, this was partially confirmed, in that Walmsley was clear that any approach to evaluation needs to engage with participant experience and feeling, in the course of the researcher's own immersion in the experience, and not focus on 'rationalising' value⁴¹⁵. But several of his key conclusions seemed based on flawed logic, perhaps due to the team's limited scope of research and knowledge of anthropological writing traditions. One of these is to do with the role of language in ethnography; Walmsley suggested, because the language used by their team's five interviewee audience members in answering questions at an arts festival proved to be limited in revealing

⁴¹² See Reason and Lindelof (eds.) (2016), p.5

⁴¹³ Reason and Lindelof (eds.) (2016)

⁴¹⁴ See Ben Walmsley, 'Deep hanging out in the arts' (2018), Abstract

⁴¹⁵ See Walmsley (2018), Conclusion

the event's cultural value, the role of language in ethnography itself is therefore limited.⁴¹⁶ I hope this thesis shows how, creatively applied, language in ethnography need not be so limited: that extended conversations can lead participants to use language in interesting ways; and that nuances or omissions can be explored through the ethnographer's own use of language.

On the recommendation of its 2016 report, the ARHC has recently created a new collaborative Centre for Cultural Value for ongoing research.⁴¹⁷ Scholarly work to address this subject is clearly set to grow further.⁴¹⁸

Fieldwork – literally, in some cases

Before I put my experiential literary approach to ethnography into practice in the chapters that follow, I will describe, in more detail, the 'fieldwork' I did while researching in live literature – only some of which took place in the grassy variety of field – and how I approached translating this into text.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I have been attending and observing many and various live literature events since 2013: a form of 'multi-sited' fieldwork,⁴¹⁹ involving immersion in the genre through multiple different events in different places and through different conversations over an extended period of time. I have attended – and, now, performed at – multiple

⁴¹⁶ See Walmsley (2018), Abstract

⁴¹⁷ See 'Funding announced for new collaborative centre for cultural value', AHRC, 9 August 2018: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/newsevents/news/funding-announced-for-new-collaborative-centre-for-cultural-value/> (accessed 9 Feb 2019)

⁴¹⁸ See Paul Benneworth, 'Putting impact into context' (2015)

⁴¹⁹ See George E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System' (1995). Wulff calls it 'yo-yo fieldwork' (Wulff, 2017, p.xviii) a term I am drawn to for its bounciness, though it perhaps implies going in and out of one place, rather than dipping into multiple different sites and events.

literary festivals in the UK and abroad, often on repeat visits. They include not just the Hay Festival but the Singapore Writers Festival, The Cheltenham Literature Festival, The Edinburgh International Book Festival, Port Eliot Festival in Cornwall, Latitude Festival in Suffolk and Wilderness Festival in Oxfordshire (all cross-arts festivals with a literary element), the London Literature Festival at the Southbank Centre, Bradford Literature Festival and the Henley Literary Festival. In addition to the multiple individual literary events I reference in this thesis, some of which I have already mentioned, I have attended multifarious literary readings and events in bookshops and other venues, literary entertainment nights, literary salons, poetry readings, literary-inflected theatre and live art events, storytelling nights and comedy nights.

I have travelled to The Hay Festival – the focus of my literary festival ethnography – three times, in 2013, 2015 and 2018, for a week each time. While on site, I attended a wide variety of different events, mostly but not all involving performances of fiction, and made notes about the nature of those performances as I experienced them, including the content of conversation and questioning, the language and texts presented, including paralinguistic and proxemic factors, and other multisensory elements that I perceived. Where possible, I spoke with participants in those events – author-performers, reader-audiences and event chairpeople – before and after, and also spoke to other members of the festival audience, who may have attended different events, in various locations around the site, including the Green Room, during the course of the festival.

As this suggests, I had access to the ‘behind-the-scenes’ elements of Hay that an ordinary reader-audience member would not have had. That access was crucial to understand the experiences of author-performers, and to comparisons between the two. Conscious of this, I reflected it in the narrative, and also strove to evoke the festival in ways that a reader-audience member might experience it if they did not have the benefit of such access.

My ethnography is a composite of these three visits, but evokes the experience without a direct reference to the year in question, as if it were my first visit to the Festival. The reason for this is to conjure, for the reader, the experience of attending for the first time – when they may well never have been in person.⁴²⁰ This means that certain details, for instance the sponsorship by the Telegraph, only accurately reflect the Festival in 2013. While this compromises strict factual accuracy, it enables me to incorporate a greater number and variety of multivocal perspectives and observations that, together, better reflect the Festival’s character, as I experienced, observed and researched it.

When I say I ‘interviewed’ participants, I never actually used that word with participants. Neither did I approach the encounters with a typical ‘interview’ mindset. My ‘interviews’ took the form of very loosely-themed, free-flowing conversations with people who, like me, were participants at events – including author-performers and reader-audiences. I would ask participants whether they would mind ‘speaking

⁴²⁰ There are various examples of ethnographies that explore narrative strategies involving composites. An example is Alma Gottlieb and Judy DeLoache’s book, *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Eight Societies* (2017), in which ethnographic material is shaped into a childcare guide, fictively written by a member of each cultural group being considered.

with me' about their experiences for my research. During these conversations, I made sure that most if not all of my questions were phrased openly – i.e. what, how and why questions – allowing participants the freedom to evoke their experiences and perspectives in their own words. I tried to ask questions that encouraged participants to think both into and beyond the texts and conversations being performed. But I was also careful to allow them time and space to describe their own experiences, and not to lead them, even if they went off on what at first appeared to be tangents; I was conscious that their choices of words and ideas, and even their demeanour while speaking to me, might add value and insight that I had not predicted. This allowed for the invaluable element of surprise, and for the individuality of their subjective experiences to come through, and it also helped to elucidate their experiences more vividly and thoroughly. I have often reflected those extended conversations in the ethnographies, evoking my experience of conversing with them, as well as the texture and rhythm of their subjective reflections.

I sought to speak to a diverse range of participants, where possible, in terms of age, gender, class and racial and ethnic background. I did not have any prescribed quotas or empirical method for doing this, and my choices were affected, to some extent, by chance: a material element of any festival experience. Overall, I spoke to over a hundred people in my three visits to Hay, but not all these conversations are represented in the ethnography.

I have anonymised all reader-audience participants, and included (with permission) names of notable author-

performers or other figures in the literary industry, where their role is integral to their perspective; all agreed to be interviewed for the purposes of this research.⁴²¹ I also made fieldnotes about the site in general, and analysed material objects associated with it, including the programmes and signed books.

In reflecting on certain performances within the festival, I made use of the Hay Player:⁴²² a site to access videos of Hay Festival events, which was generously made available to me by the festival organisers. I note here Hay Player is a wonderful resource for people who may wish to attend the Festival and are unable to, or wish to view videos or listen to audio of events from the archive. As I found, though, while watching several of these videos, the experience feels profoundly different when mediated through a screen and the particular perspective of the camera lens, and is far less memorable – for reasons I have already discussed.

For the Polari salon ethnography, my approach was comparable, although, as the salon is held roughly monthly rather than annually, I attended it more than twelve times over the course of four years of research. My observations and interviews there were conducted in a similar manner, but, because Polari is not part of a ‘meta-event’, like events within the Hay Festival, there was more limited time available at each event to conduct interviews with participants as there were not comparable ‘milling around’ gaps between events. There

⁴²¹ My approach to interviewing was approved by the University of Stirling’s ethics committee.

⁴²² See: <https://www.hayfestival.com/hayplayer/> (accessed 29 April 2019)

was also less variation between events as they all followed the same format, and featured the same host.

Another difference between my approaches to writing about Polari and Hay is that, towards the end of the research, I read from my own novel at the salon, and so I have included a more explicitly autoethnographic element in the Polari ethnography, reflecting on that experience and insights I gained from it.

Composition, messiness, marginalia

I have composed these ethnographies by weaving in all the elements I have mentioned, and wording them in a way that is alive, speakerly, performative and literary, while evoking the temporality of each distinct live event experience in the form of an overreaching narrative arc. The narrative arcs are roughly chronological – albeit with many deviations for reflection and commentary. The idea behind this form is to ‘recreate’⁴²³ the subjective experience of participating in an event – including the fact that no participant, however, focused, will maintain a singular, consistent concentration on any one line of thought, such as the meaning of what is being said on stage. Instead, reflections, memories and internal commentaries inevitably spin off on tangents from what is happening; and trigger moments in embodied reality return the reader’s focus to the earlier thread.

Consequently, I have not composed the ethnographies in thematic sections. Scenes or passages can be quite extended, taking into account extended descriptions, narrations or

⁴²³ See Dewey (1932)

reflections. This, compared to other academic narratives, including ethnographies, might make the structure of each ethnography appear disorderly – but, to the extent that this is the case, it reflects the nature of experience. As Maggie Nelson put it in *The Argonauts*: ‘How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?’⁴²⁴ Further inspired by the formal composition of *The Argonauts*,⁴²⁵ I have included relevant themes and scholarly names that come up as marginalia, to help guide and signpost the route, without disrupting the experiential flow of the narrative.

Looking back, looking ahead

In this chapter, I have painted a portrait of live literature, situated in a broad cultural, historical and theoretical context, and suggested reasons behind its growth and increasingly prominent role in contemporary Western literary culture; and, conversely, its relative neglect in scholarship until recently. I have also explored ways in which live literature’s role and cultural value might be illuminated more effectively and meaningfully through writing in a way that focuses on participant experience, by adopting the approach I have called experiential literary ethnography. I have outlined what this approach entails, with extended justifications for how it came about, and its key scholarly inspirations and forerunners, who include ethnographers, cultural theorists, novelists and neuroscientists. I have expanded on the reasons why I see it as a fruitful approach for writing about this subject matter, and to other arts-based contexts – particularly because of its

⁴²⁴ See Moran (2018) EPub location 164.2/446

⁴²⁵ See Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2017)

capacity to elucidate vital elements of cultural value and impact that tend to be omitted or marginalized through other approaches. Finally, I have outlined why cultural value is such a hot topic, and how my research contributes to the ongoing scholarship and debates around the concept.

So now it is time for the central event ethnographies to take to the stage: Chapter 2, exploring 'Hay and the Explosion of the Literary Festival'; and Chapter 3, stepping into 'Polari and the Revival of the Literary Salon'.

Chapter 2.

The Hay Festival: The remote Welsh field that stages the global publishing industry

DAY ONE

I have to sprint to make my train from London. Sitting back in my seat, allowing my breath to slow, I watch the city sprawl and recede, then pull out my laptop. A couple of hours later I change onto a smaller train that chuffs through an ever-greener landscape, and read a bit. I get off at Hereford, and after an hour's wait in a pool of sunlight, contemplating a concrete supermarket, I change again onto a bus that winds along snaking roads towards the swell of the Black Mountains. Finally, the bus pulls up at my destination: a little grey stone town in a valley at the foot of a steep bluff, on the banks of the river Wye, at the border of England and Wales. There is a sign to a Norman castle, but I drag my case the other way, along a miniature high street and past a sparse supermarket. So far, so pleasantly unremarkable, you might think, if you happened to find yourself here – until noticing that, for such a small town, it bulges disproportionately with bookshops. There are about thirty of them, mostly second-hand, for a population of 1,500 – that's about one bookshop per twelve households.

Outside this little town, in the direction of the Brecon Beacons, lies a field, which is my actual destination. An innocuous stretch of grass for most of the year, as fields tend to be, at

the end of May it transforms, rising like a giant pop-up book into a literary festival that looms mountainously in the literary-cultural landscape, attracts some of the world's biggest names in literary and popular culture, hundreds of thousands of visitors, and has spawned sister festivals in thirty countries around the world. One of the 'Big Four' literary festivals, alongside Cheltenham, Oxford and Edinburgh, Hay is one of the biggest, in the UK and globally. In 2018, 273,000 tickets were sold at the Welsh edition of Hay for 800 events: an increase of 18,000 over 2017.⁴²⁶ Literary festivals have grown over the last twenty years to the point that there are now said to be over 350 in the UK and Ireland alone,⁴²⁷ and 450 across the English-speaking world.⁴²⁸

The sun has nearly set by the time I find the house where I'll be renting a tiny room for a festively-high price. I check in, and head out to get a bite to eat at the pub around the corner, which is brim-full with people. Edging my way towards the bar, I try to guess which of them are local and which are festival-goers.

DAY TWO

The next morning, I find myself part of a slow stream of festival-goers trickling along the narrow pavement out of town towards the festival site. The breeze quickens as space opens up, and I zip my jacket up at the neck. We pass several front gardens set up as cafes selling Welsh cakes, instant coffee, sandwiches, old books and magazines, battered toys and other

⁴²⁶ See Porter Anderson, 'Hay Festival 2018 Sets a Record, Selling 18,000 More Tickets Than in 2017' (2018)

⁴²⁷ See Parker (2015)

⁴²⁸ See Weber (2018) p.5

jumble; those locals who haven't taken the opportunity to rent out their houses for peak festival prices aren't going to miss the opportunity of this annual pedestrian stampede.

**Liminality,
ritual,
time out of
time**

I wonder what to expect at the festival. How festive will it be, and how literary?⁴²⁹ As an ardent reader since childhood, I remember the first time I heard the phrase 'literary festival' – it triggered a multi-coloured vision of an verdant space populated by carnivalesque tents, in which my favourite authors, alive and historic, would be reading aloud, talking about characters from their books so vividly that the characters might materialize any minute and leap up to enact certain scenes and riff on their backstories, showing me more of themselves... others filled with silent readers lying on giant beanbags engrossed in paperbacks... some resonant with live music, all lyrics somehow connected with books... the outdoor areas scattered with people gathering for impromptu book clubs under trees and drinking and dancing on the grass... the atmosphere would fizz with a 'collective effervescence',⁴³⁰ and we would all feel as if we were in a lushly green, liminal space⁴³¹ – part of a ritual outside normal society that was deliberately non-hierarchical, creative and playful,⁴³² experiencing a 'time out of time'.⁴³³

⁴²⁹ As discussed in Chapter 1, this ethnography is based, not just on my first visit to Hay, but on a composite of visits over three different years, lasting a week each.

⁴³⁰ Emile Durkheim first used this influential phrase in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] (1995)

⁴³¹ See Turner [1961] (1995) p.95

⁴³² See Rosaldo, Narayan and Lavie's discussion of the evolution of Turner's thinking on liminality and the liminoid, at pp.2-3 of 'Introduction: Creativity in Anthropology' in *Creativity/Anthropology* (1993)

⁴³³ See Falassi (1987), p.4

I know full well, as I approach the site, that it will not be like this. Fictional characters are unlikely to materialize, for one thing. And I have done enough research to have a reasonable idea of what I might find – though I am quite sure that, like most places you travel to after reading the guidebook version, the reality will be different to the mind’s eye preview.

Interestingly, the term ‘literary festival’ does not (yet) appear in the OED⁴³⁴ – probably due to its relatively late arrival on the festival scene.⁴³⁵ I suggest that the term ‘literary festival’ be defined as a festival that is understood to have a primary focus on literary events – that is, events that feature books, writing and words.⁴³⁶ Different producers use various iterations of the term – ‘book festival’, ‘literature festival’ and ‘writers festival’ being a few.⁴³⁷

The Hay Festival changed its name from a festival ‘of literature’ to a festival ‘of ideas’ in the late 1990s, but is nevertheless regarded as, not only the most famous of literary festivals, but the epitome of a literary festival, format-wise, by being held among a collection of tents in a field, in which simultaneous, individually-ticketed and conversation-based events are staged, the majority of which involve a chairperson and a panel of two or three authors (or just one author, if that author is particularly famous), in which those authors

⁴³⁴ I refer to the 3rd edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 2011. ‘Festival’, this edition notes, has since the 14th Century been used as an adjective, meaning ‘befitting a feast-day’, ‘glad, joyful, merry’, and since the 16th Century as a noun meaning ‘a time of festive celebration’, or alternatively a ‘musical performance or series of performances at recurring periods.’

⁴³⁵ See Giorgi (2011), p.34

⁴³⁶ In her book on the subject, Weber defined it as any ‘festival that pertains to literary culture’. She included in her study festivals such as Port Eliot: a festival that used to call itself a ‘literary festival’ but that, for years now, has just called itself a ‘festival’ and incorporates literary events as a minority element of a programme featuring music, theatre, comedy and fashion.

⁴³⁷ The choice seems to reflect an emphasis upon a particular aspect of literary culture, with ‘book festival’, for instance, emphasizing the physical book and therefore the element of commercial exchange; though in reality most of them are very similar in format.

converse about their newly-published books, read aloud from them, and then answer questions from the audience.

**Festivalization:
causes and
functions**

Literary festivals are part of the 'festivalization' of culture.⁴³⁸ Festivals are everywhere now, ranging from film, theatre and mime, in the arts, to food, drink and cycling. They were traditionally conceived of by anthropologists and historians as ritualistic, short-term events, in which members of a community affirm and celebrate shared bonds through encounters and exchanges that transcend the mundanity of everyday life.⁴³⁹ But more and more contemporary festivals have begun functioning as forums for performances framed around expressions of taste, cultural identities and lifestyle practices, and are now often designed to attract tourism.⁴⁴⁰ Scholars have increasingly come to consider them as revealing polyvocal sites of cultural exchange.⁴⁴¹ But many have critiqued the way in which festivals' popularity and commercial imperatives have 'McFestivalized' them.⁴⁴²

**Community vs
individualism.
locality vs
globalization**

There are various causal theories about the causes of festivalization. One is that, 'in a world where notions of culture are becoming increasingly fragmented' due to globalization, festivals become an important way of 'communicating something meaningful about identity, community, locality and belonging'⁴⁴³ – and are increasingly rare 'collective manifestations in an era of growing individualism'.⁴⁴⁴ They are considered to be part of the contemporary monetary

⁴³⁸ Key festivalization studies include Sassatelli et al eds., *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere* (2011), Hauptfleisch et al eds., *Festivalising!* (2007), Taylor et al eds. (2014), Jordan and Newbold (eds.), *Focus on Festivals* (2016)

⁴³⁹ See Falassi (1987) p.2

⁴⁴⁰ See Taylor et al (eds). (2014), p.57

⁴⁴¹ See Sassatelli et al (eds.) (2011), p.75 and Weber (2018) on literary festivals

⁴⁴² See Rebecca Finkel, 'McFestivalisation?' (2004), p.3; and Meehan (2005)

⁴⁴³ See Taylor et al eds. (2014) p.69

⁴⁴⁴ See Owe Ronström, 'What a festival "says" and "does"' (2011) p.9

economy, as well as the ‘symbolic economy’, as places to deal in cultural capital, and – last but not least – the attention economy.⁴⁴⁵ Hay’s local economic impact is said to have totalled more than £70 million from 2015-2018.⁴⁴⁶ Festivals’ popularity can clearly be seen as products of the new ‘experientialism’ (discussed in Chapter 1), whereby the bombardment of online information and the abundant availability of material things has caused people to feel ‘stuffed’,⁴⁴⁷ and to value ‘real’, embodied experiences, that create ‘real’ memories, more highly.

As I approach the crowd of giant white tents, I wonder: how far do literary festivals like this one draw participants because they feel ‘stuffed’ with their materialistic lives and crave a physical collective experience? And does the experience really matter in literary terms, or is it more about the sense of cultural assembly?

Colourful flags and celebratory bunting flutter ahead mark the entrance, and a huge banner announces the HAY FESTIVAL above the strapline, *Imagine the World*, with several large sponsorship logos displayed alongside it, most prominently *The Telegraph’s*.⁴⁴⁸ Large, white marquees rise up behind. In the entranceway, I pause to look into a thrumming box office tent, and a *Telegraph*-branded tote bag is waved at me: free

⁴⁴⁵ See Ronström (2011) p.7; see also Tassi on the attention economy (2018) and Citton on the attention ecology (2016).

⁴⁴⁶ See Rebecca Miles, ‘Hay Festival generates millions for the tourism industry in the area’ (2018)

⁴⁴⁷ See Wallman (2015). Wallman’s argument is not just theoretical but pragmatic; he proposes that that we are all fed up of an excess of material things, which are just making us stressed and unhappy, and need to become ‘experientialists’ who place more value on temporal experiences, shared with others, that create lasting memories.

⁴⁴⁸ *The Telegraph* was the Hay sponsor in 2013 and 2015, when I was there. 2017 was the first year since 1990 that Hay went without sponsorship from a major broadsheet.

with today's paper. I accept one, take a programme from another steward, and walk on through.

I circuit the site to find my bearings. Not a difficult task, it turns out; in comparison to most music and cross-arts festival festivals I've been to, this site is exceedingly neat and geometric, with all the tents arranged in an orderly manner around a large rectangle of metal walkways. It might be situated in a muddy field, but no wellies are necessary. It feels slightly reminiscent of a trade show I once went to in London's Exhibition Centre, but the sense of the hills and trees around the site is a reminder of Hay's distance from urban centres of commerce. Greenery pervades the site, too – albeit in a manicured iteration of the surrounding countryside. In between the walkways are perfectly mowed lawns dotted with deck chairs and picnic benches for audiences to relax, mingle and read. In the centre of one lawn is a quaint shepherd's hut on wheels, advertising itself to would-be writers⁴⁴⁹ – in which audiences can sit and perhaps order a replica if so inspired and sufficiently deep-pocketed. Another lawn features a giant, multi-coloured HAY sign that children can climb on and be photographed, ideally smiling widely, and in the sunshine – which is looking doubtful today. There's a shop selling Hay Festival merch, an Oxfam second-hand bookshop, and a Festival Bookshop selling the new titles of featured authors and presenters. The latter is huge: big enough not only to contain all the books featured at the festival, but also to accommodate the all-important post-event book signing queues. Food and drink options are plentiful; there's a food

⁴⁴⁹ See BBC News, 'David Cameron buys £25,000 garden shed 'to write in'', 30 April 2017: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39761410> (accessed 3 February 2019)

hall-style tent, a fancy restaurant tent, several cafes, a tapas bar... Wait, is that the towering form of Stephen Fry walking past the press tent?

**Director
and team**

I check my watch: it's time to meet Director Peter Florence, so I weave through the increasing crowds back to the entrance – and there he is. A genial man with a dark beard and a resonant voice, friendly while also being unmistakably in charge, Florence welcomes me warmly and introduces me to some of the others on the Hay team. Like Florence, most of the full-time staff have been doing this job for years, from when the Festival was in its infancy. He has to dash off for something, but Revel Guest, Hay's vivacious octogenarian Chair, leads me through to the Green Room for a longer chat.

**Green room:
ghosts and
egos**

The Green Room is furnished with comfy sofas, chairs around tables adorned with vases of flowers, and pictures on the walls. It has a bar serving tea, coffee, biscuits and wine, and helpful volunteers hover at the edges, ready to guide author-performers to their events. Few are here yet, as the day is just beginning, but I can see that, as people pour into the site, it will function as a comfortable oasis amidst the fray. I imagine the ghosts of literary greats from festivals past – Rushdie, Morrison, Angelou – clinking invisible glasses, exchanging literary gossip and ideas, safely out of the public view yet actively being seen by each other.

**Hay Festival
history**

I ask Guest about the founding of the Hay Festival, and the story I'd heard that it was dreamt up around the Florences' kitchen table in 1987. 'Oh yes', she says. 'And it was very small, almost like a little *party* in the beginning.' Guest is no stranger to a good party; aptly named, she is known for

hosting glamorous revelries during the festival week for Hay's most famous guests at her Howards End-style mansion, sponsored nowadays by GQ Magazine and Land Rover. You wouldn't guess this to meet her out of context, though; she dresses simply, and talks to me pleasantly and directly, as if she were telling me about a local fete she happens to run. As a long-time friend of the Florences, involved with the festival from the start, she told me more about how the concept was born. The actors Norman Florence and his wife Rhoda Lewis, with their then-23-year-old son Peter, fresh out of RADA, began brainstorming ideas for a happening in their town. Since they were based in the world's first 'book town'⁴⁵⁰ – invented by Richard Booth, an eccentric owner of the Norman castle, who opened a clutch of bookshops there in the 1960s and declared himself King and his horse Prime Minister in 1977 – it made sense to capitalise on that. They came up with the concept of 'The Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature and the Arts'.⁴⁵¹ The first edition featured fifteen events⁴⁵² that took place in the back rooms of pubs, with tickets sold from a friend's caravan, but the following year, Peter Florence persuaded playwright Arthur Miller, famous by then for his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, to be the star guest – though only after making some effort to explain the location. "Hay-on-Wye?", Miller apparently asked. "Is that some kind of sandwich?"⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ For more in-depth scholarly examination of book towns, see Driscoll, 'Local places and cultural distinction: The booktown model' (2016). For more on the history of book towns, see Finkelstein and Squires (2019)

⁴⁵¹ The plans materialised without Booth's support, who is said to have barked: "I never met an author who wrote a second-hand book." See Brenda Maddox, 'Say Hay' (1998)

⁴⁵² See Aida Edemariam, 'Festival Fever' (2005)

⁴⁵³ See Maddox (1998)

**Literary
names and
credentials**

Starry literary names piled in, and authors and their agents began to lobby passionately for slots. Most prize-winning and bestselling authors in the English language, as well as many of the best-known translated authors, have gone on to appear at Hay: J.K. Rowling, Martin Amis, Margaret Atwood, Derek Walcott, Mark Haddon, Ben Okri, Ian McEwen, Zadie Smith, Carol Ann Duffy, Hilary Mantel, Michael Morpurgo, Muriel Spark, P. D. James, Orhan Pamuk, Dave Eggers, Michael Ondaatje, Doris Lessing, Edna O'Brien – to name a few. The most famous guests began to be put up in the local five-star hotel complete with helipads, and to fraternise at the five star parties.⁴⁵⁴ When one Hay audience member once put up her hand to ask literary super-agent, Ed Victor,⁴⁵⁵ how they could get their book in front of him if they were not on that glamorous party circuit, he replied: “You don’t”⁴⁵⁶ – an indication of the exclusivity that was soon perceived to surround the Festival, as a part of the wider publishing scene.

**Sponsorship,
media,
celebrity,
literariness,
controversy**

The Festival garnered *Sunday Times* sponsorship in 1990 and sparked international interest; *The New Yorker* began flying teams over to debate *Times* journalists on stage. It moved into its own field site where it would have room to expand further. Bill Clinton arrived in 2001 to speak about conflict resolution, and delighted the organisers by calling Hay “The Woodstock of the mind”: a catchphrase they quote still.⁴⁵⁷ But Clinton’s appearance, and its £100,000 price tag,⁴⁵⁸ sparked controversy about the Festival’s core identity, substance and integrity as a ‘literary’ event in a debate that still continues, nearly two

⁴⁵⁴ See Sam Llewellyn, ‘Hay Festival: A Town Set at a Slight Angle’ (2011)

⁴⁵⁵ Victor’s clients included Irish Murdoch, David Cameron, Sophie Dahl, John Banville, Nigella Lawson and Eric Clapton.

⁴⁵⁶ See David Sexton and Rosamund Urwin, ‘Goodbye Ed Victor’ (2017)

⁴⁵⁷ See John Freeman, ‘Hay Festival: ‘The Woodstock of the Mind’ (2008)

⁴⁵⁸ See Moss (2001)

decades later. It was triggered by an article by Steven Moss published shortly after the 2001 Festival, in *The Guardian*, titled 'Making Hay',⁴⁵⁹ with the by-line: 'what happened to the books?'⁴⁶⁰ 'What', he asks, 'was [Clinton] doing for Hay, which since its foundation in 1988 has established itself as the leading literary festival in the country?' He quotes the novelist Robert Edric as arguing that the way Clinton and Paul McCartney 'dominated' that year's festival 'marginalises writers and changes the nature of the event', posing the rhetorical comparison: 'Would Glyndebourne have circus clowns because it made good sense to entertain people in between concerts?' What was unique about Hay, Edric felt, was 'being eroded', in a context where 'everything else is easily available outside Hay' but 'good literature isn't'. 'It's sad', he concluded, 'because Hay has always set the standard for literary festivals.' He did not spare audience members from criticism, impliedly alleging hypocrisy: 'if you want to go and see Paul McCartney, don't pretend that it is a literary occasion.'

There are many assumptions embedded in these words that invite further reflection, not only Hay's role, moral or actual, in 'setting the standard for literary festivals', but also the normative question of what a 'literary festival' is and should be, and what literary festival audiences' true vs performed motivations are – the implication being that, for many audience members, the function of attendance as a form of cultural capital⁴⁶¹ is more important than any aspect of the experience of individual events attended, and how much

⁴⁵⁹ 'Making Hay' is also the title of an unofficial blog site about the Festival.

⁴⁶⁰ See Moss (2001)

⁴⁶¹ See Bourdieu (1984), p.87

**Raising
literature's
profile**

'good literature' they actually read. This perspective on the literary festival is adopted by the earliest sociologists to consider it, who effectively condemned literary festivals as uncritical sites of mass cultural production.⁴⁶²

The 'case for the defence' for the injection of celebrity into literary festivals, Moss proposed, could be reduced to one word: 'buzz' – or raising literature's profile.⁴⁶³ This was seen as an overwhelming positive by some authors and critics.⁴⁶⁴ Others were more ambivalent. Novelist DJ Taylor felt that the embrace of celebrity was 'inevitable' for wider economic and cultural reasons that have forced literature 'to sing for its supper' as a 'branch of the entertainment industry', since the old days of thirty Bloomsbury adherents sitting in a tent are gone⁴⁶⁵ – a reference, perhaps, to the Bedford Square Book Bang of the 1970s.⁴⁶⁶

Revel speaks to me with abounding enthusiasm and energy about Hay, its history and evolution, its global expansion, and their plans to found new Hay Festivals around the world in the years ahead. They have a close-knit production team, but Peter, she explains, firmly, has always been in charge of the programming. Before long she too is called away, and I head over to get my pass sorted out.

⁴⁶² See Lurie (2004)

⁴⁶³ See Moss, 2001

⁴⁶⁴ For instance, Moss quotes Lisa Jardine, who had interviewed Margaret Atwood at Hay in 2001, as saying that Clinton's presence 'really turned the Festival into an event.' See Moss (2001)

⁴⁶⁵ See Moss (2001)

⁴⁶⁶ See Finkelstein and Squires (2019)

**Festival
programme,
structure,
density**

The sky is now dense with cloud and there's a distinct chill in the air. I head to one of the cafes for coffee and peruse the programme. It's still early, and the first events are only just about to start, but the site is already buzzing. I sip my cappuccino, pull out my pen and prepare to start circling events I'd like to go to. It feels a bit like perusing the *Radio Times* at Christmas – and indeed, after the late politician Tony Benn started going to the Hay Festival he pronounced that it had 'replaced Christmas'.⁴⁶⁷ I knew there would be a lot of events within this meta-event, but still find myself surprised by their profusion. There are ten tents, a couple with a capacity of 1200, all lined up back-to-back with events, many featuring well-known authors and household names who have written books. A lot of the most appealing events – to me, at least – are running concurrently or overlapping; Hay is a festival with considerable 'density'⁴⁶⁸ in terms of the number and frequency of events over the Festival period.

**Festival
communitas
and density**

Hay's density, in principle, should heighten its participants' sense of collective participation – or 'communitas'⁴⁶⁹ – and consequently of 'liminality' – or the 'feeling of entering into another world' at a festival. This in turn is said to heighten audiences' attention⁴⁷⁰ over a concentrated space-time frame.⁴⁷¹ Festival density can also be fuel for audience anxiety, though, surely – how to choose? It strikes me that, for each reader-audience member, choosing a selection of events is a bit like plotting a choose-your-own-adventure-story, and will

⁴⁶⁷ See BBC News, '20 Facts about Hay-on-Wye' (2011)

⁴⁶⁸ For more on festival density, see Hauptfleisch et al eds. (2007) p.20

⁴⁶⁹ Communitas was Turner's term for the type of community that emerges in a 'liminal' performance context, outside the normal social hierarchies of the everyday, especially a liminal context, and was first articulated in *The Ritual Process* [1961] (1995) p.96

⁴⁷⁰ See Ronström (2011) p.6

⁴⁷¹ See Sassatelli et al (eds.) (2011) p.75

end up forming a narrative arc of the festival. Sitting here with the programme, reading all the event blurbs, cross-checking and weighing up, my eyes start to spiral. A few other people in the café are actively looking at their programmes too, and one middle-aged couple at another table are hunched over a programme with deeply furrowed eyebrows, exuding all the tension of an important exam.

**Demographic
impressions,
pricing**

I've finished my coffee, so get up to have a people-watching stroll around the site, to get more of a sense of my fellow festival-goers who are also here bright and early. Many, like me, are strolling around, apparently just to get a sense of things, and chatting with a friend or family member. Several interviewees had already told me, in the course of my live literature research, that they had never been to a literary festival and had no inclination to, since they were sure it would be full of 'posh, middle-class white people' – or 'smankers' (smug, middle-class etc.), as journalist Decca Aitkenhead encapsulated her preconceptions of Hay's audiences.⁴⁷² From my brief visual and aural survey, people here are all white-skinned and mostly casually dressed, and the majority appear to be middle-class. There are numerous grey heads but significantly more younger people than I had expected, and a good mix of class and regional backgrounds too, from the accents I can pick up through conversational snippets.⁴⁷³ In her piece on Hay, Aitkenhead quotes Florence as saying 'crossly', in response to her question about demographics:

⁴⁷² See Decca Aitkenhead, 'Confessions of a first-time festival-goer' (2010). See also Lurie's scholarly articulation of this perspective (2004), Driscoll's more nuanced discussion of the 'middlebrow' in a literary festival context (2014), and Weber's debunking of stereotypes (2018).

⁴⁷³ When I later asked for survey results, I was told that Hay does survey audiences formally, but does not monitor ethnic diversity, and I was not furnished with the survey data.

It's not too white... It's far more representative than the House of Commons. And, actually, I don't give a shit about any of that. It's not too middle-class. And anyway, at what point did being middle class become a problem? We're interested in people who are interested in stories, and that isn't a middle-class thing. What this is a great crucible for experimenting. There's something about being here in a field that makes everyone more at their ease than anywhere else. Being in a field is a big leveller. It doesn't matter if you're the president of the USA, or a sixth-form wannabe poet. That you're in a field is the big thing."⁴⁷⁴

When I first read this, I winced a little at what sounded like a dismissal of diversity concerns, in light of evidence of diversity deficits within the wider publishing industry⁴⁷⁵ – deficits that clearly affect perceptions, of not just Hay, but other literary festivals and events too. Still, now that I'm here, I do relate in a new way to Florence's sentiment about shared-field-solidarity, breathing in the fresh, clean air scented with cut grass, in this enclave among the hills, so far from the city, with only thin canvas separating bodies seated in events from the wide-open sky. There is a visceral sense that most people here have made a similar attenuated journey to this out-of-the-way place for the sole reason of being part of the same event, together, and there is an energy in that.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ See Aitkenhead (2010). Notably, the ethnic diversity of authors and speakers featured on Hay stages has markedly increased over the last few years: a development that seems likely to be the result of an active attempt to redress a negative perception of the festival in terms of diversity.

⁴⁷⁵ See Ramardashan Bold (2018 and 2019). The 2011 census identified 86% of the UK population as white (Office for National Statistics, 'Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales: 2011'; whereas in 2017 the publishing industry was deemed to be 90% white – see Alison Flood (2017). For an interdisciplinary cultural perspective on how race impacts on cultural production more widely, see Saha (2017).

⁴⁷⁶ A liminal communitas, even – see Turner [1961] 1995

I am interested in the diversity of festival audiences in terms of their literary tastes, values and practices – an issue that overlaps with demographic diversity, but is also distinct from it. Florence’s choice of phrase to characterise Hay’s audiences – ‘interested in stories’ – is an interesting one, cleverly encompassing fiction, non-fiction and anecdotal stories that arise in books and in conversations, both staged and unstaged.

Most people here must be quite well-off, I figure, if they are coming from faraway and staying for the whole festival. Cost would be a significant determining factor in my own event choices if I hadn’t generously been given a pass to assist with my research. The Hay Festival site is free to enter, but all events are individually-priced. Some, featuring the biggest names, are priced at over twenty pounds, multiples of which add up steeply. Added to that, accommodation in Hay at Festival time can be very expensive. Even the ‘glamping’ is pricey,⁴⁷⁷ and the unpredictable weather puts many people off that. There are quite a lot of tickets for events on offer for around ten pounds, reflecting lesser-known names, and the cost of those would be significant if you wanted to buy several per day over the course of the ten days of the Festival. This individual event-based ticketing model is the same for all literary festivals that I’ve come across, and contrasts with the model for most music and cross-arts festivals – for those, the ticket price covers entry to the festival site and all individual events, so audiences are free to drop into whatever they feel like without pre-booking. I wonder whether this difference is

⁴⁷⁷ For example, a bell tent sleeping up to five people for hire costs £995 for the whole festival for 2019: <https://www.pillow.co.uk/hay-festival-pre-pitched-camping-and-glamping/> (accessed 28 Feb 2019)

linked to literary festivals' close connection to bookselling and sales accountability, or to the fact that literary events are usually seated, since they are fairly long and require concentration, and audiences are not (generally) expected to dance through them.

This ticketing model, to some extent, compromises the liminality of the literary festival experience, compared to festivals in which there is a single ticket for weekend entry to the site, and audiences can flow between events as and when they feel like it. I have experienced the latter at several festivals, including Port Eliot: another rural festival, staged in a beautiful estate in Cornwall featuring a castle, woods, walled gardens and a tidal river, which started out as a literary festival but is now a cross-arts festival that includes a series of literary events. Not only is that site a larger, more topographically-varied and loosely-arranged space to wander around in than Hay's sit, but the sense of being able to dip into any event gives it a spontaneous feel.

**Jo Glanville:
literary
festival
bafflement;
private-public
paradoxes**

I spot someone I recognise on a deck chair, far-removed from the green room, tall, slim, black-haired – yes, it's Jo Glanville, Director of the charity English PEN,⁴⁷⁸ who will be chairing several international fiction events over the next few days. I have been to several of PEN's literary events in London, and I am curious about Glanville's thoughts on live literature. I go over to introduce myself, and sit cross-legged on the grass to chat to her. I am slightly surprised to hear that, to her, the rise of literary festivals is 'baffling'. 'I'd be very interested if you find out the key to their popularity', she adds. 'I think the

⁴⁷⁸ Jo Glanville worked in this role back in 2013, when I interviewed her; see interview table at the end.

literary event in itself is a really *peculiar* thing, because, just because someone can write a book, it doesn't mean that they can stand and *talk* about it, and talking about the book isn't the same as reading a book which is a very *private* act... and when you're reading a great piece of literature, we all know what an *extraordinary* experience that is... you enter some extraordinary *world*, and you *leave* your real world to enter this other world.'

I notice how the idea of liminality, that Turner describes in relation to the communal ritual aspect of festivals, is evoked here to refer to the individual act of silently reading fiction. 'And obviously, aesthetically, depending on what you're reading', Glanville continues, 'you're enjoying extraordinary *language*... the concept of a festival, actually – and the popularity of events where a writer is standing up and speaking – is actually *really* baffling to me. It's a conundrum! The paradox of literary festivals.'

'You know, I *love* books', she continues, 'and have always loved books, but before I started doing this job that has brought me into this sort of world I wouldn't *ever* go to something like this!' She mulls over this statement, as if unsure of its accuracy. 'Well, I would very *occasionally* go to see a writer speak if I thought they were somebody really *amazing*... Of course there's the whole tradition of, the great writer being a kind of *oracle*, a *visionary* or something, and so maybe there's a sense of people wanting to learn from *them* about how things are or trying to understand life?'

**John
Sutherland
and Crace:
origins of
the literary
festival;
post-War boom
vs Dickensian
performance**

I head back into the Green Room, where I spot the renowned literary scholar and critic John Sutherland chatting to John Crace, the journalist who had become well-known for his bitingly satirical ‘digested read’ column in *The Guardian*, which compresses renowned novels to a few short, often absurdist paragraphs. They are lined up to do a double act about Jane Austen later in the day. When I mention that I am researching live literature, Sutherland’s eyes gleam. ‘It would be very interesting to look at it as a post-World War Two phenomenon’, he says. ‘After the War, there was a big interest in the arts, which led to the founding of the Arts Council [in 1946], and then Harvey Wood started the Edinburgh Festival [in 1947],’ which was all about creating a new post-war identity for the city and forging cultural bonds.⁴⁷⁹

Crace jumps in. ‘I think starting with Dickens is a better place, because the idea of performance... When I first came here though, it wasn’t as much of a performance as it is now. I was *amazed* by how many writers had *no* on-stage presence. You know, they were supposed to sell books, but they could put a glass eye to sleep! I thought that was a real problem.’

**From baby
boomers to
reading group
members and
publishing
industry
pressures**

Sutherland considers but rejects this line of thought. ‘Still, I’d be more inclined to start with WWII, in terms of festivals. There was a huge burnout amongst the professions, so they all took early retirement, with pensions that were very generous, and were well-read, and literary festivals *throve* on that. I think that’s now been replaced by a different constituency, by the *reading group* constituency, who aren’t so well

⁴⁷⁹ See Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals* (2014)

read, but still enjoy reading... Some of them make admissions, in front of thousands of people, like: "I'm reading this book but am only half-way through!" There's also the fact that the book industry has fallen under huge pressure to sell books, so the literary festival acts as an engine for that... And to keep authors happy, you know – offer them a chance to speak in front of 2000 people and they burst into spontaneous applause.' Crace bursts into spontaneous laughter at this.

'I'd be genuinely interested to hear your conclusions', Sutherland says, turning to me. 'I don't know whether this all inflates egos and creates false currency values, or really adds something for readers.'

'I think the fact that a lot of writers still don't perform well', Crace interjects, serious now, 'is still a big problem with some literary festivals – you know, if you're paying eight quid for an event, you want to be entertained.'

'Slightly instructed as well', Sutherland chips in.

This exchange pointed me to another conundrum at the heart of Hay, and of all literary festivals: how far are they performance events; or educational events; or marketing events; or meet-your-hero opportunities; or social opportunities; or literary experiences?

**Event: Gross
and Coffin,
poetry and
illustration**

It is time for me to head to the first event I've circled in my programme, which is lined up for one of the smaller Hay tents, the 'Starlight Stage': a conversation between the T.S. Eliot prize-winning poet Philip Gross, and the artist Valerie Coffin Price. They collaborated to create *A Fold in the River*: a poetry

and art book inspired by the Welsh river Taff. Gross, who used to live on and walk regularly along the river, transformed his journals into a poetry collection. To make this book, Price retraced his routes to develop prints and drawings. The result was published by Seren, a small indie press.

The tent is prettily decorated with a web of tiny fairy lights over the ceiling, and the stage is painted black. A gentle, slight and bearded persona on stage, Gross reads softly but engagingly from his poems, which are moving, exquisite, and seem particularly apt for the geography and climate of Hay:

Enough now. Wind back the reel;
spool in the river, right up to the source
which is no one where

unless you hold it cupped
in the all-angled lens of a raindrop – that
or the quivering globe of all this
for the most part sea...

Price's projected illustrations make the experience of listening to the poems more immersive, reflecting their spirit and helping focus our attention. After a sequence of readings by Gross, Price eagerly introduces her work, and the two take turns in explaining how the project developed. Gross speaks somewhat hesitantly, but articulately, warmly and in a calmer manner than his illustrator; while not a charismatic performer, in the extrovert sense, he is clearly more used to speaking in front of audiences. The event is not chaired, and this seems to give it an intimacy and informality, but also a slight awkwardness in turn-taking. Most of their conversation is about process: their respective processes of making, and their collaboration.

**Reader-
audiences: Stan
and Kira,
interpretation,
voice,
authenticity**

After the event, I speak to Stan and Kira, a British-American couple in their mid-thirties, who are married and both work in Christian ministry. I ask how they found the event.

‘Fascinating’, Stan tells me, beaming. ‘Especially hearing about the ways people produce art. I have been interested in music before, but poetry is a bit of a side thing for me’. Kira agrees, but adds that she had studied English and had come to Hay a couple of times before, and always tries to see at least one poetry event as well as fiction. Neither had heard of Gross or Coffin before seeing their names on the Hay programme.

‘What I loved’, Kira says, was ‘the fact that both of them were so *absorbed* in this river, even though it doesn’t sound like a particularly beautiful one’. They both enjoyed the ‘play-off’ between poetry and images. I ask Kira whether she goes to literary events outside the festival. ‘No, but I would like to’, she says. ‘There aren’t many around us’, Stan adds. When I ask what they felt they gained from hearing a writer like Gross reading his work aloud, rather than reading it themselves on the page, Kira says that the *meaning* is clearer, for her.

‘Sometimes you don’t understand something until you hear someone read from it.’ Because she hasn’t read Gross’s poetry before, it is impossible to know how her understanding of the texts he read at the event might have changed had she done so – but her sense of enhanced comprehension is clear. The point raises an interesting question: how much does an audience’s interpretation of a text, that was originally meant for the page, change in the context of the factors at play in a live reading by its author?

Stan jumps in: ‘True, though that can equally limit a thing’, he suggests. ‘The writer reading aloud gives you *their*

understanding of a work, but there are legitimate other understandings... But I don't mind that, because there are so few chances to hear most poems read aloud, really, and it's a great thing.'

Stan then observes that Gross had a 'speech twitch' – which isn't 'a negative', he adds, hastily, a little embarrassed, as if he'd been caught out being malicious, 'but I found it interesting that poetry can be a profession even for someone who has an issue with speaking'. The implication is that oral delivery is an assumed core part of a poet's work. It alludes to another point about live literary performance: the fragility of the performer, and the inevitable sense of risk that attaches to an individual writer reading aloud at an event like this, when they are hoping to win over an audience to their work. Does such fragility in fact *endear* a writer to an audience, generating empathy, and a sense of authenticity, perhaps, rather than a slicker performance? Or is charismatic performance always more likely to engage, making the writer's performance role more akin to a professional actor's? To what extent do facial tics and expressions, in combination with other non-lexical elements of speech, such as intonation (paralanguage), body language (kinesics) and the implications of the physical space (proxemics), affect an audience's reception of a literary text, and its author?

I ask Stan and Kira what their Hay highlights had been in the past, and Kira doesn't hesitate: 'Oh, Toni Morrison!⁴⁸⁰ Her reading from her novel was remarkable – she's so insistent, and there's a real *rhythm* to it, and so it felt to me like, unless

⁴⁸⁰ The now-late, great Toni Morrison last performed at Hay in 2014.

you're reading it like that you're reading it *wrong*'. I am intrigued by her emphasis on rhythm: a word and an idea that is most commonly associated with music and poetry, but clearly applies to performed readings of fiction too – as it does to conversations.

Stan adds that Morrison herself felt like that about her work: 'I actually listened to her reading her audiobook of *Beloved*, after she said to us, at the event, that someone else had done it "all wrong". It was interesting to hear her read it, and to hear her opinions on it... But in some ways *she* wasn't that clear to me over audio... So it cuts both ways. It can be a play-off between authenticity and quality.'

This word 'authenticity' has already come up many times in my participant conversations about live literature. It has multiple potential meanings in this context that intrigue me: how far does it relate to an interpretation of the author's text, based on their literary intention; or to an authenticity of persona that the writer is projecting; or to an authenticity of emotional experience on the part of the audience?

As we part ways, Kira and Stan tell me they are heading to the bookshop to look up Philip Gross's other books, and I head off to the next event that I've circled in my programme. It too is on the Starlight Stage, but this time it is a fiction panel event. Billed as featuring 'two international superstars', the Danish short story writer Dorthe Nors, who has a new collection out titled *Karate Chop*, and German-Austrian novelist Daniel Kehlmann whose new novel, *F*, is about art, money and brotherhood. It is going to be chaired by Daniel Hahn, author, translator and Chair of the Society of Authors.

**Event:
international
fiction and
translation –
Hahn, Nors,
Kehlmann**

The audience seats are about two thirds full as the three take their places on the stage. They look around the same age: in their mid-forties. Hahn introduces the two authors, mentions that he will ask them to read at some point so audiences can get a 'little flavour' of their writing, and assures audiences that they will have plenty of time for questions. He comments how 'odd' it is that, 'as a chair of these events', you have the 'task' of 'finding things in common between the books' – the first of several ironic 'meta' remarks about literary festival events that he will make during the session.

The programme does not explicitly link these two authors as writers in translation – it describes them as 'international superstars' – but they clearly are staged together as representatives of the small percentage of writing in translation featured. Hahn points out that, in many ways, their books could not be more different. He describes Kehlmann's new novel *F* as 'big and generous and full of things and stuff'; whereas Nors's books, mostly collections of short stories, are 'thin and spare, and give the reader lots of things to fill in, lots of gaps.' Focusing in on Kehlmann's writing style, he describes it as 'mischievous and funny', then quotes various reviews that contradict that characterisation. He hones in on Nors's writing, describing her stories as 'potent, compact and so cleverly put together', like 'devastating little detonations'. He admits that, while reading one of them at home, he actually 'shouted out' at something near the end – a personal confession about his own reaction, I note, that links the orality of this event to an embodied oral element of reading the texts on the page.

Each author is then asked to talk about their writing process. Kehlmann talks, with measured confidence, about how messy his is, and how he often thinks that a book is not going to work and puts the manuscript aside, before coming back to it. 'I abandon a lot of material – I have a lot I could sell to these archives', he jokes. Hahn moves onto the intricate structure of Kehlmann's novel, and asks how far this was planned. Kehlmann says he deliberately wanted to try writing a book where he didn't know the answers – though, on the other hand, he was very interested in structure, and so for this novel chose to explore the same day narrated by three different brothers, whose perspectives would sometimes overlap. There was a lot he *didn't* know, though, and he really wanted to write a character-driven novel and see how the characters led him.

Hahn interjects to recount an anecdote from an event he chaired, which he calls 'typical of a literary festival', in which an audience member asked "what is plot?", and the author answered: "plot is the weight a character leaves behind them". This anecdote subtly makes the audience aware of their part in a cultural community of literary festival events, extending beyond the time and space of this festival, and also of Hahn's literary and festival-chairing expertise in being able to insert relevant authorial quotes from past events organically into this one.

When asked by Hahn how she ended up writing so concisely, Nors said it 'just happened'. She started off writing novels, but they got thinner and thinner. 'I think I distilled my way into my own language', she says. She recounts a moment when someone commented to her: "the way you speak, you're

perfectly suited to short fiction”, and she thought *go to hell!* – but then wrote a short story, and felt something happening – that it was ‘blissful’. She went on a retreat on a remote Danish island and suddenly she had written seven stories, and it was ‘like being in love’. ‘I think I found myself, my own voice’, she says. This anecdote, spoken in her sharp, knowing tones, resonates with the substance of her comment about her literary style – that she has just joked about rebuffing before embracing.

Nors generously points to a part of Kehlmann’s novel which could be taken out as a ‘wonderful short story’. But Kehlmann tells her that, unlike her – he always tries to start out writing in a minimalist way but somehow ends up with 300-page novel. They discuss the difference between novels and short stories. ‘I like to find the voice of a character and have them reveal stuff – it’s like you’re walking in the mist, and then a face appears and reveals something, and then it’s gone again, and you’re left with an experience, which can be profound’, Nors says. Hahn jumps in to draw another link between their work: both their books are ‘about people presenting certain versions of themselves’. He springboards off this to tell the reader-audience: ‘that’s why *fiction is great*: we’re allowed to see a truth about the characters that isn’t otherwise revealed to anybody’ – again, a nice way of locating the event in the broader sphere of fiction and its cultural value.

This leads on to a conversation about the nature of happiness in Denmark, as manifested in Nors’s writing. Nors quotes an Australian magazine article in which the journalist can’t understand why Denmark is judged to be one of the world’s

happiest countries – ‘when you look into Danish people’s eyes’ [spoken with a sinister edge; prompts audience laughter].

Kehlmann is invited to comment on the darkness of his characters in *F*, and talks about one of his narrators, Eric, who has strange, almost ‘psychopathic tendencies’. Hahn quotes a line of Eric’s back to Kehlmann: ‘I invent almost everything I tell people’ – which leads to a discussion about the relationship between fiction and lies in ‘real life’. ‘If you’re a novelist you’re expected to get up on stage and justify everything you do’, Hahn comments, tartly – another implied meta-commentary upon the festival event and its relationship to fiction and authorship.

After beginning on a new track about ‘themes’ that appear in both books, Hahn breaks off and comments: ‘I find myself asking about *themes* in these books, although nobody really talks about themes...’ Another meta-statement about literary festivals, perhaps. He proposes that common ‘things’ in both these books are ‘things’ that don’t happen in the story itself but are acknowledged in the telling, which gives them more drama. Nors responds that, in her case, leaving ‘things’ unsaid in a fictional narrative is characteristic of ‘Danish minimalism’. She then expands upon the ‘natural minimalism of the Danish language’ compared to English, given its smaller vocabulary – this leaves more interpretation gaps for readers and listeners, she explains, and ‘you can put in your own emotions’. That causes consequent problems of translation, though. Hahn takes this opportunity to acknowledge the translators of both books, as ‘also brilliant people’. Nors sums up the effect of her minimalist aesthetic on readers’ emotions

with typical brusqueness: 'I can get into their heads, then kick them in the stomach'.

At this, Hahn looks out at the audience and faux-anxiously points out that they should 'still read this book' – prompting audience laughter – another meta reference to the marketing element of the festival at which they are all performing.

Hahn asks Kehlmann if he'd like to read a bit from *F*. Kehlmann moves across the stage to stand at the lectern. He tells us he's chosen a section narrated by Eric, describing him waking up in the morning. 'I've already been hearing the sobbing for some time. [Kehlmann's voice here, on the word *time*, takes on a deep tone, a resonance that hadn't been present in his conversational voice, signifying the move from performed conversation to performed reading.] I was having a dream, but now I come out of the dream, I hear that the sobbing is coming from the woman next to me... I lie there motionless. How long can I pretend to be asleep?... [The pitch variation of his voice is much greater than in speech. The volume varies too. The pace is slow enough to be clear but sounds natural.] The morning sun pushes through the slats of the blinds, drawing fine lines on both the carpet and the wall... I push back my blanket and get up. As I'm groping my way down the hall the memory of the dream returns. No doubt about it, it was my Grandmother... She was determined to tell me something...'

He continues with the scene, which involves Eric having a shower, heading to his study where a Paul Klee painting happens to hang above his desktop, and popping some Valium. The narrative illustrates Eric's cultural ignorance about

art history despite his wealth; describing the expensive paintings that his colleagues own, Eric says – ‘Monet, or maybe it’s Manet, what do I know?’ [Knowing audience laughter follows.] Kehlmann performs with vigour and humour and, while the reading is longer than I had expected, lasting for about fifteen minutes, it keeps me absorbed throughout. By the end I am keen to read more about this strange and repellent character. As Hahn then points out, ‘you get from this reading a strong sense of the shifts in tone in the novel’, and things that are funny, surprising, and ‘a little bit upsetting’.

Hahn asks Kehlmann about the experience of reading words aloud when they are not actually the words he’s written; they’re the translator’s. Kehlmann says he is ‘painfully aware’ of his accent, but he likes to read from the English version because, in ‘generally, if I had the choice, I would always prefer to do public readings from other people’s books [audience laughter – again, a knowing laughter, since this practice almost never happens at a literary festival except for in the context of translation], so in a way a translation is that, so I like that. It also feels cool and glamorous to be translated into English. But if only I had the accent!’

Hahn invites Nors to read. ‘We’re going to get a *whole story!*’, he proclaims, in exuberant tones, making clear that this is something rare, something special – the norm at Hay and other literary festivals being a reading of a very short excerpt from a novel. ‘That’s the good thing about writing short, short stories’, Nors comments, moving to the lectern. ‘So, I’m going to read a story called ‘The Winter Garden’. I think it’s a boy who’s narrating here, but it’s never revealed – and I like that:

suggesting that we all share something existential. Oh, and at the beginning it mentions a Danish comedian, who's an icon'.

Like Kehlmann, Nors leaves a pause to mark the transition from conversation to reading. 'The Winter Garden'. [She reads the title with a raised voice, in a heightened, orating tone.] 'It was the night the comedian X died... he was taken to the hospital where it was said that he died on arrival. It was 3rd of September 1980 and I remember it because it was the night my mother and father decided to tell me that they were getting divorced. [Her reading style is fluid and clear, delivered at a fairly fast pace but not rushed. While she has a Danish accent she sounds fluent in English in a way that Kehlmann does not, quite.] This was announced during dinner and somewhere inside me I think I was relieved. It sounds harsh but when my mother told me I think all I did was put down my fork...'

The story evolves as a portrait of the narrator's father, and the divorced woman, 'Margit' – pronounced with a snide edge – who found out that he was divorced, sized him up and preyed on him. To the narrator's outrage, she had a son, who would stare solemnly at them from the couch and stick out his tongue when their father wasn't looking. At the end of the story, the narrator sticks their tongue out at the father when he isn't looking.

'How brilliant – and a bit brutal!', Hahn comments, at the end. He then opens the event up to the audience for questions, and a couple of hands go up.

The first person picked, a shy-sounding white middle-aged woman, stands up, thanks them both for the readings, and says she came here because she'd heard Kehlmann on the radio, and wanted to choose one of his books for a mixed gender, British book club that meets in the pub. 'What would you recommend?' I try to guess how many other reader-audience members at Hay are book group scouts. Quite a few, probably.

The next audience member, an older, balding man, asks Nors whether she found it much more difficult to get short stories published than novels – a hopeful writer, perhaps. 'Well, the publisher normally doesn't go: hooray!', Nors tells him. She explains she was published in American magazines first, then got scouted, and there they have a much stronger short story tradition, so it went well for her after that – but conceded that all shorter forms have to struggle a bit. 'But that's okay – a book doesn't have to be sold in millions to be important'. Hahn points out to the audience that Nors was the very first Danish writer to have a short story in *The New Yorker*. She grins.

The third questioner, an anxious-sounding slim younger-middle-aged woman, asks, in a somewhat protracted way as if she is working out what to say as she goes along, how both authors know when to stop editing, and how much feedback to take on board. Kehlmann answers first: 'Well, when you have a deadline, that's it... But as time passes I do have this kind of satisfying experience that the things you feel you need to edit and polish get less and less...'

‘And at some point you need to let it go’, Nors cuts in, brusquely. ‘If you still want to edit at the point you go to the publishers, you should probably not publish’.

‘There must be personality types, though’, Hahn says, sympathetically – ‘I know with my process, I edit and it gets better and better, then at some point it starts getting worse and worse’.

‘Also it takes a certain narcissistic personality to say: oh, this is really good!’, Kehlmann adds, prompting audience laughter.

Hahn ends the event with a strong urge to the audience to read both books, before inviting their applause for the author-performers.

**Conversation:
Daniel Hahn.
Writers’
performing
role;
conversation-
based festival
formats and
readings**

Back in the Green Room, I track Hahn down. A quietly-spoken man off stage, and dressed in muted colours, he is open to sharing his views with me, and we sit on one of the sofas. I ask him what he thinks about literary festivals generally. ‘They help in a lot of ways’, he says, thoughtfully – ‘not only building conversations around books but also helping get books to people who wouldn’t ordinarily see them otherwise. For writers, though, they are a double-edged sword. They are potentially exciting, but also potentially problematic...because I think writers are also *expected* to be able to do live things as well as having the *opportunity* to. When you publish a book now, the expectation from your publisher is that you’ll be prepared to do a road show which means not just having the time but also... being *comfortable* getting on stage in front of lots of people – a sing a song, do a dance, tell a joke sort of thing. There are some people who find that comes very

naturally to them and enjoy it, and some who probably don't and yet have to do it anyway. It's part of the job now I think.'

I ask Hahn whether, in his view, the usual literary festival event format for adults, such as the one at the event he just chaired, works well as a way of bringing a book to life. 'It all depends on the book, the audience and the site', he says, then muses, 'I do tend to like having readings... but not at the beginning. I'm not convinced by those events where you say "sit down, shut up, I'm going to read to you now". They're a bit *cold*. I think most of us don't have the habit of being read to very much, unless people listen to audiobooks a lot – we sort of lose that habit, so it's not a very easy thing to do.'

Audiobooks are becoming much more popular, I think. Hahn continues: 'I tend, as a matter of choice when I chair events, to have a point where I say, "do you know what I think would be nice, actually, it would be nice to have a little bit of the book read" [spoken in a revelatory tone, as if he'd spontaneously come up with the idea], and then it can be part of an illustration of something, an introduction to a conversation about the texture of the language or whatever it might be – but it can be *embedded* and it feels *live*, like a living thing, rather than being a sort of presentation.'

I am interested in this reference to liveness relating to the lack of a *script* in a literary event – to the notion of improvisation through conversation, in contrast to an author reading 'live'. 'But it depends on the kind of writing', Hahn adds. 'Take the event today with Daniel Kehlmann – I've heard him before, so I know he's very good at reading aloud. I wouldn't normally trust someone with a fifteen-minute reading as it wouldn't suit everyone. But then I don't think some writers are very

comfortable with having a *conversation* which is natural and organic and unscripted. There are some who like to hold onto their book and do their thing. So a one-size-fits-all is difficult.'

In general, Hahn adds, literary festival audiences' expectations have 'shifted in the direction of conversation'. 'There was a time', he tells me, 'when the expectation was, especially at certain kinds of events, that they would get a twenty-minute reading, twenty minutes of questions about themes – "your novels are about family a lot; tell me about family" – and then a twenty-minute Q&A. Now, audiences expect something *more* live, in a funny way, which is less predictable – which is a conversation. So, one of the reasons having two writers is quite *nice*, is because, as a writer, you can't just do your regular thing, but you and the audience get something you can't get in any other way: a conversation between two authors and a chair that hasn't happened before and can't happen again. And you want it to feel like a *spontaneous* conversation, rather than a pre-packaged thing... I'm sure people would be disappointed by going to something where someone just reads to them for 55 minutes – unless they're *really* good, in which case it's amazing what you can get away with.' I am curious about the extent to which reader-audiences share his view about the ideal ratio of conversation to readings, and resolve to reflect on this more.

**Festivals'
popularity,
access,
economics**

Hahn elaborates on why, in his view, literary festivals have become so much more popular over the last twenty years. 'Readers now have expectations of *access* – an interest in getting a little bit more, some kind of *insight*. It's a little bit celeb-y – you get to be in a room with someone amazing – this year, here, say, with Ishiguro, with someone you admire.'

Since he is a representative of the Society of Authors, I ask Hahn about the controversy over authors increasingly being expected to perform at literary festivals for free, which has been described as ‘iniquitous’ by Philip Pullman and led to a campaign.⁴⁸¹ ‘It’s difficult’, he says, ‘because on one hand you can say *only do the ones you want to* – but if my publisher was to say *we’ve got you a gig at a superstar festival that doesn’t pay anything*, they would have an absolute fit if I were to say: *no, I’m going to pass on the opportunity of being in a tent with 2000 people*. It’s something publishers still see as being of value. Not so much value that they will invest their money in it so much. But of some value. Of profile I think. Rather than direct sales.’

Book sale statistics per event at festivals ‘don’t actually tell you very much’, he adds. While this is true, I note that Nielsen Bookscan has now begun tracking sales at Hay and at Edinburgh International Book Festival, after the head of the PFD⁴⁸² literary agency, Caroline Michel, made the case that festival book sales were now such an important part of sales figures that it would be ‘crazy’ not to count them.⁴⁸³

‘There are certainly some festivals I know who are very proud of their ‘conversion rate’ – but I’m not sure you could measure it in a way that’s meaningful,’ he says. As an author, he explains, ‘you’d have to be in a 2000-seater and selling very well for it to be worth the money, directly. But you hope that

⁴⁸¹ See Society of Authors, ‘Where We Stand: festivals, teaching, appearances’: <http://www.societyofauthors.org/Where-We-Stand/Festivals,-teaching-appearances> (accessed 2 February 2019)

⁴⁸² PFD stands for Peter Fraser Dunlop.

⁴⁸³ See Katherine Cowdrey, ‘Nielsen tracks sales at Hay and Edinburgh for first time’, *The Bookseller*, 17 May 2016, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/nielsen-breakthrough-hay-and-edinburgh-festivals-329854>. Hay stocked 3400 titles and around 55,000 units in 2017, when its sales rose by 17% after an expansion of the bookshop.

**Festival
accessibility,
diversity,
children's vs
adults' events**

some people who saw the event will buy a book later, maybe months later when they see it in a shop and remember they quite enjoyed it and wonder what it's like... it's impossible to quantify'.

I ask Hahn for his views' on festivals audience diversity and how they affect reading practices. 'There are festivals and there are festivals', he says, and begins telling me enthusiastically about a festival he was involved with in London called Pop Up. It works with 'a certain kind of community and certain kinds of kids, that are not the same as Henley or Cheltenham where there are lots of regulars who read regularly and often come from a... similar background...' The indirect phraseology, evading the words race and class, is indicative of the awkwardness of representing more established literary events as a regular chair and author, while also being asked to critique them.⁴⁸⁴

'One of the things Pop Up does that I think is different', Hahn continues, 'is its dynamic and active school-based programme that involves writers going to schools and running workshops. At the end of that there will then be a festival which brings together children who've been through a programme already... It's a way of making people who *don't* feel like going to see a novelist in Cheltenham town hall is for them that *this* may be a thing that is real for them.' The format of Pop Up and other children's festivals is different to mainstream adult festivals and events too, he explains: 'they're much more interactive and much more engaging... the writers create an

⁴⁸⁴ Anamik Saha has alluded to the awkwardness among white people working in the publishing industry in when discussing race and diversity in 'The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production' (2016)

experience, so the festival becomes something much more immersive and creative, rather than “shut up I’m going to read to you”. ‘So, again, it feels something you’re a part of, rather than something you sit and tolerate while it happens to you’.

I note the repetition of the phrase ‘shut up’ in relation to an adult author reading, implying that the audience is being forced into submission – and also the reference to children’s events being more ‘immersive’ than adults’ events. As Hahn suggests, immersiveness is a characteristic of children’s literary events far more often than adult ones, since children’s events tend to be far more performative, with the use of props and images by authors being common. I will have a fascinating conversation about this later at Hay with Sita Bramachari and Joseph Coehlo, both of whom are successful children’s author-performers who use props and dramatic storytelling in their events, and have evolved some of their work for theatrical shows.

But immersiveness is also an increasingly popular characteristic of live events in the wider ‘adult’ arts culture, with events like Secret Cinema drawing audiences into an ‘immersive’ theatrical world around the film being screened. Literary festivals are not ‘immersive’ on that aesthetic and performative level – but then they are more immersive than one-off events in urban or bookshop settings, partly because of their setting. Even the use of tents creates a certain sense of immersion through its differentiation from the usual building structures in which people usually work, play and live – the thin separation of the canvas from the sky and the elements makes it feel different, and the difference is

Performed readings, text selection, impact on writing practice

heightened when a rainstorm hits, and performing voices rise to compete with the rumble of pitter-pattering drops.

I ask Hahn how, as an author, he has found the experience of reading his work aloud in festivals like Hay, fully expecting the reticence he has just expressed in relation to author readings to continue. It doesn't. 'I love it!', he says, with unabashed enthusiasm. 'My stuff is slightly odd though, because most of my work, certainly at the moment, is translation, so it's work that is written by me but also not by me... I think if something works to read, it tends to work to read *aloud*, because I think we read aloud in our heads even if we're reading silently – or at least I do. One of the measures of the way it works is how it sounds even if it just sounds inside our heads. So when it comes to reading '*aloud* aloud', in public, it's been road-tested somehow. And I like reading, being on stage.' I am struck by the disjunction between his repeated idea of audiences being made to 'shut up and listen' to readings, and his own apparent delight in giving readings as an author-performer.

I ask how he chooses the sections he likes to read 'aloud aloud', and whether he finds certain types of writing work particularly well. 'There are', he says, musingly, but 'I don't know how to characterise them. There's one paragraph of one of my novels that I translated years ago, that I think is my single favourite read-aloud thing; it's only a paragraph, and almost requires no context at all, but it's amazing.... It's basically an extended metaphor, which really shouldn't work because it's so audacious, in a way. It's a guy saying: I met this man... and the paragraph describes what the man was like, but it's so complicated... he says, *I used to have this turtle, and he used to like listening to Leonard Cohen, and he used to look*

really happy when you turned it on and really sad when you turn it off... It just shouldn't work! And yet it's the most beautifully constructed thing... But I usually just read the first two pages or whatever.'

Hahn admits to thinking ahead about the prospect of reading aloud at future events at some points while he's writing.

'When you're doing the first edit, and you think: actually there's a two-page set piece here and it's clever and it's got two good jokes in it and a nice shape and doesn't require reading the whole novel in or the rest to have an impact... so yes, I do think about it.'

Green room

Hahn has to head off to another event, so I thank him for his time. The Green Room has filled up, and with a lot of recognisable faces. James Rhodes is laughing at one of Stephen Fry's jokes, Louise Brealy is sitting with Kirsty Logan, Malorie Blackman is conferring with her publicist, and Sandi Toksvig appears to be happily sandwiched between what I suspect are members of her team on the sofa. The bundling-together of big literary names in this behind-the-scenes space at Hay has led to gossip-worthy interactions in the past. Paul Theroux and V. S. Naipaul, for instance, had a fifteen-year feud after Theroux discovered a book he had given to Naipaul, inscribed 'with love', was up for sale for £1,000, and hit back by publishing a memoir damning their friendship, whereupon Naipaul called Theroux's work 'tourist books for the lower classes' – until, in 2011, Ian McEwan decided the Hay green room was the place to brave bringing these two male egos back together.⁴⁸⁵ It worked.

⁴⁸⁵ See Joy Lo Dico, 'Celebrated literary feud ends after Naipaul and Theroux bury the hatchet', *The Independent*, 20 May 2011

**Conversation:
Alex Clark. Lit
fest explosion,
social media,
readings and
interpretation**

I spot the prominent literary journalist and event chair Alex Clark, and ask if she would mind sharing her thoughts about live literature. ‘I remember coming to Hay twenty years ago and it was a lot smaller then – there were not many literary festivals’, she recollects. ‘But in the last *few* years there has been an IMMENSE explosion.’ She goes on to muse on various potential causes. I ask whether, as a reader, as well as a critic and interviewer, Clark is affected by hearing a writer read their texts aloud during an event. She ponders her answer for a few moments. ‘There is definitely something that *happens* when you hear a writer reading from their own work, however much you’ve enjoyed or not enjoyed the book; it’s a different experience...’, she says, thoughtfully. ‘Now some writers are *brilliant* at reading, some just read in a very straightforward way, and some are not very performative, it’s not their most comfortable thing – but I think whatever it does, it *does* bring you some kind of different perspective on the text. You hear a nuance, you hear what the *author intended*, and it’s a good *guide* to intention – just in an *inflection* even, or the emphasis on a word – and you often find you haven’t read it that way yourself when you just read it on the page.’

**Inherent
difficulties
with
conversation-
based fiction
events**

‘As a chair, it is difficult to talk about prose style and language though’, she admits ‘– those aspects of writing which are what make fiction writers fiction writers, and distinguish one writer from the other – without seeming too abstract for people to really get a handle on what you’re saying. It can go slightly into the ether; one risks sounding pretentious. It’s very difficult I think with novels, when they are brand new, to talk about them *at all*, in a way... If I say, “your character *x*”, it means nothing to anyone in the audience, and if it’s got any

kind of suspense issue you don't want to spoil it. So I do think there's an issue with *how* you *talk* about a novel. And I do think that's often why, in a festival setting where you get to compare audiences across events, you do see a lower take up for fiction. I think, when there's a very clear *issue* that can be talked about, *that* will get audiences coming along.' Hence the utility of discussing themes, I think, remembering Hahn's commentary. 'Or when it's a really beloved or popular author, who's enjoyed significant success, like Hilary Mantel – you know she will always sell out every event she does. Or someone really beloved, like Ali Smith who has such a devoted readership. But it *is tricky* for fiction.'

As with my conversation with Jo Glanville, I am struck by the apparent paradox of Clark's role in chairing fiction events, yet her view of them as being inherently problematic.

**Austen's
'gradual
performances'
and reading
aloud**

Shortly after, I see a chance to seize a moment to speak with Jane Austen expert John Mullan, whom I knew had written about Austen 'road-testing' her novels by reading drafts aloud at home – a process her brother had termed 'gradual performances'.⁴⁸⁶ He warms to the subject, and points out how important reading aloud was for many of Austen's characters, reflecting how important the social practice of reading aloud was for wider society. 'Austen's name was made, in part, by reading aloud', he adds: 'George Eliot and her partner, George Henry Lewis, read Austen aloud to each other, and Lewis wrote about it afterwards and said, that's the *real* test of a greatness of a writer... when you read aloud you can't skip bits and you see that every word matters.'

⁴⁸⁶ See Mullan (2012) and Worseley (2018), p.2 of Chapter 12.

I ask whether Mullan thinks that, as the practice of reading aloud died out it, changed the nature of prose. He pouts a little. 'That's a big question to answer. There are writers who didn't write in a culture where reading aloud was common but whose work comes to life when read aloud. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example – bits of that are fantastic when read aloud! And make a kind of *sense* read aloud which they don't on the page. I think some of Virginia Woolf... *To the Lighthouse* is fantastic read aloud... it's actually very funny but you don't *realize* it quite until you hear it read aloud. You might research this: what evidence *is* there that novelists read aloud as part of the writing process?'

This conversation reminds me of the self-flagellating accounts I've heard of novelists who have had to read their entire books aloud for the very first time in the context of audiobook recordings. Audiobook producer Dougal Patmore once described, on radio, witnessing authors reading their own work and 'cursing themselves' for 'how complicated and lengthy their sentence structure was. To paraphrase one author, it was: *I wouldn't write like this again, having read it all out loud.*'⁴⁸⁷ On the same programme, author Michael Hughes said that reading his own novel aloud for the audiobook was 'transformative'. He had been unprepared for 'having such an intimate relationship' with his own words. 'Every single word of it you're experiencing *physically* in a way you never do while you're writing... I was just a wreck afterwards.' The experience caused him to rethink his literary style and aesthetic choices: 'I

⁴⁸⁷ BBC Radio 4, Open Book, 16 September 2018 (my own transcription).

set myself the task of actually trying to write as people speak.⁴⁸⁸

At live literature events, in contrast, author-performers can select the most ‘speakerly’ sections and edit them more easily. I have already noticed a lot of writers at live literature events hastily crossing through sentences in pencil in advance of their readings. But still, I wonder now: how common is this experience, among author-performers at live literature events, of feeling uncomfortable re-encountering their work by reading it aloud – and having it transform their aesthetic approach to writing?

**David Almond:
writing for
sound, rhythm,
beat; ancient
storytelling
roots;
materiality**

Across the green room I spot the bestselling children’s author David Almond. A gently-spoken man in his sixties, Almond has eyes that wrinkle at the corners and greets me in warm tones. ‘I love all aspects of writing, including reading’, he tells me, beaming. ‘And there’s a particular frisson when you get up to read in front of live audiences, and you get questions and answers – it’s very stimulating to me as an author.’ Does he write with live audiences and reading aloud in mind, I wonder? ‘I always write for sound. I write for *sound*’, he repeats. ‘So wherever I’m writing, in order to get something to work properly, I’ll *beat* it, I’ll [here he clicks his fingers, four times], you know?’ I’m surprised and rather enchanted by this idea emerging from his fingertips – and what it reveals about the musicality of his literary aesthetic. ‘And I think all writing should be like that, it should be *poetic*’, he continues ‘– so I’ll often say, you know, if a sentence is working, on the page, the way to find out what’s wrong with it is to speak it aloud, and if

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

you can't speak a sentence aloud very well it's probably a sign that something is wrong inside a sentence. So the connection between the human voice and the words on the page I think is – *really* – close – and we often forget that.'

Orality also determines how Almond selects passages to read aloud at events. 'I choose something which – speaks out well, which is rhythmical, which is poetic, which is powerful, which contains strong images – that's what I *try* to do. Writing for young people, you're always reminded that you're as close to oral storytelling as you are to books on shelves... And reading isn't just to do just with the brain, it's not just to do with the conscious mind; when children learn to read and to write, it's a *physical* thing. And writing as well is a physical act. People think it's to do with the brain – it's not, it's about the *body*. We learn to write through the body by using our hands. It's not just about the abstraction of print. And in my events I like to talk about the process – I show notebooks and talk about how I go about making books – notes, scribbling, playfulness, and then I read and I like to have lots of questions.' I am struck by how Almond's keen awareness of embodiment clearly affects both the performance of his work and the nature of the writing itself. I am hugely disappointed to find that I've just missed his event so can't now go to witness him in person.

I ask Almond how he thinks that questions and conversations about his process around the live readings add to his audiences' experiences of his texts when they go off to read them later. 'I think it helps readers to understand that writing on the page is the product of a very human act, in some ways a very *ordinary* act', he says. 'The danger of the printed page is that it looks perfect. It's almost *untouchable*. But if you

somehow involve people in the process of writing, they understand that what seems to be perfect is actually not, that we are imperfect beings. And one of the purposes in all of my talks is to make people feel able to be *creative*.' This is an interesting perspective: the idea that a literary talk is to unleash creativity, not by making people in awe of the celebrity writer-as-oracle, as Jo Glanville and Daniel Hahn alluded to, but by the opposite: making them see their flaws, their ordinariness, their humanity.

Does Almond think that people respond to his work differently having heard him talk about his process and read from his books? 'I think they do', he says, with quiet certainty. 'I get a lot of people come up and talk to me afterwards and say: it helped me to *understand* your work through hearing it spoken' – as Kira from the audience emphasised, I think – 'and also that they've understood the *nature of literature*, writing, by seeing things like scruffy notebooks.' He also believes that audiences' experience of David-Almond-the-author reading the work at a live event is fundamentally different from an actor reading the same text, or an entire audiobook. Again, for him this comes down to sound. 'It's because I write in my own *rhythm*, and I write in a kind of *northern* rhythm. And I like reading my own work aloud – a lot of writers don't – and I think I do it well, that I'm a good reader... I think my accent and the nature of the words *feed* each other, and the rhythms – I read in the rhythms of the book, and I think other people who read my work, they sometimes slip the rhythms slightly, and miss the beat. Which goes back to sound again.' Again, this reminds me of the ways in which Stan and Kira talked about rhythm as being vital to their experience of Toni Morrison's performance.

I am curious to hear more of Almond's thoughts on relationship between contemporary novels and oral storytelling. 'It goes *way back*', he says, 'and a thing I try to do when I'm writing is to be *ancient*, as well as to be very modern. You know, to actually accept that I'm part of a tradition that goes back pre-literature... right back to people in caves telling stories... it's good to see books on shelves, but we have to remember that it comes from something much rawer and wilder.'

Finally, I ask why he thinks there has been such an increase in live literature events and festivals. 'I think people want *authenticity*', he answers, decisively. That word, again. 'Seeing, hearing, touching. You know, there's one theory that we're becoming more digital and ever more remote, but that comes at the same time as this huge burst of literature festivals, drama festivals, performance festivals, philosophy festivals... and I think people don't really *want* a purely *abstract* world. Because we're *physical* beings, we're flesh and blood, and I think that's what it is.'

As I head outside I feel somehow more embodied myself, and I resolve to read Almond's books.

**Conversation:
Elsa, 'Hay
guru', on
festival as a
means of
discovering
new ideas, and
as a joyful
escape**

Outside, the sun is shining and lots of people are soaking it up on the lawns and at picnic tables. As I pass a slight, middle-aged woman sitting alone with a book, she glances up to look around, and I pause to ask if whether she would mind telling me about her experience at Hay. A quietly spoken person from Cheshire, she works as a legal publisher, and has been coming to the Festival regularly for over twenty years. 'I read English

Literature at university, so that's always been my core, even though I trained as a lawyer.' Since arriving yesterday, she's seen a session on dyslexia, 'with a Cambridge professor, and that was marvellous... there seems to be a higher level of diagnosis, and I have a young child... and her theory I think is a very very interesting one... And I went to one this morning on the Disraeli marriage, which was great – I mean, I had no idea – I knew he'd purportedly married for money but there was love there as well, and they packed a lot into their marriage, and she was a very very enlivening speaker. And the next one I'm going to is a writer I know nothing about, called Andrew O'Hagan. And then tonight it's Sally Wainwright, because she's a good scriptwriter. I tend to mix obscure authors and celebrity ones. Nothing too heavy, and nothing too frothy either.'

I ask how she chooses her fiction events. 'I mostly try to discover new authors, now. I go with my gut when I'm reading the programme. There'll be something in the little write-up which snags me. And I think; ooh [high], interesting – that's an interesting hook. Normally something to do with emotions [embarrassed laugh], because, you know, I always loved the 19th century novels. And the big story. And the big emotional core. So if there's something of that ilk in the write up – I'll book it.' I ask why she's less inclined now to go to events with writers she already knows. 'Well, it's about exposing yourself to the new isn't it?', she asks, rhetorically. As for whether she tends to buy the books afterwards : 'only if the talker really charms me, and draws me in so that I think: yeah, I *will* buy their new book [decisive].' I'm intrigued by his term: 'the talker', and the idea of 'charming', suggestive of a spellbinding power certain figures might have over the audience.

Does the experience of seeing the author reading from a book affect how she reads it on the page? 'I see them as... separate...', she says, uncertainly. 'But there might be a page the writer reads where I think, oooh, I like the *sound* of that. There was one last year – he was so eloquent, and cerebral, and quietly spoken, and *impressive* as an author, that even though I wasn't sure about the book at first, I found his talking about it and reading from it definitely influenced me – so much that I bought it and even bought it as presents for people, actually! So in that case the two really interlocked. The experiences of *being here* and *reading*.' I'm intrigued that this memory of sound is what she linked to her decision to buy the book on that occasion.

I ask what else draws her back to the festival so regularly. 'It's set in the most *stunning* countryside', she says, 'so, although I went to Cheltenham and Oxford a couple of times, to me they just didn't feel the same.... Going into a kind of draughty room to hear an author, you feel as if you could be anywhere. Whereas here it's kind of quirky, eccentric – it's – I personally feel this festival is *unique*, and that's why I come back every year.' She grins, a little mischievously. 'I would also say – it probably sounds a bit pathetic – but I also leave behind my family for these few days! And I'd say... it's almost the *highlight of my year* [reflective]. It's also somewhere where as a woman, as well, you can just hang out by yourself [high pitch – a revelation]. And that's quite rare as well, having a friendly place, a friendly festival, where you can do that. But I think we all get ground down by work. And also I've got a very young daughter. And all of those things, you know, they're great... But actually, to plug into something else, where you're

submerged in ideas, and other lives... and I tend to book a *lot* of talks, things I'm naturally interested in, but also things I know nothing about. I come away feeling enlivened, inspired... I feel like I've had a massive *injection*! Which wears down over the 12 months that pass until the next time.' I'm interested in her choice of embodied language here – the word 'submerged' suggesting a step beyond 'immersion', taking her out of her normal environment entirely; and the word 'injection' suggesting an internal transformation, running through her blood. 'But it – it just opens your mind!', she carries on, beaming. 'It's a cliché but it really, really does, because – I can't think of any other environment or setting where your mind is dipped into something, many things, that are completely different. Sure, you can go to the occasional talk, and you can look around your local bookshop which is always a pleasure. But actually it feels amazingly indulgent, and wonderful, to be able to be exposed to these minds and ideas, and to have it in such a concentrated dose. And then of course, like I'm doing now, you get to hang out, and totally relax, and think through what you've just seen or what you're going to see and look at the book.... I mean, it's sublime! It really is. And so I don't bother with any of the other festivals, having gone, in the past, to them... I just, kind of, I'm not a literary festival guru, I'm just a Hay guru.'

Her choice of the word 'guru' here brings to mind the notion of the festival as a form of contemporary secular pilgrimage, which is now the subject of increasing study,⁴⁸⁹ largely in the context of tourism, and again following in the footsteps of

⁴⁸⁹ For example, Dionigi Albera and John Eade (eds.) *New Pathways in Pilgrimage Studies: Global Perspectives* (2016) tracks the 'massive increase in the volume of pilgrimage research and publications' (p.1)

Victor Turner.⁴⁹⁰ In light of the decreasing role of religion in the UK and in many parts of the globe, the concept of making a ‘pilgrimage’ to Hay and to other literary festivals has become a resonant one. There is a quality of reverence, not only in Elsa’s words, but in a lot of other discourses I have encountered about Hay, that reflect that idea.⁴⁹¹ Hay’s now-long-term centrality to literary culture, its remote location, combined with the ritualistic nature of the annual collective gathering of audiences along with writers and the literary establishment in such a remote geographical space, arguably renders it a kind of literary mecca.

Some literary festivals expressly describe themselves as pilgrimages,⁴⁹² and the ‘literary pilgrimage’ to the fictional settings of classic novels has become a commercial form of tourism beyond the remit of the literary festival.⁴⁹³ Elsa’s emphasis on the significance of Hay’s rural location for her – in particular her point that even beginning the long train journey felt like a pleasurable element of the festival experience – resonates strongly with the pilgrimage concept, and its link with journeying physically away from everyday life. While being hard-to-reach might on first glance appear to be a *negative* characteristic of Hay, in a contemporary culture in which value is often defined by speed and convenience, the

⁴⁹⁰ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982)

⁴⁹¹ There are many references to pilgrimage in articles about Hay. See e.g. the reference to ‘secular pilgrims in Jasper Rees, ‘The Glastonbury of the Mind: Hay turns 25’, *The Arts Desk*, 31 May 2012: <https://theartsdesk.com/comedy/glastonbury-mind-hay-turns-25>

⁴⁹² See Abantu Book Festival’s self-description, ‘The Festival’: <http://www.abantubookfestival.co.za> (accessed 8 May 2018)

⁴⁹³ Tourist packages are offered to destinations such as Prince Edward Island, the home of Anne of Green Gables, where 125,000 people visit each year for the purpose of visiting the stone foundations of the house there L.M. Montgomery once lived – 25,000 of them, apparently, coming from Japan, from where there are direct flights for this sole reason, as the book has, bizarrely, become a cultural phenomenon. For a scholarly analysis, see Clare Fawcett and Patrick Cormack, ‘Guarding authenticity at literary tourism sites’, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol.28:3, 2001, pp.686-724. See also See Ann (without an ‘e’) Mah, ‘Searching for Anne of Green Gables on Prince Edward Island’, *New York Times*, 21 March 2014

experiential value of its remote rural location is actually heightened. As Maggie Kerr, Hay's Development Director, put it in a brief conversation we had there: 'Other festivals with city centre locations have to compete with other things, which makes it hard to create a sense of place and atmosphere'. This harks back to Turner's concept of liminality⁴⁹⁴, and Falassi's 'time out of time'⁴⁹⁵, as still-resonant ideas for understanding the value of a festival experience.

Event: Simon Armitage: a contemporary troubadour experiment, different forms of live literature

On the subject of journeying to remote places for literary purposes, the next event I've circled is poet Simon Armitage talking about his new prose memoir: *Walking Away: Further Travels with a Troubadour on the South West Coast Path*, with Stephanie Merritt as chair. It promises to engage with a very different form of live literature event to Hay: one that Armitage himself came up with and arranged – a long walk, broken up by performed readings of his work in return for donations and accommodation, and culminating in this book. On the programme Armitage's headshot shows the writer with a pen between his teeth. He is staged in one of Hay's biggest tents, and it is packed out.

After the two settle themselves on stage and wait for enthusiastic applause to die down, Merritt introduces Armitage, who's dressed in dark jeans and a dark shirt. 'Many of you will have read the first volume', she tells the audience – referring to his first memoir, of a different walk – thus assuming a general knowledge of Armitage's work on their part, perhaps through his previous appearances at Hay.

⁴⁹⁴ See e.g. Turner [1961] (1995) p.95

⁴⁹⁵ Falassi (1987), p.4

Armitage nods. 'I walked this [Pennine Way] route as a troubadour, passing a sock around and asking people to pay what they thought I was worth', he explains – a converse model to the literary festival ticketing structure. 'I virtually promised myself never to do such a thing again. [The audience laughs, knowingly. Armitage has a laconic, mellow, almost self-deprecatory tone of voice, and speaks gently and assuredly in a measured rhythm with a distinct Yorkshire accent. His frequent jokes, funny and incisive, are delivered with a deadpan tone, in the manner suggested by his profile picture.] But a couple of years later, I just started getting itchy feet, a bit restless... I started thinking of it a bit like testing my reputation as a poet, and also poetry's reputation, in a way. Would people come out on a wet Wednesday in Wensleydale for a reading? [He speaks so naturally, and un-performatively, somehow, that this alliteration and assonance seems entirely natural.] It started to dawn on me that I really should have put this to the test in further region from home' – hence he ended up on the south west coast path.

**Armitage:
writing and
society;
solitude vs
connection**

'Where did the troubadour idea come from?' Merritt enquires. 'I'm just not that comfortable with being a writer that just sits at home all the time... otherwise I'm going to end up writing poems about my *study wall*', he says, separating these two last words fractionally – this is a poet experienced in delivering words with the right timing. The audience laughs, appreciatively. Perhaps they appreciate, beyond the comic image of a collection of poems about a blank wall, an underlying point he is making about the work of a writer being to connect with people, with society, as he is doing now. It is also a distinct counterpoint to Hahn's description of the

tension felt by writers who crave solitude to write but are called upon by publishers to read at commercial events.

‘I was trying to imagine a walk that was contrasting in many ways to the first’, he explains. ‘So the Pennine way, it’s upland, it’s northern, it’s interior, it’s terrible [audience laughs], it’s grim... When I’d finished it, someone in a book described me as the Eeyore of walking, I’d moaned about it *that much*. [More laughter. There is a melancholic quality to Armitage’s speaking voice, even when he isn’t ‘moaning’.] So I imagined this one as walking along sunny beaches for 250 miles’, he continues. ‘I’m not that familiar with the coast, the language of the coast, its diction, its rhythms’ – nice literary metaphors, lightly dropped in ‘– so to do something along the coast of the south west, going through lots of tourist areas, appealed.

Intrigued by what would happen when he competed with other entertainments, he said, for the beginning of the walk, he decided to stay in Butlins. ‘I mean, that could have been a whole book’, he adds – again, dead pan. The audience laughs loudly, and he pauses, to mark the transition to reading, then opens his copy of the book.

‘The outward appearances are not encouraging. [His voice doesn’t change much here, though his tone becomes fractionally more declaratory.] After guest check in I’m directed towards a place called Strawberry Square, in an area labelled Plantation Quay, which seems to be an area of apartments somewhere between Swiss chalet and mock Tudor in design. Varnish is peeling from the window frames, the outside walls of each block are stencilled with large, Soviet style letters, lots of men are wearing premier league football

shirts with their own surnames printed on the back [the audience titters], and in a female voice, an uninterrupted stream of abuse and profanities issues from a ground floor flat. This isn't my first time at Butlin's. In the 70s, we bought a family day pass and spent 7 or 8 hours on the rides and in the swimming pool... I remember the straggly barbed wire fence that marked the perimeter, that my dad said wasn't to stop people getting in, but to deter escapees' [the audience laughs fulsomely.]... At one stage I find myself in the staff quarters, ranks of distinctly dilapidated barracks beyond the last supermarket, spookily quiet except for a tinny portable radio playing capital FM...' [His poetic sensibility is evident from his evocative language, including the sonic and rhythmic qualities of his lists of names, yet there is nothing overtly poetic about the delivery; it comes across as a slightly heightened version of the way that Armitage would normally speak.]

'I had tortured myself with the idea of giving a reading at Butlin's [the audience titters], pitting myself against an eighties comedian, an ex-game show host, or army sweetheart.. to see if poetry could hold its own against the massed forces of light entertainment. [More knowing titters; a juxtaposition to how many will probably see the event they are in now.] But instead of going head to head with *A Tribute to the Music of Olly Murs* [high-pitched laughs] – that was actually on that night [this comment is clearly off-script, and prompts more laughs] – ... I'd taken a cowardly sidestep, and opted for a more literary opening night.'

He proceeds to describe the venue, away from the main Butlins site, at which he had decided to perform, and paints a vivid picture of an unconventional live literature event that

jabs further at the themes of class divisions, celebrity and entertainment – themes that have been the subject of heated debates in the media in relation to Hay.

Merritt asks him about the concept of supporting himself through his words, and he compares it with busking. ‘I’ve always thought of poetry as a very portable art’, he adds. He also explains he doesn’t like to think about it as something ‘static. I mean, I was a probation officer in a former life, and I’ve always wanted to be someone out there and doing things, and I didn’t want to give that up just to sit in a garret. I’ve also always been somebody who’s written about things that are right in front of me, but for that to keep happening you have to keep changing the scenery. And I think my style of writing, in non-fiction in particular, is to look at things that are familiar and see them as a stranger’ – something, I reflect, that ethnographers often try to do, too, as well as novelists. ‘Travelling is one way to continue to have these encounters. In terms of the financial aspect to it [chuckles to himself] – yeah, there’s something... impish or mischievous in me that wants to be able to prove that I could get by, on my wits, if you like. I wouldn’t *recommend* it as a way of trying to earn a living... I totted it up and it came up under the living wage.... But the richness, the profit, comes in the encounters.’

Armitage’s project clearly drew audiences not just through the performances themselves, but through his pre-existing reputation as an author-performer; this is revealed by Raynor Winn in her memoir, *The Salt Path* (2018), which recounts the walk that she and her critically-ill husband Moth took along the same route at the same time, due to unexpected homelessness, when strangers kept on mistaking Moth for

Armitage with great excitement, one rich man even inviting them to stay at his rental house overnight as a result – a situation that led to Moth busking one summer day in St Ives by reciting *Beowulf*, the only poem he knew by heart, to the surrounding crowds, until he was moved on.

Armitage offers a fascinating evocative description of a very different kind of live literature event to Hay, showing how the ‘form’ can be stretched to less overtly literary and commercial contexts, in a way that tests the connective possibilities of literature between strangers, as a form of radical social encounter. I can’t help noticing how his description of the context around his near-to-Butlins performance reflects what I am seeking to explore in writing ethnographically about Hay and other live literature events – it suggests that elements of the experience, such as the surrounding, space, sense of time, event structure and aesthetics work together holistically to generate the meaning and value of the event for participants.

After audience questions, Merritt says ‘we’ve come to the end of the session’, and is just directing the audience to the bookshop and is on the brink of inviting them to applaud... when she stops short, remembering something. ‘Oh yes, the poem!’, she says. ‘Have we got time?’ Armitage asks her, one eyebrow raised. ‘Yes, yes!’, she replies, so he rises again, then pauses, again, to mark the start of a reading.

‘What is the sea?/ The sea is sleep/ Dockheaded fish,
and transparent, brine-blooded creatures/ That loll and
glide in its depths/ Boneless life forms turned inside
out in its dreams/ That sleep in its depths.

[There is a new quality of silence in the audience, now, as they listen.]

...

And why is the sea?/ Because it sleeps./ Sleeps like a drunk/ Its feet on the pillow of reefs and shallows, its head where light never breaks/ Face down in the sand./ I know this./ I know this./ I am the land.'

[Solid applause].

It now seems almost inconceivable that Merritt almost forgot to end the event with this poem, which seems to have brought the event back 'home' to the text lying at its heart.

**Conversation:
Armitage on
poetry on the
page and
stage, and
authorial
responsibility**

I find Armitage afterwards and ask him if he'd mind sharing his thoughts about the relationship between oral performance and his work on the page. 'I think it's a very complicated relationship', he says, reflective and more serious, now, than he had been on stage. 'When I started getting involved with poetry and literature I saw the two things as being very separate. That literature lived in books on the page, and it was certainly written for that purpose – and my understanding was that that was how most people received poetry and *wanted* to receive it.' I wonder how common this is: an authorial assumption that a publishing convention equates to an audience preference or demand. 'I had a fairly purist view about it: that poetry lived on the page, and that readings were a kind of day out, little sort of *excursions* [small laugh.] But readings have become a big part of my life, and I'm more inclined now to think of books as just another aspect of poetry.' He could substitute 'literature' for 'poetry' here, it occurs to me, given that he's just published a book of prose.

‘And certainly poetry will have predated this thing that we call literature and certainly books, and poetry’s origins go back to ancient theatre, to sacred rites, to the campfire...’ He’s echoing Almond here, I think. ‘To the troubadours, the performance was a crucial aspect. Probably *the* crucial aspect. So I think, yeah, there might’ve been a time where I was a bit shy about talking up the poetry reading, but I see it as a *task* now, and I *enjoy* it. And I like the idea that you’ve in some way got a responsibility to be publicly accountable for your work.’

This is a new angle in my conversations, this idea of live literature events being a form of ‘responsibility’ – a perspective that links with Armitage’s background as a former probation officer. ‘I like going to see readings, listening to people reading, connecting their personality, their voice and their verbal mannerisms with their work. I think it can have a humanising effect as well. A demystifying effect. I also think that poetry lends itself very much to the event, to the reading, in a way that prose doesn’t always’, he reflects, anticipating my next question. ‘You go to see an event about a novel and they have to spend up to ten minutes explaining the storyline, the character development, and then you know, they can read something that can, on occasions, be very *page-bound*. Whereas poetry by nature is a very small thing that often doesn’t get to the right hand margin, or to the bottom of the page, and I think the intro around it and the preamble can really work in concert with the actual thing.’

**Performance
vs reading;
page poetry
vs spoken
word;
cultural
appropriation**

‘And you have to really *attend* when you listen to a poem’, Armitage continues. ‘And so little bursts of conversational discussion, I just think suit – well, I’m hesitant about using the word *performance*... but certainly the *reading*.’ I ask him to expand on this ‘reading/performance’ distinction. ‘I think there used to be a thick black line between the two things, and I think that line’s becoming – more of a fuzzy line these days’, he says. ‘But I think if you start talking about *performance* there are expectations it will be something theatrical and rehearsed, and I like to think that what theatricality might be is in the *words*. And I think most poets I listen to have a fairly deadpan delivery style. And I assume that’s because they want to *trust* the words and to trust the idea that the words will do the work for them. Then there are I think other poets whose... their whole project is about performance; that is where they see their poems as existing and living, and they devise whole performance strategies... That’s performance with a big P.’ This idea of letting the words do the work is fascinating, and reminds me of research on the history of audiobooks, where this was a fundamental principle of narration.

I ask Armitage if he is referring to the spoken word scene vs the published poetry scene. ‘Definitely the spoken word scene’, he says. ‘It’s an incredibly vibrant scene as well. One example of that which I think is quite odd – I’ve been to several music festivals now where there’s a literature tent and a poetry tent and it’s *thriving*, like at Latitude... late at night, it’s always packed [spoken in a tone of wonder]... and you’d think that it wouldn’t work. Cos one thing that I’ve always said is you don’t need much for a poetry reading, but you do need it to be *quiet*, and a sort of silence to deliver the words into, and you don’t get that at Latitude; there’s always some big

hairy rock band thrashing away about 100 yards away, and if the wind's in the wrong direction those power cords are making the whole tent vibrate... but somehow people seem to be able to filter it out. So, the odd thing is, I've been round the back of the tent in the green room with the spoken word artists, and they speak one particular way, but when they're on stage they suddenly deliver their poems in this, er, Jamaican... patois...' He pauses, reflecting. 'It's a definite rhythm', I say, filling the gap. 'I think it's a bit *dodgy*' [he pauses here, with a tone of revelation in his voice, and eyes me]. 'I think it's sort of blacking up – these are sort of white kids who are... it's a form of *cultural appropriation* which I don't think has been properly examined.⁴⁹⁶ It's trying to adopt someone else's issues for the sake of coolness. It's those sort of things I'm talking about.' Another take on authenticity, I reflect. 'But I do think it's enlivened the poetry scene and it's made more page-bound poets consider what they're offering', Armitage continues. 'It's probably not enough anymore to turn up half-pissed and mumble for 20 minutes then go off. I think expectations have been raised and rightly so.' This links back to Crace's comment about live literature – that, on the whole, the standard of performance has increased as events have become more central in literary culture.

I refer Armitage back to something he said earlier: that when he started off as a poet he thought of it more as a medium for the page, but that as time's gone on that's changed, and I ask

⁴⁹⁶ This idea has been critically examined, not in the precise context of spoken word culture in the UK, but in terms of 'whites *appropriate[ing]* blackness', by E. Patrick Johnson in his book, *Appropriating Blackness* (2003), where he discusses how, 'in many instances, white exoticise and/or fetishize blackness' (p.4), and how this is often manifested in the politics of language use, where whites 'construct linguistic representations of blacks that are grounded in racist stereotypes to maintain the status quo only to then reappropriate those stereotypes to affect a fetishistic "escape" into the Other to transcend the rigidity of their own whiteness, as well as to feed the capitalist gains of commodified blackness' (p.5)

whether that has affected the way he writes. He thinks about this. 'No... at least, I'm wary of the idea of the reading as a sort of *test bed*', he explains, 'because the response you get, the reaction you get to a poem, when it's audible or visible, isn't necessarily the way you're affecting someone's *mind*, and you can't really see *that* response. And I think if you *did* start writing just for that environment, you might end up going for the cheap laughs and the instant reaction. So I would hope that there isn't too much of a relationship.' This is an interesting point; many fiction writers have spoken to me about selecting passages that are likely get laughs. 'There have been two or three occasions when I've sat down with that in mind, thinking I could do with something a bit lively and rhythmical that will work in the middle of a reading', he admits.

Recalling John Mullen's question to me about whether many writers read aloud while they write, I ask this question of Armitage, and am surprised when he hesitates, perplexed. 'I don't *think so*', he replies eventually. 'That'd be a form of insanity! [He laughs.] I think occasionally I try a line out. But I probably do it in my head; I don't speak it aloud.' He shakes his head and grins sheepishly. 'At the event, that was the very first time I'd read that poem about the sea, and I realised I hadn't quite figured out how to deliver it.' He looks genuinely embarrassed at this confession. 'You know, I was inching my way through it.' I tell him that I thought it was beautifully read, and to have a reading was a lovely way to end the event, particularly with the idea of sleeping as a form of ending in that poem. 'Yeah – it was a nice way to end', he says, as if my opinion mattered and he is relieved to hear it, despite his apparent confidence and evident performance experience. 'I

**Conversation
-based
events and
the role of
readings**

prefer to finish with a poem rather than a question. Finish on your own terms really’.

I ask what he thinks about the way literary festival events at Hay and elsewhere tend to balance questions and readings. ‘I think you need to find a balance’, he says, diplomatically. ‘I’ve been to some festivals in parts of the world where the *last* thing they want you to do is read any of your work, and it’s almost *rude* to ask do it.’ I wonder if he is thinking about Merritt nearly forgetting about his closing poem. ‘What they want is to hear you interviewed, or they want you to sit on a panel and talk about the death of the novel, or the religion in society, or something topical and political...’ I ask him why he thinks that is. ‘I don’t know whether festivals know what they’re doing, or whether they’re pandering to the cult of personality, or whether they think that people can read your work wherever they like, in their own time, but they only get one chance to hear you talk about *other* things. Or maybe there’ve been too many terrible readings [laughs] – people reading for an hour without a break.’

I ask how he feels about reading his prose, as compared to his poetry, aloud. ‘It took me a while to adjust, actually’, he says. ‘I hadn’t read from this book before – it was the first time. I started the first sentence thinking there’d be a line break, thinking it was poetry, and forgetting it was prose! It took me a while to relax into it. I tend to read poems with a little more emphasis and intensity. But I daresay I’ll get used to it in a little while. Also, as this was the first event I’d done around the book, I haven’t got used to the conversation I’ll have around the book – the *patter*, if you like. I don’t feel very

**Conversation:
Armitage's
audience.
Role of voice
and
personality**

familiar with the book yet. I haven't looked at it since the last proofs, 4-5 months ago'.

Does he enjoy that process of rediscovery of his work at events, I ask, or wish he could go back and re-edit, or just move onto the next project?' 'It's quite nice', he replies, 'because you forget the creative processes you've gone through. And I fucking hate proof reading! I can't bear it. And it's the kind of reading... you're essentially reading for *mistakes*. And that level of attention you've got to give to your own work feels... I don't know. There's something immodest about it' [he laughs, embarrassed.]

I ask for his thoughts about performance of prose at literary events more widely, referring back to his comment about the problem with explaining the novel at length before only performing a short extract. 'Do you think prose can ever work well in this context?', I ask. 'Absolutely I do', he responds, with certainty. 'But I think the same I do as about poetry.... that writers can't any more just *turn up*; you've got to think about it, maybe *practise* a little bit, choose carefully which bits you're going to read and which bits you're not... And, don't take this the wrong way, but *poetry* can be *boring* for people – I mean, some people find it *incredibly* boring, and I think if you get it wrong it can be a terrible thing. If it's too dense and clotted...it can be very alienating. And I think prose in that sense can be more engaging and welcoming. We're more familiar with it. Our experience of written language tends to be prose.'

I approach a couple of women I'd seen in the audience for Armitage's event to ask them about it, and it turns out that

one of them is a children's author, Liz Kessler, who did an event the previous night, and she is with Lara, her assistant. They're in their 50s and 40s respectively. I ask what they thought about it. 'I really enjoyed it', Lara glows. 'It was – I'm not very *literary*, and I'm not into poetry *at all* – but I wanted to go because we know Simon, but also because I'm doing a walk, along the coast path, and I knew what this was about... And I think he's just – a nice guy! And it was entertaining and *interesting*, and I've got the first book but I haven't read it yet but I will be doing, and we will be getting the second one!' She thinks about it. 'I mean, the poem he read just then was *absolutely* beautiful' Lara says, smiling dreamily at the thought. 'And it makes me think, ooh! *Poetry!* [laughs]. 'It changed your view about it?', I ask. 'Yeah! Yeah.' [revelation]

'And what did you think about it?', I ask Liz. 'I think he's just got this really lovely manner where he's very dry, and quite droll, but he's *so funny*. And he has these little moments that you kind of feel building up, and he says something funny at the end...I thought it was great. Really nice. And he's fab. Go Simon! And he's northern! [They both laugh]. Sorry, that's a private joke', Liz tells me, then adds: 'Lara's got this theory that all the people she gets on with best are northern'. 'Oh dear, well I won't last very long then', I say [they laugh again]. Jocular though they are, the comments emphasize how much accent, as a vocal quality, can impact upon audiences' reception of an author-performer's work, and their wider valuation of it. This links back to the idea of authenticity that has been coming up so frequently in my conversations, and to the role of regional identity in authenticity.

I ask Liz how much she enjoys hearing authors read prose aloud in comparison to reading them on the page. 'I do read a lot, and I like reading a book and getting into it...', she says, 'but I think there's something quite *special* about hearing an author read *their own work* – it brings it to *life*. And especially something like this, I think, which is a non-fiction, autobiographical piece, where he's talking about his experience – hearing him say it just puts you almost in the place he was... hearing his words saying it, it's – so powerful. Really.' I ask whether she thinks it is much more powerful hearing him read live as opposed to, say, in a YouTube video. 'Oh yes!' She doesn't hesitate. 'There's a connection, especially with this – there's a connection because he's talking about intimate meetings with people.'

**Importance
of accent,
voice, and
valuation of
mode of
reading**

Lara chips in. 'He's got that beautiful voice and that beautiful regional *accent*. And hearing those words as he's saying them, is how he imagined them. Do you know what I mean? Because it's *his voice*. And it makes it really special.' Liz agrees. 'With his accent, it's like you're hearing it coming straight from his mind because you're hearing it from his voice.' Lara agrees, enthusiastically. 'It's his *voice*', she repeats. 'It's similar with David Almond – he's amazing.' 'Even though it was prose', Liz says, now talking about Armitage again, 'he made it very poetic because he's got a very beautiful way of... his *language* is very beautiful, and it [his prose] *sounded* quite like reading a poem, in a way when he read it.' Lara agrees, nodding: 'Yeah, yeah...' Again, I am intrigued to hear this emphasis on the sound and musicality of voice as a recurring element of reader-audience experience.

She looks at me, confidingly, and lowers her voice. 'I've heard various people read while we've been here. And quite naughtily, actually, I've said to Liz, "oh I didn't like the way she read that", or "I didn't like the way he read that" – you know, I've pointed out the ones I didn't like.' 'So who didn't you like?', I ask, grinning, but Liz jumps in hastily. 'Nooo we're not saying that, we're not saying that!' 'Or, why didn't you like the way they read?', I rephrase. Lara answers: 'Because they just sort of read their words with no passion – it was just sort of like eurghlurblurlurlurlurlur [in a monotone], and I just didn't feel it? I think that's the difference.' Liz nods, firmly. 'Yep, I think if someone's going to read, then that's part of the whole point of it, that you're hearing the *feeling* in their voice.' 'Especially when *they've* written it!', Lara adds, with feeling. 'Surely they should – if anybody's going to read it well, *they* should!'

It is mid-afternoon. I take a break, leave the festival site and stride up the hill to look down on the town, nestled among such lush greenery, beneath the soft arcs of the surrounding hills. I breathe the sweet air deeply, and watch a squirrel scamper up a tree trunk. It's so quiet up here, so peaceful. Not a person in sight. The white tents below, where the festival continues, look so tiny from up here, so anonymous. You'd never guess, if you didn't know, that thousands of people, ideas and coffees were circulating inside them. A crow caws lazily, accompanying a trilling blackbird.

Back down in the fray, I queue, then file into the vast hive that is the tent about to host Booker-winning Kazuo Ishiguro, who'll be talking to Martha Kearney about his new novel, *The Buried Giant*. It's long been sold out. Kearney and Ishiguro

**Event:
Ishiguro,
The Buried
Giant**

arrive and takes their seats on the stage to a barrage of applause. He greets the audience modestly, and waits for the interview to begin, fluttering his eyelashes. It appears oddly disproportionate to have such a tiny, still person at centre stage in such a vast tent, though his image is projected up onto a big screen for those at the back.

‘Ish has managed to combine great literary success with great popularity amongst readers which is a holy grail for authors... his books have sold more than 5 million copies around the world’, Kearney announces. Her use of this ‘pet name’ for him surprises me, but indicates a sense of his public presence and wide appreciation, popular as well as critical – there is a reason that this event is so big, it seems to be saying. ‘Today I want to explore some of the themes in his books as well as his very individual prose style’. She begins by asking how he came to write about ogres and dragons in *The Buried Giant*, which makes the book appear so different to his previous novels. ‘You haven’t been involved in that world yourself I assume’, she grins.

‘I backed myself into a corner’, Ishiguro says, smiling modestly. He’s got a quiet voice that matches the stillness of his body language, sitting motionless in his chair, but the audience seems to grow extra quiet in response, as if all ears are being tilted towards the stage. ‘I couldn’t get my story to work for ages, and in that corner were ogres and pixies.... I do get into those kind of desperate phases with all of my novels. People think I must have some kind of routine, but it’s a fluke – I haven’t got it figured out. With this one, I had this story, and kept putting it in different times and places, even different genres... it was only when I finished I thought: Oh, there’s

ogres and things in it! Will this be an issue? And then people started saying: “Oh [markedly disappointed tone]. I liked *Never Let Me Go*, but I’ve heard your new book’s got dragons and ogres in it – I’m not sure I want to read it.” I’ve been shocked by the sheer prejudice that exists against ogres [delivered straight; audience laughs]. It’s just an imaginary thing, amongst other imaginary things... I think people are mistaking a characteristic of a genre as the *essence*. In the end I became quite militant on behalf of my ogres and pixies. They’re really just extras in my novel – I hired them, but they did a good job and I stand by them. People are terribly preoccupied about certain genre lines. I think maybe as a book culture, a reading culture, we’ve got ourselves into a bind when we take genres too seriously... most genre boundaries are relatively recent things that were created by the book industry to help market the book to different demographics of the reading public. I think there are such things as genuine genres, but most of what we call genres, the stuff that’s written on the top of bookshelves in bookshops, is a marketing exercise created relatively recently.⁴⁹⁷ Someone told me recently that horror had finished, and people were going around moving those books to thriller and sci fi [audience laughs]. I’m against the imagination police... we should be very careful of ogre prejudice.’

As these comments allude to, genre has a significant impact on way in which literature is marketed and valued: a fact that is reflected in the Hay programme, which features very few events showcasing books that are obviously marketed as genre fiction, except by authors who, like Ishiguro, have

⁴⁹⁷ See Squires (2007)

critical recognition as authors of 'literary fiction'. The limiting effect for authors is an issue that has been raised by many who have managed to transcend genre categories through work that has been received as 'literary fiction', including Margaret Atwood, Neil Gaiman and Ursula K. Le Guin.⁴⁹⁸ There are now, though, an increasing number of literary festivals that are genre specific; the CYMERA, for instance, is a new literary festival dedicated to Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror writing, founded by Ann Landmann, formerly events manager for Blackwell's Edinburgh, who wanted to 'celebrate three often overlooked but hugely popular genres' and 'put genre writing on an equal footing with literary fiction.'⁴⁹⁹

'I had ogre prejudice', Kearney gamely admits to Ishiguro and the vast assembly, 'but now I've thrown it away... and I've realized a lot of this book is actually about an idea about society's attitudes to memory or painful memories – didn't you think initially that the story could have taken place in Bosnia or Rwanda?' 'I admit that's where it started', he replies. He talks about the difference between individual and social memories, and compares the impulse to suppress memories in a long marriage to the impulse for a society to suppress atrocities. 'Is it better to remember?'

Kearney goes on to ask about parallels within his earlier work. He talks about how, as a young writer, his peers were very

⁴⁹⁸ For one of many examples of this, see Le Guin, 'Lost in Mindspace', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2007: a review of Scarlett Thomas's novel, *The End of Mr Y*, in which Le Guin writes, wryly: 'I hope Scarlett Thomas and her publisher will not take it amiss if I evaluate her book in terms of genre, as to my mind this is to evaluate it as literature.'

⁴⁹⁹ See CYMERA website, press release dated 23 November 2018, at: <https://www.cymerafestival.co.uk/media> (accessed 28 April 2019)

political, and, it being the Cold War era, people adopted strong, badge-wearing positions on issues. 'When I wrote *Remains of the Day*, I think I kind of assumed that, as young people do, that if you got your political and moral values right, at a certain stage, you'd be able to steer a good course through your life... I think that was the unexamined assumption behind those books.... As I got a bit older, into my 40s, I started to think that was a naïve way to think about life.'

Kearney nods and looks at her notes. 'You said as you get older you realise that principles can be precarious – you can be picked up by a wind and dumped down somewhere else...'

Ishiguro raises his eyebrows and shakes his head a fraction. 'That's remarkable – when did I say that?' [audience laughs loudly] He appears like the epitome of a wise sage, sitting with such poise, speaking quietly but commanding reverence from all these people, including the renowned yet assiduous, eager interviewer, and gently making light of the entire situation, including his own persona as represented in the media. 'Yes, I think those earlier books were flawed', he says. 'But I'd still *recommend* them to people. [audience laughter] – another knowing reference to the marketing purpose behind the event.

Kearney seeks to get her own back: 'You've also said that writers tend to peak early'. He smiles wryly. 'Yes, when I was in my early thirties, my wife and I were researching this... we were surprised that most significant novelists tended to peak before they were 45 – it was slightly alarming... Now that I've got older, I'm reluctant to accept this thesis in quite such a way. I'm now searching desperately for examples [audience laughter; he waits a fraction] ... of people ahead of me – examples of *late style*. If you're a footballer you retreat to mid-

field, so I'm trying to work out what the equivalent is. Loosely, there's the Neil Young model where you just keep doing what you always did, with just as much enthusiasm... Or you can do the kind of distilled, concise summary of the things you were doing before. The very precise, you know, novella, where everything is very pared down... like Philip Roth's *Nemesis*....'

**Prose style
vs. oral
style and
age style**

Kearney jumps in here: 'But you're not the retreator – you reinvent yourself with each book! I can't believe you're going to become a miniaturist.' She links his reference to the 'pared down' model of late style with a quote from critic James Wood in the *New Yorker* about Ishiguro's literary prose style in general: 'Wood said you have "prose of provoking equilibrium, sea-level flat with unseen fathoms below".. I wonder how much rewriting there is to get it down to that.

'As for the flat style with stuff underneath', Ishiguro replies, evenly [audience laughter at this self-deprecating diffusion of language] – I can't say it as well as Wood does – but when I first started to write that's just what came out. And I wasn't aware of it being a style. I just wrote in the best way I could. And it was only when I started to publish, that I started to read these reviews that said things like that, right from the start... Except, it was also apparently quite a novelty that someone with a Japanese background was writing in English, so they tended to use metaphors like a *Japanese pond*, with *carp* [loud audience laughter] – essentially saying the same thing. And I thought: Oh! Maybe this *is* a quality I have in my style. I started to take credit for it. You know, I'd say: "Yes, yes, you have to work very hard to achieve that, and do a lot of rewriting" [more audience laughter]. But to be honest it's just how my voice came out. When I started *The Remains of the Day*, it's the first time I went in *conscious* that that was how

people would see my natural voice: as a quiet surface with these emotions rumbling underneath. And I thought that should also be deployed in the writing – what the stories were *about*. I became *self-conscious* courtesy of the *responses* I got to a thing I was doing *unconsciously*. So *The Remains of the Day* is about someone who wants to keep a very controlled surface and to keep things under the surface, and by implication an English society that wants to do the same thing.'

I presume that, as Ishiguro never used to see his prose this way, he never used to see himself, his self-presentation, in this way either; and yet this characterisation of his prose style is clearly reflected in the way he is presenting himself live – so calmly, with such unruffled demeanour, subtly wry and self-deprecating, yet clearly armed with acerbic wit. It taps back into a seam in other conversations: the relationship between voice, in terms of idiolect, as manifested in vocal speech, and the substance of the writing produced, and how it relates to a sense of authenticity – but now with this new twist: its effect on book reviews and their knock-on effects on reception.

When Kearney 'opens up' the event for audience questions, I am struck that she has at no point asked Ishiguro to read from the novel. I suspect that he must have had a say in this, given his profile, and the obvious weight accorded to this event within the Festival. Could it be that he is self-conscious about how his work is received through readings, or that he prefers that the work is encountered in full on the page? Or does he simply not enjoy giving performed readings, and prefer offering his experience and opinions to the audience in conversation?

I am reminded of J.M. Coetzee, who avoids all live events – particularly those in which he is expected to offer opinions on matters beyond his books – on the basis that it is philosophically important for literature to stand on its own terms (see discussion in Chapter 1, with reference to Peter McDonald’s work.) A decade and a half after Coetzee’s Nobel Prize speech addressing this issue, the idea that any author – particularly one who has been awarded significant prizes like Ishiguro or Coetzee – would not be in high demand to perform a sage-like role at major literary festivals today, is inconceivable, whether or not they are individually comfortable with it. The pendulum of literary culture has clearly swung against Coetzee for the time being; but, as McDonald suggests, his stance can be seen as either a ‘last gasp from a bygone era’ or as a form of radical literary ‘activism’, countering the ‘opinionising that the industry favours’.⁵⁰⁰

A late middle-aged white man from the audience is selected to be the first questioner, and asks earnestly, with an Essex accent: ‘I read *Artist in the Floating World* about a month ago and I’m still savouring it, so I’d like to thank you. What I’d like to ask is everything transitional or if not what is the rock you anchor to?’

Ishiguro pauses, as a few people in the audience titter. ‘In my writing life or my personal life?’ He doesn’t pause quite long enough to allow a response. ‘In my personal life, I’ve been

⁵⁰⁰ See Peter McDonald, p.175 of ‘On Strong Opinions: celebrity authors in the contemporary agora’, *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8:1, 2017, pp.172-5.

with the same woman for 36 years so I suppose I have to *grudgingly* admit she's the rock.'

Kearney hoots at this. 'She's here by the way! You will pay for that!'

Ishiguro smiles a little. 'Since we're in a *literary* context here' – perhaps an exceedingly gentle way to make a point about what he feels audience questions at literary festivals should really be about – 'I think it's hard to find something constant to cling to in my writing life. Martha implied I'm quite *promiscuous* about ... genre... And I don't quite know how you write a novel. It always feels like a strange random series of luck and chance that the last one got finished. But... I think I do have some themes and concerns that I do quite strongly recognise as my own territory.'

A young woman, maybe 18, with glasses, a flowery top and a ponytail, asks in a quavering voice: 'I found your thoughts on genre really interesting, the idea that it's a product of the publishing industry. I wanted to ask whether you ever think about genre when you're writing or if it's something you disconnect from.' 'I do think about genre and it can be quite stimulating', he says, 'but, perhaps I'm quite naïve or silly, but my book tends to be recognised in some genre I wasn't even thinking of...'

An older, white haired man, with long hair and a beard, wearing a collared t-shirt, with a Cornish accent, asks: 'Are you aware of, or do you have any thoughts about, the fact that *Remains of The Day* is used on a business administration course?' Ishiguro had not heard this, but smiles, amused, and

offers a thoughtful response. A smiley woman in her forties with red hair gets the final turn, and asks whether *The Buried Giant* is going to be turned into a film, adding, sweetly, ‘because I really want to see the ogres.’ Unsurprisingly, it’s been optioned already, and Ishiguro offers his view that filmmakers shouldn’t see themselves as translators of books, but should make their own work.

As the event ends, the applause is thunderous. He has been a highly compelling speaker, despite – and perhaps because of – his ‘pond-with-carp’ style of speaking and expressing himself. I enjoyed it, but find myself wishing that the event had included a reading from the new book.

As everyone gets up to pile out, mostly to head to the bookshop to join an anaconda-like book signing queue, I talk to two white women in their mid-fifties who had been sitting in front of me, and are clearly friends. Katherine is from Hampshire and works in publishing, while Sarah lives locally and has a software business and a plant nursery. Katherine speaks of the event in an almost dreamlike tone. ‘He was so self-effacing...’, she says, a small smile playing on her lips, to which Sarah nods, reflectively. ‘And witty!’, adds Katherine. ‘And had this way of talking about serious issues...’

‘Frustrating though’, chips in Sarah, somewhat sternly, ‘because he would talk about themes and then not *illustrate* them.’

‘Right...’, Katherine says, sounding unsure.

**Conversation:
performed
personality;
role of
readings,
reading/book
buying
practices,
event choices**

'Examples from his books!', Sarah explains. 'He'd say something and then not back it up. I like *readings*.'

I ask if they've read his books already, and both laugh their assent, as if it were a crazy question. '*The Buried Giant, Never Let Me Go, Remains of the Day...*', lists Sarah. 'We're big fans of his work – and we've both heard him at Hay before... ten years ago now, when he was talking about *Never Let Me Go*.' I ask whether they think they got something new out of hearing him speak about his new book. 'Ooh yes', Katherine says – 'I'm going to go back and re-read it and some of his old ones!' She laughs.

'Do you think it will *change* the way you read or think about the books, having seen him live?' I ask. Sarah jumps in. 'Definitely - I want to go back to re-read things to see how his comments on his creative process influenced how I read it before – you get an insight into *how* he constructed it.' I ask whether that insight mainly comes from conversation. She replies that readings are important for that too. 'Last year I saw Hanif Kureishi read the first paragraph of his recent book and it was *great*. You've got that... *angry man* [laughs] coming through... so yes.' 'It depends on whether they're a *good* reader or not though', Katherine chips in, 'because not all of them are, are they?' Sarah laughs. 'Some are terrible at presenting their own work, and others are not, so I.... it depends. If you've got a Simon Armitage type, who's poetic, it's great...' Katherine nods at this. 'And I suppose if you go to read a book again, you've got his *voice*...', she says, prompting a vigorous nod from Sarah. 'Yes – if I went to read *Remains of the Day* now I would have his voice in my head while reading it', Katherine says, happily. 'Yes, me too!', cries Sarah. 'So that

does give it a different flavour', Katherine continues. 'A different dimension', Sarah adds.

'Do you usually choose fiction events at Hay?' I ask. 'Well, we're off to Martin Reese next, and Germaine Greer' Katherine says. 'She goes to a lot of the politics stuff, and I go to a lot of the literary stuff', Sarah explains – but Katherine isn't so sure about this characterisation. 'I'd say I do a mixture. I *do* do some of the sciencey ones.' Sarah nods. 'Yeah. I did Gavin Francis last year, about the Antarctic. That was brilliant. But that was great *literature* actually! His ways of describing ice. If you haven't read his book, read it! You know, if you think of all the explorers, writing...' 'Bear in mind, you are a geographer!' Katherine points out. Sarah, sheepish, laughs. 'Yeah. But just describing a landscape as *alien* is like fiction, in a way.' I ask whether they think they'd have discovered Gavin Francis and other writers they've seen if it wasn't for Hay. 'I wouldn't', Sarah says, emphatically. 'I bought the book before I went to see him, because I saw the programme and thought, that looks interesting, so I went to buy the book, read it, and then came.' Katherine takes a different approach. 'I have to say, I'm going to see people that I already know about, so I look at the programme... I suppose I'm coming from a bit further afield, so I have to have more motivation, be more committed to whoever I'm going to see... So yeah, Kazuo Ishiguro, Germaine Greer, Martin Reese – they're all people I'd known of *before* coming to Hay. I think I'm like that with buying books too. I tend to buy known names. Even though I work in publishing, and publishing non-names!'

'Would either of you be interested in going to events that were purely author readings, of fiction or poetry, without the

discussion element?', I ask. Neither look horrified, yet neither look keen either. 'I think you want the discussion actually', Sarah concludes, finally, and Katherine agrees.

In the evening I go along to a Christy Moore concert on the site – part of the Hay programme involves musical events in the evening, after the daytime programme that is mostly filled with spoken words. After such a long day of concentrated listening to words in speech form, it feels like a visceral release to listen to melodic, harmonized lyrics about raving fishermen, goddesses and winter paths, with no analysis, no questioning, no mediating of emotional experience.

**Hay town
at night:
How the
Light Gets
In
contrast,
local
geography**

I realise I haven't eaten and it's late, so I head back into town to find food. I wander past several gastro pubs and festival pop-up stalls and bars. Inevitably, the success of the festival has changed the town of Hay-on-Wye as well as the wider literary cultural landscape; the boost to its economy⁵⁰¹ has caused the place to gentrify considerably. Not quite all, though. On a corner at the bottom of town, I stop at a hole-in-the-wall chip shop – a reminder that not all who live in this town are well-heeled, and that much of life here during the rest of the year is as mundane and ordinary as anywhere else. Hot, greasy and salty, the first one hits the spot. I sit in the dark on a picnic table by the river to eat the rest, listening to the rush of water and the rustle of breeze through leaves.

⁵⁰¹ For more on the economic impact of Hay, see Charlotte Eyre's piece, 'Hay Festival reports £70m boost to local economy', *The Bookseller*, September 12 2018

DAY THREE

The next morning the sun is bright, the air is warm, the lawns on the site glow emerald and lots of people are milling around, drinking coffee and eating pastries. I wander around and speak to a few people.

**Conversation:
local
curiosity**

First I come across Tim, a young guy who seems to be walking aimlessly around the site. He tells me he is 23 and lives in the Valleys an hour away. He has just got here for the first time to check out what's happening, and has no idea what to expect: an indication that it is not just the bookish who come as 'pilgrims' to Hay intent on seeing particular events, but local, curious people too.

**Conversation:
immersion,
silent
reading time,
non-fiction
'talks'**

Dave, 50, from Cheshire, tells me he is a business writer, here with his family, and they've come for a whole week for the last six or seven years and don't plan to stop. 'Hay's like Christmas for us', he says, echoing Tony Benn. 'It's an *immersive* experience, because you're dropped in a field in the middle of nowhere and – we've been to Cheltenham Festival as well, and that's different because you're in a town and you can come and go. Here there's no other things to do, not usually any wifi, and no phone signal. You don't feel like you need to check email or work...' I note this emphasis on an escape from the digital, which seems to be pivotal, for him, to a sense of liminality, perhaps, and to achieving the experientialist aim of being able to devote his complete attention to the experience. 'And you can just throw yourself into this complete range of topics and subjects – I mean, this is rare for me, right now, to have an hour where I'm not at a talk and can actually read.' I

note his use of the word 'talk', rather than 'event', and also wonder how many reader-audience members value silent reading time – *not* talking – as an integral part of the live festival experience.

Not wanting to interfere in that precious hour-long slot for too long, but curious, I ask what he's reading. 'For once, it's fiction', he says, and explains that he only reads fiction on holiday. He doesn't tell me what the book is, though, and I can't see from the back cover. 'I tend to go for science, history, philosophy events – the non-fiction stuff', he tells me. 'My wife goes off to the fiction, my daughter goes to the YA [young adult fiction], and then we get together at the end of the day and talk about it! [upward inflection – he grins, serenely]. And it's just, you know, that week where you sort of have a different type of *life*.'

'And what's the appeal of hearing a writer read from their book live, as part of that?', I ask. 'Well', he muses, 'in terms of non-fiction, there are not so many presenters that read from their books – and I very rarely buy the *books* I go to the talks on either, because they just do presentations. I've just been to a presentation from Carole Black for instance, talking about ill health in the work place... it's something I've got a bit of an interest in. She just did a PowerPoint presentation, basically. And I quite like that. So for me, it's not – it sounds strange saying this at a *literary* festival – it's not necessarily about the books; it's about the *topics*, and you've got experts in their field talking about a topic.' I reflect that Dave is exactly the kind of person who might have been envisaged during Hay's rebranding as a 'festival of ideas'. I thank him for his time.

**Conversation:
anti-fiction;
focus on
question-
asking**

After a bit more strolling, I see a smartly dressed lady with a perfect grey-brown perm and pearl earrings perusing a programme, and ask about her experience. Her name is Diana, and she tells me, in a slightly anxious tone, with an aristocratic accent, that she is from Cheltenham, where she is very engaged in the festival, but is mainly concerned about protecting the gardens there during the festival period; in her view they should just host the festival in buildings. She is at Hay for the second year running, and appreciates how very well-organised it is; how events here start *on time*. I ask what kinds of events she enjoys going to. 'Well I – *don't* read *fiction* [decisive]. I think humans who sort of live life are far more interesting than someone else's imagination of what, er, life is about. It's their *perception* of life. Now I've worked at CAB [Citizens Advice Bureau] for 14 years, so I've *seen* life, and no one needs to tell *me*, really, what life is about [laughs lightly]. And today, um, I have a scientific background, you know, and I've been to see... could we recreate a mammoth. I've just been listening to someone who survived as a Jew, Auschwitz, and someone asked a question which *I* wanted to ask, but having gone through the lecture I thought no I *can't* ask the question, but then *he* asked the question!' I made a commiserating noise, and asked what draws her to attend talks at live events like this rather than reading books about those same subjects. 'Well, I went to that event today to ask him the *question*. *I* was going to ask the Israeli-Palestinian question: that was my motive. I *don't read* about the war.'

I am fascinated by this admission – that, essentially, her primary motivation for going to a literary festival event was to have her own voice heard publicly while asking a particular political question, about which she clearly felt strongly and yet

did not read – to the point that it was frustrating for that intended question to have been pre-emptively asked by a ‘competitor’ in the reader-audience – and that, whatever answer was eventually given to the question by the author-performer, it was of negligible importance to her in comparison. This brings home to me the value that some reader-audience members clearly allot to the Q&A session, as the most direct element of interactive participation in the live event. The reversal of power relations involved at this point, and the opportunity for any reader-audience member to contribute, is a democratic gesture, and it is this element in particular that, to me, makes the event comparable to a Habermasian public sphere, as Giorgi suggested: a rare phenomenon in the context of an era defined by fractured, mediated narratives about politics and society and by increasingly digitalized interactions.

**Conversation:
long-term
festival-
going;
marital
arrangements**

At a picnic table, looking at *The Telegraph*, I see an elderly man, and find him happy to talk to me. Clive tells me that his wife has been to every single Hay Festival but one, and he’s been coming too since 1989. They live in a local village, and he’s a scientist who spent his working life in Surrey. He talks about how Hay used to get people like Clinton and brilliant debates chaired by people like Jon Snow, but now it’s ‘declined somewhat’ – by which I assume he means that there are less celebrity names appearing. I ask what he enjoys most about the festival now. ‘Well, it’s a combination of stimulation, time with friends, and... we like the area.’ His wife is the one who’s really ‘interested in *literature*’, he explains; she first came with a local literature club. ‘I think she used to pick up a couple of library books on the way back from school, *daily* [he laughs]. So she’s well-grounded and founded in the literary

and loves all those events.’ Echoing my conversation with Dave, this again reflects the evidence that women in general are more likely to read fiction than men.⁵⁰²

**Conversation:
James Daunt.
Festival
evolution and
bookselling
evolution;
events as
connections;
dislike of
readings**

I’m heading to the green room when I spot bookseller James Daunt, founder of the Daunt chain of bookshops, who would imminently become the new CEO of Waterstones, the largest high street chain in the UK. I ask whether he’d mind speaking with me, and we take a seat in a corner. He tells me that the live literature scene has certainly changed a lot over the course of his career, and feels that this was partly to do with the ‘evolving maturity of bookselling. ‘Difficult as it is to imagine – I’m decrepit and old [he laughs sanguinely], but not *that* old – the London literary scene of my teenage years was a pretty modest thing. Small, small bookshops... you couldn’t swing a cat in them... Then Tim Waterstone started up his chain, and things got a bit bigger, and even my own shops. But they’re *recent*. If you just take the tiny little example of my own shops, we now do one or two events a week, which are particular – you pay your £8, we fit 160 odd people in... we started doing that, probably only 15 years ago, relatively recently. No-one else was really doing it then. We had fantastic authors because they were our customers as well, like Michael Palin – big, big names – and it slowly, slowly built. And I remember when we’d do one a month, and even that was quite a struggle... Now you put it online, 150 people snap up your tickets, and bang: you’re done.’

⁵⁰² See, for instance, S J Tepper, ‘Fiction reading in America: Explaining the gender gap’, *Poetics*, 2000, Vol 27:4, pp. 255-275
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304422X00000036>. See also Driscoll (2014) on the idea of the ‘literary middlebrow’, including literary festival culture, as being feminized.

I ask why he first wanted to start doing events. 'I'm an incredibly selfish bookseller', he says, smiling mischievously. 'I simply do my own bookshop purely for myself... and we booksellers love meeting authors! And it's about giving our customers access to the authors too. If you're an average reader, you read an author's books... and you're quite *intimately involved* every night with this person, and you might only read about six books a year, so these are people you're deeply *connected* with, and that's why I'm talking about this evolving maturity. I don't know when you first came to Hay, but it wasn't this big and expensive! [laughs] It was a little field. It's a bit like the way that the Daunt Books events have gone from 20 people to 150; Hay has become this extraordinary thing. And then there are these other smaller festivals.... now they're everywhere you turn.'

Are people's connections with the books much deeper after encountering the author at a live event?, I ask, and are they much more likely to buy the book? He tells me there is an impact on book buying, and that he was surprised to find, when he began running events, that the impact extended long beyond the book being presented. 'As a retailer, when we started running these events... we found we would sell a lot of copies of that book. And then we would sell the *next* book, when we hadn't done an event about it at all, and go way beyond the number of people that came to the initial event. So that was a strange thing.' It is also about authors 'learning to put the effort in', he feels. 'Authors who work *hard* do *better*. I think that. Of course you can be an absolute swine, and either be very bad or obnoxious or terribly shy, and succeed – but nevertheless if you do work hard people seem

to latch onto that and there is clear correlation between that and book buying.'

I ask how, in his opinion, hearing an author read from their book affects the ways readers then read them and think about the author. 'I think there are lots of things going on. There is definitely the celebrity thing going on. But for the *thinking reader*, I think, to be able to put a face to that author, also to be able to pigeonhole them – as you know, we can pigeonhole everybody very precisely by their social group, and that does give you a little bit of a background. You know, I would read Rachel [Cusk]'s book rather differently having met her... You *do* want to *know* who the author is [definite]. A Russian book I read recently, I thought it was a very, very masculine book, but halfway through I realised it was written by a woman, and that did slightly *change* it [reflective]...'

'But it's... it's also the ability to share and *talk* with others', he continues. 'In Daunt Books we run an absolutely batty thing called the walking book club...40-80 people go for a walk for a couple of hours on the Heath and discuss a book. The walking bit of it works because people can split up and move around... I think what's going on there – and we're selling lots of those books, way beyond the number of people going on a walk... so I think it's giving people an *arena* in which to discuss and discover. I think that's the thing with a literary festival – there's so much going on – so much you can discover, and we find things we would never normally do.' He is talking about curation now, I reflect, and it is revealing that Hay's curation serves to influence booksellers' ensuing curatorial practices in

their shops,⁵⁰³ as well as reader-audiences who are participating in the Festival.

I ask about live readings from books at events, as distinct from conversations, and the effect that they have on people in the audience. 'I'd personally be very curious about this', he says, frowning in concentration. 'We don't do signings, which I regard as – I don't know, I'm very purist about it, and I don't know why... If you meet an author, and have the conversation, that's what you do – but without the talk, I don't get it. Signing queue, signed, gone, boom. But obviously other bookshops... they do it everywhere, and claim successful "events", but to my mind that's not an event; there's *nothing engaging* about it, it's simply a signing... Events are about getting people *involved*... So I was coming onto saying I will *never* do a fiction reading.' I raise my eyebrows; I had not expected this. 'I figure all my customers can read', he explains. 'I know people can do poetry enormously successfully but we *never* do fiction. If we can get two or three serious authors in to discuss ideas, we do that, but we *always* try to stop them reading.' I ask whether this is because he thinks they tend to read badly – but he shakes his head. 'Again, because I'm so *purist* about this... even the great readers – like Julian Barnes reads beautifully – but I don't *get* that. I don't *want* to hear him read his novels. I'd like to get him into talk about it, but just... this interminable reading that goes on, I don't get it.' I ask whether he feels attached to the practice of silent reading as being the heart of literary culture, and perhaps protective of it. 'I *do* think that.

⁵⁰³ See Ann Steiner, 'Select, Display, and Sell: Curation Practices in the Bookshop', *Logos*, 28(4), pp.18-31, 2017

And I'm arrogant enough to say that, with my own bookshops, I do my shops for me!

I ask what he thinks about the more performative author readings, like Will Self's, for example. 'Well there are exceptions for whom I would have a reading. And Will Self is one, absolutely – I know I'd be getting something extraordinary. But that's a *performance*. It's also about his style of writing. But... I've sat through things that just *reek* with boredom. And I, always, for myself, want to save myself from that.'

Given his views on performed readings, I am curious to hear how he views audience questions. 'You have to be very disciplined', he says, diplomatically. 'The 20 min long question which is really all about themselves, how do you turn that off? We all have our own strategies... But when you get a *good* question, and the conversation *ignites*, I think for the audience, it adds a huge amount to the evening. And there's something about just connecting authors directly to readers that's very – it should be what bookshops aspire to do.'

One of the most striking things about this conversation, for me, was Daunt's vehement personal distaste for live readings by authors, even those whom he reveres, based on his admittedly-purist sense that the essence of reading is a private pleasure to be experienced silently; and yet his sense that there is a profound impact and value to the experience of encountering an author in person, including for interpreting and valuing their texts. On the part of audiences, he allots value to the visual 'pigeonholing' of authors through live events – a form of socio-cultural evaluation of their personas –

but he does not seem to allot value to the role of their vocal qualities, or the sound and rhythm in the interpretation of a text through their performed readings. Like Jo Glanville, he is clear about his preference for silent reading as the foremost mode of experiencing literary texts.

**Event:
Waterstones
fiction
debuts.**

First on my event itinerary for the day is a panel on fiction debuts, chaired by Chris White, and featuring Kevin Maher, Taiye Selasi and Gavin Extence. White explains that the event is in association with Waterstones, for whom he is a fiction buyer, and the three authors had been selected by a panel of Waterstones staff as part of the 'Waterstones 11': a list of debut novelists they rate, and commit to promoting in their stores for 11 months of the year, leaving December for Jamie Oliver and the Christmas crew. The books are all quite different; according to the programme, 'Maher's lyrical and funny *The Fields* tells of an interrupted adolescence in 1984 Dublin'; Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* is 'the story of the simple, devastating ways in which families tear themselves apart'; and Extence's *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* is a funny and heart-breaking tale of an unexpected friendship, an unlikely hero and an improbable journey.' White begins by linking the three novels in terms of the theme of family, and inviting them each to introduce their book with that angle. They are then prompted in turn to answer questions about their characters and how they were conceived; how they began writing their novels; and whether character or concept came first.

Extence, speaking somewhat hesitantly, with a tense-looking shoulders, says that his novel started with the character of Alex, specifically his voice. He describes how he had already been writing a different novel for 18 months, realized it was

bad, abandoned it, and started this one having learned valuable lessons about writing. He also revealed, with a quick look out to the audience, that his wife supported them financially during all this, and grins shyly.

During the audience Q&A, a middle-aged woman tells Extence she 'wanted to adopt Alex', and asks whether there will be a sequel; he answers that he's very honoured, but 'frankly' he thinks that 'if any more weird things were to happen to Alex' it 'wouldn't be credible' – and he imagines him in future as a very boring particle physicist. This prompts appreciative audience laughter. Another woman starts asking a question of Extence and then remembers that she had actually been referring to Kevin Maher's novel, and then realises that she'd misheard the place name that she was trying to ask about anyway, stutters, and apologises for wasting everyone's time. She clearly hadn't given any real advance thought to the question, despite it being asked so publicly, and had just felt moved to speak her thoughts aloud. Kevin Maher kindly jumps in with a related comedy anecdote to make her feel better.

I am surprised that, again, like the Ishiguro event, there are no readings from the novels during the event, either requested or proposed. I suppose that, with a panel of three, this would eat into the hour-long time slot. But I wonder whether this is the result of a brief from Daunt, as Waterstone's new owner, or if it was White's own choice.

I find the three authors afterwards, and the others have to dash off, but Extence is keen to have a chat about his experience. I'm interested to hear his perspective; while he

**Conversation:
author Gavin
Extence. New
discovery of
live
literature as
an author-
performer**

spoke very well, engaged the audience and made them laugh, he didn't come across as a natural public speaker, at ease with a big stage. He tells me he's done a few small events so far, but this is the first that 'feels like a festival with a site and tents and stuff'. I ask how he's found presenting his novel at live events and whether it has changed the way he thinks about it. 'It hasn't changed the way I think about the novel, I don't think', he says, but 'it's a part of being a writer that I just hadn't thought about *at all* and it's come as a bit of a surprise, how much there's been of doing bits of public speaking... it's a really, really *nice* part of the experience actually, because writing's a very solitary experience, obviously, so having that interaction, having someone actually *talk* to you about your book, is just a very, very nice thing when you've spent so long doing it.'

I ask how he finds the audience questions; he grins. 'The oddest one I had was in an event at Waterstones in Covent Garden, and it was the usual thing of a ten-minute reading and then questions, and this guy's hand shot up immediately at the front, and there were about 15, 20 people there, and he said: I notice from your blurb that you're from Sheffield. I used to live in Sheffield; have you ever been to Chubby's kebab house? That was a random one! The questions tend to cluster around the same things, in interviews as well as at events, but... it doesn't actually feel that repetitive. It feels quite new every time.'

The whole process of doing events, he says, has made him 'more conscious of the people who are actually reading and buying the book, which is nice – it's slightly daunting as well, especially while you're writing the second book, that there's this expectation... you're not in a void any more, but these are

the people who liked the book, and if they *really* like the book, it's wonderful, but also like, I've got someone who I've got to *please* [laughs]. So it does make me think slightly differently about the writing, but it's something that can be switched off, and *needs* to be switched off.'

I wonder how he's found reading excerpts of his novel aloud, at this and other events. At first, he says, it was 'the hardest thing, because – reading aloud feels like a really strange thing to do, especially to an audience – but I really got thrown in at the deep end with that. I did a thing in London – it's called The Book Stops Here and it's a sort of, um, literary night that's in a jazz club, and essentially they bring in authors... it's in a little bar called the Alley Cat, and it's really good [enthusiastic grin] – they have authors up on stage reading for ten minutes, and that's all it is, there are no questions or anything, and that was the first time I had to read aloud from the book, and I was just put on the stage with a light on my face so I couldn't see the audience [swallows, a little nervously at the memory], and it was quite helpful in a way, because it was just being thrown in the deep end, and like, *get on with it*, and after that it felt very normal.'

He smiles at something he's thought of. 'There was actually an audiobook as well, and that really helped, because I listened to the audiobook, a couple of times before reading for the first time, and that – it gave me the rhythm of how to read it' [reflective]. It's strange, because when you're writing you don't necessarily know *how to speak it*, in a way that works.' I had not previously imagined this as a dimension of live literature: an author learning how to perform their text, for an event, from an actor's recording. 'So, the actor Joe Thomas

read the audiobook – from *The In-Betweeners* and a few other things – and he’s just got the most *fantastic* comic timing with it. And that hardest thing is, your impulse is to read very, very *quickly*, and you have to fight against that, and really, *really* slow it down so people aren’t lost. And, you know, if you’re doing dialogue, there’s separation and things like that.’

I suggest, gently, that he doesn’t sound like he feels naturally inclined towards performing. He agrees with this vigorously. ‘No I’m not inclined to it, in the sense that – I don’t naturally like being the centre of attention, I don’t like being on a stage... I don’t *particularly* like public speaking – er, but it, it feels slightly different, because... it probably goes without saying that the events tend to be very *friendly*, and informal in a sense, and there isn’t this expectation that you’re going to perform something seamlessly, that there’ll be a certain amount of hesitation and bumbling and everything else – and I think people actually respond to that, because it’s... it’s just a *human* thing. And I think once I was aware of that it became much easier. And it helps as well that... I like talking about books and I don’t find the experience of talking about my book dramatically different to that... like a discussion you’d have with a friend about a book, that’s how it feels, really.’

He confesses, then, that he had been to ‘zero literary events’ before appearing in one. ‘I was very superstitious about them’, he says. ‘Lots of people, aspiring writers, go to a lot of events, trying to find out about the business, hearing authors they love and everything like that, but I was *really*, sort of, dead set against it... I’m not superstitious in any way, but it felt like the sort of thing that I was doing in the privacy of my own home, and until I’d got something that I was really happy with, I

didn't want to think too much about the actual publishing side of it.' Now that he's been to some events, while at festivals, he's found them '*really, really* interesting... It is just interesting hearing other writers *speak!* [revelation] Because it's not a natural situation to be in. You work on your own and... I hadn't had any particular exposure to just *talking* to people *about writing* before. And finding about what people do, how things differ and what's the same – those things are really useful. And writers talking about their own insecurities – that's lovely as well [smiling] – because you get this, like, feeling that I'm not the only one who feels like I'm just winging it.... So yeah, having interactions with readers and writers are what festivals are all about, and it's a very... *fulfilling* experience.'

**The book
signing
ritual; A. C.
Grayling;
Francis Plug**

After a coffee and a walk around the busy site, I head over the book tent to browse the books on offer – all works by author-performers at the Festival, and there are plenty to stock a giant tent. It is quite busy with other browsers, and is bifurcated by a long queue of people waiting in a queue in front of a table where A.C. Grayling, the renowned philosopher, is signing his new book, *The God Argument*. A lot of them have short conversations with him – probably asking him to make their copy out to someone, who might be them, and telling him that they enjoyed the event, and perhaps that they have read his previous books. I mull over Daunt's comment about being befuddled about reader-audiences' desire to get books signed. I have always felt similarly about this before – but being here at Hay, and seeing so many people engaged in the practice of signing, which takes place after every single event, I reflect on it anthropologically. The signing process is a kind of ritual – a ritual that forms part of

the staged event; it not only follows the staged event directly, but it is common for the chairperson or host to invite reader-audiences to go and buy the books and get them signed before the staged event finishes. The ritual is clearly intended to induce more people to buy copies of the new book – usually a hardback. And the ritual requires significant commitment of time as well as money when the queues are long, as they always are for signings after the bigger Hay events. In return for that commitment, the ritual enables the reader-audience member to take away a physical book that acts as a memento of the event, with a bespoke signature on it from the author-performer that acts as a testament to the reality of the experience, and to the connection that the event has forged between them. The ritual also enables reader-audience members to engage in a direct conversational encounter with the author-performer, in close quarters, elevating them from being simply an anonymous member of the audience to being an individual, who is named and directly addressed by the author-performer, and to somebody whose words – be they a form of thank you or explanation about a connection with the work – might resonate personally with the author-performer and be remembered by them, and vice versa. In future, back home, the signed book will sit on the reader-audience's bookshelf as a visible reminder of the ritual and event.

The book signing ritual was explored in a smart autofictional novel, *How to Be a Public Author* (2014) by Francis Plug: a pseudonym for Paul Ewan, in which Plug – the not-yet-published-author protagonist, desperate to break into the literary scene – tracks a list of Booker-winning authors around multiple literary events, not to attend the events themselves, but for the sole purpose of getting the authors to sign his copy

of their book afterwards – which he never purchased on site – and to force them, in the process, to respond to his off-beat, often drunken description of his own authorial persona. The novel ably conveys the oddness of this quasi-celebrity-stalking pursuit, while also revealing the depth of meaning it has to Plug, by functioning as a tangible link between a distant-seeming writerly ambition and its ‘real’ manifestation in established literary culture.

I move a little closer to A.C. Grayling, whose signing queue is almost over now, curious about what people are saying to him as their copies are signed. A few thank him for the event, and give him their names, and one woman tells me she enjoys all his books. Then the last woman in the queue comes up to him, offers her book to him, and says: ‘I just want to ask you, how can you be so sure about what’s come before the big bang?’ He begins to reply, but she cuts in: ‘Ah, but we can’t really know can we, so isn’t it really just about a step of belief either way? And if so, don’t you wonder how your life might have new meaning with faith in God?’ He explains his contrary point of view further, and gamely allows her to continue with a back and forth for several minutes, smiling all the while. She has clearly waited to go last in the queue so that she can have this out with him without being time-pressured by the person behind – and she is so intent that it appears that she genuinely believes that, in this moment, right after Grayling’s big event, she might cause him to hold up his hands, in a gesture of revelation, and tell her that yes: she’s absolutely right, he hadn’t thought of that, there might well be a God after all, and so he must home, rewrite the book he has just sold to everybody, and refund their money. After several minutes, as it becomes clear that she won’t desist in her efforts, he thanks

her repeatedly for her interest and her questions, and gets up from the table, not turning away from her, but backing away slowly, still smiling, as she keeps on going, before finally accepting that the exchange is finished. I speak to Grayling about this, briefly, and he appears utterly unfazed by it, remaining wholly genial. He likes, he tells me, that people feel engaged enough by his work to want to debate these things. I reflect that such a discursive approach to the signing ritual is highly unlikely to be directed at an author-performer who has just presented a book of fiction, since no book of fiction works as an 'argument' in this way – and perhaps it would be most likely to happen in response to a literary event about atheism – but even so, the encounter highlights for me the sense that reader-audiences have of the potential impact and power of the signing ritual.

**Conversation:
Gaby Wood,
chairperson,
sponsor
paper's Books
Editor.**

On my way back to the green room, I spot Gaby Wood – *The Telegraph* books editor, and chairperson for multiple events this festival – eating a bite of tapas for lunch at the corner of the Spanish bar on site. I ask whether she'd mind me joining her and telling me about her experience of live literature. She begins by explaining the background to *The Telegraph's* sponsorship arrangement with Hay: she has a good relationship with Florence, she says, but they are quite careful in terms of programming and respect a 'Chinese wall' – though he does her to chair a few things. I ask how Hay alters the Books section of the paper. 'It's nice to have focus!', she says. 'A kind of *celebration*. I really like putting together that supplement for the first Hay weekend because it's – a *celebration* of who's at Hay, but for the whole country.' Supporting Hay, she says, sends a 'signal, not just about books, but about culture generally, and ideas... it's a way of saying to

the world, we really *care* about this stuff. And it's worth giving some money to, in a world where money for culture is diminishing...' She goes onto admit that it was also about the paper getting a competitive advantage in books coverage: 'what I found when I first arrived, say a book was coming out in April and you wanted an interview with the author. The author had committed to giving his first interview to *The Guardian* because he was coming to Hay, and this was all tied up. So the publishers will delay publication to coincide with Hay, so you can have serial rights, you can have an interview, you can have a live appearance, you can do it all together... The paper that sponsors will get the whole lot. I realised, well, this is a kind of *power!!* [pause] They're able to, what's the word – *skulk* the presentation of a book before it arrives in the world.' I too am surprised now by the degree of behind-the-scenes triangulation between the press, publishing and the Festival, well in advance of books' release into the public domain.

I ask what Wood thinks about Hay's diversification from literature to ideas and the perceived focus on celebrity. 'I don't agree about the celebrity thing', she says, decisively. 'The only celebrities here really are the people entertaining in the evening... The definition of celebrity is basically someone who's on TV. If we're saying Salman Rushdie or whoever is a celebrity then it's kind of a pointless phrase. Because no one would say that they are ineligible to attend a literary festival!'

She mulls over the link between fiction and non-fiction events. 'But I have to say, in terms of fiction vs non-fiction, fiction is *incredibly hard*... to represent *live*. Very hard to *talk* about.' I recall Alex Clark outlining a similar perspective on event

chairing. 'Novelists are on the whole quite *bad* at talking about their work. And on the whole there aren't *that* many questions about it – how did you write this novel, why did you write this novel?, *oh well it just came to me* – you know... – and I've chaired millions of them, and Peter often puts novelists together for the simple reason that, usually, it's likely to be more interesting having novelists talking together rather than a conversation between you and a novelist, who doesn't necessarily *want* to talk about their novel because they just want to *write* them. And also you don't get the audience numbers... People are *more* interested in hearing a story told live about non-fiction than they are about fiction. There *may be* masses of people reading fiction, but they just want to *read it!* You know? ... In books pages it's the same... non-fiction is easier to review, because you can talk about the subject matter, and it's very easy to illustrate, and fiction is almost impossible... and on the whole, readers want to know: should I read this book or not? If it's fiction. Whereas with non-fiction they'll be perfectly happy just to read the review because it's an interesting story. Someone stands up and tells you the story of, you know, a great escape, that's interesting regardless'.

She eats a couple of *patatas bravas*, and I feel guilty about intruding on her meal and causing it to get cold. I apologise for interrupting, but she just shakes her head: 'This is going to sound contradictory to the whole idea of a literary festival', she says, 'but it is fundamentally *unfair* on a writer to expect them to be able to present their work. I think. You know, they're not the same practice. At all. And the person who's best at writing is not necessarily going to be the best at presenting.... Now, most writers do know that they're

expected to do that, so they practice, but they don't necessarily do it all that well... but those things are really *changing*... It's really significant, the specific moment we're in now: if people want to have books published and sold they have to enter a completely different game. It's a different *job*.' She reflects further. 'I've actually been surprised *here* though at how *good* people are at reading their own words. But I – don't think it's a skill everyone has. And I don't think it's necessarily reflective of the way they *hear* it, either; it's not always what they're hearing when they're writing.' I'm intrigued by this apparent change of perspective during the conversation: a pre-existing assumption that writers are inherently likely to perform readings badly, contradicted by an observation that, in fact, at Hay, they haven't.

I ask her view on whether the increased popularity of live literature is connected to the rise of the digital. 'It's hard to tell...', she says. 'It seems to make sense that people want some sort of *real* human contact, the more *vicarious* things feel through digital media.... But I don't *think* that the more digitally people read the more deprived they are. And it's not as if seeing a writer in person is that great; it depends who they are!' She finishes her food, reflects some more. 'But I do think that, if you go to a *really* great live event... you *don't* know what's going to happen. [Definite tone; pause] And you have the *feeling* you don't know what's going to happen. And that's the reason very few of these things are *just* readings... One of the *most* exciting things I've *ever* seen here was two years ago, a debate between Rowan Williams and Simon Russell Beale, about faith in Shakespeare. And there they were, two people, from two completely different

backgrounds, with different experiences of Shakespeare...that conversation couldn't have happened any other way, and it was happening *there*, in front of you, *live*! So, you know. That can be really exciting.' I'm intrigued by this view of the value of liveness – echoing Hahn's suggestion that the conversational element adds to it by being unpredictable, and derives from interpersonal chemistry as well as ideas.

I ask Wood about the audience Q&A sessions at festivals. 'You do always worry you're picking on the wrong person' she grins, 'and if you'd asked the person next door you'd have got a much better question. And if you're chairing an event with more than one writer, people will only ask questions to one of them and you'll have to try to find someone interested in asking something to the other one... People like to have their *say* [cautious], and they're entitled to! [laughs]... Usually they're very nice, like: *I love your work or I really enjoyed that*. But the whole point of leaving so much time for that, you know, fifteen minutes – a good quarter of the event – is that they continue the discussion.' In terms of fiction, she continues, reader-audiences tend to be interested in process: 'people genuinely want to know how this magical thing got produced. And the questions that will lead to that are inevitably quite limited. And the answers are almost quite inevitably unobtainable [laughs].' Once again, I note how similar her views on this are to Clark's – how both these chairpeople consider the fiction events that they present to be inherently problematic.

I ask whether any of the events she's been involved in have changed her relationships with particular books. She puts her head on one side. 'That's interesting. I don't know. Maybe...

[musing, reflective] Maybe only when it's *bad*! The only reason I'd say it *hasn't* changed my view is that I usually enter the events I chair very well-disposed towards the books. So, if it were a positive reaction, that wouldn't actually be a shift. But sometimes people can be very pompous. I mostly put middle-aged men in that category. For me, seeing them live doesn't help me. I would rather not know that they self-absorbed, pompous old farts, narcissistic writers – and writers *are* narcissistic because they have to spend a lot of time on their own... I just mean, if their work is really good, it shouldn't matter.' I nod. This goes to the issue of authenticity again, and the role of the authorial persona in the interpretation of fiction. In literary cultural terms, is it better for the pompous narcissist who is widely considered a 'great writer' to be judged on the basis of his fictional texts and not his personality – or might an embodied insight into that personality, as Daunt suggested, add something meaningful to the interpretation of his fiction? Or, as Coetzee might have it, should all fiction be best judged on its 'own terms', via individuals' silent, private engagements with the text on the page?

I go back to Wood's earlier point that live events have become an increasingly core part of the role of the writer now, and ask: does she see a risk that the most confident or pompous writers get more stage time, which could be damaging for the best writers? 'I *do*! I do think so!', she says. 'I think the truth of the matter, the *secret* truth of the matter, is if you're really really *really* good at this, you're probably not spending enough time on your own in a room. You know? And the really good writers are probably too screwed up – I mean, you *hope* they're too screwed up – to stand up and explain to everyone how great they are! You know, we can't be on the side of that

view, because we're supporting this. But the truth is, if you're really *really* good at this, at writing, then send someone in your stead. The French writer Romain Gary, do you know about him? He had a double. He wrote a book which won the Prix Goncourt, and you can't win the Prix Goncourt twice, so he wrote a whole load of other books under someone else's name, he won it *again*, and no one knew until quite the end that he was both people. And when the second person was sent to do the tour, he sent them material to perform. And I think, if we're going to do more events like this, we should treat it like theatre! I mean, there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't have a double who's better at performing!

Intrigued by this – and recalling Stan and Kira's view about Toni Morrison vs an actor reading her audiobook – I ask Wood whether she thinks it makes no difference whether the author is performing, or an actor, as long as the performance is good. 'Well', she says, mulling this over. 'I like writers, lots of my friends are writers, and I spend a lot of time with writers... *But*. I don't think the *authenticity* is in their *person*. You know. The *authenticity is on the page* [revelation].... But it's not usually *about* a reading – it's about what they've got to say for themselves. If it was just a reading, then of *course* an actor would be better.' This authenticity notion again. I resolve to reflect on it and interrogate it further once the festival is over.

**Event: Andrew
O'Hagan and
Rosie Boycott.**

I head off to see novelist Andrew O'Hagan, a Scottish writer in his late 40s, in conversation with veteran journalist Rosie Boycott, in the big BBC Arts tent. They're going to be talking about his new novel, *The Illuminations*, which explores ideas of love and memory in the context of the war in Afghanistan. It is a novel I've read recently and admired. The tent is packed,

mostly with grey heads but a significant number of younger people too. O'Hagan's body language is alert but relaxed, and he seems to be very comfortable on stage. Among other things, they talk about how the women from his childhood informed one of his characters, Maureen.

'Anne is your heroine' Boycott says, in conversational but clearly performative mode – introducing the character to the audience yet addressing O'Hagan directly. 'And she's an extraordinary character: a photographer slipping into dementia, next to her neighbour, Maureen...' O'Hagan cuts in. 'It surprised me that Maureen was the first character to speak in the book, actually...' – and Boycott cuts back: 'It surprised me too! So why was she?' 'Growing up in Scotland', O'Hagan replies, 'I was conscious that in every aspect of life there growing up in those council estates there was *always a Maureen*, though she was usually called Isa – the Scottish short form for Isabel – or Barbara. [he grins at the audience, who burble laughter] And even to this day, my mother will say 'Barbara said that people who listen to Radio 4 have got too much time on their hands' [audience laughs more loudly, in a knowing way] And she said when my book came out: "By the way, that Maureen [long pause]... Who was she *based* on?" [Audience giggles. Another pause.] "Imagination, you know!" [He adopts a tremulous, high-pitched tone for imitating his own response, which prompts more laughs] But she was based on many women I grew up with, including my mother – the kind of madams of the street who knew more than you could ever know about matters of the human heart and weren't slow to tell you where you were going wrong, which was all the time... That kind of person has always interested me... there's always a kind of Maureen [audience hmms, intrigued.]

Muriel Spark is famous for her own Maureens: the slightly bitter, knowing too much, but having their own back story that is revealed...'

'Now let's come to Anne', Boycott proposes. 'Is she based on someone? Because my father had dementia, and it was heart-breaking, being reminded of those details.' O'Hagan nods, seriously. 'That took years, Rosie. Readers are very sharp.' He glances out at the reader-audience, as if to say: *I'm talking about you*. 'I take four to five years to write a novel, because you've got to respect the readers' imagination. You hand them the arithmetic when you're writing a book. If you're trying to write well, you're trying to give them what they need to *create the book in their heads*. That's where the reward comes from reading a good book – you're involved in the *doing* of it. For me the first year was spent with people with dementia, just noticing things change every day, and over the period of months and years, as in the book, how they're able to speak, how they're able to express themselves – and disinhibition comes into it – and I had to have that mapped so carefully so that every time you come back to Anne she is slightly different on her journey through this illness.'

This conversation already reveals an author who knows exactly what the audience wants in this kind of literary performance: he's cracked jokey imitations that make them laugh; he's set the scene of his own childhood on a Glasgow council estate that gives insight into his experience of working class characters such as the one being discussed, for those who want to know more about who he 'really' is and his autobiography; he's also put those characters into perspective within literary fiction, while giving the audience a reference to

a great Scottish writer, Muriel Spark, whose work has similar tonal elements and characters to his own, giving the event a broader scope and revealing his literary influences and knowledge; he's talked about the craft of writing, in particular the judicious omission of certain details to make a book more rewarding for readers; and he's made the case for the quality of his own new novel, which he's promoting, by illustrating how extended research and reflection shaped the characterisation and 'authenticity' of the story – all in the space of a couple of minutes, and in an easy, conversational tone, making regular eye contact with the audience, who remain rapt.

For a reading, O'Hagan chooses a tense scene featuring the character of Luke, Anne's grandson, when he's out fighting in Afghanistan: an apparently separate storyline that becomes interlinked during the novel when Luke returns and tries hard to forget his memories, just as he's helping Anne to rekindle hers. It's a provocative scene to have chosen, not least because of the density of swear words. 'This is during a firefight, an unexpected firefight, just on a ridge in the middle of Helmand', O'Hagan explains by way of an introduction.' [He leaves long pause here to indicate the start of a reading.]

'Docherty at some point came up behind Luke and told him he thought the major was pretending to be asleep. He was inside one of the vehicles crouched down.

- "What? Are you messing with me?" [Here O'Hagan sharply changes tone to a fast-paced, intense, panicked anger, marking the start of Luke's part in the dialogue.]
- "He's in the vector." [In contrast, this Docherty character's voice is performed in a much more muted

tone, still fast and urgent-sounding, but quieter, lower, even a little timid – the tone of somebody attempting to sound reasonable, but conscious of the hierarchy and the other man’s anger and dominance.]

- “What? What are you talking about? Get him in here, he needs to support this shit and support the boys.”
- “He threw up.”
- “Are you fucking having me on, leper?”
- “No sir. He’s not well. In seconds the boys would notice.”

Luke knew they would notice and he feared their bottle might collapse if they knew the major was hanging back in the van during the firefight. Yet he knew something was wrong with Scullion and he’d felt it since they left Bastion.

- “Holy fu... Jesus, am I the medicine man for this whole platoon?”, Luke said.
 - “Let’s cover for him, boss”, Docherty said. “It’s been a bad week for him and – we can easily cover it...”
 - “What is it, his fucking *period*?” [He barks this word, prompting uncomfortable audience titters]
 - “It’s gonna be fine, do you just...”
 - “It’s gonna be fine? It’s gonna be fine? *Is* it? I don’t know what binoculars *you’re* looking for Docherty, but mine tell me there’s Terry fuckin Taliban crawling up our fuckin arses right in here.” [Again, the pitch, speed and volume increase.]
 - “It’s fine sir, we’re covered.”
 - “No we’re *not*!” [The pitch of Luke’s narration has risen to its peak here. O’Hagan leaves a dramatic pause, then drops the pitch but increases the pace.]
- “Scullion’s losing it, I’m telling you leper, he’s out the fucking game... Fucking Jesus Christ, he’s supposed to

be up here, commanding his soldiers, he's the CO, he has to be out here – he could be back in the headquarters eating Pot Noodle with the rest of them, like a normal... but he wanted to be involved with my section and he's here, fucking erupting with crap...you're seriously telling me he's sweating his bollocks off in the vector to help with the turbine? It's about the boys!". Luke got on the radio... "... we're out in the open here... we reque... yeah we're out on the open, we reque... we request ur... urgent air listen listen...requesting urgent air fire...'

O'Hagan's pace of delivery gets faster and faster during Luke's radio attempt, each syllable staccato, conveying his utter panic in the situation, causing his language to fracture, in speech, as it is illustrated in the text. He performs this reading in the most performative sense of that word, giving it maximum intensity, reflecting the substance, emotions and drama of the text. He reads with a pace, stress and intensity that are represented in the text and the dialogue – and he has obviously chosen a dialogue-heavy section to perform so as to create a dramatic experience for this reader-audience. He performs the text as if it were a screenplay, not going so far as to vary the accents but giving each person's lines a distinct tone and energy. The swear words take on a new meaning when they're performed here; they seem almost excessive in the text on the page, but here they sound appropriate and vital to the text, particularly when matched by the intense frown on O'Hagan's flushing face. They convey the intensity of the war situation, and the panic of the young soldiers, who in that context would be likely to let swear words fly when under fire. And their furious, dense articulation feels deliciously subversive, somehow, in

the context of the clean, ordered aesthetic of the Hay format and the BBC branding.

**Conversation:
Andrew O'Hagan
and Colm
Tóibín.
Performance,
reading aloud
vs inner
voice,
delivery
style,
emotion;
reinhabiting a
text**

Afterwards, I spot O'Hagan in the green room, talking to the author Colm Tóibín on a sofa over a cup of tea. Tóibín is at Hay to promote a new documentary about his work, following the publication of his novel, *Nora Webster*. I am loath to interrupt, but am too curious about their perspectives, so I tentatively go over to them and mention that I am researching live literature. O'Hagan is intrigued; Tóibín sceptical: 'I don't have anything much to say about *that*', he says. 'It is very interesting, the rise of live literature events', O'Hagan says, kindly. I mention how performative I found his reading, and how much he got into his characters. He smiles in acknowledgment. 'He does that too', he says, jerking his thumb towards Tóibín with a sly grin.

'What?' Tóibín asks, as if mildly put out.

'You create the characters when you're doing a performance, right?'

'Yeahhh....' Tóibín responds, musing. 'You don't want to *bore* people.' He speaks with a dry and lugubrious dead-pan tone, extending his vowels and emphasising key words in a way that is compelling to listen to. 'And if you mumble, you *bore* people, and they come up and say they couldn't hear you and you say – well that's *awful*. You want people to hear you, so you've got to try and speak properly. And if you want people not to be really *bored* and want it to be *over* soon, you've got to try and pick a section that *works*. On its own, dramatically. And if it doesn't, explain the context. And then, yes, if you can use your *voice* dramatically... but, it's dangerous! Because if

you start when you're writing, thinking *oh yes this will sound great when I'm reading it*, then I think it would ruin whatever you were doing there and then in writing.' He's echoing Armitage, here, and I'm intrigued by heightened articulation of the sense that both the writing process and the prose might be 'dangerously' affected by the active anticipation of performing at literary events.

'Yes,' O'Hagan agrees, nodding vigorously – 'it's going from the interior into this open space where it's *echoey*, and it's *performative*, and – I think Colm's right – you've got to *modulate* that very carefully. I remember when I was just starting out, watching *musicians* and how they treated the score, and thinking actually, *that's* probably a more intelligent way to use a piece of fiction that you've written, is to have it there, almost as a score – of course you're reading from it, but you're not really *just* reading from it, you're *lifting* from it – and the analogy rings true for me, that each time it will be different, and these marks on the page will give rise to something fresh each time.' This idea of the literary text functioning as a musical score reminds me of Almond's emphasis on sound and musicality, though his focus had been on rhythm – and also of Le Guin's ideas about the fundamental relationship between sound, rhythm and text.

'The thing is that the work comes from *emotion*', Tóibín interjects. 'It's quite an odd process because there's only one poet I can think of, that's Ian Hamilton, who said that he *couldn't* read his own work, because it had come from raw emotion, and it would *release* raw emotion if he read it out loud, especially for him, because it was all too close to him. It was too *much* for him. And I know the feeling [raised voice,

reflective], not the *too much* part of the feeling, but the feeling of – something you write comes from something that has *mattered* to you. And reading that out loud to an audience, then, is not merely a *performance* of something abstract and distant; it's actually quite *raw* and *close*, and reading it out loud you're – *revisiting* it. Or at least releasing it. And that's quite – afterwards you feel something funny has happened. And if the audience *gets* it, you feel you've actually shared it, or evoked it, or communicated it or done *something* to it that allowed it...' This idea of a re-visitation or release, as an emotional authorial experience that translates to the reader, and is distinct from an actorly performance, gives the notion of the live reading still more layers.

'I'm with Colm on that – against the notion of *recitation*', O'Hagan says. 'People can parrot material, but ... if a reading's gone well it's because I've discovered something *new* about the piece while being on stage... there's a *discovery* in it for me. You know that moment in Hamlet, the advice to the actors to *coin* the thought as you're having it. You know, you don't just – *read* – out loud... that seems to me a missed opportunity.'

I am intrigued by their shared emphasis on finding new qualities in their texts through the act of performatively reading them at live events, even though they approach it differently – and how O'Hagan has now made explicit that he thinks about performance, conceptually, in relation to theatre, which fits with his theatrical delivery style.

I ask whether they have a sense that readers are interpreting the fictional texts they're performing more autobiographically

in a festival context, when the readings are performed alongside on-stage conversations about their lives and work. Tóibín nods, reluctantly. ‘Yeah’, he says, in a dismal tone. ‘But I remember hearing John Banville, who reads very well – he reads in a sort of dry, distant tone, but whatever he does with the rhythm, he brings the *emotion* in. But he read an account of someone recovering from injuries, as a result of a fire, someone who’d been burned, whose skin had been burned, and described the pain and the days, and we all just realised this has *never happened* to *this* man, *he* has not been burned – but whatever he was using, it sounded real and *true*. ... sometimes writers can do it simply by having felt the *emotion* to write the scene, the emotion revisits when you read it out loud. So it doesn’t have to be directly autobiographical to actually *matter* to you.’ This gets back to the idea of authenticity – but authenticity lying principally in emotion, rather than authorial identity.

Recalling Simon Armitage’s idea about the ideal degree of performativity in a live reading being one that allows the words need to speak for themselves, which seems to contrast with O’Hagan’s more dramatic approach, I ask whether, with a flatter style of reading, it might feel for a reader more like the experience of reading on the page than a more actorly performance would do. ‘There are very few prose writers who throw the work *away* when reading’, Tóibín says. ‘There are some poets who do it... But I don’t know any prose writers in particular – I can’t think of anyone [musing] – who deliberately *sets about - not -* giving the audience something from the reading that is *emotional*.’

O'Hagan cuts in here. 'I think there is an example, and it's Margaret Atwood. I'm not sure if it's a decision or the way it is. It has a particular effect on your understanding of the prose. She always kind of pulls all the music *out* of it – for *me*.' I reflect on this; from what I have seen of Atwood reading aloud from her work, she is very wry and dry, though I had 'read' that tone that as reflective of a key characteristic of her prose style and humour. Tóibín laughs appreciatively, conceding, and nods his agreement. 'You feel sort of, if anyone thinks *I'm* going to get you all to *emote*? – we've been *through* that, girls we've *had* emotion', he mimics – clearly with an affectionate reverence for Atwood's spirit. O'Hagan takes this implied political angle a step further, returning it to the text. 'I always think it's a political act in that way: that I'm not *doing* *entertainment*. Bringing you back to the bare concrete experience of these words in this order... it's just a technique; it's as much stylistic effect, I think, as you would be able to distinguish in the work.'

I pursue this line of thought to ask whether, in their view, literary readings are fundamentally different to acting out a monologue or solo show, in the sense that an actor is striving to create a performance. 'Yeah', Tóibín says, reflectively, adding: 'There are times... when some writers do it, it's more *hamming* than acting. And actors listening to *writers*, it's like – oh my God, if you had any idea how *bad* you sound from *our* point of view – technically it's all over the place; you should stick to your day job, sonny. Because of the whole way of using your breath, or...' O'Hagan laughs and chips in: 'You never feel that *actors* think, like, oh my god, *the soul speaks!*' Tóibín grins: 'They *really don't* think that.' He sighs, reflecting further. 'I think that, with a writer reading, you *do* get

something *pure* and *interesting*. Which is, um ... I mean, I did a reading last night, and it's the only funny bit in the book – at least / think it's funny – but someone said to me afterwards, that doesn't read funny on the page, but the way you read it, you give dialogue such a dry sound that it sounds funny out loud, in a way that if you read it, it doesn't. I didn't know that! I thought it was always funny.' I'm taken by this revelation: that, as an author-performer, he has discovered something genuinely new about how his work is being interpreted on the page through performing at a live literature event.

'I think that's really important', O'Hagan joins in. 'And one of the reasons for doing these events, apart from the obvious reasons that authors come and publicise their books and all the rest of it, is that there is an enjoyment in it for a certain kind of author – in *reinhabiting* the work. Because you don't, as a rule, walk up and down your hall, er, *giving voice* to your work.... Or do you? [to Tóibín] Walk up and down the hall reading your own work?'

'Oooh, imagine if that started!', he replies, and they both laugh.

'So this is a nice opportunity to actually go back inside, and you *do* do it differently each time – I think', O'Hagan concludes.

'So, do either of you read out loud when you write, as part of the writing process?', I ask.

'I do, definitely', O'Hagan says. 'I *have to hear* it.'

Tóibín jerks his head to look at him closely, with an incredulous expression. ‘You read it *out loud*?’

‘Yeah!’ O’Hagan laughs, as if it were obvious.

‘Oh I *never* do that’, Tóibín says. ‘Oh my *god*, if I started to do that... I don’t know what would happen!’ [We all laugh.] ‘Do other people do it?’, Tóibín asks O’Hagan, genuinely curious. ‘I don’t know, do they?’, O’Hagan asks, turning to me. ‘Well, I’ve come across a lot of authors so far who say they do’, I offer. O’Hagan nods, as if he fully expects this answer. ‘I *need* to hear it’, O’Hagan reiterates, ‘because you can... sometimes you get too much into a *screen*. Yes, it’s to do with screens... When I was working as an editor at the London Review, some pieces you used to get in and you’d think, oh, the screen wrote that. It was too *enmeshed* in the screen.’ I’m intrigued by this idea that screens might have transformed the writing process for authors, making reading aloud more important than it was before – and also by how wildly opposed O’Hagan and Tóibín seem to be when it comes to reading aloud while writing. The divergence seems to reflect their views about performed readings at events.

‘So you’ve *never* read your work aloud as you’ve written, or as a form of editing?’ I ask Tóibín, to clarify. He leaves a dramatic pause before answering me. ‘*What?* No! I’m too old. And I don’t like my own voice! I don’t – like – my own voice.’ I can’t tell to what extent this is a joke. I conclude that it’s not. ‘But you read very lyrically’, I tell him, having heard him read at an event in the past – and it’s true; he even speaks lyrically in conversation, now, with a very distinct, lilting rhythm, which isn’t just about his Irish accent – and his published prose,

**Conversation:
reader-
audiences.
Event choices,
emotion,
authenticity**

which always love reading, is spare but lyrical too. 'I know. I know!' he agrees. 'It's an *inner* voice.'

It seems, from the author-performers I have spoken to at Hay so far, that there is a marked split between those who read their work aloud as part of the writing process and those who don't. I wonder how many of the latter, like Tóibín, nonetheless link their writing to an 'inner voice' – the phenomenon that the poet Denise Riley has interrogated so thoughtfully. I am intrigued by the way in which Tóibín, despite his initial reticence to engage in a conversation about live literature, became even more involved in it than O'Hagan, – and particularly the sense I got, rightly or wrongly, that Tóibín had only just thought about these issues seriously for the first time, and was surprised to discover that his own practices and approach differed to others. I begin to suspect that this is the case for many authors of fiction, since live literature seems to be so rarely discussed in its relationship to their craft, and is so often characterised as a 'mere' publicity exercise.

I head outside, and chat to a couple of festivalgoers who are wandering down an aisle: Janet and Tim – both about fifty, white, one a lecturer and one an IT consultant. They've attended several events so far – including Lucy Worsley's event, which had the room 'gripped' and led them to buy her latest history book, Sandi Toksvig's lecture on reading which was 'very engaging' as 'she's a good wordsmith', and Michael Palin's event about his new book on Brazil, which was 'disappointing' because they'd wanted more 'stories from the past, about Monty Python', and instead 'just' heard about the

book. When I ask whether they enjoyed hearing authors read from their books, Janet says: 'I think it's very personal to them... it depends how much *emotion* is put into it. If it's something very personal, very funny, I think it really transcends – having somebody reading it themselves, they were there, relating something *they* experienced...' – I note the connection made here between a sense of authentic emotion and an authentic biographical account.

'You might have read the book in advance', Tim adds, 'but you might not get ... there's a lot *behind* the words that they're trying to get across'. In contrast, his comment is more focused on authenticity of interpretation and comprehension.

I ask whether they go to other literary events and festivals. 'Oh, we'd definitely choose a festival like Hay over going to stand-alone literary or book events', Janet says. 'There's so much going on here, and so much choice, it's nice to *be* here, to meet people, and.... I like books! I haven't got a kindle and I don't want one – I like the *touch and feel* of books and I like *people* with books – I like that this festival is *promoting that*. I feel like we're all quite similar minds, and it's nice, you know, to be part of a literary crowd.' This links back to Almond's emphasis on the materiality of books, and I am intrigued by how she links it to the experiential quality of being in the physical, embodied space of Hay. It echoes other reader-audiences' expressed feelings about the value of the place and of embodied co-presence between reader-audience members.

**Conversation:
Simon
Garfield.
Actors and
letters.**

Back in the Green Room, I spot Simon Garfield, and go over to speak to him. Actors Jude Law and Louise Brealey are set to perform historical letters from his new book, *My Dear Bessie*, as part of an event produced by *Letters Live!*: a successful performance enterprise set up by the publisher Canongate. *My Dear Bessie* is based on a collection of wartime love letters that Garfield found in the Mass Observation Archive, between a serving soldier and his fiancée back in England. 'Now it's on stage for the first time!', he fizzes. 'It's just an extraordinary thing... They *did* work really well *on the page*, there's no question. But the minute you get actors to read it... an actor takes it up *seven notches*, and people are in their *thrall*, and you think, this is actually happening live! You'll see – it's just magical.'

I ask him whether he thinks letters, as a form, as opposed to fiction, work particularly well in performance, because the narrator is likely to be giving voice to their thoughts in the way they would speak naturally to the other person. It's a leading question, I know, but I feel sure he will have an independent view. He nods, emphatically. 'Yes. Especially *these* letters. Because they're not written by *famous* people. With an Oscar Wilde letter, he has in the back of his mind that someone may print this, or collect it... But these people weren't famous, the letters were collected by their sons, so they are *absolute raw honesty*. *That's* why they work *so well*. Because you know there's no angle... there's nothing but truth and total commitment to the words as they are there.'

Is an audience likely to get something different from an author reading their own words than an actor, in a fiction context?, I

ask him. 'Yes – if you're Alan Bennett', he replies. 'But if you're some novelist who's a brilliant writer but not a performer, then less so... I would have thought. It's interesting, because in the last ten years there's been an *enormous* transformation I think in the way writers *appear* at events. [pause] I mean, you could say they've become less literary and more performance-based. [pause] So you know, with Simon Armitage and so on are great performers and funny... but it used to often be the case that a famous writer would turn up and read from a novel and not give anything other than what was in the text, and read it in a very flat, monotonous tone... it's kind of a dead event, you know [musing]. And you couldn't get away with that now. *Now* it's about being involved with the audience – everything, the Q&A, and maybe having a chair ask questions first, then putting it out there, choosing the choice bits, you know - *engaging*. All that kind of stuff.

'What do you think is driving this desire for more liveness?' I ask. 'I think there must be an element of... for want of a better word, *fandom* about it', he says. 'And then I think there's just this thing which is – true of live performance in general, beyond literature – which is, because of the internet, now, I think you kind of get the feeling *everyone is seeing exactly the same thing at the same time* on a screen. But a live event is a *unique* event, be it music or... You know, the classic example is how bands used to make all their money from selling albums and now they make it from tours, and that's because people want a *unique event*. And the thing with *Letters Live!*, and we've done about ten or twelve now, is that you know you will *only* get, on that one evening, the likes of Stephen Fry, and Sarah Lancashire, and Jude Law, and everyone else, reading *that* particular letter at *that* particular time. And it'll *never* be

repeated. And it's great! You know, you're there, you want to see what happens. There is a *uniqueness* about *being there...* and also, there's a *participant* thing that we were talking about, that *you* are actually *part of* the event.'

I go along to *Letters Live!* that evening and the performance is sold out, packed – and as electrifying as Garfield had assured me it would be. Jude Law and Louise Brealey perform the love letters with verve, vulnerability and emotion. Afterwards, I go back to the Green Room, queue up for a cup of tea, and find myself standing next to none other than Jamie Byng, Director of Canongate, who tells me to come over and meet Jude Law. 'Oh great!', I squeak.

Surprisingly friendly towards a random student who's just been sprung upon him, Jude Law smiles like a Cheshire cat as I tell him how much I enjoyed the event. I ask him how he finds performing letters compared to, say, a play script. 'A play's written to be *played*, to an audience', he says, 'and what *this* proves is that *anything* – well, not *anything*, but the *written word*, performed with an audience... suddenly some alchemy happens, and it can be potent stuff. It's *really* interesting.' I ask whether he thinks there's something special about the letters, compared to other forms of writing. 'Yes, and *these* ones, they are – it's life and death! Bombs are dropping on them... they're writing, and churning up absolute, guttural... like, *I've got to say this now!*... It's mainlining fucking content, like, *mainlining*, like – no *play* has quite *this* material. It's raw.' I nod. 'There's so much fragility, as well as humour in them...', I suggest. 'Humour's the interesting thing', he cuts in. 'Because we all read stuff, and have a chuckle or whatever... But in a *shared reading*, when people really *laugh* – and once you get a

bit of a laugh [he postures now as if he's on a stage, cracking a joke, and everyone around us laughs]... shared humour is a really *magical* thing.' It is a reminder of how important laughter is in any verbal, embodied performance, as the clearest possible sign, for the performer, of the audience's collective engagement – and how empowering it must be, as an actor, to be assured of being able to summon up such responses. After a bit more chat, they head off for a party at Revel Guest's house. I chicken out of asking for a selfie.

DAY FOUR

**John Le Carré
on stage:
better read or
heard;
literary and
conversational
style**

On my final day in Hay, I head to a headline act in the main tent: John Le Carré (the pen name for David Cornwell), now in his eighties, being interviewed by Philippe Sands – 'his first time at Hay!' Philippe informs the audience – again, a full house, for an event that has long been sold out. Sands pauses for the predicted, vociferous applause, before adding, ' – and he says it's the last' [more laughter]. 'I try to avoid the toils of publicity', Le Carré explains, wryly but gently, in a pristine RP [received pronunciation] accent, his voice soft with age, and yet very clearly enunciated, his tone immediately endearing himself to the audience. 'I do believe I'm better read than heard', he adds, reflectively, alluding to a philosophical critique of the literary festival – and, indirectly, encouraging the reader-audience to buy his books.

Nonetheless, he goes on to deliver a riveting conversation-performance, which does not involve a reading from his new novel, but mostly describes his own life story and the points at which it intersects with various of his novels. This includes anecdotes about his time as a spy, and times when

researching his books took him to dangerous places. He has an uncanny ability to craft a verbal story, apparently impromptu, that keeps the entire audience captivated. His language is simple and conversational, yet evocative and tonally varied; each scene he narrates has a well-paced story arc; and his delivery is quietly confident and easy, and rhythmically and tonally varied, including extended monologues in response to questions, and mingling humour with seriousness.

The understated quality of his delivery reminds me of the way Colm Tóibín described John Banville; but rather than conveying an *emotional* power – the quality Tóibín valued about Banville’s performance – the power Le Carré conveys is, to me, more about an *energy*, a kinetic quality of language and content, delivered with a constant wit, or threat of it, and a tendency to effect a sudden turn of phrase. These combine, with the characters he’s describing – including himself, while negotiating astounding scenarios – to make you feel certain he is about to come out with something else extraordinary any minute, as if it were an everyday occurrence; and that you need to keep your attention fully switched on so as not to miss something.

Le Carré seems to be the personification of literary craft, in a way; his oral narrative has a pace and ‘readability’ as well as an intelligence and complexity that mirror his novels. I feel I would be curious to read his autobiography on the page, now, but that is something he says he will never write. He makes clear that he is, at heart, a fiction writer, and wants to be read as such. So this event, I reflect, is the closest thing I’ll get to reading his literary memoir. And it seems preferable, in fact, especially since now I have had the chance to witness him

speak, and to 'read' his body language and delivery style. The experience will, I'm sure, enable me to vividly remember his stage persona and his way with words, via the embodied experience, when I next come to his fiction. And the event has worked on the level of publicity too, since it has made me want to read his newest book, even though the thriller is not normally a genre I turn to – though Le Carré is one of the few thriller writers whose books have previously enjoyed reading. But I'm not rich enough for the hardback in the Hay bookshop. I am, as ever, grateful for libraries.

Post-Festival reflections

As I wheel my case out of the Festival site and begin the long journey back to the city, I smile inwardly at the recollection of my initial Blyton-esque woodland fantasy of the perfect literary festival. I have had a fulfilling and fascinating experience at Hay – even though it was much more formally organised and commercially-oriented than I'd expected, or than the word 'festival' in its oldest sense might suggest to the uninitiated. The experience of being there did not feel liberating as various music and cross-arts festivals I'd been to that featured more spacious, scattered site design, and unticketed, unsynchronised events, allowing for more spontaneity and a sense of creative disorder, transcending the routine of everyday life. But it did feel unusually 'dense', in the sense of being packed with interesting literary perspectives and texts and ideas and possibilities, and as such it was richly satisfying.

Triangulation of Hay, the publishing industry and the media

My conversation with Gaby Wood revealed the tight triangulation of Hay with the publishing industry and the media, and illuminated the ways in which the economies of publishing shape the Festival's design and feed its growth. Book sales at the big festivals, Hay and Edinburgh, particularly

through ‘conversion’ sales directly after events, have become so significant to the publishing industry that Nielsen Bookscan, has now begun tracking them independently⁵⁰⁴ – a fact that is indicative of the impact of these festivals have on the publishing industry, and on literary culture, which can only increase the motivation on the part of publishers to lobby for their big titles to be featured. I came away with a sense that economics significantly shaped, not just Hay’s curation and programming, but the hyper-efficient design and layout of the space, the precise event synchronisation, the impeccable organisation, and standardized event format. Every single event I witnessed was impeccably run, precisely to schedule. In combination, all these factors can make Hay seem like a giant mechanism of industry control over consumers.

**Experiential
qualities of
Hay for
reader-
audiences**

But reader-audiences I spoke to did not experience Hay that way – myself included, much of the time. They rarely betrayed any concern about the industry influence on Hay, or even awareness of it, and most of them were enjoying the experience – some, like Elsa, euphorically relishing it. And there are experiential advantages to Hay’s precise organisation and layout: they allow the meta-event to flow remarkably smoothly, despite the huge numbers of people present, and a remarkable density of concurrent events – and this enables the whole experience to feel simultaneously animated, collective and peaceful, and – once tickets are bought – allows for a focus on the content of events rather than on logistics. Also, despite the Festival’s internal orderedness, its rural setting, in tents among rolling hills, does create a sense of liminality – perhaps particularly for

⁵⁰⁴ See Cowdrey (2016)

somebody like me, or like Elsa, who has travelled there from an urban environment. The programme, while being curated principally around household names and commercially-promoted writers, was packed with varied and interesting events. And the event format, while being extremely predictable, also worked reliably well; individual sessions rarely lagged or felt baggy, and were almost always engaging in themselves. The quality of the events I witnessed was uniformly high, with almost all conversations and readings being engaging – even if, after a while, the standard formula grew repetitive, and even though I often wished there had been longer readings and more performative experimentation.

But I mull over whether this overview of the reader-audience experience amounts to a grand deception, which I, and other reader-audience members, had fallen for: had we all been lured to this famous festival as part of a giant book publicity and sales exercise in which we had been led to believe we were playing an audiencing role but were actually functioning as customers – like fish emptied into a pond who had been successfully lured towards the hook of book-buying by a tempting selection of bait? My case is certainly four books heavier than when I came.

To an extent, perhaps, but there was also much more of value in the experience than that.

**Embodied
personas and
evaluation**

One of the main things that strikes me, in reflecting on how I valued my experience of Hay, is how engaged I felt, during the course of each event, with the process of acquiring an evaluative sense of each author-performer through factors like voice, body language, prosody and attitude, as well as what was said and what was read – and how this evaluative process felt like a valid way of determining how I would probably evaluate their fiction, even if I had only heard that person read from a fraction of their book. I don't feel wholly comfortable about this. Like reader-audience members Sarah and Katherine, I almost always wanted to hear readings from the texts, as well as a staged conversation, in order to get a deeper sense that I could make a meaningful evaluative judgment about the literary work being presented. But even so, isn't it fundamentally flawed and irrational, and even anti-literary, to be making such a natural linkage between an evaluation of an author-performer's 'authentic' self, observed partly through performed conversation, and evaluating their fiction? As Jo Glanville and James Daunt felt: isn't the only genuinely valuable literary experience the act of reading a book, silently?

In part, as neuroscientists have shown, and as Will Storr has recounted so acutely in his book, *The Science of Storytelling*, this is just how we are wired as humans:

We're wired to be fascinated by others and get valuable information from their faces. This fascination begins almost immediately. Whereas ape and monkey parents spend almost no time looking at their babies' faces, we're helplessly drawn to them. Newborns are attracted to human faces more than any other object

and, one hour from birth, begin imitating them. By the time they're adults, they've become so adept at reading people that they're making calculations about status and character almost immediately, in one tenth of a second.⁵⁰⁵

This is all part of the same 'theory of mind' process in the brain – an active form of empathy – that is proven to be so actively engaged while reading fiction.⁵⁰⁶ So there is a direct link. And, as neuroscientist Tali Sharot has explained, our brains also wire us to retain and value information received from other humans, in person, particularly when the emotions are engaged, and prime us to respond with even more emotional engagement as part of an embodied audience.⁵⁰⁷

**Authenticity:
a golden
thread?**

While gazing out of the window as the bus swerves and rattles on its way, I ponder on how often the idea of *authenticity*⁵⁰⁸ had recurred during my conversations with participants, both explicitly and implicitly, in reference to what they valued about the literary festival experience – the various meanings they seemed to ascribe to the concept, and the different ways in which they seemed to value it. The word 'authentic' was used frequently but inconsistently, and was applied phenomena and elements of the festival experience ranging from their interpretations of the text to their authors and to the festival itself.

⁵⁰⁵ See Will Storr, *The Science of Storytelling* (2019), p.35

⁵⁰⁶ See discussion of Zunshine's work on theory of mind and fiction in Chapter 1.

⁵⁰⁷ See discussion of Sharot's work on theory of mind, decision-making and audience influence in Chapter 1.

⁵⁰⁸ Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess have proposed that, in general, 'authenticity refers to the condition or quality of realness' – see Vannini and Burgess, 'Authenticity as Motivation and Aesthetic Experience' (2009), p.104

Authenticity theories

If 'authenticity' is a golden thread concept running through multiple aspects of Hay, based on my conversations with participants, then how meaningful is it, and what can it reveal about the value of experiencing the Festival?

It is worth unpicking how authenticity has been theorised as a contemporary concept, and how it relates to notions of value.

'Authenticity' has been held up as a key theme of the 21st century, and a 'pervasive trope' of 21st century fiction, literary culture, the wider culture, and even human subjectivity,⁵⁰⁹ and is the subject of a raft of theorizing.⁵¹⁰ Whereas in the Romantic era, authenticity was seen as a way of connecting with the true feelings of the self;⁵¹¹ in the 21st century, authenticity is seen as more multifaceted,⁵¹² mutable,⁵¹³ and constantly contested.⁵¹⁴

The widespread desire for authenticity is often seen a direct counter-response to digitalization, in two key ways.⁵¹⁵ One is the way in which the mediatization of people's communications has given people a sense the world is becoming 'deeply inauthentic'.⁵¹⁶ The second is the 'inexorable flood' of information available online, which makes

⁵⁰⁹ See e.g. Daniel Lea, 'The Anxieties of Authenticity in Post-2000 British Fiction' (2012)

⁵¹⁰ For articulation of this proposition and discussion of the history and contemporary ideas of authenticity, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992); Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity* (1998); E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003); Charles Lindblom, *Culture and Authenticity* (2008); Vannini and Williams (eds.) (2009); and Wolfgang Funk, Florian Groß & Imtraud Huber (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Authenticity* (2012).

⁵¹¹ See Vannini and Williams (2009), p.6

⁵¹² See Funk et al (2012) p.13

⁵¹³ See Vannini and Williams (2009) p.3

⁵¹⁴ See Funk et al (2012) p.13

⁵¹⁵ See Vannini and Williams (2009), p.10, quoting Rebecca Erickson, 'Our Society, Our Selves: Becoming Authentic in an Inauthentic World', *Advanced Development Journal*, 6, pp.27-39 (1994)

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*

individuals feel an anxious sense of “too-muchness”,⁵¹⁷ and a desire to connect more directly with other humans and with tangible, organic planetary life – which (as I discussed in Chapter 1, in relation to ‘stuffocation’, and the value of curation) all explains the increased emphasis on liveness across the arts and culture. It explains why reader-audiences’ sense of being able to ‘read’ author-performers through their embodied presence, at a live literature event, in conjunction with the content of their communications, is experienced as being ‘authentic’ and therefore as valuable.

Authenticity is usually linked to a sense of ‘realness’, but most contemporary scholars who have theorized it agree on one paradox: that its meaning can never fully be pinned down. Authenticity is understood to extend to both personal and collective experiences, products, performances,⁵¹⁸ and affective and aesthetic responses. It is integral to heated debates around identity and cultural appropriation.⁵¹⁹ In terms of aesthetic evaluation, authenticity has been linked with a ‘sense of connectedness’⁵²⁰ to the world, a feeling of ‘ecstatic flow’ and a feeling of ‘fusion with one’s community’.⁵²¹ It has been attributed to the ‘appetite, especially among the middle classes, for the genuine and unvarnished’, for instance in ‘organic consumerism’.⁵²² Performance studies scholars have

⁵¹⁷ See Lea (2012) p.474

⁵¹⁸ See Vannini and Williams (2009), p.10

⁵¹⁹ See especially Johnson (2003) for an in-depth exploration of authenticity in relation to ‘black’ identity, including the idea of cultural appropriation.

⁵²⁰ See Vannini and Burgess (2009), p.111

⁵²¹ See Vannini and Burgess (2009), p.111, quoting Csikzentmihalyi (1997)

⁵²² See Lea (2012) p.459. While mulling over this idea as I am writing, I notice a viral tweet by an American electrical engineer for space science, Brad Luyster: ‘Me at 19: why would someone with a cool stem degree want to sell kombucha at the farmers market or run a yarn store?/ Me at 30: ohhhhhh’. Tweet from @zuph, 4th March 2019, <https://twitter.com/zuph/status/1102582420900114432>

named it as a key element of audience experiences.⁵²³ Does this make it too broad a concept to be useful? Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess, in writing about authenticity, have argued that, despite its multifacetedness, enough people ‘believe it matters’ to make it a powerful cultural force worth exploring.⁵²⁴

I am particularly interested in the idea of authenticity, as articulated by Vannini and Patrick J. Williams, in an introduction to their edited volume on the subject, as an ‘interpretive process of evaluation, engaged in by individuals and groups – and process that is entirely dependent on the particular social or cultural context in which those individuals and groups are interacting.’⁵²⁵ Applying this idea to the particular socio-cultural context of Hay, I reflect on the extent to which the idea of authenticity shapes the ways in which participants – including me – evaluate their overall experience of the festival.

**Authenticity,
the
interpretation
of fiction,
and the
problem of
autobiography**

My sense of uncertainty about whether my evaluations of author-performers’ ‘authentic’ identities should legitimately affect my judgments about their fiction was reflected in several of my conversations with author-performers. Colm Tóibín in particular, expressed strong resistance to the idea that reader-audiences should be led to draw any links between his fiction and his own autobiography, or anyone else’s. And yet the conversation-based event format that characterizes Hay and other literary festivals inevitably invites

⁵²³ In Radbourne, Johansen, Glow and White’s study, ‘The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts’ (2009), they proposed four elements of audience experience: authenticity, knowledge, risk, and collective engagement – see pp.19-20

⁵²⁴ See Vannini and Burgess (2009), p.116

⁵²⁵ Vannini and Williams adopt a similar view, as articulated in their Introduction to Vannini and Williams (2009), p.14

such links to be made. As such, the literary festival forms part of a wider 'resurrection of the author' in contemporary literary culture.⁵²⁶ And there is now neuroscientific evidence to support the idea that readers of fiction are very susceptible to the framing of fiction in their interpretation of it.⁵²⁷ Consequently, the foregrounding of autobiographical links to fiction at live literature events is likely to have a significant effect on how the text is read.

**Authenticity;
authorial
identity;
cultural
appropriation;
autofiction;
the end of
fiction**

And how significant is this preoccupation with authenticity for literary culture? Arguably, it could impact on literary writing – even to the point that it leads to the end of fiction. This sounds like an overstated hypothesis, but there a logic to it. The widespread contemporary preoccupation with authenticity and the linked notion of identity, which links to a concern across publishing with how authors' 'authentic' autobiographical identity relates to their publications, and that in turn leads to an expectation that autobiographical links will be present in their fiction. Persistent diversity deficits across culture, including in publishing and fiction, and the welcome quest to rectify these deficits by increasing the presence of authors who identify as belonging to marginalized minority groups, leads authors who identify as being part of minority groups to feel they should write fiction about their own experiences. The same preoccupation links to a concern with identifying cultural appropriation on the part of authors who write fiction about the experiences of characters from minority groups of which they are not themselves a part, and

⁵²⁶ See discussion of Gardiner's theory of the 'resurrection of the author' in Chapter 1.

⁵²⁷ See Zunshine (2006). Referring to Barthes' 'concept of the 'Death of the Author', Zunshine qualifies the idea that fictional narratives are always stored in a 'metarepresentational format' in our minds, and proposes that: 'We can be very sensitive to any attempt on the part of the writer to pass his or her fantasy as a 'true' and not a 'meta' representation'.

leads authors who do not identify as being part of a minority group to feel that they would be safer in writing about characters with cultural experiences similar to their own. The expectation that fiction will reflect authors' authentic identities is not simply attributable to diversity problems, though: the preoccupation with authenticity goes deeper than that. It is also attributable to social media, and the expectation it has created of having access to public figures' 'real' lives and views – even though social media is clearly a forum for the publication of personas which are often hard to distinguish from 'reality'. The consequences of this, for sought-after authors, can be as dramatic as the hounding of Elena Ferrante by a male journalist, for having published novels under a pen name and being audacious enough to resist the clamour and decline to engage in public discussion about their 'real' identity, or discuss the extent to which their fiction may in fact be read as autofiction.⁵²⁸ Whether the autofiction trend represents the 'end of fiction' has been speculated upon by several renowned literary critics, including Alex Clark and Anthony Cummins.⁵²⁹

The issue came to a head on a literary festival stage in 'Shrivergate': an event at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2016, when Lionel Shriver used her keynote speech to attack the notion of 'authenticity' in literary culture which, in her view, is entirely rooted in identity politics and has mutated into the idea of cultural appropriation that has infected the

⁵²⁸ Re the notorious 'unmasking' article, see Claudio Gatti, 'Elena Ferrante: An Answer?' (2016) and commentary by Stephanie Kirschgaessner: 'Elena Ferrante: literary storm as Italian reporter 'identifies' author' (2016), and Orr (2016).

⁵²⁹ See Anthony Cummins, 'The struggles of Karl Ove Knausgaard—and those of his readers—are finally over' (2018); and Alex Clark, 'Drawn from Life: why have novelists stopped making things up?' (2018). See also Hywel Dix's edited volume exploring autofiction's history and evolution, *Autofiction in English* (2018); and Marjorie Worthington's examination of autofiction in a post-truth era, 'Fiction in the "Post-Truth" Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction' (2017)

**Cultural
appropriation;
identity;
diversity;
authenticity**

health of fiction. She expressed this in uncompromising terms, with a clear focus on the impact of this on white writers like herself, arguing that they are no longer ‘allowed’ to write outside their experience, and ‘any tradition, any experience... any way of doing and saying things that is associated with a minority or disadvantaged group is ring-fenced.’ This, she argued, was threatening the entire concept of fiction, which, to her, made no sense. ‘Fiction is inherently inauthentic. It’s fake. It’s self-confessedly fake; that is the nature of the form, which is about people who don’t exist and events that didn’t happen.’ It is a form ‘born of a desperation to break free of the claustrophobia of our own experience.’⁵³⁰ The speech prompted furious responses, including from author Yassmin Abdel-Magied, who wrote an article about walking out of Shriver’s speech, calling her position ‘arrogant’ and making the point that ‘it’s not always ok if a white guy writes the story of a Nigerian woman because the actual Nigerian woman can’t get published or reviewed to begin with.’⁵³¹ Shriver had indeed failed to acknowledge the very real diversity problems in publishing (which I discussed earlier in reflecting on the diversity of participants at Hay), and paid no regard to their impact on people who identify as belonging to marginalized minority groups. She presented her case in a way that was utterly insensitive to the importance of these underlying diversity problems. That said, her main point, about the fundamental characteristic of fiction being invention, and the value of imagining oneself into another’s shoes through both writing and reading, is valid and important. But the effect of her speech was divisive – and the divisiveness was heightened

⁵³⁰ Shriver, ‘I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad’ (2016)

⁵³¹ Yassmin Abdel-Magied, ‘As Lionel Shriver made light of identity, I had no choice but to walk out on her’ (2016)

by, not only her omission of diversity problems and her choice of language, but also her delivery, which was fiery and uncompromising.

On a Hay Festival stage – not in Wales, but in Cartagena – Zadie Smith was asked about authenticity and cultural appropriation in fiction, and responded with nuanced incisiveness: ‘If someone says to me: ‘A black girl would never say that,’ I’m saying: ‘How can you possibly know?’ The problem with that argument is it assumes the possibility of total knowledge of humans. The only thing that identifies people in their entirety is their name: I’m a Zadie.’ Collective identity, she added, was sometimes necessary to invoke in order to ‘demand rights’; but she quoted her husband, the author Nick Laird, as complaining to her in dismay: ‘I used to be myself and I’m now white guy, white guy.’ She replied to him, at the time: ‘Finally, you understand.’ ‘But the lesson of that’, she told the audience, ‘is that identity is a huge pain in the arse. The strange thing to me is the assumption [of white people] that their identity is the right to freedom.’⁵³²

It may be that having more conversations on festival stages along these lines, engaging with questions about diversity in publishing, the role of ‘authentic’ authorial identity and the significance of the idea of cultural appropriation in fiction, will cause festival events themselves to shift in how they foreground and approach authorial identity.

As J.M. Coetzee might argue, though: any conversation-based live literature event format will almost inevitably foreground a

⁵³² Claire Armitstead, ‘‘Identity is a pain in the arse’: Zadie Smith on political correctness’ (2019)

conversation with an author about elements of their autobiography – and also about their views about culture, society and the world in generally, rendering them a kind of sage figure. This, in Coetzee’s view, effectively diminishes the cultural value of the literature that is supposedly being featured, reducing the significance of the literary forms that have carefully crafted in order to be read on the page.⁵³³ The only true form of literary ‘authenticity’ on this view, lies in the experience of turning the pages of a book.

Literary authenticity and the role of orality

But my research at Hay suggests that literary authenticity is multi-layered – or, at least, that it means different things to different people – and it does not necessarily turn on the experience of silently-reading the printed word. David Almond, for instance, is an author-performer who explicitly links literature, at its core, to sound, the voice, rhythm, and the ancient practices of storytelling, echoing the views of Ursula K. Le Guin.⁵³⁴ For Almond, that is where literary authenticity lies, and he pays attention to this in his performed readings, which audiences – like Liz and Laura – rave about.

Literary value and the role of writing

The idea that true literary authenticity is rooted in orality challenges Walter J. Ong’s theory that contemporary literature, based on writing, is fundamentally different in nature from ancient oral literary traditions (see discussion of Ong’s theory in Chapter 1). It accords the view of anthropologists of communication, like Ruth Finnegan, who challenge any meaningful divide between oral and written literature, once it is performed. My research suggests that

⁵³³ See discussion in Chapter 1 of Coetzee’s approach to the role of his authorial persona, with reference to Peter McDonald’s work.

⁵³⁴ See discussion of Le Guin’s work in Chapter 1.

many author-performers, such as Andrew O’Hagan, regularly read aloud during their writing process, revealing that orality is a fundamental part of their literary craft. Even Colm Tóibín, who insisted that he never read aloud during his writing process – though he also admitted to disliking the sound of his own voice – talked about an ‘inner voice’.⁵³⁵

Could it be that the rise of live literature – perhaps in conjunction with the rise of audiobooks – is bringing literary culture ‘back’ to a point where literary value is more closely linked to orality?

**Authenticity
of embodied
verbal
communication;
the
significance
of performed
sound**

It was very clear from my conversations with reader-audiences at Hay that many of them hugely valued the embodied, oral elements of events, particularly the performed readings, often linking this to a sense of an ‘authentic’ experience of the literary work, as much as to the author-performers themselves. They often responded sensitively and deeply to qualities such as tone, accent, and rhythm, as well as body language, and this often led them to evaluate both the performance and the work in what were felt to be meaningful and ‘authentic’ ways, aided by the staged conversations. Examples are Stan and Kira’s descriptions of how valuable it was for them to hear Toni Morrison’s rhythm to get an ‘authentic’ sense of her work, and Liz and Laura’s descriptions of their emotional responses to Simon Armitage’s vocal qualities, which resonated with their own sense of connection with an ‘authentic’ northern identity. Katherine and Sarah felt short-changed when there was no performed reading in Ishiguro’s event because they felt that they had been denied

⁵³⁵ See discussion of Denise Riley’s and Steven Connor’s theorisation of on the inner voice in Chapter 1.

something that, for them, would have been of real value by giving them an authentic insight into the text – from an author-performer they were already familiar with, and had already seen and heard live at Hay. In contrast, they described the impact of witnessing Hanif Kureshi read from a novel of his at a previous Hay Festival, which they described as being delivered in an ‘angry man’ style: an affective evaluation that had enhanced their understanding of his work and their own subsequent reading of it. Many reader-audience members talked about ‘hearing’ the voice of the author-performer ‘in their head’ while they read their books after events.

**Authenticity
of
interpretation
– finding the
humour**

While Colm Tóibín was resistant to the idea of live literature events leading reader-audiences to make autobiographical links with his work, he did acknowledge that his performed readings could enable them to interpret them more ‘authentically’; he gave the example of someone who came up to him after an event and told him that his delivery style had enabled them to see humour in the writing where they hadn’t seen it before – and where he had intended it.

**Authenticity
trumps
theatricality**

Crucially, my research revealed that reader-audiences valued the sense of experiencing an ‘authentic’ performance by an author-performer more highly than what might be viewed as an overtly ‘good’ performance in actorly, theatrical terms. Event chairpeople and producers did not seem to take this into account when worrying about the inclusion of performed readings and assuming that reader-audiences would be bored by them. That worry, in turn, was partly founded on a common – flawed – stereotype that authors were inherently introverted hermits and uncomfortable with performing, in comparison to actors and presenters. But reader-audiences

did not necessarily value a theatrical style of delivery by an author-performer – unless, that is, the delivery was interpreted as ‘authentic’: in other words, unless it chimed with the assessments they were concurrently making about that author-performer’s persona, in conjunction with their faces, vocal characteristics and body language.

**Authenticity
through
actorly
reinhabiting**

An example of a theatrical performance style is Andrew O’Hagan’s. In talking about his approach, he felt that performing a reading should involve ‘reinhabiting’ the work, interpreting it like a musical score, and thus experiencing it anew each time – suggesting an ‘authenticity’ that relates to present, embodied engagement with the text and the audience. This approach is much more akin to the work done by an actor in performing a script. It suited the scene from his novel that he chose to perform: a highly dramatic battle scene. It also seemed to resonate with O’Hagan’s dynamic personality in conversation.

**Authentic
literary
performance as
serving the
words**

A contrary approach to performed readings, suggested by Simon Armitage, is that they should primarily ‘serve the words’. On this view, an ‘authentic’ performance of literature is one that enables the words to be at the forefront, or, at least, allows the inherent qualities of the text to shine. This fits with the general advice given to the earliest talking book narrators on what makes a good performed reading of a novel.⁵³⁶ Notably, Armitage is an example of an author-performer whose performed readings generated an equally if not more effusive response from reader-audiences, even though his delivery style is very different to O’Hagan’s; it is, in

⁵³⁶ See discussion of Rubery’s work on the history of the talking book in Chapter 1

comparison, more subtle and understated in its performativity. Again, this is reflected in Armitage's conversational demeanour, including his dead-pan humour, as well as in his lyrical literary style.

**Authenticity
worries: an
author-
performer
imitating an
actor**

Gavin Extence, a debut novelist just getting used to performing at events, spoke of his initial worry about how to perform dialogue from his own text, fearing that, off the page, he might spoil the experience of the words on the page for reader-audiences – and so choosing to 'learn' his delivery from an actor instead. But, as Stan and Kira suggested, in talking about Toni Morrison: while they highly valued witnessing her 'authentic' performance in person, they ultimately wanted different from a whole audiobook narration.

**Authenticity
and emotion;
deceptively
flat delivery
styles**

Tóibín and O'Hagan pointed to examples of performed readings where emotion was ostensibly devoid from another author-performer's reading due to a 'flat' delivery style. Tóibín cited John Banville, whose reading was very quiet and apparently flat – *but*, he added, you could tell that emotion was bubbling beneath the surface. The implication was that this discernible emotional quality made the reading authentic and therefore valuable. O'Hagan cited Atwood, who, they both agreed, was deliberately flat in her delivery – and yet agreed that her particular flatness was imbued with a wry dryness that they attributed, possibly, to political motives, linked with her wider public persona, her feminist credentials, and the aesthetics of her literary style; or perhaps to her 'real' self and sense of humour; or to her literary aesthetic, which is often dry and witty. I don't know what Atwood would make of these hypotheses about her presentation, or even of the description of her delivery style as flat. But the process of

evaluation of that delivery is interesting in itself. In Ishiguro's event, which did not involve a performed reading, he responded to a similar characterisation made of his writing style by literary critics early on in his career. He talked about how the literary aesthetic of his writing was described as being still, on the surface, but with 'stuff underneath'; like a 'Japanese pond with carp' – and that he didn't necessarily see his own style that way at the time, but had come to embrace it, and even to roll with it, as the accepted characterisation of his literary texts. Observing him in performed conversation, I couldn't help noticing that his performance had a similar poised and understated quality to it, with unexpected humour often bubbling up, which seemed to align with this description, and seemed to substantiate this as an 'authentic' view of his literary work.

**Authenticity:
emotion in
delivery**

'Authenticity', in literary performance, clearly involves many potential layers of interpretation. The *process* of determining what is authentic about it, and why – including through references to the text – seems to be a fundamental part of the way in which literary festival events are appreciated and valued by reader-audiences. Likewise, author-performers often seem to be subtly attuned to what they consider to make an authentic performance of their own and others' fiction.

**Authenticity:
live, embodied
performance**

There were other ways in which the experience of Hay was valued in terms of authenticity. One is a sense of liveness, which was frequently linked to the dynamics of conversation in a festival event. As Hahn and Wood suggested: the more improvisatory the conversation seemed, the more alive and 'authentic' the experience felt. And while, as I described, the

formula of Hay events is quite standardized, which can manifest as a form of artifice, particularly when repeated many times in a row, it also seemed to me to add a refreshing layer of ‘authenticity’ when events included meta-commentary about the literary festival event format, as Hahn’s often did, since this alluded to the fact that every participant shared a live awareness of the performance that we were all experiencing.

**Authenticity:
process and
craft vs
commerce**

David Almond, as well as valuing the role of sound, rhythm and voice in literature, also sensed a desire on the part of reader-audiences for a sense of the authenticity of the process of *making* literature – particularly since the product of literature is often presented, at Hay and elsewhere, in the form of a perfect, shiny hardback, available for sale for those who can afford it. Consequently, in his festival events, Almond emphasises the ‘authentic’ process of creating literature by showing reader-audiences his messy note books.

**Authenticity:
embodied
liveness vs
digital**

Another way in which Hay was valued in terms of authenticity was in the way it provided participants with an embodied, live experience in contrast to the digitalization of their daily lives and communications. Several reader-audience members I spoke to, like Dave, emphasized how important it was to them to retreat from the constant digital bombardment of everyday life to a space where they would be able to immerse themselves in embodied events where they could really focus on and connect with an author-performer – while also experiencing a sense of connecting with their families and friends too, and other festival-goers. This seemed to give them

an ‘authentic’ sense of being part of a humanized ritual and an embodied community.⁵³⁷

**Authenticity:
rural escape;
unvarnished
experience;
pilgrimage**

Similarly, the Festival’s rural setting, and its tent-based construction were valued by many participants experientially and as a form of authenticity. This is manifested very clearly in the experience that Elsa described, of the relief of escaping from her busy, city-based life to a remote field, oriented around human conversations and ideas: a form of secular pilgrimage, that takes on a liminal quality.⁵³⁸

**Authenticity:
literature’s
role in
culture**

Authenticity, then, does seem to me to be a valuable interpretive process that helped to illuminate the multi-faceted, overlapping, sometimes contradictory ways in which the Hay Festival experience is valuable for participants. In fact, the interpretive process of deciphering authenticity seems to be part of that valuation. While the role of the publishing industry and the media in shaping Hay might appear to make it seem inherently ‘inauthentic’ – the primary view that the early literary festival scholars took of festivals’ commercial orientation⁵³⁹ – it does reveal the very real ways in which literature is intertwined with the cultural world in which it is produced.

Disembarking

I get off the train in London, and lug my case out onto the thickly-fumigated air of the Euston Road, already feeling reminiscent about Hay’s clean greenness, and the contained vitality of the festival site – the simplicity and stimulation of

⁵³⁷ See discussion of experientialism, stuffocation and the attention economy/ecology in Chapter 1, with reference to the work of Wallman (2015) and others.

⁵³⁸ See discussion of secular pilgrimage and liminality in Chapter 1.

⁵³⁹ See discussion of Lurie (2004), Meehan (2005), Driscoll (2014) and Weber (2018) in Chapter 1.

life, when all you are expected to do (aside from research) is wander around some tents with a bunch of other people and soak up new ideas and stories.

Chapter 3.

Polari Salon: The Revival of an Enlightenment Tradition with an LGBT Twist

Behind a low stage illuminated in flamingo pink, still empty but for a small wooden podium at the centre, ceiling-high windows display a spectacular backdrop of the Millennium Wheel, mere metres away. It's glowing emerald – though, as I watch, it begins to shift to a brilliant orange like a giant reverse traffic light installation. Behind the wheel is a sparkling black ribbon: the Thames, underlining the Houses of Parliament. The view could almost be computer-generated, but this is really what London looks like from the fifth-floor function room at the South Bank Centre.

Screens either side of the stage, however, show a 'real' computer-generated image of the same Millennium Wheel backdrop, but with a larger-than-life man lounging in the foreground, sporting a top hat garnished with a feather and a purple sparkly tie reminiscent of Willy Wonka, and holding a paperback which he is regarding with an exaggerated expression of gleeful shock, half looking at the camera. Several other books float and flit around him like butterflies amidst sparkles of magic dust.

A full-house of about 150 people has gathered here on this chilly January evening, to a soundtrack of feel-good funk, and the chatter is noisy and ebullient. Some are queuing for drinks at the little bar, exclaiming at how good it is to see each other,

hugging, jostling, joking, chatting. The majority seem to know several others and act like regulars. Seats are quickly filling up. I'd say there is a mix of men and women here, ranging in age from twenties to sixties.

As the music volume ramps up a notch, the man from the screens takes to the stage in the flesh, wearing a flamboyant combination of white sunglasses, a silver top hat – which turns out to be the same hat in which he once posed nude for a gay magazine cover⁵⁴⁰ – a candy-floss suit jacket and a boldly-patterned tie. 'Welcome!' he grins. 'I'm Paul Burston and I'm your host for this evening. Now, are there any Polari virgins in the house?'

A scattering of hands cautiously ascend as members of the audience 'come out' as Polari virgins – I estimate about a third. Burston regards them for a moment, before slyly semi-reassuring them: 'we'll try to be gentle with you.' He promptly explains to us all that his tan is thanks to his trip to Rio last week – assuming a general familiarity with his normal appearance which further suggests the presence of regular audience members. 'I was lying there on the beach, imagining you all in budgie smugglers', he adds with a lewd grin – a comment that I presume applies only to the men in the room, so probably about two thirds of the audience.

For any 'Polari virgins' reading this, who have never previously considered themselves as such: Polari is a literary salon with a

⁵⁴⁰ See Julie Bindel, 'Paul Burston's literary event, Polari' (2012)

particular orientation: namely towards LGBT writing, and LGBT-identifying authors and audiences.

I'll hover here over the term 'LGBT', to explain why I am using it in this ethnography. The main reason is that it is Burston's term of choice, and is used in the Polari publicity material and on its website.⁵⁴¹ And LGBT remains a common acronym to encompass people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender – though it is far from universally adopted by people who identify within those sub-categories, and is regarded by some as outdated. Many now prefer either 'LGBTQ' to encompass 'queer'; some prefer 'queer' to encompass all identity categories more simply without acronyms; and 'LGBTQ+' has become a more common adaptation to encompass people who may or may not identify as 'queer' but do not fall into any of the other sexuality categories either – for instance, they might identify as pansexual.⁵⁴² 'LGBTQIA+' specifically encompasses people who identify as Intersex or Asexual while also leaving room for other identifications.⁵⁴³ When I ask Burston about his choice of term and its implications, in a post-show conversation, he shrugs, cheerfully, tells me that anything beyond LGBT just sounds too complicated to him, so he usually uses that term for Polari communications, but he doesn't really mind what other people want to use – 'queer' is fine as far as he's concerned, or 'whatever'. This approach will prove to be part of a wider objective of Burston's: to represent and cater for

⁵⁴¹ See www.polarisalon.com (accessed 29 April 2019)

⁵⁴² For an exploration of the implications of this terminology for librarianship, see Melinda F. Brown and Deborah L. Lilton, 'Finding The "B" in LGBTQ+' (2019)

⁵⁴³ For a discussion of terminology and a glossary, see Michael Gold, 'The ABCs of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ ' (2018)

people who do not identify as heterosexual and cisgender; but equally not to get bogged down in identity divisions.

'Polari', though, is a term that originated squarely in the 'G' category: it is the name of a coded language that was taken up by the gay community in London, in an era when homosexuality was illegal, as a means of disguising their activities.⁵⁴⁴ It became a core element of London's burgeoning gay scene after WWII, centred in the gay bars of Soho. Deriving from the Italian *parlare* (to talk), the language dates as far back as the 16th century, when it was used among circuses and show travellers, then developed and spread in the merchant navy as sailor slang, evolving along the way to include elements of London slang, Romani slang and Yiddish. After peaking in the gay community in London in the first sixty years of the 20th century, it began to decline after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967 – notably when the term 'gay' became common parlance.⁵⁴⁵ It is still around today, though, and has undergone something of a renaissance;⁵⁴⁶ it made up the entire script of a 2015 short film by Brian Fairbairn and Karl Eccleston called *Putting on the Dish*.⁵⁴⁷ Its longstanding role and significance in the context of London's gay scene is vividly depicted by journalist Peter Burton in his memoir, *Parallel Lives*, as he recalls going out in Soho in the 1960s:

As feely hommes (young men), when we launched ourselves onto the gay scene, Polari was all the rage. We would zoosh (style) our riahs (hair), powder our eeks (faces), climb into our bona (fabulous) new drag

⁵⁴⁴ See Paul Baker, *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men* (2002), p.1

⁵⁴⁵ See Baker (2002), p.6

⁵⁴⁶ See Baker (2002), p.8

⁵⁴⁷ See J. Bryan Lowder, 'Polari, the gay dialect' (2015)

(clothes) and *troll* (go, walk) off to some bona *bijou* (little) bar. / In the bar we would stand around polarying with our *sisters*, *varda* (look at) the bona *cartes* (male genitals) on the *butch homme* (man, pronounced 'o-me') *ajax* (nearby) who, if we fluttered our *ogle riahs* (eyelashes) at him sweetly, might just troll over to offer a light for the *vogue* (cigarette) clenched between our teeth.⁵⁴⁸

The Polari language was 'never meant to be written', Burton points out. In those days, he explains, the gay community 'flaunted' their homosexuality, and were proud to broadcast their difference to the world – but '*only when we were in a crowd*';⁵⁴⁹ they were all conscious that Polari, while enjoyable as a mode of communication, was ultimately a 'secret language born out of repression'. He goes on to expand upon the distinctive way in which it was spoken, its tonality and its resonances. It had a double edge even when spoken in the 'safe', collective context of a gay bar – Burton describes its tone as having a 'particularly brittle, knife-edged feel', especially when brandished by 'some acid-tongued bitch whose tongue was likely to *cut your throat*'; 'queens with the savage wit of the self-protective.'⁵⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he reflects, 'there was something deeply reassuring about Polari'; its 'bizarre' and 'secret' nature gave those of us who used it an additional sense of corporate identity. We were part of a group – and that knowledge was both a comfort and a curious protection.'⁵⁵¹ There was, simultaneously, a *protectiveness* of the Polari language on the part of the gay community, perhaps exemplified by the reaction against its usage by Morrissey in 1990 in a song called 'Piccadilly Palare', on the basis that the

⁵⁴⁸ See Peter Burton, *Parallel Lives* (1985), p.38

⁵⁴⁹ See Burton (1985) p.39

⁵⁵⁰ See Burton (1985) p.41

⁵⁵¹ See Burton (1985), p.42

**Polari Salon
origination
and
evolution**

singer-songwriter was not openly gay – although he had publicly stated that he was attracted to both sexes the previous year.⁵⁵²

The Polari Salon was founded in the heartland of its namesake language; Burston started it in 2007 as a pop-up initiative in a Soho gay bar, *The Green Carnation*, where he was then DJing to supplement his writing income. The idea was borne out of ‘frustration’; by that point, Burston had published three novels and a number of non-fiction books, but claims he had not once received an invitation to read at a literary event. Identifying a widespread reluctance to promote gay authors, and a concurrent demand among gay authors for opportunities to air their work,⁵⁵³ he pitched the idea to other bar owners, and it expanded. In 2009 Polari was headhunted by the Southbank Centre’s then literary manager, plucked out of Soho, and relocated across the river, whereupon its audience numbers and public profile quickly expanded.

Following its success, and its recognition as a platform for emerging LGBT writers, Burston founded the Polari First Book Prize as a way of further promoting emerging LGBT literature and writers, and the Salon was subsequently funded by the Arts Council to go on a national tour to festivals, libraries and theatres, expanding its reach to towns and cities beyond the capital. It is ticketed, but at a relatively low price of £5, which – in live event terms – makes it accessible to people with diverse incomes.

⁵⁵² ‘Piccadilly Palare’ was a song, from Morrissey’s 1990 *Bona Drag* album, and was about male prostitution around the Piccadilly area of London. The lyrics include: ‘*So bona to vada...oh you! Your lovely eek and your lovely riah*’, which translates as: ‘So good to see...oh you! Your lovely face and your lovely hair.’ The counter-reaction to the song is referenced in Wikipedia entry on ‘Polari’, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polari>, accessed 3 Oct 2018.

⁵⁵³ See Bindel (2012)

**The
backstory of
the literary
salon**

It is a marked contrast to the elite character of the historical literary salon phenomenon – a phenomenon that had been thought to have faded out forever in the 19th Century, after its peak in the 18th Century in Paris, London and beyond. The former salon format usually involved high society hostesses, or salonnières – often women – inviting groups from high society to the salons of their grand domestic houses in order to discuss books, ideas and tastes, often through performed readings to the assembled company.⁵⁵⁴

The historical salon phenomenon has been the subject of much academic attention since Habermas cited it as a core part of his well-known theory of the emerging public sphere in eighteenth century Europe, on the basis that salons provided a unique new opportunity for interpersonal communication and exchange in urban centres, nurturing rational and critical debate.⁵⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, in 1996, went on to examine the literary salon's role in the formation of cultural tastes and class distinctions and as a location for 'genuine articulation between the fields' of literature, the press and politics.⁵⁵⁶ More recently, Susanna Schmid has explored the role of women in British salons, considering groups such as the Bluestockings, and these salons' unique role as intellectual and cultural hubs,⁵⁵⁷ and Maria Popova has written about the impact of women's salons in America.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ See Dana Goodman, *The Republic of Letters* (1994), p.101-3

⁵⁵⁵ See Habermas (1989), especially pp.30-36

⁵⁵⁶ See Bourdieu (1996), p.51

⁵⁵⁷ See Susanna Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (2013)

⁵⁵⁸ See Maria Popova, *Figuring* (2019)

It is only in the last decade that there has been a marked revival of the salon in the contemporary British literary scene, alongside the growth of festivals and other forms of live literature event. The best known literary salon is Damian Barr's – which started life as the Shoreditch Literary Salon, but changed identity alongside the ascending star of the event profile and its host's. Sparklingly entertaining, and yet with an ability to discuss literature in depth on stage, Barr drew in the best known authors, and the salon soon migrated from a packed-out back room of the Shoreditch House club to the grand surroundings of the 5* Mondrian Hotel.

The Word Factory's 'Short Story Salon' takes place in the event space in Waterstones Piccadilly, a large bookshop in central London, and is primarily aimed at new writer development; it features a panel of three writers reading from their work, followed by a discussion and audience questions, and is often programmed in conjunction with creative writing 'masterclasses'. More recently, publisher-run salons have emerged, like that founded by the literary imprint of Harper Collins, 4th Estate. Perhaps most akin to historical iterations of the literary salon is that run by Mieke Vogel, founder publisher of Pereine Press, who hosts gatherings in her London home. Unlike the historical salons, though, all these contemporary salons are more publicly-available events, ticketed at a price, and not limited to select bourgeois invitees.

The literary salon revival is undoubtedly linked with a growth of other regular live literary events with similarly-intimate audience sizes, all of which have a more performative, less overtly commercial orientation than the literary festival format tends to have.

**Resonances
between
language and
salon, role
in identity
formation**

Right from the outset, at Polari tonight – even from the projected image – it clearly displays a distinctive aesthetic among literary events, which Burston has described as ‘a literary showcase with a cabaret feel’.⁵⁵⁹ Experiencing this, in the context of what I have been reading about the Polari language, I reflect on the ways in which both the salon and the language started out as performative manifestations of London’s gay subculture. Not only is there an obvious resonance between the spoken nature of Polari as a language and the spoken nature of its namesake salon, but the ‘sharp’ texture and ‘cutting’ effect of the language that Burton describes, in tandem with the ‘queendom’, camp and sexualised humour that still remain so characteristic of the London gay scene, are already clearly mirrored in Burston’s on-stage persona and his aesthetic framing of the event.

To what extent, I wonder, does Polari salon – along with other comparable cultural events – now operate as a contemporary source of collective LGBT identity in the city in lieu of the fading Polari language? How do the ‘L’, ‘B’ and ‘T’ categories relate to the ‘G’ now that Polari salon has moved beyond the gay scene? And what about ‘Q’ and ‘+’?

Scholar Jennifer Reed interrogated the issue of sexuality labelling in cultural performance in an article about the cultural impact of the US-based *Ellen* sitcom, from which Ellen DeGeneres was famously dropped after she came out as a lesbian. When Ellen returned to screens a few years later with her own talk show, she generally referred to herself as ‘gay’

⁵⁵⁹ Text taken from the Polari Salon website: www.Polari.co.uk (accessed 29 November 2015)

rather than as a lesbian – but, according to Reed, performed that identity in a ‘postgay kind of way. That is, in a way that said: “I’m gay, but it doesn’t matter”’.⁵⁶⁰ Reed argues that the approach taken by Ellen’s producers ‘allows the show to sidestep the challenge that lesbian subjectivity makes to the heterosexual contract,’⁵⁶¹ and allows liberal straight audiences not to be ‘bothered with any of the real differences that lesbian identity can present or with their own homophobia’.⁵⁶² Reed does not underpin this with any evidence of liberal straight audiences’ views, or consideration of how far what Ellen’s ‘postgay’ approach, as she calls it, has positively impacted upon discriminatory attitudes towards performers identifying themselves with any sexuality or gender label other than straight. Nor does she consider how large and diverse Ellen’s audience would have been had the show producers chosen to foreground the ‘lesbian’ label. Perhaps most crucially of all, she does not acknowledge the agency that Ellen DeGeneres herself must have had in her show’s approach to her own re-labelling, given that she is one of its Executive Producers. But she makes a wider argument that ‘the use of any label grounds the politics in a particular place. That is, each term (gay, lesbian, queer, homosexual) carries with it the histories and politics of meanings’.⁵⁶³ In Burston’s case, there is a clear attempt not to get ground down in the politics. I note the parallels between The Ellen Show and Polari, in terms of their presenter’s deliberate flexibility and lack of emphasis on identity labels – albeit, in Polari’s case, the situation is complicated by virtue of the salon’s self-identification, initially as a gay literary salon, and later as an ‘LGBT’ salon. This

⁵⁶⁰ See Jennifer Reed, ‘The Three Phases of Ellen: from queer to gay to post-gay’ (2011), p.19

⁵⁶¹ See Reed (2011) p.20

⁵⁶² See Reed (2011) p.23

⁵⁶³ See Reed (2011) p.12

deliberately distinguishes it from other, more mainstream live literature events.

**Persia West:
trans
identity,
romantic
lesbian
fiction**

Burston summons the first 'performer' up to the stage – his choice of term, which I note immediately, as it differs from almost all other literary events I have been to previously, in which people who speak about and read from their books on stage are more commonly referred to as 'speakers', 'authors', 'writers' or 'readers'. 'Persia West has worked as a bar girl, financial journalist, model... English teacher, garden designer, activist on human rights with a special focus on trans rights, and has just published her *first novel – I Am Alessia!*', Burston tells us all in proud tones, and applause bursts forth.

West presents as a tall woman, who appears to be in late middle age, she wears her hair in a long, gingery bob, and her neck is sheathed in a sheer, flowing scarf. At the podium, she greets us, and tells us, in very low, breathy and seductive tones, that her novel was inspired by Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. She pauses for a long moment to look around at the audience, apparently meeting several pairs of eyes, and then begins reading aloud from the opening.

The scene describes, in the first person, the narrator's experience of walking down the aisle with her father at her wedding to marry a man when she is in fact in love with her cousin Alexandra, who is standing in the congregation, watching. '*We stood at the back of the cathedral, my father and me... I was electrically alive and full of expectancy...*' West drawls out her vowels and glances up at us suggestively every

so often. It occurs to me, a few lines in, that she probably identifies as a trans woman, in life beyond the podium.

'My stage the church, my audience the congregation... we walked slowly down the aisle... My eyes locked on hers... Sweet and strong... Time stood still for an eternal moment... I'd been caught in the iron grip of my father...but now a note within me shrilled with the thrill of the wild unexpected. The writing might bulge with clichés, but it is delivered with a sincerity, passion and poise. West doesn't shy away from hand gestures to accompany significant changes of pitch, and is clearly revelling in this performance, in an overtly theatrical way that is rare in a literary festival context. Some people in the audience look rapt, while others glance at each other with expressive uncertainty, but an intent and respectful atmosphere is sustained throughout the reading.

**Persia West:
reading aloud
vs written
word,
performativity**

It turns out that West has a lot of experience of public speaking, though not of publicly reading aloud from her fiction; this novel, her debut, has only just come out. Her website reveals that she does indeed identify as a trans lesbian woman and is an activist in relation to gender. She defines herself as a 'storyteller' and 'speaker' as well as a 'writer', and states that she gives regular talks about 'gender, spirituality and consciousness', and has also given a lot of thought to the subject of reading aloud in general.⁵⁶⁴

For West, her voice has an integral relationship with her writing. 'I feel that the written word is frozen speech... I write like I speak, the voice inside me, but with more colour, so in

⁵⁶⁴ This was taken from West's website: <http://persiawestwords.net> (accessed 16 March 2016)

some ways it goes deeper to speak it out loud', she writes.⁵⁶⁵ She goes on to compare the written and spoken word with visual media, juxtaposing them via the metaphor of heat, based on their impact on imagination: 'Such channels of perception as TV and movies are *cold* media; this is because they leave nothing to the imagination... Reading or radio or storytelling are *hot* media; we create our own movies of the mind within ourselves with the stimulus of words alone, each to our own imagination.' She distinguishes the written and spoken word in theatrical terms: 'I just love the *theatre* of spoken words [emphasis added], because they have their own power and resonance, and when I speak to a group, an audience, I feel some 'fluence rising in me and projecting out to the listeners, who become charmed, entranced and taken to another world.' This combination of overtly romantic and fantastical language, and the notion of 'entrancement' in reference to audiences, clearly informs the distinct performativity of her reading. I wonder to what extent West's fascination with voice and performance in relation to her fiction links to the way in which she has had to learn to perform her voice socially in a culturally-feminine way, focusing on its timbre, tonality, affect and effect in the process; there is an inherent performativity in being trans.

**Persia West:
trans
identity,
performed in
writing on
social and
other media,
fiction,
authenticity
and cultural
appropriation**

In life beyond the salon, West's twitter feed reveals that she is passionate about the public presence and perception of trans lesbian identity in performed contexts, and angry about its marginalization – including by the gay and lesbian community – and is unafraid to say so in strong terms. This was exemplified in the context of London Pride when a group of

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

lesbians protested against trans participation, on the basis, as one of them put it, that 'a man cannot be a lesbian, a person with a penis cannot be a lesbian'.⁵⁶⁶ In response, West took to Twitter and posted: 'For my many lesbian friends who support the reality and goodness of we trans people #LwiththeT After the hideous lunatics being able to lead Pride in London with their hatred... some bizarre delusion'.⁵⁶⁷ But she does not discuss such events or views tonight at Polari.

I note that, although lesbian sexuality is foregrounded in her fiction, as evidenced by the text she reads aloud, this text engages with lesbianism between women who do *not* identify as transsexual. Intriguingly, West has been public about her anger at trans identity being 'used' in fiction by authors who do not adopt that identity themselves, as a form of cultural appropriation. In another tweet, she stated: 'Radio 4, the Today programme this morning, interview with @SalmanRushdie, writer, selling his new book, all about gender identity it seems, having the knowledge of knowing 2 trans people a bit. Drives me up the fucking wall, writing the usual shit to make a buck out of us all grr'.⁵⁶⁸ In light of this, I can't help wondering about West's choice to write fiction from a non-trans lesbian point of view.

The most public debates over recent years around cultural appropriation in fiction, and linked ideas of morality and authenticity, have been in relation to race, and the debates have aired on literary festival stages.⁵⁶⁹ I note that the

⁵⁶⁶ See Josh Gabattiss, 'London Pride' (2018)

⁵⁶⁷ See West, Tweet published on 14 July 2018, accessed @persiawest on 8 October 2018

⁵⁶⁸ See West, Tweet published on 26 May 2018, accessed @persiawest on 8 October 2018

⁵⁶⁹ See Shriver (2016) and Abdel-Magied (2016)

format of the Polari salon, being readings-focused, does not leave space for questions that might prompt such ideas to be aired and debated as part of the event. I wonder now whether Burston's format decision is a deliberate means of avoiding such debates, and to fuel connection rather than division between within members of LGBT communities in a literary-cultural context. Clearly the socio-political implications of gender identities are central to Polari's raison d'être. While it manifestly retains a camp, quintessentially 'gay' aesthetic, that links to its Polari roots, its physical migration to the Southbank Centre coincided with its migration from a gay to an LGBT 'identity' as an event. West was chosen as tonight's first author-performer, and three out of the five performers for this evening identify as female, it seems clear that there is no bias towards gay authors.

**John R.
Gordon, Team
Angelica
publishing,
and dark,
alternative
trans
narratives**

As the applause for West subsides, Burston bounces back onto the stage to introduce the next writer, John R. Gordon, a novelist, playwright and screenwriter, and the founder of a publishing company called Team Angelica. Team Angelica aims to celebrate queer writing, as part of a mission to 'bring out books that are provocative, original and inspirational', to 'present and represent the un- and under-represented, and to enable and encourage new and diverse voices, especially voices that are gay, queer, black and of colour', and 'to put out work that is transformative, and that celebrates difference and diversity and the maverick spirit'.⁵⁷⁰

Gordon looks the part of a maverick spirit; his head is closely

⁵⁷⁰ Text taken from <http://www.teamangelica.com> (accessed 29 November 2015)

shaved at the sides with a long, styled central top section, and he wears angular glasses and a beaded shoestring necklace. I would guess he's in his late 40s. He holds up a paperback copy of his novel, *Soujlah* – published by his very own Team Angelica. 'It's about a mother and son, Poppy and Stanlake, who are refugees from a civil war in West Africa', he tells us. "Stanlake is a seventeen-year-old boy, who's very effeminate with long dreds. They come over here and then are relocated to a grim house down the Old Kent Road, where they encounter petty drug dealers who don't realize that Stanlake might be very effeminate but he has been a child soldier and has done terrible, terrible things... and eventually the lead gang member becomes erotically fascinated by him.'

He begins reading aloud from the book with a scene in which Poppy has just got back from the housing office and is making tea for Stanlake, whom she notices is wearing eye shadow and lipstick; this is the moment that the narrative begins to reveal the erotic power Stanlake will prove to have over the drug dealers who have been persecuting them. His reading voice is soft and level, making me lean forward fractionally to be sure I hear every word, yet it is assured and compelling, in a very different way to Persia's more performative reading style – and it turns out to be in stark juxtaposition to the shock value of his text.

A couple of minutes in, we are introduced to Stanlake's inner erotic thoughts with a description of how his cock hardens at the sight of the men's underwear catalogue at a bus stop, and this is quickly followed by gruesome flashbacks of Stanlake's time as a tiara-wearing child soldier, when a rebel soldier '*put the raw flesh on the end of the bayonet... then placed it on his*

tongue... mucus membrane... was sticking in his throat and he began to gag and retch.. then he threw up the slimy hunk of muscle... Audience members near me wince and grimace at this, and one woman, who looks physically ill, whispers not-so-quietly to her neighbour: 'ohhh god!'

Not only is Gordon's performance style very different to West's, the novel extract he has selected – and indeed the tone, style and content of the novel as a whole as he outlines it – could hardly be more different from either, save for the common theme of non-heteronormativity. This text sheds light on a rare manifestation of trans-sexualization in the context of certain refugee communities with traumatic roots that is rarely aired or discussed in British publishing in any form.

I wonder about the degree of expectation there is, at Polari, to include reference to sex and sexuality explicitly in the texts performed. Jennifer Reed, critiquing Ellen DeGeneres's decision to evade talking about sex and sexuality directly, argued that it was essentially damaging to the lesbian community's cause; in Reed's view, by representing herself as 'a lesbian without being lesbian, or a postgay lesbian', the impact of Ellen's presence diminished the potential force of the important challenge that needed to be posed to the 'heterosexual social contract' – because, 'without lesbian desire, there is no lesbian. Under the all-encompassing force of the heterosexual contract, the lesbian is lost'.⁵⁷¹ The problem with Reed's argument here seems to me to be: what about the agency of the individual performer or artist? What if

⁵⁷¹ See Reed (2011), pp.20-21

they want to be recognised for their talent in a way that does not directly involve sex and sexuality; and do not want to feel compelled to shape their work in order to function as part of a community-based challenge to heteronormative dominance?

**Catherine
Hall,
contemporary
-historical
fiction,
performance
nerves**

The next author-performer, Catherine Hall, is a slim woman in her early thirties with a blunt fringe and long bob. She is introduced by Burston as ‘born and raised in a remote sheep farm in the Lake District’, which is the geographical setting for her first novel, *The Proof of Love*, which won the Green Carnation Prize – an ‘LGBTQ’ award. She tells us in a light, soft voice that she now “lives in London with her two small sons, their father, and their father’s boyfriend, which sometimes feels like a lot of disaster for one small lesbian to live with”, immediately making people laugh, and also making her own gender identity clear at the outset.

She is going to read, she says, from her latest book, *The Repercussions*, which is about a war photographer just back from Afghanistan. Before beginning, she briefly introduces the book and its main characters. “Jo, the war photographer, has just moved into a flat inherited from her grandfather, and finds there a diary of a lady called Elizabeth who looked after soldiers who fought for Britain in WWI. This causes Jo to come to terms with what happened to her in Afghanistan but also what’s happening now with her husband and her female lover.” The chapters alternate between Jo’s letters to her ex-girlfriend Susie, and Elizabeth’s account of nursing Indian soldiers at the Brighton Pavilion in 1915.

Hall begins the performed reading with a scene where Jo is writing a letter to Susie, describing her current situation,

sitting on a balcony of her Brighton flat. *“I feel strange as I always do when I get back, caught between different worlds...”* She reads at a fast, nervous pace, which is hard, at first at least, to latch onto. She moves onto a World War I diary extract by Elizabeth, and then reads from a travelogue from her time in Afghanistan after the Taliban emerged, which comes to life with evocative descriptions – *“balconies hung cracked over gracious houses’*, and *‘human bones on the street, dug up by children from graves which were shaken by bombs”*. While the content, style and setting of her chosen extracts is varied, Hall’s reading tone does not vary much, and nor does she settle into a slower reading pace, making it difficult to remain engaged in the text. She is clearly nervous, but I find myself sympathetic to her nerves – partly as I was endeared to her by her initial self-deprecating and funny introduction – but also, as I am drawn to her story, language and literary style, I find myself actively wanting to absorb it properly, so I concentrate hard, and find myself adjusting to the reading and appreciating the writing and the performed reading more as it proceeds. I note that, in Hall’s performance, there is no explicit reference to sex, sexual desire or sexuality.

**Reader-
audience
member
Hilary on
the venue,
the
community,
the role of
the writing,
mixed
performance**

During the interval I ask a lady sitting near me if she’d mind speaking with me for my research, and she immediately replies: “of course!” – an attitude that will be reflected in almost all my Polari participant conversations, and seems to match the relaxed, enthused vibe of the event. Robin is a petite 52-year-old South Londoner with a short blond bob, dressed in a check shirt and jeans, and is here for the fourth time with a group of friends. The venue, she tells me, was her initial attraction: “I’ve been coming to the Southbank since I was a child. As a venue, it’s really one of a kind’ – but Polari

also appealed because “you hear new stuff and get to chat to other people”, and because it’s “pretty much the only event of its type in London which is just... gay and lesbian”. This is fascinating; while I had been aware of divisions within the LGBTQ+ community, I had not realised how far that translated into the existence of shared arts and cultural spaces, and how rare Polari was perceived to be by those who attended it.

I ask Robin if she is here at Polari more for the community and social side or the literature. “The literature first”, she says, “but *obviously* because it’s gay and lesbian – and the social aspect to it probably second.” The queer perspective of the writing by the featured authors is important to her, she explains, and more so than their individual identities as authors – but the two do interrelate. “Most of the writing at Polari touches on gay and lesbian issues”, she says, and even if that’s sometimes “quite indirect... that’s fine. Really it’s just interesting to hear whatever the subject matter might be about, from a lesbian or gay perspective. Even if it’s fictional.”

The quality of writing at Polari is “pretty mixed” in her view, but she praises its range and diversity. Coming here has prompted her to read books she wouldn’t otherwise have read, including poetry by Stella Duffy (who is performing later tonight) and it has caused her to put lots of other writers on her to-read list – though she can’t recall any names off the bat. The kind of writing that works best in performance, she thinks, is “observational humour”. She grins as she says this. “People always like to laugh don’t they? – so I think any writer that can choose something from their work that can make people laugh and is about observation and human nature, that can cut across all sorts of things – that’s going to work really well.” She

finds the standard of performances at Polari mixed, as well the writing, but, immediately after making this point, clarifies to me that she doesn't necessarily *expect* writers to be good performers: "that's not their forte; they might be writers but that's a very different thing." This echoes my conversations with reader-audiences at Hay: the idea that a 'good' performance, in a live literature context, won't necessarily be theatrical or dramatic, and that a sense of authenticity in performance is more valuable.

**Conversation:
on listening
to fiction
and literary
festival
dread**

The next woman I speak to is Clara, a tall, slim, quiet lady in her late forties with cropped hair and glasses, who's here by herself, and for the first time. Her sexuality isn't obvious from her appearance, and she doesn't make any allusions to it in our conversation. She's just finished a literary PhD and is currently working as a university administrator. "I heard of the salon because my cousin is John Gordon who's one of the writers here tonight", she says. "I've also read Diriye Osman's *Fairytales for Lost Children*" (another book published by Team Angelica, which will be featured at the next Polari; Osman's first book won the Polari First Book Prize).

"So far I've found it brilliant. Fantastic! I love literature – but I'm used to reading, so I tend to find it difficult to *listen*, because my mind wanders – but with the three readings tonight, my mind hasn't wandered! I've been riveted, so far. I've loved it." I ask why she thinks her mind usually wanders while listening to literature being read aloud. "I think it's to do with the way my brain works", she muses. "I'm a creature of the mind, and I'm a very reserved person, and when a narrative enters through my eyes very privately and then I think about it, I like that, whereas if I hear it... I just tend to be

aware of other things more.” She mulls this over for a moment, then adds: “I suppose I’ve felt like listening to narrative is a more *childish* thing – which is not to say that it’s *bad*, but... I find it difficult to reclaim it.” I’m intrigued by this explicit link between reading aloud and childhood. How far is that changing with the rise of podcasts and audiobooks – that I discussed in Chapter 1 – and how does attending literary events like this causes you to *practice* listening, as an audience member, and attune your ear and concentration? I reflect that I have already found myself working on my own listening concentration tonight, during Hall’s performance; and, over the last few years that I have been listening to more and more audiobooks, I have found myself better able to concentrate on the literary narrative that I’m listening to.

I ask Clara whether she thinks she was absorbed this evening more by the performances or the content. ‘The content’, she says, decisively. ‘The first one [Persia West’s reading] I thought was completely brilliant. I would like to read it.’ She also found West to be the best performer, intends to buy her book from the Foyles bookstall in the corner after the event, and feels sure that having heard West read it will affect her own subsequent reading. ‘I would remember what she said, *absolutely* differently, now that I’ve seen her read, and I would really look forward to the scene around the fish pond.’ She doesn’t think she hears voices in her head when she reads books normally, not having heard the author read aloud from them. ‘I... think I *feel* the voices in a different way. I don’t hear them, exactly.’ I’m reminded of Denise Riley’s work on the ‘inner voice’, and the new neuroscience around that concept (discussed in Chapter 1).

The only live literary events that Clara has previously been to are book launches in bookshops, which she says she has '*quite* enjoyed', but proposes that: 'because the readings here [at Polari] are longer, you can get your teeth into more... and have a real sense of what is being read from'. That said, she feels that the authors' short introductions to their texts so far this evening were key to her enjoyment of the performed readings. 'I would have struggled otherwise', she admits – then adds, a little darkly: 'particularly with the last one'.

I ask whether she prefers this readings-focused format to a live literature event that you might get at a festival or bookshop which includes a Q&A with the author. 'Yes. I don't feel a Q&A is necessary', she says, firmly. 'Nor would I feel the need to ask questions if there was one... though I'd possibly be interested to listen to others' questions. But so far, tonight, I thought the format was *perfect* – three readings, then an interval.' Has she ever been to a literary festival, I wonder? '*No!*', is the emphatic answer. 'I feel as though it wouldn't be my cup of tea', she explains. 'I think I'd find it too middle-class and right-on. I mean I am middle-class but I'm not very right-on. I just don't think I'd fit in. But this is fine!' She sounds surprised about that, on reflection. 'Here, it's friendly but.... it's... leaving me alone? I don't feel *alarmed* that it's going to ask any more of me than I want to give. Which I like.' In contrast, she imagines the type of crowd at a literary festival to be: 'middle-class people with their children who don't let their children watch television because they think they ought to read instead... it's just *disgusting*.' I can't help smiling a little at this sudden vehemence. Conversely, she proposes: 'You wouldn't look at the people *here* and imagine they are literary, right? This could be anything!' I am reminded of my

conversation with Jo Glanville at Hay, whose sentiments about literary festival audiences were similar (see Chapter 2). And I am struck by the apparent contradiction that Clara described herself to me, at the start of our conversation, as a lover of literature with a PhD in the field; and yet she has this passionate wish not to be amongst others who look as if they might be 'literary'. I wonder how she would describe a quintessentially literary person, to look at. Having enjoyed this event so much, Clara tells me she that would definitely come back and go to more events like Polari – but stresses her point about festivals further, expanding on her vision of them: 'I still wouldn't want to go to a literary festival with *grass* and *marquees* and *falafels* on sale' – each item listed as if it were a mosquito she wanted to repel.

**Conversation:
friendship,
community,
interactivity
and
theatricality**

A lesbian couple in their forties called Sal and Jo tell me enthusiastically that they are regulars and come to Polari about five times a year. Sal is a student in counselling and psychotherapy, and Jo a social worker. 'One of our friends is an author', Sal tells me, 'and she's quite a regular on stage here... so we came first to see her, but then we made lots of friends and came back. It's quite a community.' I ask which is the bigger draw: the community or the literature. 'It's both...', she says, 'but I wouldn't go to just any literature event. The fact that it was a queer event drew me.... And the fact also that it's really cheap, it's five pounds! Brilliant. South Bank is a brilliant location too.' They say they haven't been to many other live literary events, except 'friends doing launches', a Jeanette Winterson reading, a reading by Judith Kerr at the Southbank where they took their nine-year-old daughter, and the lesbian arts festival, L Fest.

They enthuse about how L Fest includes lots of interactive sessions with author readings and audience questions. ‘That’s the stuff we like, where it’s very interactive’, Sal says. ‘Here at Polari, while there’s no Q&A with the author, it’s still great because you can always go up and approach them – like, if you see someone you really like, you can go up to them in the break and say hi and they’ll be really happy.’ They both tell me they don’t hesitate to talk to the authors personally, and do this often. ‘I love the fact that you can get to them if you want to. And trust me, we do,’ Sal says. They both laugh. They say they often buy books here and get them signed, either for themselves or as presents for friends.

I ask what they think they gain from hearing the author read aloud from their books as opposed to just reading the books on the page. ‘Well, there are books here that I wouldn’t normally buy...’ Sal says, ‘but for me it’s also that I can then hear their voice inside my head as I read it. It brings it to life! Especially if it’s funny... I love seeing people read from their own stuff. I think it’s really *interesting*.’ I ask if that, for her, is partly to do with being part of a responsive audience, as she’s described. She agrees, but not entirely – ‘it’s also that I just like to hear their voice, the way they’re *phrasing* things... Some guys who come on even act stuff out as well.’

While Sal ‘definitely’ prefers authors who add more drama to their readings, Jo chips in to say that she thinks it’s always better to see an author than an actor doing a reading, even if the author’s reading is less dramatic. ‘You’re getting their interpretation of the whole theme and characters and ideas... and what we really want is the *authenticity* of the original authors. So even if they aren’t so eloquent and fluff a few

lines, hearing their *spirit* through their words and through their characters is really interesting. And also recognizing how, although their characters might be quite diverse, each one is a small snippet of their personality coming through.’ Sal adds that listening to the writer read their work aloud always enhances the way she then reads their books, beyond the sound of the voice. ‘Some stuff, I’ve read and I haven’t really enjoyed that much, and then I’ve seen the author read it and I’ve read it *differently*. It’s better.’

However, when I ask them both if they’ve ever experienced a badly performed reading where they thought they might have liked the book better if they hadn’t heard it read, they laugh knowingly. ‘Couldn’t possibly comment!’, Jo says. ‘There are definitely better readings than others’, Sal adds, diplomatically. I ask what they think makes a good reading. ‘If someone’s nervous it makes *me* feel nervous, so I’m a bit funny about that’, Sal offers. ‘If someone’s mumbling and fumbling and tripping over stuff... I struggle to connect with it. I just think: be relaxed! The pace shouldn’t be too fast, unless it’s appropriate – and just that bit of character brought to it.’ I ask them to expand on what they each mean by authenticity, and Jo nods vigorously. ‘It’s about *genuineness*, rather than trying to act it out’, she says. ‘Just being comfortable with their own words really.’ She uses the last reader, Catherine Hall, as an example: ‘some of it was quite fast, but she relaxed a little more into being comfortable with what she was saying and you could feel that coming through. So although it wasn’t as *lyrical*, as if an actor was reading it, but you still get more meaning from the words because you can hear what she *intended*.’

Neither has a preference for either comic or serious writing; they like the combination that tends to be represented at Polari. 'We've been here in tears before, literally *crying*', Sal says. 'It's something about ...the author's connection to the work. If they feel really connected to it and there's the connection there and the confidence there – you really feel it.' She couldn't recall exactly what moved her to tears, but Jo tells me: 'There's often a lot of stuff about *loss* that people are prepared to share through their writing, and that's something that everyone can connect with in different ways...if you can hear that in that writer, and then that touches you, and it's very moving.' Sal agrees, and links this to the LGBT theme – though she doesn't call it that: 'With the gay community, and how we can be treated, there's something about that shared experience of rejection and prejudice... when someone comes up and speaks to that it really *resonates* throughout the whole room. And you really feel like a community, together, understanding that.' This value placed on a sense of 'emotional community' – a term coined by Max Weber⁵⁷² and adopted more recently by Michel Maffesoli in relation to urban sub-cultural groupings⁵⁷³ – is echoed in other iterations of gay culture, including in relation to tourism, where it has been proposed as an important means for participants to gain 'competency in performing gay identities' and enable them to 'cope with issues associated with homophobia.'⁵⁷⁴

Of tonight's readings so far, Sal says the first one was 'a little bit Mills and Boon!', but they were both fascinated by Gordon's reading. 'He was giving me a view into something I

⁵⁷² See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* [1951] (1978)

⁵⁷³ See Maffesoli (1996), p.12

⁵⁷⁴ See Martin Cox, 'The Long-Haul Out of the Closet' (2002), p.169

don't know much about and it felt very real', she says. Jo agrees and says she was particularly interested in the way he approached gay identity. 'The thing he was focused on, about child soldiers, was that loss of self and how they were expressing themselves with wigs, dresses, make up, nail varnish, which changed them in some way physically but with no recognition of their former selves, and they needed that to move forward... I think that was something really refreshing and *new* in terms of a take on that situation.' Sal nods. 'It took a queer identity into a context I had no knowledge of.' They concur, too, that most of the writing performed has a queer identity theme. 'Or, if they've been straight people they've usually been really camp', Sal adds. 'Like Celia Imrie - she's straight I think but she's really camp and has a big gay following.' As for the material: 'it doesn't have to be gay and lesbian issues, but it's really nice to be able to come here and relate really closely.'

Compared to other LGBT arts events, Sal says this one is special. "There's something about this setting, the fact that it's live and that there's an interval where people chat and we get to know one another... There is a real sense of *community* here'. There's also 'something immediate' about a live literary reading, she says, which is not present in other contexts. 'At another art thing, if you were just walking about looking at stuff, you wouldn't necessarily *react* in the same way.' Jo adds that Polari's informality contributes to its audience appeal, and makes it more intimate. 'When the authors are reading... it's less of a formal performance – just like it's their turn to speak in a conversation or something – it's so much *closer*... whereas there is that fourth wall, when you're performing as an actor, or musician.' Sal pays tribute to the host for

cultivating this atmosphere: 'It's the way Paul does it, too– he encourages people to sort of like clap or cheer or – get *involved*, you know?'

**Event: James
Maker, mixed
genre,
autobiography,
deadpan humour**

Paul takes to the stage for the second half. 'Hello everyone! Did you have a nice interval? Are you nicely *lubricated*? [He pauses for an audience titter.] You'll need to be for our next performer. James Maker is a former rock singer, spoken word performer, and world expert on the New York Dolls. In June 2011 he won the inaugural Polari First Book prize for his memoir, *Autofellatio*.' Burston lingers on each syllable of this title. 'After 10 years living in Spain he returned to London, his home town. He can't work out how Oyster cards work, but he can produce a *sensational* omelette.'

A small, bald man, dressed in a black velvet floral shirt, Maker thanks Burston and tells us he's going to read an extract of a chapter which is a work in progress, from a book which is a mixed genre – some travelogue, some autobiography.

He begins his performed reading in a deadpan, northern voice, and by the end of the first sentence has got the audience cracking up loudly, immediately transforming the tone and atmosphere of the event. He lightly, yet relentlessly, mocks the British expat characters featured in the piece, two of whom silently judge him and his young gay local companion from across a Spanish restaurant. "*I was shown to a table with a clear view of a British couple from the East Midlands. I'd met them before. The husband was an electrician who was proud of having fitted a villa with British three pin sockets, which was akin to erecting a Gone with the Wind staircase in Northumbria. And his wife was a martyr to menopausal hot*

flushes... someone had suggested to her that, as we lived in a climate where al fresco dining was common, she should rent herself out as a heater". I wince a little at this joke, and wonder what the menopausal lesbians in the room make of it. In prose liberally sprinkled with double entendres, he adds gesticulation for suggestive actions such as dipping bread in seasoned oil as he goads his judgmental onlookers, knowing exactly what will follow. "*Lots of things travel at speed of light*", he warns, "*especially... light and unsubstantiated gossip*". His performance grows increasingly bold and camp, and he makes plenty of eye contact with the audience, regularly shifting his reading glasses up and down to adjust from page to people.

**Stella
Duffy,
performing a
standalone
story
written to
be read
aloud for
radio, site-
resonant**

For the finale of Polari, another well-practised performer takes the theatricality of the evening's readings to a new level. "Stella Duffy has written 13 novels, 50 short stories and 10 plays" Paul Burston tells us. "*The Room of Lost Things* and *State of Happiness* were both longlisted for the Orange Prize, and she's twice won Stonewall Writer of the Year. Her latest book is a collection of short stories, *Everything is Moving, Everything is Joined.*" As well as a writer, Duffy is a co-director of the organization Fun Palaces that seeks to engage people from all communities in the arts. She mounts to the stage to the tune of loud whoops: she has been here many times before and is obviously highly popular. "Yeah, twice longlisted for the Orange, I reckon that adds up to a shortlisting" she says. She is in her mid-fifties but looks younger. She wears a tight floral dress in black, white and teal. She introduces the story she's about to read by telling us that it's part of a collection that was published after she tweeted a fan's request to Salt Publishing, and they agreed to it. "I love Twitter!", she

exclaims, jubilantly. She then explains her decision to perform this particular story on this particular night: “it’s because of where we are - that’s a fuck off view right?!” The story, ‘From the River’s Mouth’, is set around the Thames, and was commissioned for Radio 4, so “written to be read aloud”. Duffy tells us that, for the broadcast, the actor Samantha Bond performed it from inside the Greenwich tunnel, on her request. “I’m sorry I’m not Samantha Bond”, she adds. “But she does kiss me at parties now which is great. And people liked her performance so it’s been repeated a lot. And actors get bigger repeat fees than writers do”. I get a distinct sense that Duffy is deliberately emphasising, in this introduction, her presence, popularity and status in the arts and literary world beyond the LGBT community, for those who are not already aware of it, underlining her status as a headliner for this event and, perhaps, indicating that her public identity and literary work are not primarily defined by her lesbian identity.

Duffy’s performance, when she begins, is actorly too, but not in the mannered mode employed by West. She starts reading at a deliberately fast pace, delivering a dialogue section in a strong Cockney accent. *“Sorry luv, don’t do south... need a passport don’t you?... Not me, can’t go south, don’t go south, won’t go south”*. Then the pace slows suddenly: *“Enough. [Long pause]. I have heard enough. [Another pause]. There is time and there is tide and theeeere - is the Thames – [her voice drops to a whisper.] Here is the Thames. Old Father Thames they used to say because they don’t know any better. [A poetic rhythm starts to build]. I am no more father than I am mother [declaratory]. But I do have my children, my tributary babies, running to me, clinging to me...I am tired by these people who are frightened by water, worried by the south... I twist and I*

have turned... yet you are too scared to cross me don't cross me then [a snappy, angry tone]." Having managed to traverse what seems to be the majority of human moods in under a minute, Stella proceeds to read the rest of the story in a similarly dramatic, lyrical style, making frequent eye contact with the audience, and employing occasional physical gestures while she reads, like beckoning and flicking away. The story itself does not have a direct LGBT theme or content, I note. Looking round, I see that the audience is utterly captivated, creating a palpable sense of collective engagement that is maintained right until the end, when Duffy is rewarded with rapturous applause and more whoops. I'm reminded of O'Hagan's similarly theatrical performance at Hay – though the audience dynamic there was far more muted.

Duffy describes herself as a 'writer and theatremaker'. She has a theatre background, and runs a community performance organisation alongside her writing. Consequently, she has given a lot of thought to the performance element of her literary events. On her blog, she refers to them as 'rehearsed readings', and issues the following instruction to other authors: *'authors, rehearse your readings! edit them, make them work for reading aloud not just on the page – it makes SO much difference. I always rehearse, even for gigs like this, so I have readings ready if audiences want them.'*⁵⁷⁵ This, from my now-plentiful experience of speaking to authors about live literature events, is a rarely-articulated perspective – those who do edit texts for readings tend to do it at the last minute,

⁵⁷⁵ See Stella Duffy's blog, 'talking books and writing and diversity and stuff' (2018); also 'the book event – thoughts for authors' (2013), for Duffy's perspective on how few other authors appear to practice readings.

with pencil scratchings-out, and 'to rehearse' is a little-used verb. It pays off, judging by tonight's performance.

Duffy has also given thought to the quality of liveness in other live literature event formats, notably literary festival events that incorporate audience questions, and she links that element to the notion of authenticity that audiences, like Sal and Robin, often value. 'Instead of second-guessing what people want to hear/know about', she writes, 'I now prefer (if the festival will let me) to v quickly tell the audience the kinds of things I do and care about and then ask them what they're interested in, responding to that, and finding a narrative in their suggestions. It means they get something that is more like a show, but it's also led by them, and it also means they get a more authentic me, because I'm choosing to respond to them, live, rather than just give them a rehearsed reading and a bit of Q&A. I've done it several times now and it's always worked really well. Not surprisingly, audiences are far more interested in something they have input into, and I'm far more interesting when I'm being genuinely *live* [emphasis added]. We all win.'⁵⁷⁶ I wonder how many festivals have 'let' her do this, and what direction those conversations have taken.

Although, in the context of tonight's Polari, Duffy does not directly address her sexuality, like Persia West, she does write prolifically in her blog about her lesbian identity, and her ideas, emotions, anger and activist motivations relating to gender identity and equality. This reveals that she still experiences these issues as central to her sense of self, that they are inextricable from her authorial identity, and that they affect her sense of performative authenticity.

⁵⁷⁶ See Duffy (2018)

even now, I can't really hold Shelley [her wife]'s hand in public without feeling like it's a 'thing' – a statement, a gesture – even now, after 25 years together. How for so long – at only 53 – my sexuality (and my gender) have been a thing outside the mainstream, outside the welcomed and accepted norm, that it became part of me too, that being other became part of me....now, most of the time in my moderately liberal, generous, London life, people are open and kind. But those many many years of feeling othered don't just go away. They live inside me. Othered as a woman. Othered as a gay women. Othered as a woman from a working class background. And it doesn't disappear because things are (often) nicer now, (sometimes) easier now I'm older (ageism and my breaking body aside, obv), certainly easier now I'm more established in my work – that feeling outside, that feeling apart, that feeling [of being] not welcome. Not really, not fully, *not as my whole self*... I realise why I still feel so other. / Because our gains are so newly won, because they are not the norm (for the whole world), because it takes so little to put the clock back, to put our lives back. It's really really not fixed yet.⁵⁷⁷

When I see Duffy perform at the salon again, two years later, in a very different tone, after briefly promoting two of her recent books, she will perform something very different to either those texts or that short story, ratcheting up the anger expressed on her blog to another level: she will read aloud an autobiographical piece, which was published in the literary magazine *Granta* – “I've never been in it before – it's a proper literary magazine and everything”, she'll proclaim proudly while waving it aloft for a crowd who, it is assumed, will not be *Granta* readers – which confronts and describes, in frank, direct and angry tones, the sexual abuse she was subjected to as a child and the impact it has had on her as an adult, and

⁵⁷⁷ See Duffy, 'some equality is not equality' (2016)

goes on to argue passionately that lesbians' experiences have been neglected in all the mainstream #metoo conversations. "Fuck off with your pussy grab. My cunt is – *not – kitten-cute*", she will read, glaring at the audience like a spitting cobra, before wilting a little. "I am washed out... But this is true. This is mine. This is my story. Me." This performance will seem to be flying a defiant flag for the LGBTQ+ community, by making the point that, as queer culture scholar Thomas Peele has put it, 'proliferating queer representations in popular culture' have 'not eliminated the problem of heteronormativity or anti-queer violence',⁵⁷⁸ and also by announcing that these kinds of experiences have now entered the 'literary' mainstream, in part thanks to her. It will also be a performance that acknowledges how well the Polari reader-audience community knows her, both as an author-persona and through her writing – certainly well enough not to be abashed by extremely hard-hitting autobiographical material; conversely, Duffy will appear entirely confident that they will want to hear it in all its rawness, and to be left with it ringing in their ears at the end of a Saturday night. During the slightly stunned silence before the applause, I will reflect on how much in common this performance has with *Nanette*, the recent Netflix show of a live stand-up performance by Hannah Gadsby in which she tackling abuse and discrimination against lesbians and announces her own performance as the end of comedy. The show became a viral phenomenon when it was released on screen, and was marked out by critics as a piece of work that would change the whole landscape of comedy writing in relation to sexuality post-#MeToo, operating as a 'dividing line'.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁸ See Peele, 'Introduction', p.5, of Peele ed., *Queer Popular Culture* (2011)

⁵⁷⁹ See Melena Ryszik, 'The Comedy-Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art of Hannah Gadsby' (2018)

Tonight at Polari, though, Duffy's performance concludes with no such confrontation. Paul Burston energetically invites all writers back to the stage for a final bow, tells us the names of the author-performers he has lined up for the next salon, and bids everyone goodbye. The music is ratcheted up in volume again as the audience starts to chat, to get up, put on coats, or head to buy books or drinks.

**Conversation:
hearing work-
in-progress,
courage,
community,
newness,
temporality**

I ask Sal and Jo what they thought of the second half. 'Well, we know Stella', Sal says, proudly. 'But Robin's seen James before but I hadn't, and he was fantastic. Considering it wasn't a finished piece as well! So brave.' She particularly likes hearing new work-in-progress tested out like this, she says. 'We all get together to hear something that *no one else* is hearing, simply because we're part of a community! It's cool.'

The idea of being the *first* to hear a piece of writing in public, before it has even been published, constitutes a heightening of the temporal quality of a live experience, that I will see rewarded by particularly enthusiastic audience applause at future Polari salons. The presentation of new work to salon reader-audiences is something that traces back to the Enlightenment; as Habermas put it, in relation to 17th century France, 'the salon held the monopoly of first publication: a new work... had to legitimate itself first in this forum.'⁵⁸⁰ While the notion of 'newness' is promulgated by other live literature events too, it is more often in relation to 'first' live readings from newly published novels; this is a core element of Damian Barr's literary salon, for instance. It is also true of the bigger

⁵⁸⁰ Habermas [1962] (1989) p.34

festivals like Hay, where, as I discussed in Chapter 2, there are negotiations with agents and publishers behind the scenes to stage first presentations of novels by the most critically-acclaimed and bestselling authors – though festivals, being large, annual productions, cannot be as time-sensitive to publication as regular salons. This fetishization of the experience of being among the first to discover new artworks appears across other forms too, such as music, film and theatre, often through the terminology of a world or country ‘premiere’. But it is arguably heightened in the context of performing a new short story to an audience before it has even been through the initial filters of editing and publication for a live audience; a heightening of the feeling among participants that they are unique, in an unrepeatably moment, in being the first to receive that story in any form. Sal’s reference, once again, to the notion of ‘community’ in relation to Polari, when describing her experience of hearing new work in this way, suggests a still-further heightening of the experience that is linked to the regular, collective nature of this particular embodied reader-audience; the sense of contingency and impact involved in the ‘feedback loop’ is increased because this single, unique performance, taking place in this forum, before any other judgment or form of editing has been applied to the work within the literary community, is *collectively* understood to affect the future content and publication prospects of the text being performed.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁸¹ See Fischer-Lichte (2008) p.38-39, and my discussion in Chapter 1.

**'The love',
support for
new author
development**

Sal reiterates how great it is to hear people who are well-known, like Stella, who's 'managed to bridge the gay-straight-kind-of-thing', as well as 'people who are just starting out.' The inexperienced ones are not always great performers, and 'sometimes you're like urrrrooooohuurrrr...', she says, "not quite, not sure' – but ultimately 'there's still the *love*. The love is always there.' This provides a fascinating insight into the unusually positive and encouraging atmosphere here at Polari; there is an explicit sense that, not only are the most successful 'headline' performers still battling against the system in an attempt to 'bridge the gay-straight-kind-of-thing' and therefore need backing, but the newcomers are expected to be poor performers, and the audience takes an active, valued role in supporting them to develop and succeed. Put this way, the Polari community appears akin to a heart-warming literary microclimate, consciously aware of its fragility in relation to the broader ecosystem, but staunchly nurturing its new shoots as well as its established flowers.

**Conversation:
spontaneity,
cliquiness,
corporatisation
of festivals**

I get chatting to another audience member, Dom, who is forty years old, lives in East London and works as an interpreter. He's come to Polari before, a few times. 'I like reading – I read a lot', he tells me. 'And I write myself. So I like hearing writing – particularly LGBT stuff. I like the way Polari feels quite spontaneous, and you get to see a range of authors from relatively big names to people who aren't published.' The quality of the performers, in his view, 'really varies. *Massively*. The quality of what they read and the performance... That variety does not put him off coming, but does affect what he decides to read on the page after the events. He was very struck by Stella Duffy tonight, he tells me, and plans to buy some of her work, either here now, or at some point soon.

‘She’s a very good reader and performer, but it was also the text – it was very creative, and quite poetic. I liked that it was a self-contained piece, and I think she said she wrote it with reading aloud in mind... I think authors need to choose well, what they read. Duffy’s piece really worked – it wasn’t just that it is self-contained... another thing is that it was about the Thames, so there is a connection between the place we’re sitting, here, and the writing – I like that. London writing, also LGBT stuff – both of those subjects would make me listen more carefully’.

I ask him what he feels about the audience at Polari, as a regular member. He looks uncertain, and a bit sheepish. “It probably feels a bit more intimate than other events”, he says – “but it does feel a bit cliquey. I come on my own, because I don’t have any friends who are into this kind of thing, so I kind of observe others socialising here. It’s not *unfriendly*, but... yeah, *maybe* cliquey. There are quite a few people here I’ve seen before but not talked to.” He has been to literary festivals before, he tells me – he even went to an event earlier today that was part of the LSE Literary Festival, which he says was ‘good because it was free’, and he also told me he had enjoyed a little literary festival at Laugharne in Wales, where Dylan Thomas lived, which is ‘a bit leftfield, leftie – more than the Hay Festival now is, which I’ve been to too, which started off small but is now more corporate.’ He mulls for a moment, then adds: ‘while it might be cliquey here, but it’s still also a bit like *family* – I don’t mean a nuclear family – but you get a real sense here that lots of people know each other. And at other [literary] events, even small ones, it feels like the speakers are... distant, somehow, but here it feels like they’re more part of the audience. That’s a big positive. I think it’s

more relaxed than *any* literary festival. Probably also because there's alcohol and it's in the evening.'

**Conversation:
live
literature
virginity and
facial
expressions**

Emma, a woman in her early forties who works at a sixth form college, tells me she came to Polari with a friend, and had never been to any kind of literary event before. 'I like reading and I'm part of a book club, but this was like finding a whole new side to reading for me', she said. 'It's even *more* engaging than reading on the page, I think, to hear the pieces being read aloud... you see the *facial expressions* too which really helps bring it to life. I'm definitely going to more now.'

**Paul Burston
on the
growth of
Polari's
nurturing
audience**

Paul Burston is happy to make more time to talk to me, even amidst the thanks and goodbyes. He talks about Polari's move from Soho to the Southbank. 'It just snowballed here', he says. 'There turned out to be a really big, untapped audience, who were just saying, *give us some stuff!*' Now, he says, it has come to expand both in terms of numbers and profile but also in terms of significance for the LGBT community, because of the supportive Polari community, or sub-sub-culture, that has emerged. 'Whether it's a first time or self-published writer who's never performed in front of an audience, they're just so *welcoming*,' he says, fondly, as if talking about a beloved brood of grandchildren. He compares the Polari audience to the audiences for readings he's done as an author in other contexts. 'I've done tonnes of readings in bookshops and libraries and stuff like that, and *there* they're like: *impress me.*' He gives a cynical eyebrow raise, imitating a hard-to-please audience member. 'It's very hard then. Whereas this is very nurturing. It's a family environment. I didn't create that – *they* created it. I don't take credit for that. It's lovely.'

“Literary event” vs cabaret show, entertainment and variety; Q&A boredom

That said, he talks about how he actively cultivates the atmosphere through his programming. ‘I don’t programme it as if it’s a “*literary event*” [he pauses here to waggle two fingers, miming inverted commas.] I programme it as if it’s a *cabaret show*. That’s the way I think about it. You need to *entertain* people.’ This doesn’t mean it’s all about humour, though; Burston prioritises variety. ‘My own novels have been comic novels, so far, and that’s easy to present to an audience because you know you’re going to get a laugh. But you can’t present a literary night on that basis because that’s basically a comedy night... There *has* to be a mixture of genres and styles.’ I presume this is both to provide variety for audiences, and to showcase the diversity of writing by LGBT author-performers.

I ask Burston to expand on the readings-focused format of Polari, in comparison with a standard literary festival event format involving one to three authors, extended discussions, usually with a chairperson, about their work and writing, very brief readings, and a Q&A with the audience. He raises his eyebrows. ‘I’m sorry, I’m a journalist, and *even I* find that [Q&A] boring. I mean obviously if someone’s a cult author and everyone just wants to ask a question, that’s a different thing. But for most authors, the audience would really rather hear the *work*, I think.... For *me* it’s about the work. Polari is a *showcase*... And people seem to like it.’

But he’s equally passionate about the community function of Polari as an event, which he contrasts to literary festivals. ‘Whether you’re gay or gay friendly, people come here because it’s a *social space* where they can meet their mates,

**Polari's
mission to
change
LGBTQ+ scene
more widely,
healing
division**

listen to some writers, have a drink - it's a *social* thing. It's not a *we're-going-to-be-worthy* thing.' He gestures, almost regally, around the room. 'Half this audience is regulars. Literally. I mean – this bunch over here come every night" [pointing to one group], this bunch over here come every night [pointing to another].' I wonder whether he has a sense that some newcomers might find this cliquey.

Putting this in the context of the wider LGBT community, Burston tells me that he is using Polari to pursue an extra-literary mission to bring the LGBT scene back to 'how it used to be. Over the last twenty years I saw the London gay scene become a *shadow* of itself – it got bigger, but far less hospitable, far less friendly, far less inclusive, body fascist, gender divisions, women not being with men, men hating women – *horrible*. All the things I hate... there's so few places to go now where there's a nice mix of people! I love the fact that this thing started and... it's so varied and diverse.' The mixture of men and women is something 'you never see on the gay scene these days – never. And all different ages and backgrounds, you know, 18 to 80. And that's amazing, to have that social space that's so *inclusive*. It's partly the force of my will to make it happen, because I'm determined to make things better!'

And Polari, he adds, has proved it can draw similarly diverse audiences outside London. 'We just did the first Polari tour towards the end of last year – it was Arts Council funded, and we went around the country – and it was exactly the same there. I was amazed!'

I ask what he thinks it is about *live literature*, specifically, that

contributes to this effect on the LGBT community, as opposed to any other form of event. ‘I really think LGBT people are still *starved* of these stories’, he says. ‘They *need* them.’

Burston on Polari and the wider gay cultural scene; publishing worse than it was; the role of the prize

During our conversation, several different people come up to Burston before heading off, saying things like: ‘Thank you Paul! See you next month!’ – and in return he ladles out affectionate compliments like: ‘You’re looking very fruity tonight, Jan!’, and: ‘Alright gorgeous, take care!’

He returns to the subject of how Polari fits into the wider gay cultural scene, and the role he wants the Prize to play. ‘We have gay soap operas now, which we didn’t have when I was growing up, and we have gay drama which can be quite dramatic and a bit stereotypical. There are books now, but very *few* books. Publishing is actually *worse* now than it was twenty years ago, for gay books. There’s not a single gay publishing house – not one. Publishing houses now, since the financial meltdown, are so *nervous* of publishing queer stuff. So... when we started the Polari Prize in 2011, we made the decision to make it open to self-published work. A lot of self-published work is shit, obviously, but a lot of it isn’t shit; it’s self-published because they couldn’t get anyone to buy it... The winner last year, Diriye Osman – his is an *extraordinary* book. If he wasn’t queer, that book would be in Waterstones. It’s ridiculous. It’s an amazing amazing *amazing* piece of work. For a debut.’

I saw Osman at Polari, before he won the prize, and he was a highlight among the author-performances I have witnessed there over several years, certainly in theatrical terms. A gay, transgender Somali writer with a bleached hair top, big

statement glasses, and a huge, confident and mischievous smile, he thanked the audience for ‘coming and jamming, as we call it’, introduced the extracts from his quasi-autobiographical story collection, *Fairytales for Lost Children*, with a snapshot of his autobiography, describing, with a light touch, his traumatic move from Kenya to Somalia as a child, and how at age 17 he ‘specialised in only two things: weed and sex’. During his intense, dramatic, impassioned reading, he made plentiful eye contact and at one point looked at the audience with a glint in his eye, divulging: ‘I’m getting into this!’, tacitly encouraging them to do the same. He told me afterwards how he had written his stories specifically for performance, and loved to perform them with the accompaniment of hip hop beats which he had done in other venues – and, as he explained this, the subtly rhythmic, propulsive quality of his reading became more apparent and made sense to me.

Tonight, when we chat after the event, Burston emphasizes to me just how important Polari is as a platform for emerging LGBT writers, published, self-published and unpublished. ‘In an ideal world there shouldn’t be a need for this. But there *is* still a need. Stella Duffy would probably get a gig somewhere else. But no-one else on this bill would get a gig anywhere else, which is ridiculous because they’re fucking talented writers.’

The situation has evolved just this year, however, after the submissions opened for the Polari First Book Prize 2018. In a recent blog post,⁵⁸² Burston wrote:

⁵⁸² See Paul Burston, ‘Polari First Book Prize 2018’ (2018)

The prize has grown enormously. The number of submissions this year was four times the number we received [last year]... But it would be naive to think that LGBT content is no longer an issue in publishing. Earlier this year, author Matt Cain crowd-funded his novel 'The Madonna of Bolton' through Unbound after it was turned down by many major UK publishers for being "too gay". It became the fastest-funded novel in the history of Unbound.

He added a warning about future threats to LGBT publishing:

This week a writing competition caused a stir on Twitter. Based in America, The Creative Writing Institute have a flash fiction competition that rules out submissions containing "sex, graphic violence and LGBT content." As if our lives and our stories are somehow pornographic by nature and on a par with graphic violence. I had to remind myself that this is 2018. Not 1958. For as long as attitudes like this exist, and many publishers remain risk averse to books with LGBT content, there will still be a need for prizes like ours.⁵⁸³

For the moment, though, Burston tells me that he is proud of the audience numbers that Polari regularly pulls in which, he points out, are rare for literary events, even those in the mainstream. 'I've done author tours for the last ten years, and a lot of the time you just get a few people. A handful. But here we get a *huge* audience, and it's so *lovely* to have that. To say to the authors: *okay, come on – I can guarantee you a really good audience and a bookseller.* And they're like: *okay!*'

What's in a name? The 'Packaging' of literary events

I ask why he thinks live literature events have proliferated, despite the issue of audience numbers, at least at the other events beyond Polari that he's alluded to. In Burston's view, the 'packaging and presentation' are more important than many live literature producers assume. 'A lot of people think:

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

an author reading – boring. But if you repackage it and present it as a *salon, festival*, blah blah, whatever – it’s an *event*. An event is fun. A cultural event.’

He muses on the importance of the venue. ‘On our tour... we did a mixture of ten touring events, a mixture of existing book festivals, theatre events and libraries. For the theatre ones – every one I hired, we sold out. It’s astonishing. So I think it’s about the presentation. The New York Times has said Polari is the most *theatrical* salon. And that’s why I dress up so much and am a bit silly on stage. It just makes it – approachable.’

I ask whether it’s a problem for him that some writers are better at performing than others. ‘Yes, yes, yes, *yes*’, he says. ‘Many times I don’t know what they’re going to be like. But what I do know is that in this space this audience is very receptive.’ The added risk of novices being poor performers is built into his programming, as I had come to suspect. ‘Often the first few people on the bill at Polari have never been on stage. That’s a *deliberate* thing that I’ve done. Showcasing new talent in a safe environment. This audience will not boo and heckle them, because if they do they know I’ll come and slap them. I’m joking! But they *know* it’s going to be supportive. So even if they stumble a bit, and they’re not the best performer in the world, it’s okay, because the audience are really here for the headliners anyway.’ I am fascinated by the idea that Burston has almost *trained* his regular reader-audiences to behave supportively, therefore cultivating a deeper sense of community among them and *with*, as well as for, debut authors, priming them to expect and accept the worst performances alongside the best.

**Nervous
debuts,
cultivating a
supportive
community for
new authors; a
moral mission**

‘Having created something so successful, which I created out of pure *vanity* for myself, I’ll be honest... I absolutely feel a *moral duty* to use that to support the next generation of people’, Burston continues. ‘Not just in terms of their age, but where they are in their careers. Whether they’re writing their first novel at 17 or 70 is irrelevant to me. Because they’re *new writers*. For me, Polari, without the new writers thing, would not be the same. It’s *really* important to me. At every event there’s someone new. The first person or two people on the bill. Tonight is a Friday in January, so we stacked it more heavily because it’s a difficult night to fill. But most nights here are on a Tuesday or Wednesday – and then there will often be more people in the first half who are untried and untested.’

I ask how he feels that nights like this one change the way that he responds to the books as a reader. He ponders the question for a moment. ‘I don’t like audiobooks’, he says. ‘It’s a silly thing but I just don’t like them... to me reading a book is a very *private* interaction, and listening to something is a bit more like television or radio. And I do too much of that. Reading for me is quite precious. But... it *does* make a difference to me if I read the book after hearing the author reading it. I *hear the voice*. Stella is a good example: Stella’s work is quite challenging for the reader, and yet she’s such an amazing performer that it makes the work more accessible. And that to me is a really important thing. That’s part of what Polari delivers to the audience.’ I’m intrigued by the apparent paradox here: the privacy that Burston attributes to reading; and the performativity of this readings-focused event.

After my conversation with Paul, I wonder how much impact the author-performers have on each other at Polari – whether

the 'headliners' inspire the novices, and what impact it has on the novices to be sharing a stage with more established author-performers.

I get a new insight into this at the next month's Polari, when talking to the author Christopher Fowler, the 'headliner' for the night. Like Duffy the previous month, Fowler performs a stand-alone short piece written with the intention of being read aloud – in his case, specifically at Polari. While Fowler is a prolific novelist and short story writer in his early sixties, the piece he performs is not fiction but a travelogue-come-personal essay, composed in a conversational tone. It is about walking around London while reflecting on subjects ranging from the city's widening wealth gap and its impact on the arts to its special character as one of the few European cities without a single old centre, and from how London is to him a spiritual state as much as a place to how it is reflected in writing, from Dickens to gay London writers, and from how gay fashion is now mainstream and gayness is accepted and even depicted on TV in programmes like *Cucumber* – but 'we're still outsiders' – to how gay writers can rebuild London using original, 'outsider thinking' in their work. He delivers it with commitment and panache, and it receives thunderous appreciation from the audience. More than one person sitting near me comments to their neighbour that it was 'brilliant'.

Afterwards, talking to Fowler, I am intrigued to hear that he decided to write the piece, in this form and style, *directly* because of his experience of performing at a previous Polari. 'I was programmed to read from my novel directly after this new

**Christopher
Fowler,
performed
readings,
autobiography
and immediacy,
authenticity,
autofiction,
cultural
appropriation**

author whose background was in slam poetry’, he tells me. ‘He was so amazing.’ Fowler shakes his head slowly and dreamily at the memory. ‘He was talking about his father and his peers, his life... things I just don’t know about. I live in Kings Cross, so I’m in the heart of London where things are happening, and I like that – but still, as you get older, you end up largely with your own peers, largely because the young don’t want to hang out with you!... and so I felt like the older statesman, coming after him and just reading from my novel, so I thought: next time I should write something new!’

Fowler’s prediction that a new, autobiographical piece related to the city in which he and the audience were situated in the present moment of the performance would resonate more deeply when performed aloud than fiction, was manifestly realized. It chimes with observations I have previously made at Hay and other live literature events: namely that an element of the ‘authenticity’ that reader-audiences so often claim to value lies, in part, in a sense that they are actively connecting the person on stage and their words with their “real” self and their life. This links, to some extent, with the contemporary expectation of social media access to authors’ ‘real’ life narratives and, with the rapid growth of autofiction,⁵⁸⁴ as well as ongoing cultural appropriation debates. It also chimes with Daniel Hahn’s observations at Hay about the importance of creating a feeling of liveness in the sense of offering the audience something spontaneous and new that they would not be able to access elsewhere (see Chapter 2).

⁵⁸⁴ See Clark (2018) and Cummins (2018) and discussion of autofiction in Chapter 2.

Fowler also reveals that he had already been giving serious thought to the way in which reading aloud forces adjustments to writing style that increases the ‘immediacy’ of the text, and that this was due to readers’ feedback. ‘I wrote a novel called *Paper Boy* a couple of years ago’, he says, ‘which came out of several pieces I’d written to read aloud – so it’s different to look at it book form – it doesn’t look like a normal book – and I got great reviews saying it was very *immediate*. And I thought, *yes, it is immediate!*... I think... you cut out – the tongue twisters – but also the long-windedness when you focus on reading aloud. You know, I’ve come out of some readings [of fictional texts written for the page] thinking: what was I *doing?*! [an expression of anguish on his face] So I think it [focusing on reading aloud] really does make writing better.’ He’s echoing the author Michael Hughes here, I think, when speaking of the painful experience of narrating his own audiobook (see Chapter 2). ‘I used to run a reading group in Kentish Town called Big Words’, Fowler continues. ‘We had a young, 24-year-old, blind American there once. He said: “ask me anything you ever wanted to ask a blind man but were too afraid to ask” – and it turns out what he talked about that night was exactly in his book, and it was amazing to read it, hearing his voice in your ear, and that’s partly because he writes exactly how he speaks. Of course if the person is boring, though, it’s like being stuck... And you’ve still got to be original in your language. I was reading Margery Allingham today, who nobody reads any more, and the language is bonkers – someone said, “are you going senile?”, and he replied: “I’ve yet to take my plate into public” ... We need more of *that*: more unexpected turns of phrase!’

**Fowler on
difficult
audiences**

It is not just the immediacy of the writing that affects the success of a performed reading though, for Fowler; he points out that ‘audiences can be tricky’ for authors to deal with. ‘Once or twice here [at Polari] in the past there have been tricky crowds... once there was a bunch of drunks! Oh, and there’s a club called The Garage by Highbury corner, and there used to be a literary night there – and drunks would always pour up after the live music act and find themselves walking through and say “what the fuck’s goin on in ere?” It could be like a baptism of fire if you were new, I can tell you.’

**Fowler on
performativity,
theatricality
and actors’
talents**

I ask Fowler if he has any examples of a standout live literary event he’s seen or been part of as a performer, either good or bad. ‘Well, Polari is really interesting’, he says. ‘It’s very varied. I was amazed once by... what’s her name... an author who performed from her novel, *In Search of the Missing Eyelash*. She came on after an astoundingly *boring* Canadian lesbian who read a laundry list of her life [he rolls his eyes]... and then she was just *brilliant!* She really *performed*.’ I know exactly who he is talking about: Karen McLeod, whom I saw at a small underground venue in Hackney in her comedy guise as *Barbara Brownskirt*, in which she ‘self’-defines as ‘the worst living lesbian poet performing today’. When her name was announced, I remember, there was an awkward silence, and it was made to seem as if she hadn’t turned up – but then she scampered up from the back of the audience panting loudly, wearing a raincoat with the hood up, thick brown plastic glasses and a long brown tweed skirt, which turned out to be part of the act, proceeded to read her comic poetry aloud with plentiful charisma, and was hilarious.

‘Actors’ readings *can* be more successful than authors’’, Fowler adds, thoughtfully. ‘If you get an actor who *understands* what they’re reading – and I listen to audiobooks – they can be great. The series I’ve got going on with elderly detectives is read on audio by a guy who *really* gets it – he understands the intonation, and brings it to life – in a way that I just can’t. They can make a line *work* that doesn’t on the page – an unfunny line funny. It’s a talent. An art.’

Live literature scene generally ‘dead on its feet’; literary festivals as ‘chicken farms’

I wonder how Fowler sees the changes in the live literature scene over the decades since he has been involved in it as an author. ‘I think it’s died on its feet’, he says, grimly and firmly. ‘I used to do a lot – small events all over the country. Now I do a fraction of what I used to do.’ I suggest that this is interesting, since in some respects live literature has burgeoned, certainly in terms of the number of literary festivals. ‘The *format* has definitely changed’, he says. ‘But the big festivals now are like being shipped into a *chicken farm* – I did Cheltenham last year and it was like that... Harrogate is good, the audiences are really *engaged*, and you get good questions that are on the nose... I’ve never been to Hay though, never been invited – I’m not on their radar... don’t have a TV series. [He grins, wryly.] Cheltenham is different. It’s grander. And it can give people grand ideas. One author there behaved like a total cow. I was doing an event with her, and she came on stage, and we were sitting down about to discuss how to write murder mysteries – and then she stood up and said “for all my *fans*, I’m sorry I missed you last night – but I’m *here now*”, and I thought, who made you queen?! But this year... [he leans forward with his eyebrows raised] I was part of a literary festival in Whitstable, run by a young woman with a background in PR, trying her hand for the first time – and she

aced it. Everything ran perfectly: the booking, the planning, the thought that went into it, theming of the days – *everything* worked. It’s obviously going to be a fixture now. The first author she featured was someone local... the whole thing sold out... her dad picked authors up from the station... and you thought: *you go girl! So festivals can be good.*

Fowler on live literature’s need to entertain, inform, excite; and pole dancing

He shakes his head slowly with a wry smile. ‘But a lot of literary events are what you most *fear* you will get from a reading. I used to live in Barcelona, and remember the time I came over to London to do an event at this private members’ club, and it was just the *worst* – everyone was being very worthy and not engaging. It felt like the worst waste of time. In my head every creative work forms a *triangle*: the creative writer, the piece they create, and the audience.’ Polari, in his view, genuinely caters for its audiences. ‘The live literary scene needs pepping up, like *this* – it needs beefing up – it needs to entertain *and* inform *and* excite. And I think you have to do something else with the format now, something *different*... At Polari there have sometimes been performances of staged excerpts – there was once a pole dancer, and *that* was popular!’

Gay and entertainment-oriented performative aesthetics

Polari’s aesthetics continue to mirror its Polari language origins in the gay bars of Soho, and are key to its current, distinctive identity and its experiential quality. Upbeat music, coloured lighting, cabaret-style table seating at the front and the presence of a bar render the atmosphere informally theatrical and entertainment-oriented, and this is

corroborated and enhanced by host Paul Burston's extravagantly camp outfits, short, jocular introductions to each 'performer', and emphasis on their readings, with no conversation or Q&A.

**Literary
texts: variety
of form,
style, tone
and content**

Importantly, though, the programming at Polari is *not* just focused on entertainment; it emphasises literary variety, in terms of form, tone, style, voice and aesthetics as well as content. The majority of texts performed come from newly-published novels featuring LGBT characters, but they include both published fiction and work-in-progress, short stories, poetry, memoir and non-fiction. This ranges from observational comedy about awkward sexual situations to moving confessional memoirs about the discovery and exploration of gay identity – a standout performance in this vein was one by Mansell Stimpson, who recounted from his memoir about the experience of not discovering he was gay until he was forty, and the subsequent recasting of his past life that entailed, as well as his need to imagine a different future. There have also been histories of gay culture, including a very entertaining reading from a new non-fiction book about The Gateways, London's first lesbian venue. Reflecting on the variety of literature performed within the LGBT frame, I am reminded of Peter Burton's comment in *Parallel Lives* that, from a gay publishing perspective, when editing *The Gay Times*, he found it perpetually 'fascinating trying to produce a specialist publication for a group of people who have only their sexuality in common'.⁵⁸⁵ He decided upon the following curation objectives: that 'the magazine should have the broadest basis of appeal; that it should not become over-

⁵⁸⁵ See Burton (1985), p.118

intellectual; that the contents should reflect the widest possible range of gay life; that the magazine should promote a completely positive view of gay life; and that our freelance contributors should feel a part of the magazine' – all objectives which – at least when expanded beyond the remit of 'gay life' to 'LGBT life' – seem to be manifest in the programming approach at Polari.

**Literary
texts: variety
of quality**

As many of the regular reader-audience members acknowledged, there is also a real variation in the quality of literary texts performed at Polari. On one occasion I witnessed the performance of a terribly-written self-published text that the performer admitted Burston had, at first, been reluctant to accept, until giving way after repeated pleas. But, importantly, the potential for quality variation is not perceived, by most reader-audience members, or indeed author-performers, to diminish the value of the event. In fact, the very opposite is true. Naturally, Polari does not market itself on the basis of variations of literary quality, and yet the expectation of some such variety is implied to some extent by its showcasing of emerging writers. Burston seeks to make programming decisions, however, to ensure both a base level of quality, and that texts of high literary quality are always featured during each event. The established event format and structure, namely that each event begins with someone new and 'untested' and ends with an established 'headliner' who is pretty much guaranteed to be good, creates a graded scale of expectation of literary quality on the part of the reader-audience, which may or may not be exceeded. Moreover, the tight time limits imposed on individual performances not only make the event run smoothly but mean that, if there is a particularly bad performance in the early stages of the

evening, it will not need to be endured for too long. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Burston has cultivated a community in which it is clearly understood by all participants – both reader-audiences and author-performers – that Polari functions as a platform for emerging new writers, who wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity to perform their work, particularly given their niche categorization as LGBT writers. This, to me, seems integral to its literary-cultural value.

**Intra-author-
performer
impacts and
influences**

The creative impact upon author-performers of witnessing their peers on stage at Polari is not only 'bottom-up', in terms of the hierarchy of experience that I have outlined, as might be expected; the impact goes both ways. This evidenced by 'headliner' Fowler's admission that his new piece of writing at Polari was inspired directly by his previous experience of a new writer who performed before him at an earlier iteration of the Salon.

**Author-
performer
identities:
implicit or
explicit, not
prescribed**

The majority of author-performers at Polari identify as falling within the LGBT category, and/or one of its sub-categories, and perform texts that touch on themes relevant to their sexual and/or gender identity – but this in no way a prescribed rule. Straight writers sometimes perform, and the subject matter of the writing by author-performers identifying as LGBT in their personal lives might only engage with those themes indirectly. However, the significant majority of readings do engage in some way with issues of gender identity and sexuality – and they do so in a marked variety of ways. The consequence, at the end of a Polari event – and even more so after being part of a number of Polari events – is an impression of diversity and multiplicity within the LGBT

experience, which challenges not only external stereotypes, but also reductionist perceptions that fuel divisions between sub-categories of LGBT.

While almost all the author-performers I have seen at Polari have either expressly defined themselves as trans, gay or lesbian, or implied this through their readings, having fiction as the dominant literary form performed means that the authors' personal sexual and gender identities never necessarily need to be revealed or discussed, and also dissuades audiences from focusing-in on associated personal judgments.

Almost every Polari author-performer I have spoken to has told me, with apparently genuine enthusiasm, how much they have enjoyed and appreciated the salon, and many have commented on how unique it is. Few have expressed a sense that there is an expectation to argue for or represent a particular iteration of gender or sexual identity. One author-performer, though, who identifies as a lesbian, told me that she was glad to have been invited to Polari but felt she didn't fit in; that the aesthetic was too camp to represent her, and it was still, at heart, an event designed for gay men.

The Polari audiences appear unusually enthused and conscious of their collectivity in comparison to those at other live literature events. Many reader-audience members are regulars, and even those who are not regulars have a strong sense that they have participated in a close-knit, familial community, and regard the salon as a social as well as a literary event. Even the person who admitted to regarding the regular audience as somewhat 'cliquey' did not feel excluded,

**Reader-
audience
collectivity
and community;
a supportive
contract**

and referred to the feeling of being part of a family. There is a sense of warmth, informality and openness at Polari, which extends to a strong foundation of support and affection for all the writers performing, whatever the quality of the writing or the performance; it could be described as part of the 'contract' of this particular audience that they are there, in part, to help provide that support. As Sal put it: 'The love is always there.'

**Participant
diversity:
reality and
mission,
LGBTQ+
divisions**

The diversity of Polari audiences, in terms of age, gender and class – less so race and ethnicity, since reader-audiences and author-performers I have observed have been predominantly, though never exclusively, white – is remarkably rare in London's contemporary LGBT scene, as many reader-audience members commented in conversations. Burston admits to a personal mission for Polari that goes beyond the literary, to champion diverse social spaces, and this mission appeared to be succeeding based on observations and conversations I had with audience members. Most of those I spoke to were part of gay and lesbian couples and friendship groups, from a mix of ages, though the majority were in their forties. Several had come to Polari alone, several were connected to the performers, and a handful were aspiring writers themselves. There was a strong feeling among Polari audiences that the salon was an important and effective forum for exploring and sharing issues of LGBT identity, particularly in relation to experiences and structures of prejudice and exclusion.

Most reader-audience members at Polari told me that they came for the writing and LGBT community aspect equally, but that, while the writing was centrally important to their decision to attend, they would not define themselves as

particularly 'literary' – and some, like Clare, saw literary festivals, in contradistinction to Polari, as places where 'literariness' was expected and performed inextricably with other manifestations of middle-class social conformity.

**Event impact
on
readership
– practices
and
purchases –
and silent
reading; the
'voice in
the head'**

The salon clearly affects reader-audience members' reading practices beyond the event itself. In terms of book choices and purchases, many said they regularly bought books by author-performers whom they saw, heard and liked, and got them signed, other said they planned to read books by author-performers they liked at a later date, and most said that the performances led them to read more and different books than they would otherwise have done. The performances also affected the quality and nature of their silent reading experiences; the vast majority felt that having heard the author-performers read aloud enhanced their subsequent experience of reading their book, often by allowing them to 'hear the voice' of the author in their head, and also enabling them to keep a visual image of the author-performer, and their facial expressions and mannerisms, in mind. It also affected their interpretation of the texts themselves. As such, the experience clearly plays into their sense of 'authenticity' in relation to both the immediate event experience and the subsequent reading experience – something I have observed across different forms of live literature event, yet which rarely seems to be considered as a factor by producers, who often limit or even exclude performed readings.

**My own
experience as
a Polari
author-
performer**

Fast forward a couple of years, and Burston invites me to read from my own debut novel, *The Invisible Crowd*, at Polari. While I don't identify as LGBT, and neither does the protagonist of my novel, Yonas, who is an asylum seeker from Eritrea, it is a polyphonic novel, in which two of the central characters are gay, and sexual identity does become an issue in the story. Burston apologises that he can't pay authors to perform, but offers two comp tickets and reminds me that there is a bookseller present. I accept the invitation gladly, especially after having experienced Polari as a reader-audience member, and ponder over which parts of the novel to perform. I choose a scene with comedy in it, and a poignant and dramatic scene that I think will provide a good counterpoint, both of which touch on the way in which the characters' gay identities impact on their lives. I bring a couple of gay friends along to the event who haven't been before and are curious, and the performance, happily, seems to go well – at least, the reader-audience is as supportive as it had seemed while I was a part of it at previous events, they laugh at the right places, seem attentive and clap energetically.

**Post-show
epilogue:
radio
invitation and
un-invitation;
awareness
about LGBTQ+
spaces**

A couple of days later, I receive an email via my website from a comedian and author who had seen me listed on the Polari bill, asking if I would like to come on her radio show to talk about my book. I said yes, and she promised to send me details. A few days later, she got back in touch to say that she'd worked out that I didn't identify as LBGTQ myself and so wouldn't be suitable. I felt only a momentary flash of disappointment; the incident illustrated to me how much Polari is contributing, beyond the realm of literature, to a wider cultural environment in which both LGBT voices and

LGBTQ themes are shared, noticed and valued. Through my research and experiences at Polari, I now have a deeper understanding of how important it still is to many people identifying as LGBT to have spaces, like that radio show, that are reserved solely for sharing other LGBT-identifying voices and in order to ensure that they have a platform within a supportive subcultural community.

I have also learned how exceedingly rare it is to have spaces, like Polari, that are dedicated to supporting, celebrating and exploring LGBT identities through literary and artistic work, and yet do *not* limit the gender identity of participating author-performers and artists.

In the Andrew Sean Greer's novel *Less*, the protagonist is a mid-list gay author called Arthur Less, who describes being perplexed at noticing that his fiction seemed to be being ignored by the gay community, while also being of only marginal interest to the mainstream literary community. Finally, at a party, he is told by a well-meaning friend that he is widely seen as a 'bad gay', because he doesn't engage with gay characters and issues enough in his writing: a label that floors him, temporarily, because he had not previously considered his authorial identity as being aligned with his sexuality. This narrative alludes to the risks inherent of identity-based literary communities which can start out as ways to support writers who are otherwise marginalized because of their identity, and their perceived membership of a group, but can risk end up entrenching divisions. It illustrates how identity judgments, both 'inside' and beyond communities, can distort the ways in which audiences respond to fiction. To me, Polari treads this line deftly, by being overtly

supportive of a marginalized identity-based group, and yet being inclusive in its scope, and foregrounding the fiction more than the authorial persona through its performed reading-based event format.

While Polari originated in 'G' culture, and is presented with an explicitly camp aesthetic that has a direct link back to the culture around the Polari language from which it originated, it strives to be entirely open to people who define themselves by each of those other letters and who define themselves otherwise, and the gender diversity of its audiences reflects that openness. For the most part, it succeeds, though its roots in gay male culture remain manifest.

**Cultural
value;
community
meaning;
impact on
literary texts
and publishing**

Researching Polari has convinced me that, when well-curated, with awareness of their audiences' needs and characteristics, live literature events – for all the reasons that have emerged through this ethnography – can serve as a uniquely valuable forum for airing, sharing and forging identities, for nurturing, supporting and strengthening communities, and for furthering equality and understanding in society, for both reader-audiences and author-performers. In large part this is because the live performance of literary writing not only entertains and engages, but requires author-performers to share with reader-audiences, through their own voice and body, a piece of text they have composed that is meaningful to them personally, creating a depth of communication that is felt as 'direct' and 'authentic', and that is remembered afterwards, as evidenced by the number of comments about 'hearing voices' in future readings, as well as in regular participants' commitment to attending.

The act of performing of fictional texts at an embodied live event clearly has the ability to communicate in-depth experiences, emotions and perspectives relating to LGBT identities in varied, complex, multifaceted ways, without that author-performer necessarily having to articulate or represent a personal position on the issues or experiences raised in the text, or to make embarrassing personal, autobiographical admissions. The absence of Q&A or staged conversation means that no participant is pressured or required to enter into tense, politicised debates about identity as a consequence of the publication of their writing – when that writing was not necessarily intended to fuel or prompt such debates. The regular inclusion of new literary texts – often stories that have never previously been published or performed live – increases the intensity, impact and value of the performances for participants, by emphasizing the ‘ephemerality’ and ‘uniqueness’ of the performance event.⁵⁸⁶

The act of sharing such texts, within an embodied reader-audience community that is largely LGBT, creates a particularly strong and palpable sense of shared emotion and bonds – particularly in relation to loss and pain, as Sal so clearly articulated – but also through laughter, and other physical responses that communicate emotional and aesthetic reactions, including attention-focused silences and noisy moments of applause. The literature acts as a super-‘glue’ holding together the ‘emotional community’ of this ‘metropolitan tribe’, as Maffesoli would conceive of it:⁵⁸⁷ a tribe, or ‘affinity grouping’, that ‘revalues the ancient

⁵⁸⁶ See Fischer-Lichte (2008) p.75

⁵⁸⁷ See Maffesoli (1996) p.23

anthropological structure of the 'extended family'.⁵⁸⁸ The 'proxemics' of being part of a regular, embodied, 'tribal' event mean that participants acquire an 'embodied knowledge rooted in a corpus of customs',⁵⁸⁹ forge 'collective memories', and are able to 'recreate the cenacles that keep us warm and provide social spaces in the heart of the cold, inhuman metropolis.'⁵⁹⁰ John Dewey got to the nub of this back in 1916 when he wrote: 'There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication'⁵⁹¹ – and the verbal performance of fiction, at Polari, seems to tighten the knot.

The value of Polari is not, however, solely about using literature in such a way as to forge socio-cultural connections and emotional solidarity through an aesthetically-, textually- and spatially-linked community. Vitally, on the other side of the coin, Polari appears to be making a valuable contribution to the creation, composition, production and publication of more diverse, interesting and socially-representative new writing that engages with LGBT experiences, and that is welcoming to new voices and audiences.

The relatively small-scale, community-based, and performed-reading-focused characteristics of Polari, and other, comparable contemporary literary salons, are key to understanding their role and phenomenological impact for participants, and within literary culture – in comparison to other live literature events, such as the larger, more diffuse and commercially-oriented festivals. While the 'literary salon'

⁵⁸⁸ See Maffesoli (1996) p.69

⁵⁸⁹ See Maffesoli (1996) p.25

⁵⁹⁰ See Maffesoli (1996) p.42

⁵⁹¹ See Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916)[2001] p.8

has clearly metamorphosed significantly from its Enlightenment-era form, notably by moving beyond the domestic 'salon' setting, the fact and growing success of its revival are testament to the power of embodied intimacy in this particular genre of live literature event, and particularly to the value of foregrounding performed readings from fictional texts.

Chapter 4.

Experiencing Reflections: patterns, divergences, insights, suggestions

Glancing back

These experiential literary ethnographies have explored the contemporary culture of live literature in the UK through the lens of participant experience at two very different events: a large, mainstream literary festival and a small, performative LGBT salon. Participants have included both reader-audiences and author-performers, and myself, playing several parts while researching and composing this thesis. Through the content, language and form of these ethnographies I have illuminated key elements of these events' cultural value.

Narrative ethnographies vs distilled key insights

I have explained and demonstrated why I have adopted an experiential and literary approach to narrative form in the ethnographies at the heart of this thesis. However, I am well-aware of how useful distilled sets of conclusions can be for those involved in practice, production or scholarship, and who may be keen to apply some of the ideas and practices discussed. And there are multiple common themes and disjunctions between these two ethnographies that deserve to be extracted, compared, contrasted and reflected upon in the process of concluding this research.

So, for the remainder of this concluding chapter, I offer a series of key insights. I use the word ‘insights’, rather than ‘findings’, because these conclusions have emerged from participation ‘*in*’ events and other situations, and embodied observation – ‘*sight*’. These key insights may well indicate wider patterns of experience and practice beyond the live literature event contexts I have explored, and could consequently have a wider scope of application – for instance to other forms of live literature practice and production, or to other arts and cultural contexts. However, while they are expressed in more general terms than the ethnographic narratives, I emphasise that they do not purport to be evidentially provable or universal. They set out to illuminate as much as they do to inform.

Most of these key insights arise directly out of the ethnographies: they compress and evaluate the significance of certain elements and ideas, and highlight common refrains, themes and patterns, as well as divergent details and contradictions. I have compared, contrasted, and stepped back to view certain insights through a wider-angle lens.

The insights also incorporate some relevant experiences, observations and ideas that have emerged from six years of live literature research and practice. As I outlined at the beginning of this thesis, my research and experience has extended far beyond the two events and conversations explored and represented in the ethnographies – it includes observations and conversations at many more events; conversations with various people involved in the literary industry about live literature; and my own experiences as an author-performer and as a curator-director of live literature.

When those other experiences are drawn upon I make that clear. The majority of insights emerge directly from the ethnographies.

The key insights span many elements of live literature and its cultural value, and have varied implications. Some insights, for instance, suggest that the experience of participating in a live literature event enhances participants' ongoing engagement with literary texts and culture; while other insights raise potential problems with live literature's role in literary culture.

I have divided the insights into three main sets.

The first set of insights focuses on the experiences of reader-audiences at live literature events. It covers reader-audiences as a subject of research; curation and conversion; embodied liveness vs. digitalization; conversation-based fiction events; the role of the Q&A; performed fiction readings; the book signing ritual; community and diversity; and identity and authenticity.

The second set of insights focuses on the experiences of author-performers at live literature events. It covers author-performers as a subject of research; the career impact of live literature, including pressure, payment and value; connecting with reader-audiences, authorial identity and social media vs. live interaction; literary community; reading aloud, the practice of writing and the role of orality; responding to questions, the role of the 'sage' and the authorial persona vs. autobiographical identity; and the ritual of book-signing.

The third set of insights focuses on experiential literary ethnography as an approach to illuminating and communicating live literature's cultural value. It covers elements of composition; limitations and qualifications; and the advantages and value of this approach.

Key insights: Reader-Audiences

Reader-audiences as a subject of research

As I made clear at the outset of this thesis, this is the first research to explore reader-audiences' experiences of live literature events phenomenologically. It does so by composing ethnographies in such a way that they are read as extended, evocative recreations of those events that incorporate multiple reader-audience perspectives. My invention of the hybrid term 'reader-audiences' reflects these dual and overlapping elements of their participation.⁵⁹²

Even in the context of performance studies, where audience research relating to theatrical productions is a strong research trend that has been blossoming over recent years, there remains limited ethnographic research that explores audience experience in a comparable way – despite the fact that ethnographic research into audience experience has been highlighted as having important potential by major reports on cultural value – notably those published by the AHRC and ACE (discussed in Chapter 1). This research seeks to fill that gap.

⁵⁹² See more extended discussion of this choice of term in Chapter 1.

Clearly, there are many reader-audiences who enjoy going to live literature events; this is evidenced by their sheer popularity, which seems to be ever-growing. But, as my ethnographies show, not only are live literature events themselves diverse, and can diverge significantly from the dominant literary festival format – as Polari does from Hay – but reader-audiences’ articulations of their experience at live literature events, and their evaluations, are as diverse as the individuals themselves. One of my umbrella conclusions about reader-audience experiences of live literature events is just how complex and multifaceted they are, contrary to prevalent yet increasingly-outdated stereotypes. This echoes Weber’s indicative conclusions about literary festival audiences (see Chapter 1).

Moving beyond Weber’s scope of inquiry, though, my research delves more deeply into the nature and quality of reader-audience experiences at live literature events. It offers insights into *how* and *why* they value these experiences, why the multifaceted quality of their experience matters, and what the consequences of their experiences are for their ongoing literary practices, tastes and values – and, more broadly, for literary culture.

*Reader-Audiences: Curation and Conversion: Publishing
Customer vs. Audience Member*

One central function of live literature events is as a form of curation. As discussed in Chapter 1, curation is an increasingly vital and valuable function in 21st century literary culture, for both publishers and reader-audiences – just as it is across all areas of culture, given the infinite quantity of information and

alternative entertainment options available online. My research corroborates my suspicion that the popularity of literature events, and the value that reader-audiences attribute to them, is closely linked to the contemporary ‘attention economy/ecology’, also referred to as the ‘crisis of attention’ (discussed in Chapter 1), whereby people are faced with an overwhelming choice of places to direct their attention; and also to the linked emergence of ‘experientialism’, in which experiences that capture audiences’ attention the most memorably are highly valued (discussed in Chapter 1).

My research suggests that reader-audiences value live literature’s function as a form of *experiential curation* – that is, curation through experience. As such, live literature often has a significant impact, not just for their ongoing individual literary judgments, choices and practices, but for patterns of value and behaviour across literary culture.

The most obvious evidence of live literature events’ curatorial impact upon reader-audiences’ ongoing reading practices is the effect known as ‘conversion’ (discussed in Chapter 2), whereby reader-audience members buy the book presented at an event immediately afterwards. This is facilitated at many live literature events where there are bookstalls or bookshops in place for the purpose, and it is discussed in my research through various conversations, including those with Daniel Hahn and James Daunt at Hay. The term ‘conversion’ speaks to a core objective behind the event on the part of publishers and, author-performers: namely to convert their investment in the event into profit from book sales, usually of their key titles.

Beyond that, with its religious connotation, the term 'conversion' also suggests an objective of causing reader-audience members to make a longer-term commitment to the literary work of the author-performer in question. As my conversation with James Daunt revealed, embodied events involving readers meeting an author in person – even just book signing events that are minimally performative – can have long-term impacts on sales of that author's work. My research supports this idea: many of my conversations with reader-audiences suggest that, even if they do not 'convert' by buying a physical copy of a book immediately after a given event, there is still an increased likelihood that, after a positive experience at an event, they will buy or read a book by that author-performer later on.

Book sale statistics from the big festivals, Hay and Edinburgh, now reveal how significant the immediate purchase conversions, and overall book sales, are to publishers today; the stakes linked them have increased in recent years, to the point that these two Festivals' sales are now tracked by Nielsen Bookscan (discussed in Chapter 1). As my conversation with Gaby Wood alludes to, the curatorial decisions of the big festival producers are significantly shaped by lobbying from the publishing industry to promote key titles, usually the titles in which they have invested the most money. The evidence of increasing book sales at festivals is a development that can only increase publishers' motivation to lobby Festival producers still harder in favour of their chosen lead titles.

The impact of live literature curation also extends beyond the effects it has on individual reader-audience members: it also affects other forums for literary curation. The big festivals like

Hay directly affect bookshop curation and sales, since booksellers who participate in festival events, or even simply peruse festivals' curation via their programmes, go on to promote featured titles in their shops, and this in turn impacts on the reading choices of many more people (see discussion with James Daunt in Chapter 2).

At live literature events that focus on presenting newly-published titles, particularly the big festivals, the books on sale are generally in hardback, and so cost reader-audiences much more to buy than they would once they are released in paperback. Consequently the financial cost of immediate purchase conversion, on top of ticket costs, is fairly high (see discussions around ticket pricing in both ethnographies). So why do so many reader-audiences 'convert'? Part of it is simply about their relatively in-depth exposure to the books and authors featured. In the case of literary festivals like Hay, their curatorial focus on presenting the new books written by the most high-profile or critically-acclaimed author-performers – often as the 'first ever' public event to feature that text – is intended to endow reader-audiences with a sense that their participation in the event is a heightened, unique and ultra-present experience, that will bring them up to date with the latest ideas, literary trends and public figures. While reader-audience members I spoke to did not talk about Bourdieuan cultural capital *per se* – unsurprisingly – many were very well-aware that they were discovering the newest work produced by significant authors, who were often widely-known names, and clearly valued this.

However, it was not at all clear to me that a sense of cultural capital or of 'newness', or the ability to talk about their access

these 'new' literary phenomena after the event, was the sole or even major factor causing them to 'convert' by buying a book. More impactful was the experience that the event had had on them, and their wish to deepen that experience by reading the book that had been presented. My conversation with reader-audience members Stan and Kira, at Hay, reflects this: at the end of the conversation, they told me they were heading to the bookshop to look at 'other books' by the author-performer, Philip Gross – not necessarily to buy the new collection he was presenting and reading from at the event.

In the early research on literary festivals (as I discussed in Chapter 2), the commercial aspect of festivals' impact on audiences, with its corresponding emphasis on the dominance of big names and new titles, tended to be both foregrounded and denigrated by scholars and critics. Festival audiences were simplistically painted as shallow cynics who only attended in order to take a shortcut to the prestige associated with being familiar with the most popular new books without bothering to read them, just so that they could make out, at dinner parties back home, that they had read the books, and even better, had 'met' the authors. This skewed stereotype has already been soundly critiqued by Weber in her research, building on research by Driscoll and others (as discussed in Chapter 1).

My research also expands upon this in the context of live literature events that break the literary festival mould. It shows how smaller live literature events, like Polari, tend to be far less influenced by publishers in making their curatorial selections. In the case of Polari (as discussed in Chapter 3), the

curation of books featured at events is shaped far more by their relevance to the LGBT community than either their literary acclaim within the established literary-critical forums, or their publicity profile generated by publishers' promotion expenditure. This goes to the heart of Polari's identity as an event. I saw many author-performers at Polari performing from books that have barely had any other publicity, including self-published titles, and even new works-in-progress; and reader-audiences I spoke to valued Polari's curatorial role immensely in presenting a selection of author-performers, and their literary work, that would otherwise be neglected in the mainstream literary industry, including the mainstream literary festivals, possibly because of its LGBT orientation.

Even though reader-audiences do often end up buying books immediately after experiencing live literature events, book purchasing is rarely a focus or a deliberate aim for them in deciding to attend those events – even though they are usually conscious of the possibility before attending, and even when, at the end of an event, they are explicitly encouraged to buy the book. And it extends to reader-audiences even at Hay, where the book-buying element of the Festival is foregrounded in multiple ways, including through the design of the site, with its continually-expanding Festival bookshop (see discussion in Chapter 2). It was clear to me from conversations across multiple live literature events, that the vast majority of reader-audiences would not attend live literature events if they did not expect them to be rewarding experiences on their own terms.

Even at the big literary festivals, reader-audiences tend not to be conscious of, or at least focused on, the influence of

publishers' commercial interests on the curation and dynamics of the events – including the extent to which they feature key titles, linked to financial investments made in advances. Even if reader-audiences are conscious of events' relationship to the publishing industry, they rarely accord weight or significance to this in relation to their own experience, or in making judgments of aesthetic value about the books presented. On one view, this amounts to a successful deception of reader-audiences by live literature producers on behalf of publishers – particularly at the big festivals – in that they do not see themselves as publishers' 'customers', whose choices are skewed by the selective presentation of key titles, and yet they go on to behave as such.

But to take that characterisation as the whole story would be a distortion, and would miss the way in which live literature events give reader-audiences a sense of real agency in relation to their aesthetic evaluations of texts and author-performers, through an experiential process that enables them to reach judgments that they would not necessarily make after being introduced to the publisher's own characterisation of the book in other ways – for instance through the blurb on a cover, through other forms of literary curation such as book shop tables or book blogs (see discussion of curation in Chapter 1 with reference to Bhaksar) or through other related paratexts (see discussion of Genette and Gardiner in Chapter 1). My research offers insights into how and why live literature events are valued so highly as evaluation tools by reader-audiences: how, for instance, they work, not just as a fulsome and performative set of curated introductions to books and the ideas behind them, but as meaningful communicative experiences in their own right.

When participating in live literature events, and experiencing them as performances, reader-audiences enter into a multi-layered experiential process that helps them to shape not only their future literary practices, judgments and values, but their perspectives on their own identities, relationships, communities, and the culture and society in which they are situated. These dimensions all combine to form part of live literature's cultural value.

Reader-Audiences: embodied liveness vs digitalization; proxemics, risk, judgment, memory

A key facet of live literature's cultural value is its 'liveness', and my research explores what that signifies and reveals how is valued. Putting this in context, the rise of live literature is part of a rise of liveness across art forms and culture in the 21st century, which, again, has gone hand in hand with the rise of digitalization and experientialism, and with the rising value of curation (all discussed in Chapter 1). In the face of infinite possible sources of entertainment, live experiences that are more memorable gain primacy in the hierarchy of value.

Reader-audience members whom I spoke with often accorded a high value to the liveness of live literature events in multiple respects, including temporal, spatial, geographical and physical elements. They frequently valued their sense that their experience of the event they were attending, both individual and collective, could never be replicated or repeated – even if a particular event were to be recorded and broadcast online later, as Hay Festival events are, via the Hay Player.

I note here, in mentioning the Hay Player, that it is just one example of many online sources for videos of live literature events. It serves as a rich source of retrospective access to individual events within the Hay Festival for the benefit of anybody in the world: from reader-audiences who, perhaps for health reasons or financial reasons, were unable to get to the Festival in person, to for scholars who, like me, are interested in viewing events from past years. The videos can not only offer viewers the full content presented on stage at individual events, but can also give them a good sense of the author-performers, enabling them to engage to some extent with elements like their voice and delivery.

Live streaming technology has allowed digital reader-audiences around the world to access some live literature events in real time, as they are physically taking place – what I will call ‘digital liveness’ in order to distinguish it from the embodied liveness of events I have been researching.

Watching a live stream can give digital reader-audiences a sense that they are at least temporally sharing the experience with the reader-audiences who are physically present there. There is much to celebrate in these developments, and much that digital reader-audiences can glean from such live streams, videos, and also audio recordings of literary events.

However, my research is focused on interrogating what is distinctly valuable for participants about the embodied experience of participating in live literature events in person – an experience that is so highly sought-after, and yet so infrequently interrogated – and it concludes that there are many distinct values.

Part of the distinct experiential value of live literature events for reader-audiences relates to the requirement they make for *disconnection* from ubiquitous electronic devices communication mediated through screens. This was manifested particularly clearly at Hay, where many reader-audience members I spoke to specifically linked the quality of their experience at the Festival with their digital and electronic disconnection. A notable example is my conversation with Dave, who spoke about how rare it was for him not to be checking email, and how he was now enjoying being cut off from phone reception – and, interestingly, how he was also, for once in the year, reading a book of fiction.

In comparison with digital media, live literature events have a highly resonant communicative impact on reader-audiences and can significantly affect their judgements of literary value. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (with reference to the work of Tali Sharot and Will Storr) neuroscience has revealed the profound extent to which live, embodied events, involving verbal narrative performances, resonate with reader-audiences and affect their decision-making. My research has illuminated ways in which these ideas translate into reader-audience experience. Witnessing author-performers in the flesh, while performing from their literary texts, triggers in reader-audiences a complex mesh of evaluations of elements of the author-performer's presentation such as gesture, body language, demeanour, facial expressions, dress, vocal qualities, characteristics of delivery, such as accent, phrasing, and timing. When speaking with me, reader-audiences often revealed close attention to such details, which were experienced as being inextricably intertwined. They often

framed their descriptions around the idea of authenticity, particularly in relation to elements of the voice, and frequently expressed a positive sense of having experienced an *authentic* encounter with the author-performer and their work as a consequence (see extensive discussion of authenticity in Chapter 2). The consequent communicative experience is more deeply memorable, and evaluations linked with embodied memories impact significantly on reader-audiences' overall judgments about the author-performers and their literary texts (see discussion in Chapter 1 with reference to Sharot's neuroscientific work).

In the context of experientialism, neuroscience has proved that the impact of embodied performances upon audiences is enhanced in a digitalized culture, as it resonates more deeply in the context of a bombardment of digitally-accessible information (discussed in Chapter 1). Yet my research also indicates that the extent of the communicative impact of live literature experiences is often underestimated, even by those involved in its production.

The proxemics of live literature events, including their spatial characteristics and geographical locations, are also more significant to how they are valued by reader-audiences than they are often assumed to be, and contribute to their memorability, impact and value. Live literature events such as festivals that are situated away from urban centres, with participation often requiring a substantial physical journey away from the mundane everyday, provide an enhanced sense of liminality that serves to further intensify participant experience, particularly if festivals also offer a density of events, and as such, they can provide an experience that is

akin to a pilgrimage (see discussion in Chapter 2 in relation to theories of liminality, festivalization and pilgrimage). As my research shows, reader-audiences value these dimensions of the experience. Again, this is often linked to accessing a sense of authenticity. Many people I spoke to at Hay commented on the pleasure they felt in 'getting away from it all' to experience the festival, in the context of a place that contained none of the distractions and stresses of home, particularly for those who live in urban environments. My conversation with Elsa emphasises this; her impromptu characterisation of Hay as a form of pilgrimage was notable – for her, it has become an annual ritual in which she travels physically far away from her work and family commitments in the city order to immerse herself, on her own, in the event experience and all the ideas and stimulation that Hay has to offer. Her heightened, expressive language revealed how much emotional value she attaches to it. Several other reader-audience members at Hay also explicitly referred to the experience of travelling there in pilgrimage terms, both by reference to their journey, and the reward of a transformative experience at the destination.

Even in an urban context, such as Polari at the Southbank, in the centre of a busy city – to which many reader-audience members travel only a short distance on a bus – attending an embodied, live event in a designated performance space is still felt to have a significant impact that appeared to be liminal in quality, in the sense of being present in a performance space that feels immersive and removed from everyday life. My conversation with Hilary exemplifies this, particularly her account of why the South Bank Centre location is important to her as an iconic cultural space she has been conscious of since her childhood, growing up in South London, and of what it

means to her for Polari now to be based there, and to offer a regular physical space within the building that is dedicated to LGBT literary cultural appreciation and community. The aesthetics of Polari's design, including the use of cabaret-inspired lighting, the projected pink-and-purple magic-realist promotional image, and Burston's overtly camp dress for the performances, all work together to enhance the sense of performativity and to generate a dynamic atmosphere, in which participants feel kinetically involved.

The embodied presence of an audience in any shared physical space is another key to the value of liveness. As Fischer-Lichte has shown, embodied live performance experiences are qualitatively different from digital experiences due to the constant feedback loop process between audiences and performers (discussed in Chapter 1). The neuroscientific revelation that audiences' heartbeats synchronise at emotional moments in live performances proves what an unconscious and yet profound experience audiencing can be (discussed in Chapter 1). My ethnographies bear out these ideas. While I was unable to prove heart beat synchrony, not being equipped with the relevant technology, I observed, felt, and often extracted from reader-audience members, through conversations, a visceral sense of an intangible sense of connectedness during live events, manifested as a heightened atmosphere in a shared space. Some reader-audience responses at events, such as rippling laughter to silent tension, are observable, and appear to affect the meaning and its value of the experience for reader-audiences in resonant ways.

My research also shows the ways in which reader-audiences also valued the *community* element of being part of an

audience at a live literature event. At both at Hay and Polari, they often emphasized how the experience felt like being part of a group of like-minded people – even if, as at Hay, they confessed that they might not actually meet or talk to anybody new, and would socialize, verbally at least, with the friends or family members they came with. The significance of the community element of audience participation was distinctly heightened at Polari. This was not just because Polari is a far smaller and more regular event than Hay, so that reader-audiences are more likely to recognize each other visually – but also because the sense of a community defines the founding principles and continuing identity of the salon, in the context of wider LGBT marginalization in society.

The role of live literature events in deepening existing interpersonal relationships between reader-audience members was significant too. Dave is an example of someone who came with his family to Hay annually, and valued it as a unique place for them to bond, by sharing an experience which also allowed them each to go off and see their own individual events if they wanted to, according to their respective interests. They would then reconvene and would be able to share accounts of their individual experiences, while sharing a collective experience in the process.

Another core element of liveness is the sense of risk and even potential failure involved: a factor that pertains to the value of all live performance events (discussed in Chapter 1), and adds a sense of high stakes and intensity to the experience. This element of experience has a particular resonance within 21st century digitalization. On one hand, failures or defects in live

performance cannot be rectified as they could be, through editing, in video versions of the event published later, which creates a sense among embodied reader-audiences that they are experiencing a more authentically 'human' performance, with all its flaws, wrinkles and rough edges, than they would be likely to access online. On the other hand, the quick-response mode of social media, particularly on Twitter, means that any failures in an embodied live performance can be shared with audiences outside the event at high speed, and then exaggerated or taken out of context. My ethnographies illuminate how a background awareness of the potential for failure has an impact for reader-audiences. There were no spectacular 'failures' in any of the events I observed and depicted in the ethnographies – though these do exist. An example might be when several people walked out of Lionel Shriver's event at the Brisbane Writers Festival (discussed in Chapter 2) – though it is quite likely that Shriver intended to trigger such a reaction, or at least foresaw it. Even though manifest 'failures' on a grand scale are rare in a live literature context, several reader-audience members mentioned, as I noted earlier, that some performed readings can be dull. They occasionally also mentioned apparent flaws in individual performances, like facial or speech 'tics', as Stan and Kira observed in Philip Gross. Notably, though, observations of personal flaws like this were often ultimately characterised positively, as being evidence of the author-performer's 'authentic' persona. In a post-event conversation, though, small, momentary flaws in performances are unlikely to be picked out by reader-audiences as worthy of mention – either because they are not remembered precisely, or because it might seem petty to mention them. An advantage of my ethnographic approach is that I am able to mention some of

them, in the course of an evocative scene. And from my own experience, tiny errors are present in almost every live literature event I have attended. By this I mean things like an author-performer hesitating a bit awkwardly in an answer to a question, or fluffing part of a reading, or the chairperson almost forgetting to say something they meant to – as Stephanie Merritt did in Simon Armitage’s event at Hay. I have brought out several of these in my ethnographies. To me, and I suspect to most reader-audiences, a scattering of small ‘failures’ of this nature contributes to and enhances the sense of liveness and presence. If they were to be perceived as consistent, though, to the point of interfering with a narrative or the presentation of the event, then that value might be diminished.

Another element of the value of embodied liveness is its impact on memory. As discussed in Chapter, 1, neuroscience proves that embodied, live experiences enable reader-audiences not only to focus their attention but also to *retain* conveyed information better than other sources; and, crucially, this memory value is enhanced in the contemporary era of digitalization, characterized by the bombardment of information available online. An understanding of the working of memory is vital for understanding the value of live literature for reader-audiences beyond the events themselves, and the ways in which the impact of an experience ripples out to their future relationship with the books and author-performers presented, and to their other literary and cultural practices, choices and values.

A linked insight from my research is how often reader-audience members experience a somatic or bodily, sensory

memory of the live event when they go on to read the books presented silently, in their own time. The process acts as a conduit for re-accessing a memory of the author-performer's voice, pace and tone: many reader-audience members talked about hearing the authors' voice 'in their heads' while reading. The memorability of embodied live performance events also shapes participants' judgements and evaluations of the texts, including on matters of aesthetic quality and taste (discussed in Chapter 1). This links back to the idea of experientialism, and the contemporary value placed on experiences because they form meaningful memories.

This does not mean that contemporary reader-audiences are consequently snubbing digital sources of literature *en masse* in favour of embodied experiences, or that they are abandoning digital modes of communication, information, culture or entertainment. It does not mean that reader-audiences are ceasing to use e-readers, to read literary reviews, to participate in social media literary groups, or even to watch videos of literary events. Far from it. Reader-audiences are, as Weber showed in her literary festival research (see Chapter 1), constantly reacting to live events through digital devices and social media – posting pictures of literary festivals on Instagram, for example. It is not *despite* this integral role of digital communications in everyday life and literary culture, but *because* of it, that many feel that the experience of embodied live literature events is qualitatively different in terms of value: that its impact goes deeper and extends for longer.

*Reader-Audiences: Conversation-based fiction events:
dominance, appeal, inherent issues*

If you ask most people to describe a typical live literature event involving fiction, most will describe a conversation-based event: the typical event format at literary festival (see format discussions in Chapter 2). In essence, as I discussed back in the prologue, this type of event usually involves at least two author-performers and a chairperson, who have a staged conversation about their recent books, probably each give a very short reading from those books, and then take audience questions.

On the face of it, conversation-based live literature events appear to be based on the broad principle of informative introduction to literature – that is, both informing reader-audiences about the books being presented, and about author-performers' point of view and background. From a publisher's perspective (as I have discussed already in this chapter), a key objective behind events is to achieve a purchase 'conversion'. But the events are not marketed as publicity presentations by event producers. Neither are they marketed as being solely informative events. From a reader-audience perspective, there is an ontological uncertainty around them; it is unclear whether they are supposed to be valued primarily as sources of education and information, or as entertainments or arts-based performances with their own aesthetic value. Notably, the performance element of these events is rarely emphasized, even though these events often include performed readings as well as performed conversations. This uncertainty was reflected in terminology reader-audiences used when speaking with me about such events. Many flitted between using the terms 'author', 'speaker' or even 'talker', and sometimes expressed

uncertainty about which was right; and also veered between referring to the events themselves as ‘talks’ or ‘events’; and between referring to the text-based element as a ‘reading’ or a ‘reading-aloud bit’. Few actually used the terms ‘performer’ or ‘performance’, even though many speak of their experiences in what are essentially performance terms, and manifested a clear consciousness of their audiencing role (see discussion in Chapter 1).

The notion of conversation-based fiction events as primarily informative, or educative, seems to contribute to an aversion of them on the part of some prolific and passionate fiction readers. Jo Glanville, for instance, in Chapter 2, had difficulty with whole concept of live literature for this reason, suggesting that a focus on explication of literary writing in an event is a distraction from the most important literary experience, which lies in the experience of silently reading the book in question. And many author-performers indicated that they would not themselves attend live literature events, as reader-audiences – unless those events formed part of a meta-event, like a festival, in which they were performing.

My research reveals that there can be much more to reader-audience experience of conversation-based events than just being informed or educated, and that reader-audiences often want to have a more performative experience.

Conversation-based events are always performances of a kind, even if they are not presented particularly performatively, which is often the case – although I note that at Hay, as my ethnography shows, the quality of event presentation is generally extremely high, even though the format is

undramatic and predictable. Referring back to my insights above relating to liveness, and the role of risk in its value for reader-audiences: there is a quality of liveness that is specific to the conversation elements of live literature events – and it hinges on a sense of unpredictability, that is linked to risk (discussed above). As Daniel Hahn emphasized, when an unscripted conversation is staged between two author-performers, who may never have met before, who may or may not get on with each other or have chemistry on stage, and who could be asked anything, and who might come out with anything – perhaps something unexpectedly controversial, or illuminating, or funny – this contributes to a heightened sense of liveness.

My research also suggests that conversation-based live literature events also function for some reader-audiences as a unique forum, within contemporary culture, to access trusted, inspirational and ‘authentic’ insights on life and the worlds. This function bears many similarities to the ritual gathering involved in attending a religious ceremony, where a priest or guru imparts wisdom on life by speaking about or around the ideas contained in religious texts (also forms of literary narrative). Religion has a vastly diminished role in public life in the UK, and other Western countries, in the 21st century, and the increasing practice of attending a live literature event can be seen as a contemporary substitute. The importance allotted to Q&A sessions, where author-performers are asked to present their views on multiple subjects, suggests that reader-audiences increasingly value live literature events as forums for enlightenment in the context of a widespread sense of distrust of politicians and other traditional sources of authority in the ‘post-truth era’; and also in the digitalized era, where

traditional sources of opinion, formerly trusted as being authoritative, are now challenged by a myriad alternative sources. The sense of being able to evaluate an author-performer's perceived authenticity, through embodied observation and evaluation of their presentation, in person, is taken as a means of determining trust. When viewed in this way, it seems particularly ironic that the sharp decline in authors' incomes and the financial valuation of their work (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), which is linked to the devaluation of literary and other artistic work through digital piracy and the mass availability of alternatives online, has been concurrent with an increase in authors' moral or 'truth-telling' currency.

My research also reveals some inherent difficulties with the conversation-based format for fiction events – though these difficulties were more often articulated by chairpeople and event producers than by reader-audiences (as explored in Chapter 2.) One difficulty lies in the fact that the conversation-based format links to a perceived function of live literature events as forums for acquiring new knowledge about literature, as opposed to a means of *experiencing* literary work. This works well for non-fiction events, which tend to naturally facilitate wide-ranging conversations about the core subject matter of the book. But fiction rarely has such a clearly defined core subject matter; it is more fundamentally about the characters and events that happen to them, and its value turns on language and form of the writing in which the narrative is composed – that is, aesthetic qualities of the prose. Event chairpeople tend to see it as a much steeper challenge to engage reader-audiences in fiction events, primarily through conversation 'about' more than one book

that lasts under an hour, in what are entirely new fictional worlds – particularly where there is a perceived risk of plot-spoiling by summarising the narrative. Event chairpeople are also often wary of being too esoteric for reader-audiences by going into detail in conversations about matters such as language and style. It is perceived as being easier for reader-audiences to talk about ‘themes’ – Daniel Hahn’s bugbear – which consequently often dominate lines of questioning, even if the fiction being featured does not obviously address any particular theme.

Yet my research suggests another disjunction between perception and experience here: that reader-audiences rarely expressed the content of conversation-based fiction events as being too esoteric, even in the case of events I observed, such as those chaired by Daniel Hahn at Hay, in which questions of form, style and language were addressed in depth – at least, depth relative the time available. It may be that some of the perceived difficulties in this respect are, to an extent, caused by an underestimation of reader-audiences’ capabilities or interests; or with an understandable preoccupation with being as accessible as possible.

It is clearly easier to talk about, or illustrate, the aesthetic literary qualities of a work of fiction via the inclusion of a performed reading in an event. And yet my research shows that the inclusion of performed readings is often perceived by chairpeople and event producers to be problematic and risky. There is a structural issue at play here: the fact that the novel – the dominant form of fiction in publishing and presented at live literature events – is generally far too long for anything longer than a fraction of it to be performed aloud.

This is certainly the case when the readings form part of a standard hour-long event that features two or three author-performers, and also includes extended conversations with a chairperson and an audience Q&A. The performed reading is thus inevitably incomplete, and yet needs to work as a representative experience of encountering the novel as a whole, when it may only represent one small strand of it. Performed reading elements of conversation-based events often last under five minutes, which allows for approximately 750 spoken words, or 0.75% of a 100,000-word novel. There appears to be a common assumption among chairpeople and event producers, from my research, that the reading element does not add much value for reader-audience, even though it is usually included as a gestural sample of the book being presented. I challenge such assumptions in this thesis, for reasons I expand upon below.

Conversely, the practical issue of being able to feature only a fraction of a novel in a performed reading, especially in the context of a conversation-based event, does pose the potential problem of making the readings feel more like token samples than satisfying performances with aesthetic value in their own right. It was for this reason that, when conceiving of my own live literature project, I decided to feature short stories, in order to be able to stage fictional narratives with a complete story arc, as part of a quest to create a kind of event that was more inherently performative.

Another risk that chairpeople perceived in including performed readings in conversation-based events is that the readings will be dull, and will bore reader-audiences. Sometimes they are dull, and many reader-audiences testified

to that. But, as I expand upon below in the section about performed readings, there is a common misapprehension about *what makes* a performed reading valuable from a reader-audience point of view. The anxiety about the dullness of readings also appears to be linked to the common, broad-brush stereotype I often encountered of authors as introverts and poor performers of their work, who would far rather be sitting at home at their desk than performing – a stereotype that my research reveals is flawed. It also links to a perception of reader-audiences as having short attention spans, and little patience with being asked to step quickly into a brand-new fictional world through a performed reading, preferring ‘easy’, informal conversation – again, a perception that my research reveals is flawed.

In general, I found that reader-audiences valued the inclusion of performed readings in conversation-based events, even if the readings are short and only represent a fraction of a novel – and even if they are not judged to be performed particularly well: a finding I expand upon below. My conversation with Sarah and Katherine after Ishiguro’s event at Hay is revealing in this respect: they expressed their disappointment that the event omitted a performed reading, and spoke warmly about readings they had experienced at past Hay events – citing one by Hanif Kureishi, and describing how much that reading added to their subsequent experience of reading his work, and to how they felt about his work, and his presence.

The dominance of conversation-based fiction events within festivals and the contemporary culture of live literature, and the minor, peripheral or absent role of performed readings within those events, means that many reader-audiences are

led to assume that, not only are conversation-based events the default format for live literature, but that any performed reading element is only ever likely to be short, and of minor importance. This is part of a wider under-appreciation of the role of performance in live literature that risks having the catch-22 effect of causing author-performers to put less effort into their performances than they otherwise might (as I discuss further below).

There is also a gender dimension to the dominance of conversation-based events at literary festivals, and a linked sales dimension. Within literary festivals, non-fiction events tend to command larger audiences and are much more popular with male reader-audiences – which is unsurprising as men much less likely to read fiction (as discussed in Chapter 1). Several men I spoke to expressed their preference for non-fiction events in firm and absolute terms, often explaining it by stating that they liked *learning* from presentation-style events, as well as by making clear that they did not read fiction – my conversation with Dave at Hay is an example of such a perspective. Women reader-audience members, in contrast, tended both to be open to attending both fiction and non-fiction events, whether or not they came out of them with a clearly definable learning outcome. As such, it clearly makes financial sense for festival organisers to pay attention to providing non-fiction events, and to make a standardized format work well for non-fiction and fiction books. But format standardization does not necessarily cause the fiction to receive its optimal presentation.

Reader-Audiences: The role of the Q&A; reader-audiences as performers

My research has also explored the significance of Q&A sessions in conversation-based literature events. The Q&A element is often caricatured and mocked by commentators, on the basis that reader-audiences often either ask bizarre or apparently tangential questions, or even fail to ask a question at all, instead beginning with the familiar refrain: “It’s more of a comment than a question...” This phenomenon was satirized in an article for *McSweeney’s* by Evan Williams, titled ‘The art of asking a question to a literary festival panel’:⁵⁹³

The key to asking a successful question to a literary festival panel is preparation. You’ll want to have every detail of the preface to your question prepared, such as your name, age, and entire medical history. Don’t worry about the actual question; you can make that up as you go along.

Once you finally find the microphone after several doomed attempts to follow the clear directions of the host, you’re going to want to cut short your unprompted analysis of how your eczema has influenced your approach to creative nonfiction to ask an important question:

Can the sound guy give you some more foldback, please? You really need some more foldback for when you ask your actual question.

There is clearly an element of literary-cultural snobbery here: an expectation that, just because the event has involved a discussion framed as being about a literary text, the question should be expressed both intelligently and concisely, and engage with a novel aspect the text presented, or the conversation that has been performed around that text.

My research, though, suggests that Q&As do not often conform to this caricature. At Hay, as I illustrated in my ethnography, the questioning tended to be fairly closely

⁵⁹³ See Evan Williams, ‘The art of asking a question to a literary festival panel’ (2016)

engaged with the preceding staged conversation or reading. And the majority of Q&A sessions I have witnessed at other conversation-based live literature events also frequently involve reader-audience members asking pertinent and interesting questions that arise from the conversation or performed text, or that seek to explore other matters that are in some way literary.

Often, my research shows, reader-audience members' questions imply that the questioner is an aspiring author; there are frequently questions about methods of editing and routes to publication, as well as daily writing routines. Weber's research on festivals also supports the idea that a significant number of festival audiences are writers. Some of these same questions, of course, can be attributed to a generalized curiosity about creative processes, rather than as a quest for personal writing advice. Sources of inspiration is another very common subject; the question 'Where do you get your ideas from?' was discussed by Ursula K. Le Guin in an essay titled: 'The question I get asked most often.'⁵⁹⁴

Having said that, the Q&A sessions can certainly result in bizarre questions; take Gavin Extence's account of someone asking him if he had been to a particular kebab house in Sheffield just because the city is mentioned in his novel. It was initially surprising to me that people regularly begin to ask a question, even as part of a huge audience, at an event that is begin recorded, when it is clear that they have not quite worked out what it is they really want to say. Also, as the stereotype suggests, Q&A sessions do occasionally encourage

⁵⁹⁴ See Le Guin (2004), pp.261-282

certain people to speak out who do not appear to be closely engaged with the texts, or with any literary elements of the staged conversation, but who feel a need to publicly air their opinion or even their voice publicly, and want to take the Q&A opportunity to do so. Notable in my ethnographies – though, from what I have seen, to an exceptional degree – was Diana, at Hay, who told me that the sole reason she had attended a certain event (non-fiction, I note) was in order to have the opportunity to ask ‘her’ question.

Whatever is asked, or said, at a Q&A session, the session inevitably adds a significant table-turning dimension to a live literature event, effectively reversing the established power relations. Reader-audience members who do take up the opportunity to speak are effectively transformed into reader-performers themselves, for a short time, transforming the author-performer into a member of the audience in turn. This gestures towards democracy, making the event in some way comparable to a Habermasian public sphere (see discussion in Chapters 1 and 2). And this kind of embodied, participatory event is a rare phenomenon in contemporary digitalized society, where communities are increasingly fractured, and it arguably gains in value for reader-audiences accordingly. It gives questioners a sense that they have a public voice that deserves to be heard.

My research also suggests that the Q&A session is valuable for reader-audience members, even if they do not ultimately choose to ask a question themselves, because it offers the sense that they have the *opportunity* to engage directly in the event – and this potential agency intensifies their engagement. As I discussed in Chapter 1, recent neuroscience

confirms the reward value for audiences of having the opportunity to interact directly in an event, and this is borne out in my research: I found that reader-audience members at conversation-based events, even those who told me that they do not usually like to ask questions themselves, were rarely opposed to the practice of Q&As, and conversely found them to be an important element of such events.

For this reason, even contributions to Q&A sessions that are perceived as bizarre or rambling can be seen to have their own value: they illustrate the diversity of the reader-audience, and the sheer unpredictability of what any single member might contribute. This not only enhances the sense of risk that is linked to liveness (discussed above) – but it also gives the collective reader-audience a more concrete sense of each other. Regardless of the content of the contributions made, vocal qualities of audience contributions, like accent and tone of voice – qualities that are so important in reader-audiences' evaluations of author-performers, as I discuss below – are manifested in the multivocal diversity of questions asked. This creates a more tangible sense of an audience-based community.

Polari, as I have explained, is an example of a live literature event that deliberately eschews Q&A. In Polari's case, this appears to have two main purposes – beyond host Paul Burston's expressed personal dislike of them. The first purpose is to make the whole event more performative through its structure, by focusing on the performed readings, thus rendering the event a stage for literary experience rather than for literary discussion and information or education. The second purpose, in Polari's case, seems to be to avoid the

kinds of direct, often political and tense, emotive debates around LGBT issues deriving from broader social marginalization of LGBT-identifying people, and divisions within LGBT communities. The focus on performed fiction readings and omission of Q&As successfully operates, at Polari, to make the reader-audience feel like a united, albeit diverse, community: a collective of people who have come together for a shared experience of literary narratives in performance – narratives that have power precisely because, to the extent that they approach those political issues, they do so sideways, and the narratives are worded in ways that transcend divisive debate by being literary in nature.

Reader-Audiences: Performed readings: theatricality, boredom, authenticity, interpretation

As I have already indicated, my research suggests that reader-audiences are likely to value performed readings highly as part of live literature events – and more highly than is often assumed.

Despite this, most of the event chairpeople I spoke to during my research were wary of including performed readings in conversation-based events, unless they were extremely short. Specifically, they worried that reader-audiences were likely to find the readings *boring*. Throughout my research, and not just at Hay, this perceived risk of boredom was often given as a reason by event producers and chairpeople, not only for minimising or cutting performed readings from live literature events.

This wariness of performed readings was often linked to a common stereotype of authors as being inherently unlikely to be good performers. Many expressed this empathetically, by making clear that they did not *expect* authors to be good performers, since that role had essentially been thrust upon them with the rise of live literature. Ultimately – so the line goes – authors are happiest as hermit figures, and prefer retreating into a solitary place to write to being on stage, and so live literature events are simply not their natural habitat. My research suggests that the hermit personality stereotype is usually, though not always, inaccurate – and that even author-performers who consider themselves introverts usually enjoy performing at live literature events (I explore this further below when discussing author-performer insights).

Outside the literary festival scene, events like the Polari salon work extremely well for reader-audiences by being structured primarily around performed readings and containing no performed conversation or Q&A at all, and I have never heard a Polari reader-audience member complain of dullness, even though performed readings are far longer than they ever are in conversation-based events.

Interestingly, in making an assumption about what would define a ‘good’ performance in a reading, many chairpeople and producers seemed to be referring to what they might expect from an actor in a theatrical production. But this is not necessarily the case. My research offers insights into how reader-audiences evaluate the experience of a performed reading as being successful and/or valuable: a question rarely considered by scholars or practitioners, but which adds a fascinating dimension to an understanding of the value of live

literature events. Firstly, while an utterly monotonous, mumbling or error-ridden reading is likely to be evaluated negatively by reader-audiences, this does not mean that its opposite – a slick, energetic and theatrical performance of fiction – is always the kind of performance that will be deemed successful, valuable or meaningful.

Sometimes it is. Many author-performers I observed, whose performed readings were on the theatrical end of the delivery spectrum, are widely agreed by reader-audiences to be ‘good performers’, and those readings were effusively received. During many post-event conversations with me, reader-audiences expressed glowing praise of readings they had witnessed, occasionally expressing a wish that the reading had lasted longer. In Chapter 2, for instance, I describe Andrew O’Hagan’s blazing, performative rendering of a scene from his novel, which the reader-audience seemed to relish; the same is true of Stella Duffy’s performance at Polari.

In contrast, Simon Armitage is an example of an author-performer whose performed readings generated an equally if not more effusive response – and yet his delivery style is very different to O’Hagan’s; it is more subtle and understated in its performativity. To me, neither one was better than the other – but Armitage’s delivery style in his performed reading reflected his general demeanour and dead-pan humour, as well as his lyrical literary style; whereas O’Hagan’s dynamic, fast-paced style was both appropriate to the scene and to his energetically witty self-presentation. In line with this observation, my research suggests that the most important basis for reader-audiences in evaluating whether a performed reading is successful, valuable and meaningful is whether they

perceive it to be *authentic*. By that I mean, in part, an authentic rendering of the text – but, more importantly, an authentic version of the text as it is imagined by the author-performer, and that reveals something of the author-performer’s personality, as well as the intention behind the text. ‘Authentic’ performance, in a live literature context, appears to trump an overtly skilled or manifestly enjoyable performance, from a reader-audience perspective.

As I have outlined, reader-audiences are subtle judges of verbal communication and paralanguage when evaluating performed speech, and this includes readings; they ‘read’ performed readings at live events, combing them for authenticity, among other qualities, whether or not they are able to articulate this in detail.

Even an author-performer who is perceived by reader-audiences as being relatively vulnerable or uncomfortable with being on stage – who may, for instance, struggle to generate laughter responses so successfully as other author-performers – may still be evaluated positively by reader-audiences after a performed reading, so long as reader-audiences interpret their disposition as being authentic. A slightly halting performance might be characterised as endearing, or as ‘human’, and the author-performer and book in question, and the event as a whole, may be evaluated positively – perhaps even more highly.

A central reason for this is that reader-audience members tend to feel that experiencing an authentic performed reading enhances and aids their *interpretation* of the literary text – even if they cannot put their finger on exactly how their

interpretation is affected. Performed readings, for many, are experienced as a kind of channel that enables them to gain a sense that they have accessed *authorial intention* in a meaningful way, as well as other elements of the author-performer's 'true' voice and character, all of which are felt to inform a fuller understanding and evaluation of their work.

Many reader-audiences spoke about being affected, during a performed reading, by a combination of elements beyond the text as it would be encountered on the page. These included prosodic qualities like tone of voice, accent, pitch and speech, as well as timing and sense of humour. I was struck by how often reader-audiences referred to *sound and rhythm* in describing why performed readings mattered to them. And finding the humour in a text was frequently cited as a benefit of hearing the author-performer read it aloud; when audience laughter is experienced at an event, this contributes to an individual reader-audience member's sense of being able to 'correctly' identify the humour in the text, alongside others who were 'reading' it the same way. These factors were connected to gaining a sense of authenticity – not only in relation to the author-performer and their intentions, but even in relation to the quality of the text itself, as a product of its performer.

Similarly, several reader-audience members commented that performed readings helped with their more straightforward quest to *comprehend* the texts, though this function was always entangled with interpretation.

As I discussed earlier, in relation to embodied liveness, reader-audience members also spoke, frequently, about how the

experience of performed readings affected their experiences of reading books silently to themselves after the event – notably, often through an experience of hearing the sound of an author-performer’s voice in their heads: a version of Denise Riley’s ‘inner voice’ (see discussion in Chapter 1). This is often felt to be a meaningful and significant impact of a performed reading; the memory of the voice is often described viscerally, and seems to be experienced almost as if the ghost of the author-performer has accompanied the reader-audience member from the event to their chosen reading spot.

Collectively, these effects and impacts of performed readings are significant, and cannot be provided by staged conversations or Q&A sessions.

It is important to note that not all performed readings are deemed to be successful and valuable by reader-audiences – even if they *are* interpreted as providing a limited sense of authenticity. I have witnessed plenty of performed readings that I would characterise as awkward and stumbling, usually because they were clearly unpractised, and appeared to have been approached with a lack of care, to the point where, as a reader-audience member, I became disengaged with the performance, and consequently with related reflections on its interpretation. And many reader-audience members have mentioned to me in conversation that, from their experience, performed readings do not ‘always’ work well, ‘can’ be boring – and can serve to put them off reading the book.

I note, though, that I did not encounter any reader-audiences at Hay, or at Polari, who deemed a reading they had just witnessed as being straightforwardly boring.

Despite perceiving a very limited risk of outright boredom from performed readings, I found reader-audiences to be highly likely to be positive about the *potential* value of the experience of a performed reading. They tend to be open to the risk of being disappointed by a performed reading, without necessarily judging the event itself negatively – so long as the *evaluation process* that that the experience provided was engaging.

There is clearly another disjunction here between what is often assumed about reader-audience experiences, and what they actually experience – and, importantly, what they *value* about that experience.

It seems to me that, on the rare occasion that a performed reading is deemed by reader audiences to be poor, or boring, a root cause is quite likely to be cultural: that it may arise because the act of performing readings is so often undervalued – not just by author-performers, but producers and publishers too, and so the author-performer in question has neither practised nor given the performance any thought. This could be a symptom of a wider perception of live literature as a form of publicity and information, rather than as a form of performance and experience.

It is illuminating to delve a little more deeply into the relationship between what reader-audiences deem to be a ‘good’ performance vs. an authentic performance – and, in

doing so, into the relationship between performed readings at live literature events and performed readings by actors for the fast-growing genre of audiobooks.

Recent scholarship on audiobooks, performed by actors, and the history of the early 'talking books', reveals that there was extensive debate in their early days over what made a good reading of a novel, as opposed to a play script (see discussion of Rubery's research in Chapter 1). The broad consensus was that the best readings 'serve the text' and should not be approached in the same way as a theatrical performance; the delivery should be less heightened, allowing the language and narrative to speak more for itself – a sentiment echoed, as I have shown, by Simon Armitage and others. Actors rarely present authors' books at live literature events – and when I suggested to reader-audiences the hypothetical prospect of an actor performing readings in that context instead of an author-performer, they invariably looked surprised, and expressed a preference for witnessing the author-performer. However, many also stated that they listened to audiobooks as well. And when I offered reader-audiences a hypothetical choice between an author and an actor performing a recorded version of the text for an audiobook, many felt that an actor would probably be likely to do a better job – but that this would depend on who the author/actor in question was and how he or she read. This suggests that there is a close relationship between the visual, embodied connection with the author-performer at a live literature event, and the way in which their performed readings are evaluated in that context.

My conversation at Hay with reader-audience members Stan and Kira about Toni Morrison provides an enlightening

example here. Both reader-audience members had witnessed Morrison perform a reading from her novel at a Hay event, years before, and had subsequently listened to her reading her own audiobook, after she critiqued a version of her audiobook recorded by an actor, telling the audience that it had been 'done all wrong'. They both felt, with certainty, that witnessing Morrison perform at the live event was vitally important experience for their future readings of her work, and how they valued her work, particularly because the sense it gave them of her *rhythm* – but they also felt that, over the length of an entire book, her performance lacked clarity, and an actor's may have been preferable. This example reiterates the central role of 'authenticity', relating to both authorial intention and performance persona, as a determinant of value for reader-audiences at live literature events, as well as illuminating distinct elements that make for a successful, or valuable, performed reading in this context.

More performative literary events, that tend to emphasise performed readings from literary texts, seem to be on the rise. As I outlined in Chapter 1, there are many live literature events now springing up, diverging from the literary festival model, that also prioritise performed readings, and experiment with them in new ways. My own live literature project, Ark, is one example; and there are now many more, ranging from literary entertainment nights to theatre shows to live art performances. But reader-audiences at the more mainstream literary festivals are often unaware that such 'other' events exist. With the exception of performed poetry, live literature is rarely considered on its own terms as an art form.

But some influential author-performers may be starting to shift this perspective. Neil Gaiman's work, including the curation of events such as *The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains*, a short story he wrote and performed with a live string quartet and large-scale animation, represents an outstanding example of this creative approach to the practice of live literature. Notably, Gaiman explicitly defines himself, not as a novelist, or even as a writer or author, but as a storyteller⁵⁹⁵ – and this way he deliberately straddles genres and artforms, and challenges normative assumptions about the scope of literary-cultural practices. Reader-audiences relish this, in great numbers.

Reader-Audiences: Meanings of the book-signing ritual

The practice of book-signing after live literature events is very common: it takes place at all literary festivals I have attended, and also at other literary events like Polari, usually after a purchase 'conversion' at the event bookstall or bookshop.

My research suggests that, while this practice might appear trivial, and is assumed to be so by some in the literary industry – notably James Daunt, who admitted that he still doesn't quite 'get it'. While it is certainly directly linked to the commercial objectives of selling books that, to a greater or lesser extent, shape most live literature events – the post-event book signing process is experienced for many as a form of ritual, and it can be highly meaningful for many who

⁵⁹⁵ See Joanna Robinson: 'Neil Gaiman on His New Storytelling MasterClass, *Good Omens*, and the Upside of Twitter' (2019) in which he is quoted as saying: 'I know lots of novelists. Novelists are very nice people. But I'm not a novelist. I'm a storyteller who sometimes writes novels, and graphic novels, and short stories, and makes film or television'.

participate in it. And a great many reader-audiences do, despite the cost implications of book-buying at events (discussed above).

I had never had an interest in obtaining signed copies of books before beginning this research, but have since got several signed at the end of events. After observing and reflecting on the signing ritual, I suggest that it can usefully be viewed as part of the main event, particularly as it is often mentioned during a performance. The purchased book serves as a personalized memento of the event that effectively materializes the text presented in the event; it will be read silently at some point after the event, and trigger ongoing associations with the event including, perhaps, 'hearing' the author-performer's voice while reading. The process of signing involves a direct, one-to-one encounter with the author-performer at close proximity, which is likely to involve the reader-audience member sharing their name and a snippet of their personal experience with the author-performer, which might touch upon their relationship to the author-performer's work and how they enjoyed the event; and witnessing their name being written down in the author-performer's handwriting, perhaps with a personalized message reflecting and documenting the brief conversation. Akin to a witnessing process at a wedding ceremony, these ritualistic processes strengthen the sense of connection that the reader-audience member has with the author-performer, deepen their memory of the event, and contribute to their evaluation.

Reader-Audiences: Community and diversity: emotional, social and interpersonal experience at live literature events

Another key insight from my research is the extent to which experiencing a live literature event can generate in reader-audiences a sense of emotional connection and community with each other, whether or not the reader-audience is particularly diverse in terms of social categories like race, class, sexuality, gender or age.

It is easy to observe a sense of collective connection at live literature events. This is indicated in multiple ways, from the ways in which people react and behave during performances – leaning forward, smiling, laughing, for instance – and ways in which they speak and interact after the events, both between themselves and in conversations with me.

Interpersonal and social relationships among reader-audience members themselves are perceived to be important elements of experiencing live literature events. Many reader-audience members attend with friends or family, and see the experience as a way of forming or deepening those interpersonal relationships through a shared cultural experience. Simply being part of an embodied reader-audience gives many people a sense of being actively included in a community, whether or not they actually interact with each other directly or verbally. The intangible sensation of this experience has been evidenced in neuroscience through the synchrony of audience responses at live events (discussed above).

In a live literature context, reader-audiences said that they valued being part of a group of 'like-minded people', through a shared interest in reading – even though most had not met each other before the event in question, and any single

reader-audience group is unlikely to be replicated again. As such, live literature events create a sense of a physical ‘interpretive community’ (see discussion in Chapter 1, referencing Stanley Fish), that affects each member’s ongoing interpretations and evaluations of the text and author-performer, via shared memories, creating an ongoing ‘mnemonic community’ (see discussion in Chapter 1, referencing David Wiles), even though participants may not interact through direct one-to-one conversations with each other.

At an annual literary festival like Hay, where many reader-audience members are repeat visitors, the ritualistic repetition extending over decades can lead them to feel part of a deeper, longer-term community than they might at other festivals – even though many of them admitted to only socializing directly with the friends or family members they came with, and would probably not even recognize any other repeat visitors, given the scale and duration of the festival.

At a smaller and more regular live literature event, like Polari, the sense of community is likely to be deeper and more tangible. It is manifested through conversational and physical interaction between regular reader-audience members, and facial recognition of other regulars. In Polari’s case, the sense of community is attributable to factors including a shared interest in LGBT literature, and way in which the event is hosted and produced by Burston, which actively fosters a sense of camaraderie. Polari is an example of a strong ‘emotional community’: a direct example of a ‘tribus’, united in part by a collective awareness of a shared identity or issues (discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 with reference to Maffesoli).

A heightened sense of community at a regular event can have the converse effect making some participants feel excluded. At Polari, the obvious familiarity between people who were long-term regulars made some newcomers and individuals feel slightly left out from what was perceived to be a 'clique' – although, in Polari's case, even reader-audience members who felt that way also perceived the event to be generally friendly and welcoming. Notably, for some people, this was in direct comparison to their perception of how they anticipated that they would feel at a literary festival.

This brings me to diversity. Diversity is a key issue in contemporary literary culture, which affects any notion of community, and it applies to live literature events as it does to other areas of publishing. There is an established perception that literary festivals, as the most dominant form of live literature, are insufficiently diverse, particularly in terms of race, but also in terms of other minority categories. As one Polari reader-audience member put it, she was delighted by her first experience of Polari, but would still *never* want to go to a literary festival because it would be 'too white and middle-class'.

This highlights a particular way in which Polari is valued, which links to the central motivation behind its founding: namely the lack of diversity represented in mainstream fiction – in Polari's case, specifically, the deficit in terms of LGBT authors and characters. As that reader-audience member suggested, there is still widely perceived to be a lack of diversity, in race and class terms too, at many mainstream live literature events, notably the big literary festivals, both on and off stage.

Diversity has been the subject of much discussion in the media, including in relation to Hay, and there have been increasing campaigns and initiatives in the publishing industry over the years that have sought to increase diversity. But, as important recent scholarship by Ramardashan Bold, Saha and others shows (see discussion in Chapter 1), the diversity deficit continues to be significant. This causes mainstream live literature events, and literary culture in general, to be perceived as alienating and excluding, particularly for those reader-audience members who define themselves as being from a relevant minority group.

In a literary festival context, where events tend to be closely connected to the publishing industry, this lack of diversity is likely to be in part a result of that wider publishing industry problem. However, it is clearly not the whole reason, since each director, producer or curator is ultimately responsible for the structure, characterisation and publicity of their own event. Inadequate diversity affects not only perceptions of live literature and literary culture, but substance, too. It does not only manifest itself in which authors get exposure, but which literary texts get published, and which get written in the first place. It also affects, the subject matter and characters in the texts, and the language and form in which they are addressed; and it affects which readers gain access to those texts, what cultural impact literary texts and their authors are likely to have. Hay has not historically been particularly diverse (see discussion in Chapter 2), and the same applies to most other literary festivals.

Fortunately, now, Hay and all literary festivals I know of are actively seeking to improve their diversity, in part by attending

to the curation of their programmes to include more ethnically diverse author-performers. There is clearly a long way still to go. But a new festival like Bradford Literature Festival,⁵⁹⁶ which explicitly foregrounds ethnic diversity, is an example of curation which has energetically and adeptly responded to the challenge. A relatively young festival in the UK, Bradford has sought to be more representative of its local community, to promote ethnic diversity, and to confront themes that may not be immediately popular with large audience numbers.

My observations and reflections on diversity during this research reinforced my sense that, if literary culture is going to thrive, particularly in a digital age with so many competing forms of entertainment, aesthetic engagement and information, it needs to diversify more, including through live literature. When it does, the sense of community that live literature engenders will seem all the more culturally valuable.

Reader-Audiences: Identity, authenticity and cultural appropriation; the role/problem of live literature

The link between diversity, identity and the concept of cultural appropriation in fiction (see discussion in Chapters 1 and 2), raises complex and deep-rooted problems that ripple through literary culture. They tend to be foregrounded in conversation-based live literature events, and they make the presentation of fiction at such events particularly problematic.

Fiction, by its commonly-understood definition, entails imaginative invention, and specifically it allows for narrators

⁵⁹⁶ See Bradford Lit Fest website: <https://www.bradfordlitfest.co.uk> (accessed 1 October 2018)

and characters to be 'made up' in ways that do not necessarily correspond with an author's own autobiography or background. The idea of cultural appropriation limits the extent to which authors should legitimately do that, thus highlighting the role of the author and their biography. The current debates around cultural appropriation in fiction clearly manifest a broader 'resurrection of the author' in literary culture (see discussion of Gardiner's work in Chapter 1 and 2). Live literature – particularly conversation-based events – serves to 'resurrect the author' still further, since conversations inevitably interrogate the inspiration for the fictional text, and its connection to, or divergence from, the author-performer's 'real' biography. The questions, and the answers, impact on how reader-audiences interpret and value the work. Not only do conversation-based live literature events provide for such questions to be discussed, but they also provide additional 'clues' to the relationship between the author and their text, for instance in their vocal qualities such as accent, rhythm and timing. These are elements of communication that are not necessarily manifest in the text on the page, but are inevitably manifest in a live event. As shown in my research, these elements significantly affect reader-audiences, including in their determinations of authenticity, and their processes of judgment and valuation.

If taken to an extreme, in terms of value, this interpretation of identity-based authenticity throws into doubt the future legitimacy and cultural role of fiction altogether – in the sense of an author being able to invent voices other than their own, and to have their work positively valued. Lionel Shriver made this point in her controversial and deliberately provocative speech at the Brisbane Writers Festival (discussed earlier in

this chapter, and in Chapter 2) – but her failure to acknowledge the real diversity deficits in the publishing industry that lie behind identity representation issues, and her ridiculing of concerns about diversity, unsurprisingly prompted a furious backlash. The issue of cultural appropriation has arguably changed the whole direction of fiction, even pointing towards a negation of its value. As critic Anthony Cummins has put it, autofiction’s rise can be seen as a means for authors to ‘sidestep an increased nervousness about cultural appropriation as well as imagining the lives of others, something novelists – not least those of the state-of-the-nation variety – once took for granted’.⁵⁹⁷ Those author-performers who opt not to participate in conversation-based live literature events, or to otherwise discuss the relationship between their fiction and their ‘real’ identities publicly, like Elena Ferrante, can be hounded for it (see discussion in Chapter 2).⁵⁹⁸ Zadie Smith encapsulated the problem of cultural appropriation and authorial identity in fiction neatly, at a Hay Festival in Cartagena, by calling it a ‘pain in the ass’⁵⁹⁹ (see discussion in Chapter 2).

Polari is a rare example of a live literature event with a specific mission to engage with diversity deficits in literary culture relating to LGBT issues; and yet it is also an event that comprehensively avoids compelling reader-audiences to draw links between authorial biography and fiction, by keeping the event open to author-performers who write about LGBT issues as well as those who identify as LGBT, and also by omitting conversation and Q&A as part of the event format.

⁵⁹⁷ See Cummins (2018) and discussion in Chapter 2.

⁵⁹⁸ See Gatti (2016), Kirschgaessner (2016), and Orr (2016) and discussion in Chapter 2.

⁵⁹⁹ See Armitstead (2019)

Clearly literary festivals and comparable conversation-based events are not to blame for Elena Ferrante's hounding by journalists seeking to reveal her 'real' identity, or for Smith and Laird's marital tensions over cultural appropriation and identity representation in fiction. But this research illustrates how the dominance of the literary festival, and of conversation-based literary events based on the festival model, contribute in a real way to a literary-cultural shift of focus towards ideas of identity-based authenticity in relation to fiction. This impact of this ripples out and affects ways in which fiction is experienced, perceived and valued, and even the ways it is composed and published.

Key insights: Author-performers

Author-Performers as a subject of research

There is extremely limited research into fiction authors' perspectives on literary culture, and particularly into their experiences of performing their work at live events; Wulff's research on Irish writers (see discussion in Chapter 1) is a rare example. My ethnographies include multiple conversations with author-performers that I had on-site, often directly after they had performed at a live event, which enabled me to extract a wide range of responses that often emerged from immediate memories of the event experience.

Some of the vulnerabilities and insecurities around authorial personas and live literature performances are unlikely to be divulged in the context of an event-based conversation. My own experience as an author-performer at live literature

events, and as part of various author networks, suggests that such vulnerabilities and insecurities are common.

Author-Performers: Live literature and career impact: pressures and tensions; payment and value; author networks

Many author-performers see live literature events as a duty that forms part of their contemporary role as an author of written texts: a duty that many veteran author-performers, who were publishing work before the 21st century live literature boom, say has fundamentally changed the shape of their writing careers.

Even more recently-published authors, like Gavin Extence, sometimes admit to an initial degree of surprise about the extent to which participation in live literature is expected of them by their publishers after their book comes out.

Having said that, I note that at Hay, where I spoke to Extence, the picture of author-performer experience in this respect is distorted relative to the experience of the majority of author-performers: those who are chosen to appear at Hay are highly likely to be those at the top of their publishers' promotion agenda, and consequently are likely to be scheduled to perform at a great many other live literature events after their book has come out; whereas authors who are lower down the priority list have to try to seek out events for themselves.

This does not mean that those authors who are of lower priority for their publishers feel any less expectation or duty to perform; quite the opposite, in fact. There is a general understanding among contemporary authors that they are

also required to be author-performers, to some extent, in order to succeed, and that the more live literature events they manage to appear in, the more copies of their books are likely to be sold, which will improve their chances of having future books published, and generally, the better for their writing's reception and for their career.

Consequently, author-performers feel under increasing pressure to sell their books through live literature events, particularly festivals; they experience pressure to be *invited* to appear at them, and they have feelings of inadequacy and disappointment if they are not invited – especially by the big literary festivals. Such invitations are clearly experienced as markers of cultural capital within the literary industry – as reflected in my conversation with Colm Tóibín in Chapter 2, who admitted that he was only glad to be invited to perform at events because otherwise he would feel he were *not* being invited – the implication being that this would signify that his work had been devalued. And, as discussed in Chapter 3, Paul Burston started the Polari salon partly in frustration that he had published several novels but had not once been invited to perform at a literary event: something he felt was linked to his LGBT identity. Consequently he feels a moral duty to give a platform to new and unsung LGBT writers.

Authors often cite a tension between the expectation of self-publicity through live events, the time this effort takes, and the outward-facing perspective it demands on one hand; and, on the other hand, their need to focus on writing the next book. Many of the most successful authors in sales terms, who are the most in demand for events and embark on lengthy international book tours, tend to feel an exacerbation of that

tension and a burden upon their personal lives – though they do it, aware of the benefit in book sales and career terms. Ali Smith navigates the balance by writing each book in four months of a year and doing events only outside that time⁶⁰⁰ – but then Ali Smith is highly sought after given the well-deserved popular and critical acclaim for her writing. Few authors I have spoken to are, or feel able to be, so rigorous about organizing their time (or so capable of writing a brilliant novel in four months).

The tension relating to time-management and attention is compounded by the concurrent pressure of expectation upon authors to perform their authorial personas digitally, online and through social media. As author Lan Samantha Chang put, it in an article about how difficult it is for writers to protect their ‘inner lives’: ‘new authors... are threatened that their book will fail unless they keep tweeting, giving readings (if they are lucky), reading reviews (if they are lucky) and writing dozens of small articles and Q&As that will stay online forever’⁶⁰¹ – revealing the psychological impact of this combined publicity expectation. ‘Book publication is more public than it has ever been’, Chang continues. ‘It is public information that one’s book has or has not been touted as a book to watch out for on certain websites, or has/has not made certain favourite lists or sales lists, or a hundred end of the year lists. This is not to mention the prize season, which can make the writer lucky enough to be a finalist feel like a runner-up in a beauty pageant.’⁶⁰²

⁶⁰⁰ See Armitstead (2019)

⁶⁰¹ Lan Samantha Chang, ‘Writers, protect your inner life’ (2017)

⁶⁰² Ibid.

To add to the impact of all this pressure, authors have faced a steep income decline over recent years (discussed in Chapter 1), and consequently, even the most successful author-performers often genuinely need the money that live literature events can provide through appearance fees. And yet many events do not offer fees (see discussions in Chapters 1 and 3). Not getting paid for appearing at the big literary festivals, where ticket costs are high, diminishes author-performers' sense of self-worth and value, even if the cultural capital gained is high – hence the Society of Authors' campaign and Phillip Pullman's act of protest (discussed in Chapter 1). Most authors expect to be asked to perform without payment in small venues, particularly bookshops, which are notoriously cash-strapped in the era of Amazon, as a form of both self-publicity and book sales and support to the shops – who, in return, it is hoped, will put more effort into promoting the author's books. Some of these bookshops, despite the difficulty of making bookselling pay, still find ways to pay authors for their time in doing events that does not involve cash, as I was grateful to find when I was invited to perform by Daunt Books, Hampstead, and was presented with a generous credit voucher in the form of a postcard. As I show in Chapter 3, Polari does not pay author-performers for its Southbank events – though Burston, in my case, was apologetic about this and pointed out that there is a bookstall to sell copies. I note that Polari does now pay for its events 'on tour' outside of London, which are funded by ACE; so, at the Southbank, there is clearly a balance to be struck between keeping the ticket price down and supporting author-performers. Most authors will, as I did, agree to perform at live literature events for free, encouraged by the knowledge that a book stall will be present, acutely aware of the importance of their sales figures for any

future book deals – even though, financially, they are likely to get a minimal amount of money in royalties from the sale of books at any single event.

Author-performers also participate in and live literature events as a form of network opportunity, where they can connect with each other and gain a wider and more meaningful literary community. As my research shows, this is manifest most obviously in green rooms at events like Hay, which can also be seen as physical markers of cultural capital, and greenhouses for literary gossip (discussed in Chapter 1 and 2). From personal experience, I have stayed in touch with several author-performers whom I met through shared events, and have valued that connection; it creates a sense of solidarity and even teamwork in what is otherwise a generally-solitary line of work, marked by the pressures relating to income, publicity and sales pressures that I have described.

There are now multiple online author networks, many formed through social media, that offer a similar support and solidarity function for authors of fiction, even if they do not get the opportunity to meet in person at live events, and in my experience, many authors value these networks highly, in part because of the pressures outlined above.

Author-Performers: Connecting with reader-audiences and the authorial persona: persona vs. personality; social media vs. live; community vs. diversity

Moving onto the experience of author-performers during events: my research explores the ways in which participation

in live literature causes author-performers to gain a deeper sense of connection with their reader-audiences. In general, as my conversation with Extence illustrates, this connection is usually experienced as being rewarding, for writers at any level or fame. The embodied presence of a reader-audience creates a tangible sense of a readership that is otherwise invisible, and that can appear distant or even non-existent during the low or anxious moments in most authors' lives and careers, when they feel under pressure in relation to book sales and reviews, at a point when the content of the book is unalterable and the reception is varied or uncertain. It is like witnessing an interpretive community materialize (see Chapter 1 and discussion above). As I illustrated in the prologue, describing my own experience of performing from my novel amongst an audience and seeing, sensing and hearing their feedback, this experience can make a book's impact on the world feel far more tangible and meaningful to author-performers. There is a sense of empowerment bound up with this experience, which can be rare in a post-publication phase that is often characterised by behind-the-scenes vulnerability and anxiety. Author-performers testified to this in my research – notably Gavin Extence, as a debut, and Colm Tóibín.

Social media has added a new dimension to the post-publication experience, in terms of reader-audience connection, and its impact is double-edged for author-performers. Reader responses are far easier for authors to access than they used to be, including those of readers who are geographically distant. Positive reader responses can be heart-warming and gratifying for authors, as another route to accessing a sense of the value and impact of their work, and a tangible insight into the distinct ways in which the book has

moved or otherwise resonated with individual readers. Soon after the hardback publication of my own novel, I was contacted through my website by a man who had long been resident in Singapore who had just picked up my novel randomly in a bookshop and loved it, even though it was not the kind of book he would usually read, and felt sufficiently moved to get in touch. I had been unaware that the book was even being sold in Singapore, and the moment touched me and stayed with me.

However, as with so many social media narrative patterns, online reader responses can be negative, nonsensical, wildly insulting, vindictive, peculiar, misguided, or all of the above – in ways that not only upset authors, and do not offer constructive criticisms, but are experienced by authors as actively destructive to their self-esteem and to their future careers. Online reviewers often appear to feel more liberated about being strongly critical through digital anonymity, or simply in view of the likelihood they will never have to meet the author in person and be confronted about their comments. A tweet by the novelist Celeste Ng illustrates this:

Hi, quick PSA [public service announcement]: you have every right to not like a book, and every right to say whatever you want about it. But please don't tag the author if you didn't like it. It serves no purpose other than to be rude. We are humans with feelings too. Thanks!⁶⁰³

She was responding to a tweet by a reader (whose identity she blacked out) which read:

Did NOT like "Little Fires Everywhere" by @pronounced_ing. Well-written and an interesting story – but it infuriated me when it came to adoption, a mother's love and interracial family dynamics. However, it made me appreciate my upbringing even more: 0 stars #books #family⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³ See Celeste Ng, Tweet posted on 12 July 2018, Twitter handle @pronounced_ing. Accessed 2 Feb 2019 at: https://twitter.com/pronounced_ing/status/1017539391789654016?lang=en

⁶⁰⁴ Anon, *ibid*.

After Ng's tweet got over 5,000 likes and a lot of engagement, she posted a follow-up:

Aw, thank you all for the kind words. My ego is fine, honestly— putting this out there because I know this stuff happens a lot, to a LOT of writers, and I figure a reminder to be kind to each other never hurts. ❤️⁶⁰⁵

It has also become clear to me through my own author networks that many authors frequently experience strong emotions of upset and self-doubt after reading strongly negative or personally-insulting online reader reviews; yet, understandably, rarely publicize such feelings.

Notably, in contrast to this social media realm, live literature events are far more likely to result in reliably direct and positive responses from reader-audiences, or at least in more sensitively and constructively-expressed criticisms. This is in part because reader-audiences usually invested more in their attendance of an event, in terms of both time and money, so are more likely to be positively inclined towards the book or author in question. But it is also because those responses are modified by the fact of being face-to-face with the author-performer in person, and, concurrently, by being observed and judged, by other reader-audience members, which inhibits vituperative responses. As Gavin Extence described, live literature events tend to be experienced as friendly and supportive. The experience of receiving positive, embodied responses in a live literature context may well be valued even more highly by author-performers in the context of the negative experiences many have though social media feedback.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

*Author-Performers: Reading aloud and the practice of writing:
the role of orality and voice*

Some of the most fascinating insights from my research concern the relationship that author-performers negotiate between their live literature practice and their writing practice through the role of the voice, and the value they accord to the voice in fiction.

This can be traced back to the writing process, and whether or not authors read aloud as they write: a question that has been neglected in literary research, as John Mullan indicated in my conversation with him at Hay (see Chapter 2). My research suggests that many author-performers do read aloud as part of their writing and editing process – Andrew O’Hagan being an example of someone who regards that practice as a necessity. Responses to this question reveal a connection between literature and orality that is rarely acknowledged, in a culture of scholarship and publishing that focuses on the written, printed word (the history of the book being an exception). For an author-performer, the process of compositional reading aloud inevitably ceases for a period, once the book is in the process of publication – which is likely to last for a year or more – and is then returned to in a more public, performative context during live literature events.

I was intrigued, during this research, to find that some author claim *never* to read aloud while writing their fiction. Colm Tóibín is an example; though he talked instead about writing through his ‘inner’ voice: an alternative conception of orality (discussed in Chapter 1, with reference to Connor, Riley and

neuroscientific research.) It seems possible, from my research, that writers such as O'Hagan, who tend to write more performatively in terms of dialogue and scenes than writers such as Tóibín, who focus more on descriptive prose, are more likely to rely on reading aloud as part of their process.

My research is also revealing about the ways in which author-performers approach live literature events, in terms of preparation. Some author-performers practice their planned readings at home in advance of events. And certain author-performers, such as Stella Duffy, are very vocal about the *duty* upon author-performers to practice, for the benefit of their audiences and the reading public (see discussion in Chapter 3) – and I note that Duffy has a background in theatre. But other author-performers admit to not practising before their readings – occasionally, as Tóibín did, expressing surprise at the suggestion that they might – a response that again reflects a wider perception of live literature events, that I have already critiqued, as being primarily publicity appearances rather than performances.

Over the course of my six years of research, though, it has come to seem to me that, as live literature becomes a more significant part of authors' careers, more and more of them are now beginning to see themselves as author-performers – albeit they do not use that term – and that, consequently, practice before events is becoming more common, or, at least, they are attending more carefully to the practice of reading their work aloud as a form of performance.

While a significant number of author-performers express some anticipatory anxiety about the prospect of performing at live

events, whether or not they are appearing ‘solo’, most of them ultimately find the experience of performance rewarding. Beyond the reward of making connections that I have just been discussing, the common stereotype of authors as hermit figures, who would generally rather not perform at any live literature events, is not borne out in this research.

That said, another issue that faces author-performers in reading aloud from their books at live literature events, particularly conversation-based events, relates to the issue I discussed earlier about structure: namely that the time available for a reading is often very short. So how to select a single passage to perform, when it will be received by reader-audiences as representative of the entire book? The task can be particularly difficult in the where a novel has multiple narrators, or in cases where the author-performer does not want to give away any ‘spoilers’ by reading a passage that is too far in. The opening of a novel, consequently, seems to be chosen the most frequently. Alternatively, the choice of passage to perform is often made on the basis that it is funny or dramatic (see discussion of Helena Wulff’s observations of readings in Chapter 1), and is therefore likely to make a swift impact, and produce an audible or visible reaction in reader-audiences that creates a sense of engagement, such as laughter – thus stimulating the live ‘feedback loop’ (see discussion in Chapter 1). By incorporating audience responses, such as laughter or murmuring, my ethnographies illustrate how these kinds of literary passages work in performance. My observations suggest that a wide variety of passages, in terms of tone and dramatic content, can be successful – provided, again, that the reader-audience gains a meaningful sense of authenticity through the performance.

Many author-performers admit to thinking about the prospect of performing their fiction aloud at live literature events while writing; but many – notably Simon Armitage and Colm Tóibín – say that they actively try to quell that thought. They do this for fear that it will impact on their writing, either in ways that it ‘shouldn’t’ – based on an idea that the integrity of their vision will be compromised by a desire to please an embodied audience; or that it will make them too self-conscious and paranoid, hindering the flow of the writing process.

Some author-performers – notably David Almond – place a high value on the sonic qualities and musicality of their prose fiction texts while composing them, in a way that is *not* directly linked to anticipating the prospect of live literature events, but is part of a deeper conviction that literature should be connected to orality, and more than that, to sound and rhythm. This aesthetic and philosophical view of literature is more commonly associated with poetry, but was lucidly articulated by Ursula K. Le Guin in relation to prose (as discussed in Chapter 1).

During my research, Almond, Armitage, and several other author-performers I spoke to, explicitly connected their live literature practice with ancient storytelling traditions, and to a core idea they have of their basic function as storytellers. From this view, literature is conceived of more as a contemporary architecture that has grown up around live storytelling traditions, and it is print publishing that is the ‘addendum’ phenomenon; not live literature.

Even for those author-performers who are less focused on rhythm, orality and storytelling as an element of their role and

the core of their writing practice, the act of reading aloud from their books at live events is often experienced as a ‘re-inhabiting’ of a text that they had once been consumed by, during the writing process, but had subsequently been distant from during the pre-publication phase, and before the cycle of literary events around the book began. Andrew O’Hagan spoke particularly strongly about his sense of reinhabiting his texts through performance, and also admitted to finding new and surprising qualities about his text during each subsequent reinhabitation.

The reinhabiting process can be an emotional one for some author-performers, though – in fact ‘too emotional’ for some (see discussion about Ian Hamilton in Chapter 2). This serves as a reminder that many fiction authors choose to express thoughts and feelings through text on a page, through fictional characters, often including a fictional narrator, precisely because they would not otherwise have felt able or willing to share these narratives through oral performance. The increasing prevalence of live literature may be affecting how those authors approach their writing.

That said, for novelists, in a live literature context, because only short extracts tend to be required or requested for performance, the more sensitive passages can usually be avoided. I was once asked by a chairperson at a live literature event to read from the most harrowing scene in my novel, which I had previously avoided doing, as I felt it would give a distorted sense of the book as a whole and affect the tone of the event – but on the spur of the moment I decided to try it anyway, keen to oblige and curious to find out how well it would work. I felt awkward during the reading, and felt glad

that I had the opportunity to read a couple of other short passages too, so that it would not seem like the sole representative part of the book. I did not get the sense that it had put many people off, and several did still 'convert' by buying a book afterwards, but it was impossible to tell whether some had been put off by it, or assumed that it was more representative of the overall tone of the text than it is.

Some author-performers feel conflicted about their oral, performed voice vs their 'inner voice' in a live literature context, even after years of doing performed readings and conversation-based live literature events. Tóibín's self-deprecating declaration, 'I don't like the sound of my voice', is an unusually strong example.

In terms of oral delivery, some author-performers seek to render, through performed readings, the variety of fictional voices that they have created in the text, by adjusting their voices for different narrators or characters, including by speaking in different accents and adopting varying tonalities that suit those characters. Andrew O'Hagan was the most extreme example featured in my ethnographies. This approach necessitates both confidence and some advance practice – which, as I have shown, is not always done. Most authors lack confidence to attempt different characters' voices, and many admit to some anxiety about how performative to be in relation to characterisation, dialogue and multiple narrating voices. I have found myself perplexed about the best approach to take with my own novel, which has a multi-voice structure, when certain live literature events have forced me to read first-person narrative sections.

These varying approaches link back to the historical debates relating to ‘talking books’ about how far it is ‘appropriate’ to dramatize a literary text when reading it aloud, and how far to allow the reader-listener room for interpretation, or to allow the text to speak for itself (see discussion in Chapter 1 referencing Rubery’s research). My conversations with Tóibín and Armitage are representative of a widespread sense among author-performance that actorly ‘hamming’ of a text does not necessarily do their text the best service, even if they felt confident enough to make their performance actorly – and that there is some compromise to be struck by the author-performer. I was struck, though, by Gavin Extence’s admission that he ‘learned’ how to perform his own novel aloud by listening to the actor’s renditions on the audiobook edition. This possibility is increasingly available to author-performers as audiobooks grow. But my conversations with reader-audiences about the value they placed on a sense of authenticity in a performed reading problematize that idea.

Many authors keep their reading-aloud style flat or dry. Sometimes this is borne out of such a view about the primacy of the text, but often it appears to be indicative of the author-performer’s personality and usual speaking style. Margaret Atwood is a notable example, as debated by O’Hagan and Tóibín at Hay: she has a fairly flat, dry reading-aloud tone that they speculated was political, as a kind of feminist statement; but that also clearly matches her writing style, which is notoriously witty and packed with deadpan humour as well as acute human insights and sharp descriptions. Her performance at conversation-based events indicates that the same is true of her non-literary speech, which suggests that her reading-aloud style is simply an iteration of an aspect of her personality. This

tendency to draw links between perceived authorial personality and literary style was a phenomenon that Ishiguro discussed, self-deprecatingly, in relation to his own work – and the same is true of delivery style. Again, this can all be said to come down to an interpretive evaluation of ‘authenticity’, in terms of the text, and the authorial persona behind it – or, perhaps, within it.

Author-Performers: Responding to questions: explaining invention; the role of the ‘sage’; authorial persona vs. autobiographical identity

As I have discussed above, conversation-based live literature events often involve discussion of themes and intentions behind an author-performer’s composition of their fiction. And this often involves an attempt to summarize key elements of a text which, often, has taken them years to craft, and which is, almost by definition, incapable of accurate summary. As L. Samantha Chang put it: ‘We make art about what we cannot understand by any other method.’⁶⁰⁶ Similarly, Lorrie Moore has pointed out that: ‘No one who has ever looked back upon a book she or he has written, only to find the thing foreign and alienating, unrecallable, would ever deny its mysteriousness.’⁶⁰⁷ And yet conversation-based events require such analytical exercises to be undertaken – and require the author-performer to provide explanations for reader-audiences that are both clear and engaging.

Another element of live literature for authors is the extent to which they are expected to offer opinions, at live events, on

⁶⁰⁶ See Chang (2017)

⁶⁰⁷ See Lorrie Moore, ‘It’s better to write than be a writer’ (2018)

matters beyond their autobiography and their writing, such as politics or other moral or societal issues. This translates to the idea of the literary event as a form of pilgrimage (discussed earlier and in Chapter 2) – and also to the idea of the author as a ‘sage’ that Coetzee has positioned himself against, on the basis that the literature itself should take priority, and that its distinct mode of expressing ideas needs protecting and valuing (see discussion in Chapter 1, referencing McDonald). Ishiguro’s performance at Hay represented a wry embracing of that role, which seems to be a more common attitude among author-performers. Neuroscientific evidence shows that the act of sharing advice triggers reward mechanisms in the brain (see discussion in Chapter 1), and it does seem that many author-performers enjoy this aspect of events, even if they find the prospect stressful, or if they consider it to be irrelevant to, or disjunctive with, the literary work that they are supposed to be presenting. For my part, I’ve been happy to answer questions at events about relevant issues in my novel – such as immigration policy; to me, this has made the book feel useful and resonant for readers, and that it is playing into relevant conversations in the wider culture, however small and isolated. But I am always glad to hear evidence, in questions, of an emotional engagement with the text, too.

At live literature events, author-performers tend to critically evaluate the reading styles of fellow/competitor author-performers when they witness them in performance at live literature events, even if they do not readily admit to it. Andrew O’Hagan and Colm Tóibín’s conversation demonstrates this (see Chapter 2). However, few published fiction authors regularly attend live literature events in which they are not performing professionally. In part, this is due to a

perception of conversation-based events being primarily targeted at introducing readers to books and inducing them to purchase 'competitor' texts, combined with their educational function, and regular incorporation of questions along the lines of how to get published, which are unlikely to be relevant to published authors. Author-performers are more likely to attend more intimate book launches, as reader-audiences, than literary festivals.

Reader-audience Q&A sessions generate mixed feelings among author-performers. I have already discussed the frequency of questions like: *Where did you get your ideas from? How long did it take you? How many hours a day did you write for? How did you know when you'd done enough research?* – many of which, as I have indicated, suggest a desire on the part of the questioner to understand the process of writing and creating better, or to work out how get a book published themselves. Some author-performers betray momentary impatience with such questions; Dorthe Nors, in Chapter 2, is an example. And some author-performers openly sneer at the whole practice of audience Q&A – Will Self, for instance – for being insufficiently literary, unengaged with the detail of the book, trivial, and ultimately a waste of their time.

But this perspective, at least articulated openly, is rare. Most author-performers claim to be generally receptive to and grateful for audience questions. They tend to value them as a further indication of the audience's dynamic engagement and interest in their work, and also as a direct way to connect with individual reader-audience members, during which the reader-audience as a whole comes to appear less like an anonymous group. Reader-audience Q&As are also experienced as a way

to gain granular glimpses into the divergent ways in which readers have interpreted and responded, emotionally, psychologically, aesthetically and culturally, to the narrative that the author-performer has created – or to the ideas they have communicated during the event – or to ways in which the book has shaped the world. Ishiguro being informed that one of his novels had been used on a business design course is one example that emerged in my ethnographies. In general, questions, or comments, articulated by reader-audiences, can be read as a distinct form of evaluation that is rare in its directness – and, as I have indicated above, one that tends to involve welcome positive feedback for the author-performer.

Many authors of fiction feel some degree of anxiety, discomfort or awkwardness about the prospect of divulging autobiographical information to the public in the course of conversation-based events, which, as I discussed above, inevitably steer towards drawing autobiographical links with fictional texts. Some event chairs give author-performers a list of indicative questions in advance, to enable them to prepare their answers, but even prepared questions tend to be diverged from as conversations evolve. By the point of the events, most author-performers have already given some thought to ways in which they are comfortable with making, complicating or ruling out autobiographical links, based on the framing of a book's wider publicity campaign before it is released. But they can still find it difficult to make judgments about what to talk about at live events, particularly when members of their family are involved. I witnessed Maggie O'Farrell, at Hay, while in conversation about her extraordinary literary memoir, *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death* (2017), which goes into intimate detail

about her daughter's severe illness, talk about the effort she needs to put into limiting what else she reveals about her daughter at live events, in order to protect her daughter's privacy. Such meta conversations are fairly common in the context of fiction.

My ethnography of Polari revealed the positive effects of performing fiction as a way to explore identity when it is *not* overtly linked to the autobiography of the author-performer. This is achieved through an event format that focuses on performed readings rather than conversation, and allows the author-performer to frame that performance in their own words – in a very short introduction. This gives the author-performer more control over the process. It also gives them more of a sense that the event is fundamentally about their fiction, rather than their authorial persona, or their wisdom about writing or other subjects that appear in their texts. After performing at Polari myself, to a warm and supportive audience, I certainly felt liberated by this sense that I was presenting my fiction more prominently than I was presenting myself.

Author-Performers: Signing books; post-event connections

The book signing ritual that often follows live literature events also tends to be experienced positively by author-performers, including as a way to connect even more directly with reader-audiences, and to receive feedback that reader-audiences may not have wanted to offer publicly during a Q&A. This, at least, is true as long as a respectable number of people buy the book and seek a signature on it, as evoked by John Banville's account of his humiliation at an event in which he appeared

alongside a more famous Pulitzer prize-winner (see Chapter 2). The ritual is also experienced as tangible evidence of ‘success’ in sales terms, as evidence ‘conversion’. The act of signing the object – which is not itself the product or property of the author, but was the product of the publisher, and is now the property of the reader-audience member – nevertheless reinforces a sense of authorship of the text, of its value to the reader-audience member who has bought it, and of the connection now being made to their future reading experience. In view of the post-publication anxieties that author-performers often experience, the act of signing can be experienced as a form of reassurance, as well as a salve for the ego.

A key difference between an author signing and a celebrity autograph is the common practice of ‘making the book out to’ someone upon the request of the reader-audience member, by writing a short personal message to that person: a process that involves acquiring some information about them, and that gives the author-performer an extra layer of insight into the future life of the book and its reader. The contents of these messages accompanying signatures after events can cause many author-performers to experience anxiety, though. Signings are, after all, pieces of writing, albeit in micro form, will be read as ‘authored’ in the context of the book, and are likely to be given some attention and allocated some weight, by the reader-audience member or their chosen recipient, and yet need to be done at speed, on the spot. Is ‘Best wishes’ too bland?, I have witnessed author-performers ask each other. Once, when I was signing copies of my novels after an event in a library, a middle-aged man told me in depth about his daughter’s desire to enter into a law career and the human

rights work experience she was now doing, and how my book would be the perfect present for her. Touched, I checked the spelling of her name and began to pen a short message that wished her luck in her career, and, while I was writing this, he commented: 'I didn't expect you to write *all that!*' – in a way that was not phrased critically, quite, yet was intended to make the point that I was doing something beyond what he meant to request – and I felt guilty, as I signed my name, that I had now spoiled his present by making it a little *too* 'bespoke.' She might, of course, have read the message, and the book, very differently. I have no way of knowing.

Key insights: experiential literary ethnography and cultural value

Experiential literary ethnography: why it is an effective way of communicating cultural value

As I discussed in Chapter 1, 'cultural value' is a hotly contested term. The question of how to evidence it – in relation to any arts-based event context, including live literature – is a fraught one: it is the subject of ongoing research and debate in scholarship and in the realm of funding, policy and practice, as manifested in extensive commissioned reports on cultural value by the AHRC, ACE and the Warwick Commission.

In light of this, and as an answer to that question, I propose that experiential literary ethnography – an approach I have devised and demonstrated in this thesis – represents a uniquely fruitful means of illuminating and communicating the cultural value of live literature and other arts-based events in a way that is phenomenological, and explores the multifaceted

qualities of experience, including aesthetic responses, through a multivocal spectrum of perspectives.

The experiential literary ethnography that I have developed here is rooted in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, in the anthropological literary philosophy of Ursula K. Le Guin, and in the evocative anthropological writing of multiple scholars including Ruth Behar and Michael D. Jackson (see Chapter 1, with reference to many other scholarly influences). It is a contemporary approach that emerges out of various recent transdisciplinary developments in scholarship – not only the flowering of literary, experiential approaches to writing anthropology that have emerged out of the embodied, sensory and emotional ‘turns’ in academia (see discussion in Chapter 1, with reference to Pandian and McLean among others), and also recent developments in neuroscience that are increasingly revealing the impact and value of live, embodied performance experiences and compelling literary narratives (discussed in Chapter 1 with reference to Sharot).

I contend that evocative and experiential approaches to writing are *particularly* important in the context of live literature and other arts-based events. This is because somatic, emotional, aesthetic, spatial and temporal elements are so central to the ways in which they are experienced and valued by participants, including aesthetically as well as socially and cognitively – and consequently, they are central to the ways in which these events *have value* within literary culture.

The composition of the ethnographies featured in this thesis is designed to evocatively recreate key elements of live literature

event experiences, incorporating multivocal perspectives including those of audiences *and* performers: a combination that is rare among existing ethnographic studies of cultural events (as discussed in Chapter 1). The ethnographies are able to reveal how and why multifaceted and complex elements of experience interconnect and interrelate, both to each other and to wider cultural structures, patterns and narratives. The effective combination of this multiplicity in narrative is achieved through the use of creative writing techniques, ranging from language, characterisation and scene-setting to dialogue and polyphonic form.

This compositional approach has enabled me to hone in on specific, situated details of particular events, including the micropractices and microsocialities that are increasingly being advocated for by ethnographers interested in cultural experience, who now recognise their significance (see discussion in Chapter 1 with reference to Born and others). At the same time, it has allowed the ethnographies to encompass the embodied senses and emotions involved in participant experiences, including my own, which are now understood to have such a profound cognitive impact on the ways in which they form judgments of value – notably, in the case of live literature, judgments about books and their authors that affect ongoing literary practices and perspectives.

These characteristics of experiential literary ethnography enable it to be both analytical and evocative, and to avoid the significant pitfall, present more scientific and conventional forms of scholarly writing, of omitting vital elements of participant experience – particularly aesthetic qualities of experience – or at least reducing those elements of experience

to the point where they are no longer meaningful, and their value cannot be effectively communicated.

As a flexible, reflexive and creative approach to writing, I propose that experiential literary ethnography has the potential to offer new and significant insights into the impact and value of many other contemporary cultural practices, in ways that both complement traditional social science approaches and transcend their limitations.

Finally, a note about impact, and wording, which takes me back to the beginning of Chapter 1: an important advantage of experiential literary ethnography – and other approaches to scholarly writing that pay comparable attention to creative writing techniques – is that they are likely to be more accessible to wider audiences; and they have the potential to make a greater impact upon those audiences through multisensory and emotional engagement in the reading process.

Experiential Literary Ethnography: Elements of composition

As I have summarised, the composition of each of the event ethnographies featured in this thesis involved a process of interweaving multivocal, multi-textured elements of experience with wider contextual reflection and analysis, while always maintaining a narrative momentum in order to evoke and recreate the temporal flow and dynamism of the live event experience.

There are several key elements to each ethnography.

One element is evocative ‘thick description’,⁶⁰⁸ based on my own observations of events and the people participating in them, exploring things like body language, dress, posture, gesture, accent, voice, pitch, pacing, temperature, smell, spatial layout, staging features, audience arrangement, publicity materials, background music, imagery, design, atmosphere.

A second element is conversation extracts with participants – notably author-performers as well as reader-audiences, as well as producers and other interested people. The length of these extracts has sometimes been extended beyond what is conventional ethnographically⁶⁰⁹ or in other qualitative research, where their trains of thought, speech patterns and wording choices revealed complexities and expressive particularities of individual experiences and perspectives. These conversations mainly took place on site, but I also conducted many beyond the realm of events, some of which I brought into the ethnographies where necessary.

A third element is quotes from performed texts at live literature events; without these, it would be impossible to effectively evoke the experience of listening and responding to them, and its value. I included, along with these extracts, observations about matters such as body language and delivery.

A fourth element is my own memories, perspectives and experiences as a participant in live literature events, where

⁶⁰⁸ Geertz (1973) pp. 5-6, 9-10

⁶⁰⁹ See Judith Okely, *Anthropological Practice* (2013), esp. location 475.0/561 (EPub edition) for discussion of the value of incorporating extended texts and dialogues in emergent ethnographic writing.

they seemed relevant and resonant – including as an author-performer, and an event curator and director, making the research fully reflexive.

A fifth element is relevant commentaries in the media relating to live literature events, such as Will Self's article about reading aloud published in *The Telegraph*, in a Hay Festival edition, when it was a festival sponsor. This includes social media, such as relevant tweets, like those I included by the author Celeste Ng and her respondents.

A sixth element is theoretical and contextual reflection, drawing from multiple different scholarly disciplines and literary sources.

Focusing on language, there are several key characteristics of this ethnographic approach.

Firstly, it is reflexive. Responding to the subject matter, I have aimed to use a 'speakerly' wording that reflects the orality at the heart of live literature events.

Secondly, it is literary and experiential; I have crafted the language to render the ethnographies as immersive as possible, involving evocative 'thick descriptions' that 'enliven' the live events being examined (see discussion of Narayan's work on this in Chapter 1) through a process of 'recreation' of the embodied and multisensory experience (see discussion of Dewey, Stoller, Vannini and others in Chapter 1). In order to achieve that, I have paid attention to form, style, metaphor, dialogue and other elements of literary craft.

Experiential Literary Ethnography: Limitations and qualifications

But before I expand further on the advantages of experiential literary ethnography as an approach to writing about live literature events and cultural value, and future possibilities for its application, I want to acknowledge its limitations, and qualify the ways in which these key insights should be interpreted.

I have already qualified the interpretive scope of these key insights (see the start of this chapter), to make clear that while the insights suggest patterns of experience, perception and behaviour that extend beyond the distinct events and people represented in the ethnographies, they are not intended to be universally applicable and are primarily derived from these ethnographies.

Similarly, I emphasise here that the compositional elements of my experiential literary ethnographies, as I have summarised above, are not intended to be read as a toolkit for replication across different contexts by different writers. How best to compose any experiential literary ethnography, in terms of form, style, tone and structure will always be a reflexive question; the optimal composition will necessarily depend on the nature of the art form, event and participants in question – and on the ethnographer's own involvement, perspective, and creative disposition. Nevertheless, I hope that my summary will act as a useful guide to approaching it for those who wish to.

While I have contrasted this experiential literary ethnographic approach to other scholarly approaches to writing about literary and other cultural events – including quantitative analyses, more scientifically-worded theories and forms of scholarly writing, and more traditional approaches to ethnography – I would like to be clear that I am in no way dismissing the value of alternative approaches. No single method or approach, on its own, can ever be comprehensive in capturing the impact or value of an experience for even a single participant, never mind multiple participants, and different approaches have different strengths and weaknesses. In considering the question of cultural value, data – including neuroscientific findings and demographic statistics which I have drawn upon in this thesis – can be vital for revealing patterns of behaviour and response, often on a large scale, that more qualitatively-focused researchers might well miss. Statistics, such as those showing gender or ethnic diversity in any given cultural context, can be powerful instruments for catalysing – though they can of course be manipulated with distorting effects.

However, in order to make a communicative impact, all data and statistics need to be conveyed through narrative and in ways that resonate. The most effective narratives involve engaging storytelling that seeks to illuminate insights, rather than simply to inform about facts (see discussion of Sharot's neuroscientific work on storytelling and influence in Chapter 1). As Susan Sontag put it: 'Information will never replace illumination'.⁶¹⁰

⁶¹⁰ Susan Sontag, 2001 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech (2013)

This perspective is increasingly important as data increasingly dominates the operation of all human action, and as it has become increasingly clear how easy it can be to deploy quantitative data in ways that distort meaningful reality.⁶¹¹ My ethnographic approach seeks to communicate experience, in conjunction with selected data, social structures and analysis, in an illuminating, resonant and truthful way.

A linked issue in interpreting these ethnographies is that of factual accuracy vs. truth. As I explained in chapter 1, both ethnographies are based on a composite of visits between 2013-2018, but are written in the present tense and, in the case of Hay, the ethnography is presented as if narrating a single visit to the festival. This can be seen as distorting the ethnographies' factual accuracy to some extent. But it also increases their ability to explore the experience meaningfully, in a way that represents, a multivocal diversity of experiences and perspectives, and is able to be more evocative of the live, temporal experience of each event. Truth is consequently prioritised above factual accuracy to some extent in this approach, for a phenomenological purpose. As I discussed in chapter 1, all purportedly objective and abstract scholarly narratives are narrated in an omniscient third-person are composed of selective material and shaped by the writer, and are consequently not necessarily as representative of reality as they are often made to seem, particularly of phenomenological reality. In contrast to that, I have made the reflexivity of this research explicit from the outset; in Chapter 1, I set out key elements of my own experience that have

⁶¹¹ See e.g. Charles A. Gallagher, 'Blacks, Jews, gays and immigrants are taking over' (2014), and Zachary Karabell, '(Mis)leading Indicators: Why Our Economic Numbers Distort Reality' (2014)

informed my point of view, and this is represented in first person narration in the ethnographies.

A final pragmatic limitation of this ethnographic approach that I would like to note here is its difficulty. Creative approaches to academic writing are often characterised by scholars who do not adopt them as soft or insufficiently rigorous, implying simplicity or ease (see discussion in Chapter 1, with reference to Sword). But the process of composing these experiential literary ethnographies has not been easy, just as literary craft in general is not easy: it has entailed a delicate balancing act between multiple elements of prose, while maintaining a narrative flow that evokes an experience reflective of the event in question, and yet organically interrogates its impact and value for both individuals, communities and literary culture in general. I propose that the effort – essentially form of polyphonic composition that is both creative and critical – is worthwhile and valuable.

Final reflections: Trajectories, future possibilities and recommendations for live literature, ethnography and cultural value

While I cannot predict what the future of live literature will look like, my research has convinced me that it has already had far more significant impacts on contemporary literary culture than it is assumed to have had, that it will continue to evolve, and that its cultural value is likely to continue to grow.

My phenomenological focus reveals that live literature events are often experienced as authentic and memorable

communicative performances that forge meaningful connections between reader-audience members, author-performers and literary texts, and impact significantly both on the ways in which reader-audiences value books and authors, and on the ways in which author-performers relate to their work and their readerships.

Literary texts remain at the core of live literature's cultural value – and my research has shown how fiction events are valued in unique, multi-layered and sometimes profound ways by participants because of the special capacity of fictional texts to connect people through the engagement of theory of mind, or imaginative empathy.

My research has also illuminated ways in which literary festivals and conversation-based events are exacerbating the tendency, across literary culture, to promote and evaluate fictional narratives in relation to the biography and identity of their authors (see discussion above and in Chapter 1 and 2). This tendency arises partly out of a widespread socio-cultural preoccupation with identity, in the context of diversity problems and social inequality – and it is affecting the substance of fictional texts, by pushing fiction towards autofiction, arguably problematising fiction's validity.

While literary festivals and conversation-based events can be seen as contributing to this trajectory, they also function as a fertile platform for discussing these sorts of issues. In doing so, they reveal the close connection that literature has always had with the culture and society around it, and that it should have in order to continue to be relevant – and they strengthen that connection, making literary culture both more accessible,

more relevant to many people, and more meaningful for many people. My research among reader-audiences reveals the variety of ways in which that connective process is playing out.

A clear consensus emerged in my research that author-performers feel under pressure to appear at festivals and conversation-based events – even though most ultimately experience these events positively as a way to sense a concrete connection between their work and readers. But for a few authors – Coetzee and Ferrante, for example – the pressure to be part of conversation-based events, and comparable forms of media and publicity about their books, is experienced as negative, or even damaging to their identities as authors, or to what they see as fiction’s cultural value. Part of that resistance is about the distancing effect that these forms of author-promotion are perceived to have upon readers’ relationships with literary texts. If performed readings are omitted from live literature events, or are consistently marginalised, the element of live literature’s value that derives from direct experiential connections with performed literary texts is diminished.

There are clear indications that live literature is expanding in more diverse, varied, performative, experimental and immersive directions that foreground literary texts. Polari illustrates this trend through its emphasis on performativity – and many more inventive forms have emerged over the last decade (see discussion in Chapter 1). But live literature has potential to enliven and diversify much further, and to evolve an art form in its own right. This, to me, would help to make literary culture as a whole to become even more dynamic, inventive, adaptable, appealing, and ultimately sustainable.

As I write this, the prospective Oxford Professor of Poetry 2019, Alice Oswald, has issued her statement, in which she writes: 'I'd like to stage some Extreme Poetry Events: for example all-night readings of long poems, poetry in the dark or in coloured light, even perhaps a Carnival of Translation, A Memory Palace, a Poem-Circus (like the Music-Circus of John Cage), or an exhibition of mobile poems'.⁶¹² This seems to represent a pivotal moment for the liveness and performativity of live literature.

As forms of communication, both written, oral and visual, become ever-more digitalized, it seems inevitable that experientialism – manifested in embodied cultural experiences of all kinds, including live literature events – will continue to gain in cultural value. And the more that digitalization encroaches into daily life, and the more fractured societies become in the face of climate change and other global threats, the more important literature becomes, with its unique capacity to engender empathy and to move people. *Live* literature, with all its multi-layered experiential qualities as a form of embodied performance (discussed in Chapter 1) has the capacity to increase literature's cultural value further. Live literature events make their participants feel more deeply and authentically connected to society, and to the cultural communities they imagine, and to each other, but also to literary texts, which, after all, are always forms of 'silent conversation',⁶¹³ and rhythmic patterns of sound.

⁶¹² Full statement available online at: <https://secure.ersvotes.com/V2-4-4/oxfordpoetry19/en/home?bbp=-1&x=-1> (accessed 30 May 2019)

⁶¹³ See Walter Savage Landor, *Imaginary Conversations* (1909)

As I outlined in the introduction, I have come to see my creation of experiential literary ethnography, in part, as a response to an urgent call for approaches to researching live arts-based events in ways that can capture their value as a form of cultural experience. The increasing cultural desire among audiences for embodied experiences emerges alongside an increasing demand for meaningful evidence of the cultural value of such experiences, not least to justify their funding. Consequently, I suggest that this ethnographic approach, and others like it, are likely to be of increasing relevance and value. Experiential literary ethnography has the potential to be applied in relation to many other arts-based events and contexts, in scholarship and beyond; and I hope that my introduction to it, and my demonstration of it here, might lead others down a similar path.

Just like live literature events, though, approaches to writing about cultural value can only remain novel and relevant through continual creative reinvention.

Coda

Imagine you are Ursula K. Le Guin, aged 69. It's a balmy April day in Berkeley, 1998, and you are on campus, giving a talk on the role of sound and the voice in literature. You feel strongly about this. To you, literature is fundamentally about 'the wave in the mind', as Virginia Woolf put it in one of her wonderful letters to Vita Sackville-West – and there's far too much reverence around for the printed page, which is only a recent cultural invention after all. The audience has been very attentive so far and look genuinely engaged. You've cracked a few jokes, in your deadpan fashion, which induced some laughs and livened the room up a little – but, as is often the case at academic conferences, all these people appear rather serious.

You reach the end of the talk part, but don't let on with your body language. Instead you allow a suspended silence to hang in the air – though of course there's no such thing as silence, as John Cage pointed out, especially in the presence of a room full of beating hearts and itchy scalps. 4 minutes 33 seconds would be overdoing it, but you wait for a good few, slow breaths to circulate – enough time for everyone in the room to register the birdsong beyond the open window, a far-off bubble of laughter, the creak of a chair, the sniff of a cold-sufferer, the crackle of a page turn in a notebook, the ticking of multiple watches and minds all wondering whether to clap now, or what you're about to say or do next. Well, they might not know it, but they are about to slide headfirst into a new domain. Each one of these avid scholars, whose eyes are fixed so earnestly upon you, needs to snap out of her skin like a steamed sugar snap pea from a slick green pod.

“Loud Cows”, you announce, followed by another short pause.

Then:

‘It’s allowed. It is allowed, we are allowedSILENCE!

It’s allowed. It IS allowed. It IS allowedSILENCE!!

it *used* to be allowed.

SI-EE-LENTSSSSS.

I-EE AM THE AWE-THOR.

REEED MEEE IN SI-EE-LENT AWE.

but it’s aloud.

it *is* aloud.⁶¹⁴

⁶¹⁴ See Le Guin, ‘Off the Page: Loud Cows’ (2004), which includes the full version of this performance talk and poem.

Participant conversations referenced in the ethnographies

Note: reader-audience members' names are anonymized, as indicated by inverted commas.

Hay Festival

1. Peter Florence, 2013 (Festival Director)
2. Revel Guest, 2013 (Festival Producer)
3. Jo Glanville, 2013 (Event Chairperson)
4. John Sutherland and John Crace, 2013 (Author-performers)
5. 'Stan' and 'Kira', 2013 (Reader-audience members)
6. Daniel Hahn, 2015 (Event Chairperson)
7. Alex Clark, 2013 (Event chairperson)
8. John Mullan, 2015 (Author-performer)
9. David Almond, 2015 (Author-performer)
10. 'Elsa', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
11. Maggie Kerr (Hay Festival Development Director)
12. Simon Armitage, 2015 (Author-performer)
13. Liz Kessler, 2015 (Author-performer and reader-audience member) and 'Lara' (reader-audience member)
14. 'Sarah' and 'Katherine', 2015 (Reader-audience members)
15. 'Tom', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
16. 'Dave', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
17. 'Diana', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
18. 'Clive', 2013 (Reader-audience member)
19. James Daunt, 2013 (Leading bookseller, reader-audience member)
20. Gavin Extence, 2013 (Author-performer)
21. Gaby Wood, 2013 (Event Chairperson, Books Editor for sponsor)
22. Andrew O'Hagan and Colm Tóibín, 2015 (Author-performers)
23. 'Janet' and 'Tim', 2013 (Reader-audience members)
24. Simon Garfield, 2015 (Author-performer)
25. Jude Law, 2015 (Performer)

Polari Salon

1. Paul Burston, 2015 (Polari founder)
2. 'Robin', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
3. 'Clara', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
4. 'Sal and Jo', 2015 (Reader-audience members)
5. 'Dom', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
6. 'Emma', 2015 (Reader-audience member)
7. Christopher Fowler, 2015 (Author-performer)

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